

The Flaneur in
Nineteenth-Century
British Literary
Culture

The Flaneur in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture:

*“The Worlds of London
Unknown”*

By

Isabel Vila-Cabanes

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To Wolfgang G. Müller,
“I knew when I met you an adventure was going to happen.”
(A.A. Milne)

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Flanerie and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century European Capitals

With the rise of urban and cultural studies during the second half of the twentieth century, the figure of the flâneur—or the peripatetic observer of modern urban life—has become the centre of attention of recent literary and sociological criticism. Originally associated with nineteenth-century French metropolitan culture, and, particularly, with the works of Charles Baudelaire, the growing interest in the type in academia has widened the scope of research from modern Paris to other thriving metropolises not just at a European level, but world-wide. Today, the flâneur figure has transcended its original meaning to become a relevant literary-critical concept for urban representation, individuality and modernity in literatures all over the globe.

The flâneur is an urban type that flourishes with the burgeoning of the great European cities in the early nineteenth century, turning, as scholars such as Walter Benjamin, David Frisby or Bruce Mazlish have suggested, into “the product of modernity at the same time as heralding its advent.”¹ The dynamics of modern city life play a prominent role in the practice of the flâneur, who observes the ever-changing urban spectacle and reflects on the experience of a new lifestyle caused by a series of economic, political, and social transformations. In the course of the industrial revolution, the gap between life in the country and life in the city became more accentuated than in previous epochs. The urban drift from the country to the city led to human agglomerations in small spaces, producing an intensification of social interactions. The expanding metropolis became a space of mobility and human fluctuation where the effects of modernity on the individual sharpened. The fragmented and fleeting experience of modern urban culture affected individuality in

¹ Bruce Mazlish, “The *flâneur*: from Spectator to Representation”, in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 43.

different ways, and new social types developed in the mosaic of the metropolis. The flaneur is a well-recognised urban figure that has left clear footprints on the literary discourse of the modern metropolis.

There are two classical studies of urban modernity and flânerie that have determined contemporary research on the type. On the one hand, there is Baudelaire's seminal essay *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), which describes the aesthetics of modernity from the perspective of the flaneur as well as the manner in which the modern artist solves the tension between modern urban existence and its literary representation. On the other hand, there are the works of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, which can be regarded as the first extensive academic study on the flaneur and modernity. In *The Arcades Project* (1927-40) and *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1935-9), Benjamin elaborates on the notion of the flaneur as an exemplary instance of the impact of modern urban culture on individuality, mainly drawing on the writings of Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe. Baudelaire's and Benjamin's works have not just shaped later conceptualisations of urban modernity, but they have also been used as the foundations for the definition of the type in scholarly studies. However, their renditions of the flaneur have proved to be problematic, calling, as recent criticism has pointed out², for a revision of their theories and a new characterisation of the figure.

Charles Baudelaire: The Flaneur and the Aesthetics of the Modern Metropolis

Baudelaire was a pioneer in the aesthetic representation of a renewed reality, and his works are essential in the conceptualisation of modernity from an aesthetic perspective and in the context of flânerie. In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, he offers a definition of modernity that has become a standard quote in contemporary literary criticism in the attempt to illustrate the paradoxes of the epoch: "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable."³ According to Baudelaire, the quality that distinguishes

² Most notably John Rignall, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* (London: Routledge, 1992), Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), or James V. Werner, *American Flaneur: The Cosmic Physiognomy of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 2, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 695. [By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the

modernity from previous eras is precisely the ephemeral. In contrast to the classical conception that the time of art is the eternal, modern art should comprise the duality of the immutable and circumstantial, which in modernity is to be found in the trivial, passing instants of everyday life. Similarly, he describes beauty as containing both an eternal as well as a transitory side which reflects the contingency of the times: “Le beau est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion.”⁴ Since the work of art needs both elements to be distinctive of a particular milieu, Baudelaire is actually conferring artistic value to insignificant and fleeting instances of ordinary existence.⁵

For Baudelaire, the ephemerality which distinguishes modern culture can be best appreciated in the metropolis, for, as he claims in “De l’héroïsme de la vie moderne” (1846), “[l]a vie parisienne est féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l’atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas.”⁶ He equates in his works urban experience with the experience of modernity. The swarming crowd and the incessant succession of images which the city provides to the observer become the ideal location to capture the essence of modern life and art. In such a visually-charged environment, the modern artist is given the heroic task to represent the eternal beauty of the passing moment: “il y a dans la vie triviale, dans la métamorphose journalière des choses extérieures, un mouvement rapide qui commande à l’artiste une égale vélocité d’exécution.” (686)⁷ The artist “cherche ce quelque chose qu’on nous permettra d’appeler la *modernité* [...]. Il s’agit, pour lui, de dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir de poétique dans

contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.] Translations of the essay from *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Myne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 685. [Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions.]

⁵ Werner, *American Flaneur*, 11.

⁶ Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. 2, 496. [The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvellous; but we do not notice it.] Translation from Charles Baudelaire’s “On the Heroism of Modern Life”, in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, ed. Jonathan Myne (Garden City New York: Doubleday, 1956).

⁷ [in trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist.]

l'historique, de tirer l'éternel du transitoire.” (694)⁸ He believes that the modern artist can distil the beauty in the ever-changing urban panorama. In Baudelaire's words, “the painter of modern life” can be described as an

Observateur, *flâneur*, philosophe, appelez-le comme vous voudrez ; mais vous serez certainement amené, pour caractériser cet artiste, à le gratifier d'une épithète que vous ne sauriez appliquer au peintre des choses éternelles, ou du moins plus durables, des choses héroïques ou religieuses. Quelquefois il est poète ; plus souvent il se rapproche du romancier ou du moraliste ; il est le peintre de la circonstance et de tout ce qu'elle suggère d'éternel. (687)⁹

Since modernity is distinguished by its fragmentary and evanescent nature, the epoch requires a new type of artist who can translate such aspects into the works of art. Baudelaire identifies the painter of modern life with the nineteenth-century illustrator Constantin Guys, whose sketches of Parisian scenes represent, Baudelaire believes, the contrasts of modernity, although he points out that the modern artist can also be a producer of texts, such as sketches of manners or novels. In the passage in question, he identifies the modern artist with the flâneur, for the figure is both a critical observer of modern life and a philosopher of the truth and essence of his time. Therefore, for Baudelaire, the flâneur in his role as an artist combines the specific skills to capture the transitory side of modern culture. Such a practice can be also observed in Baudelaire's own poetic work, for, as Benjamin states, Baudelaire as a modern artist “is on the lookout for banal incidents in order to approximate them to poetic events.”¹⁰

Baudelaire's essay is a pivotal text in the study of flânerie because it provides a definition of the figure of the flâneur in the context of art and literature. His artist-flâneur is an ever-curious onlooker of the modern urban spectacle: “la *curiosité* peut être considérée comme le point de

⁸ [He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call ‘modernity’ (...). He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.]

⁹ [Observer, philosopher, *flâneur*—call him what you will; but whatever words you use in trying to define this kind of artist, you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of the eternal, or at least more lasting things, of heroic or religious subjects. Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.]

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 99.

départ de son génie.”¹¹ He is fascinated by every aspect of the metropolis, finding always the new in the most common instances of everyday life. As Benjamin says, “To the flaneur, his city is—even if, like Baudelaire, he happened to be born there—no longer native ground. It represents for him a theatrical display, an arena.”¹² Baudelaire declares that the flaneur is like a child for whom everything seems to be a new adventure. He compares the artist or flaneur with Poe’s convalescent in “The Man of the Crowd”, since Poe’s character looks at life with a renewed curiosity after having recovered from an illness. The artist-flaneur combines the analytical skills of an adult with the inquisitive gaze of the child, and, as a result, he can discover the novelty in the trivial and momentary events of everyday existence.¹³ According to Benjamin, the flaneur’s experience of the new in modernity is actually paradoxical. The uninterrupted blitz of changing images in modern commodity culture is only an endless return of the “ever-same”, or the eternal recurrence of the same under the appearance of a novelty.¹⁴ Drawing on Baudelaire’s poem “Les Sept Vieillards” (“The Seven Old Men”), Benjamin claims in the *Exposé* of 1939 that the paradox of the “ever-same” “points to an agonizing phantasmagoria at the heart of flânerie”, stating that “the newness for which he was on the lookout all his life consists in nothing other than this phantasmagoria of what is ‘always the same.’”¹⁵ He explains that Baudelaire’s flaneur is confronted in the poem with different old men who actually represent the same type.

Since Benjamin’s early analysis of modernity and flânerie, Baudelaire’s definition of the flaneur has been regarded as the paradigm of the type by scholars worldwide. However, Baudelaire’s conceptualisation of the flaneur in the essay, especially when viewed together with his flaneur poems, is sometimes inconsistent. As Paul Smith points out, *Le peintre* “is full of veiled sarcasm, odd contradictions, and shifts of tone and register whose sense and relative coherence only emerge when the essay is seen against the recurrent thinking of the poet’s larger œuvre.”¹⁶ Thus, Baudelaire’s

¹¹ Baudelaire *Œuvres*, Vol. 2, 689. [the mainspring of his genius is *curiosity*.]

¹² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 347 [J66a, 6].

¹³ David Frisby, “Georg Simmel: First Sociologist of Modernity”, *Theory, Culture, Society* 2, 3 (1985), 50.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 172. For a discussion of Benjamin’s notion of the “ever-same” in relation with Baudelaire see David Frisby’s *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), 36-40, 202-4.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 21-22.

¹⁶ Paul Smith, “‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ and ‘La Peinture de la vie ancienne’”, in *Impressions of French Modernity: Art and literature in France 1850-1900*, ed. by Richard Hobbs (Manchester: Manchester University Press,

depiction of the main traits and tasks of the flâneur should be read as an intentionally ironic text. Moreover, most of the notions he introduces in the essay are further developed, and at times even transformed, in his poetry. Both problems can be observed in the flâneur's relationship to the urban crowd. On the one hand, Baudelaire argues in *Le Peintre* that the "perfect flâneur" is the "passionate spectator" who finds his home among the crowd that incessantly moves around the streets of the metropolis:

La foule est son domaine, comme l'air est celui de l'oiseau, comme l'eau celui du poisson. Sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'*épouser la foule*. Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. Être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi ; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde [...]. L'observateur est un *prince* qui jouit partout de son incognito.¹⁷

For Baudelaire, the flâneur finds in the crowd the ideal spectacle and environment for observation and reflection. The shifting procession of city dwellers offers ever-new images which fascinate him, since the fleeting urban multitude is ultimately another expression of the transitoriness of modernity that the flâneur in his role as an artist aims to capture. Baudelaire describes the relation between the flâneur and a feminised crowd as a marriage or a union, turning them into one single being. Baudelaire has a tendency to eroticise the poet's relationship with the city, which in the above-quoted passage is evinced in the analogy of the flâneur as the husband and the crowd as his wife.¹⁸ In fact, the eroticisation of urban experience is common in the flâneur writings of Baudelaire and Balzac, and, in British literature, in the late nineteenth-century flâneur poems of Amy Levy and Arthur Symons.

As Smith explains, Baudelaire's above-quoted characterisation of the flâneur and the crowd is "both sincere and ironic", since Baudelaire asserts

1998), 77.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. 2, 691-2. [The crowd is his element, as the air is birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world (...). The observer is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.]

¹⁸ Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 139.

that the flaneur finds himself everywhere at home, but he claims later in the essay that the flaneur is a solitary man wandering through a “*grand désert d’hommes*”.¹⁹ Paradoxically, Baudelaire’s flaneur stands at the centre of the crowd, while he can still remain an anonymous figure, or a “prince” in “incognito”. He is a privileged observer who enjoys the urban spectacle from an anonymous position and wanders unnoticed about the city. Prendergast explains that Benjamin identifies the flaneur’s “incognito”, as described by Baudelaire, with the motif of the “mask”. He suggests that Benjamin’s idea would imply that the mask conceals “some core of moral identity intact”. However, Baudelaire’s ironic words may actually refer to the “inability to connect with the sense of a whole” and to a “sense of the self as battered into crisis”.²⁰ Certainly, Baudelaire plays with contradictions and paradoxes in his essay in such a manner that his definition of the flaneur remains, to some extent, ambiguous.

Baudelaire goes on to expand on the flaneur’s relationship with the crowd in *Le peintre*, arguing that

Ainsi l’amoureux de la vie universelle entre dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d’électricité. On peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule ; à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie. C’est un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l’exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive.²¹

The crowd is an endless source of inspiration and energy for the peripatetic observer, who seems to passively register every single detail of the urban crowd, as if he were its mirror. Baudelaire also claims in the essay that the practice of flanerie entails active intellectual processes, for later the artist-flaneur is to use “[t]ous les matériaux dont la mémoire” in the creation of a work of art.²² In this passage, Baudelaire introduces a notion which is particularly relevant in the context of his poetry: the

¹⁹ Smith, “Le Peintre”, 84. Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. 2, 694.

²⁰ Prendergast, *Paris*, 151.

²¹ Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. 2, 691-2. [Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive.]

²² *Ibid.*, 694.

flâneur has the ability to double himself onto the other. Paradoxically, the flâneur can empathise with and project his self at will on the passers-by he observes in his sojourning around the city without fully losing his individuality. This strategy is particularly outstanding in poems such as “Les Sept Vieillards”, “Les Petites Vieilles” (“The Little Old Women”), “Les Aveugles” (“The Blind”), and, especially, in “Les Foules” (“Crowds”).

On the other hand, Baudelaire offers slightly different approaches to the phenomenon of the urban crowd in *Le peintre* and in the prose poem “Les Foules”.²³ While in *Le peintre* the relationship of the flâneur with the crowd is described as a harmonious marriage, in “Les Foules” such “universelle communion” is to some extent contradictory—indeed, the poem is mainly constructed on antithetical ideas, e.g. “Multitude, solitude : termes égaux et convertibles”.²⁴ In “Les Foules”, in keeping with the essay, Baudelaire continues to describe the flâneur and the crowd in an eroticised manner. Yet the analogies Baudelaire employs in the poem are more sexually explicit than in the essay: the flâneur and the crowd are no longer portrayed as husband and wife but as prostitute and client, turning their relationship from a marriage and pure joy into an “ineffable orgie”.²⁵

Baudelaire takes up again in the prose poem the notion of the artist-flâneur as capable of temporarily “inhabiting” the passers-by he observes, feeling other people’s experiences and emotions. However, while in *Le peintre* the flâneur seems to have some control, in “Les Foules” the flâneur’s dominant position is questioned in the end. Although Baudelaire claims that the flâneur “peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui” and “adopte[r] comme siennes toutes les professions, toutes les joies et toutes les misères que la circonstance lui présente”²⁶, he also implicitly suggests that, in doing so, the flâneur is at risk of simultaneously losing a part of himself in the process.²⁷ Again, Baudelaire plays with antithetical ideas, for in the poem the flâneur does not just “entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun”, but he also potentially exposes his soul to the unknown and unexpected: “cette sainte prostitution de l’âme qui se donne

²³ In fact, the poem could be considered as a pair of *Le peintre de la vie moderne*. Sonya Stephens, “The Prose Poems”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 79.

²⁴ Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. 1, 291. [Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable]. All translations of the prose poems from Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen, 1869*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970).

²⁵ Prendergast, *Paris*, 139. Baudelaire (1990), Vol. 1, 291. [ineffable orgy].

²⁶ Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, Vol.1, 291. [The poet enjoys that incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or someone else, as he chooses], [He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers].

²⁷ Prendergast, *Paris*, 139-40.

tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprévu qui se montre, à l'inconnu qui passe."²⁸ Baudelaire's artist-flaneur is a paradoxical type who faces the heroic task of representing the aesthetic side of a conflicting epoch.

Baudelaire's theoretical approach to the aesthetic experience of modernity and his conceptualisation of the flaneur is thus complemented by his poetic work. His literary representations of the metropolis capture the experience of modernity from an urban perspective, turning the modern metropolis into both the subject and object of art. In the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire expanded the section "Spleen et Idéal" and added a new section of poems entitled "Tableaux Parisiens" ("Parisian Scenes"). These depictions of urban scenes and casual encounters elevate the genre of the *tableau de Paris* made popular by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in the late eighteenth century from the *feuilleton* to lyrical poetry.²⁹ Baudelaire's "Tableaux" differs in focus and style from the poems in the previous edition, since they are mainly concerned with daily and nocturnal rambles around the streets of Paris. They present the city as an itinerant adventure, a place of mystery and chance where the peripatetic observer or flaneur can unveil the secrets of everyday life.

In the study of modernity and the flaneur, especially as a literary figure, Baudelaire's œuvre has a prominent place. Today, his characterisation of modern times and the flaneur has become a common reference in academic studies on the type. Starting with Walter Benjamin, who bases almost his whole analysis of the flaneur as well as of modernity in general on the various works of the French poet, scholars such as Janet Wolff, Priscilla Ferguson, Ross Chambers or Keith Tester rely on Baudelaire's definition of the flaneur and his portrayal of the modern metropolis. Although there is no doubt that Baudelaire's writings are a cornerstone in the development of the flaneur and his characterisation of the practice may be one of the most impressive and original visions of nineteenth-century urban culture, his notion of the flaneur turns out to be problematic when looking upon a broader range of flaneur texts. First, as the latter analysis shows, Baudelaire's definition of the flaneur is at times ambiguous and contradictory. Second, while his flaneur shares common traits with other well-known representations of the type—e.g. Auguste de Lacroix's "Le Flaneur" (1841), or Balzac's use of *flanerie* in his writings—Baudelaire's urban poems present Paris from a highly subjective standpoint. His flaneur

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 291. [this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes]

²⁹ Karlheinz Stierle, "Baudelaire and the Tradition of the *Tableau de Paris*", *New Literary History* 11, 2 (1980), 345. In the article, Stierle offers a thorough analysis of the genre of the *tableau* from Mercier to Baudelaire.

is a marginal type and bohemian artist who identifies with other destitute and liminal urban types. For him, the metropolis is an unknown territory in which everything appears as new and anything is possible. However, as this study will argue, the flaneur existed long before Baudelaire appropriated and redefined the type, and it was often rendered rather differently in literature. Moreover, the flaneur is not exclusive to nineteenth-century modern Paris, since the character also appears in other European cities such as London. The carefree joy that early nineteenth-century flaneurs display in their renderings of Parisian life is not always present in his poetry. Curiously, Baudelaire's vision of Paris is often more similar to characterisations of nineteenth-century London, than to the city which is often presented in French flaneur writings. The reason lies partly in the fact that Baudelaire's approach to the city is highly influenced by that of Poe and De Quincey, who set their flaneur texts in the English capital.³⁰

Walter Benjamin's Study of Modernity: Towards a Definition of Flanerie?

Benjamin saw in the flaneur an instance of the effects of modern capitalist culture on the urban individual, elaborating a critique of modern times partly based on the analysis of the flaneur. His works are particularly challenging because of their intricate content and their structure and chronology. For instance, both *The Arcades Project* and "Central Park" are collections of excerpts and quotes organised in sections on account of their topic. *The Arcades Project* is perhaps the most complex of Benjamin's works. The fragments and pieces that make up this unfinished project are assembled into "convolutes" or sections, which represent what Benjamin believed were the most outstanding aspects of modernity. Benjamin refers to this formal technique as "literary montage",³¹ a method that, as Rolf Tiedemann explains, consists of letting the quotations speak for themselves so that it is the reader who must piece together the overall meaning of the text.³² *The Arcades Project* was written over a period of thirteen years, and the focus of Benjamin's research in later stages of the project turns from a more personal mythology of modernity to social theory, Marx, and commodity fetishism.³³

³⁰ Michael Sheringham, "'The Key to the Street': 'London' in the Construction of 'Paris'", *Synergies Royaume-Uni et Irlande* 3 (2010), 39-40.

³¹ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 460 [N1a, 8].

³² Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill" in Benjamin, *Arcades*, 931-2. Cf. Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 188-90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 929-38. Cf. Frisby (1985a), 239-40.

Influenced by Baudelaire's conception of modernity as a fragmented and ephemeral reality, Benjamin agrees with theorists such as Georg Simmel or Siegfried Kracauer on the fact that the snapshots of everyday life could represent modernity itself. He approaches the study of modern times with the strategy of the micrology,³⁴ that is, by concentrating his attention on specific instances of life in order to portray the whole essence of modern times. With regard to Benjamin's distinctive methodology, Kracauer points out that "[h]is particular concern is always to demonstrate that big matters are small and small matters big."³⁵ In his analysis of modernity, Benjamin centres on a number of motifs and figures which he regards as representative of modern times—e. g. the street, the arcades, Baudelaire, the Seine, the museum, the prostitute, the ragpicker, or the flaneur—so as to describe the transformations of experience which come along with the modern epoch.³⁶ Each of these images is seen as a reflection of the historical and economical events that define modernity, and, as such, they have the potential to reveal the true nature of modern life.

Benjamin was greatly concerned with the elaboration of an aesthetic theory of modernity. He studies the modern epoch from an artistic perspective, often illustrating his ideas with examples of writers such as Baudelaire, Poe, Hugo, and, occasionally, Percy Shelley, or Dickens. Benjamin considers Baudelaire's poetry as a threshold into the nineteenth century, arguing that "[h]is work cannot merely be categorised as historical, like anyone else's, but it intended to be so [historically bound] and understood itself as such."³⁷ Thus, for Benjamin the aesthetic realm becomes the key to understand the changes in individual experience that come along with modern culture. In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", he observes that the transformation of experience has resulted in a general disinterest in lyric poetry during modernity:

If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favourable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers. This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience. (110)

³⁴ Prendergast, *Paris*, 5.

³⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, transl. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 262.

³⁶ Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 236–7; Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 150.

³⁷ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 116–7.

The accuracy of Benjamin's observation may be questionable, for lyric poetry does not disappear during the second half of the nineteenth century, when Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Benjamin also argues that technological progress has altered the outer world of the individual as well as the mental realm. He assumes that it is the crisis of experience associated with modern times that makes the reader estranged from lyric poetry, wondering "how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm." (116) In Benjamin's view, only a poetry that would contain this paradox in its core could be appropriate for the representation of modern existence. He explains that, from the late nineteenth century on, philosophy tried to distil "true experience" from the experience of the masses. In order to find the real essence of modern life, the artist must turn to the individual subject and discard "man's life in society." (110)

Benjamin argues that the kind of experience that Baudelaire presents in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is the "after-image" that remains when one rejects the phantasmagoria of mass culture:

The unique importance of Baudelaire resides in his being the first and the most unflinching to have taken the measure of the self-estranged human being, in the double sense of acknowledging this being and fortifying it with armor against the reified world.³⁸

By moving away from the illusions of industrial society, the poet can discern "an experience of a complementary nature"³⁹. The aesthetic experience that Baudelaire's oeuvre recounts is the individual's response to the shock of modern urban life, which becomes a constitutive element of his literary production. As Gilloch notes, Benjamin believes that both "form and content" must "coalesce" in the urban discourse of modernity.⁴⁰ Benjamin notes that Baudelaire uses images that had been previously considered unfit for poetic reflection, a notion that will become very popular in modernist literature. The poet chooses everyday events as the new subject of art. For instance, Benjamin commends Baudelaire for elevating meaningless instances of daily life to the status of art: "His images are original by virtue of the inferiority of the objects of comparison. He is on the lookout for banal incidents in order to approximate them to poetic events."⁴¹ For Benjamin the modern hero is no

³⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 322 [J51a, 6].

³⁹ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 111.

⁴⁰ Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 19.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 99.

longer Odysseus plying the Mediterranean seas, but the pedestrian idling around ordinary streets of a big city. It is no accident that Leopold Bloom is portrayed as a modern-city Odysseus.

Benjamin also observes that there is a change in poetic language. In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, he asserts that in the beginnings of the nineteenth century only elevated registers and speech were considered appropriate for poetry or tragedy. Benjamin goes on to argue that, although Hugo already blurs the boundaries of colloquial and elevated language in his writings, Baudelaire is the first artist to reconcile ordinary speech and ordinary topics with poetic production: “The *Fleurs du Mal* is the first book that used in poetry not only words of ordinary provenance but words of urban origin as well.”⁴² He argues that Baudelaire incorporates the urban in his poems, since he takes words that in themselves have no poetic potential and, by placing them in the appropriate context, grants them a poetic quality. However, Baudelaire is not the first writer to introduce common language and urban events into poetry. City-bound topics are also frequent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which is evinced in John Gay’s *Trivia* (1716), or later poems such as William Blake’s “London” (1793).

The city plays a major part both in the poetic discourse of modernity and in its prose. In the section “The Flâneur” of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, Benjamin points out that a new literary genre has been born in the heart of the city. He introduces the term “panorama literature”, which refers to a kind of writing characteristic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries portraying different images or “panoramas” of the metropolis.⁴³ The “individual sketches” or physiologies, which abound in collections such as *Le Livre des cent-et-un* (1831–34) or *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1839–1842), became extremely popular in the early forties with the rise of the *feuilleton*.⁴⁴ Early physiologies, Benjamin explains, focus on the description and categorisation of urban types, while, in later writings, the city becomes both the subject and object of art. It is in this context that the figure of the flâneur makes its appearance, for “[t]he leisurely quality of these descriptions fits the style of the *flâneur* who goes botanizing on the asphalt.” (36) In the section “Daguerre or the Dioramas” of the *Exposé* of 1935, he observes that the physiologies of the *feuilleton* are the written equivalent of the plastic dioramas. He goes on to argue that “[i]n the dioramas, the town was

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴³ Margaret Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2007), 17. Rose uses the expression “panoramic literature”.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 35.

transformed into landscape, just as it was later in a subtler way for the *flâneurs*.” (161-2)⁴⁵ He states that the dioramas represent the effort of the urban inhabitant to incorporate the country into the metropolis. For Benjamin the flâneur can be considered to some extent as the urban counterpart of the country traveller who collects memories of his environment for later investigation. The flâneur can likewise find enough instances and specimens with which to occupy himself in his idle rambles around the city streets.

In his conceptualisation of the flâneur, Benjamin is at times inconsistent, since among other reasons, he often adapts the notion of the flâneur to the particular theoretical point that he is trying to illustrate about one or another artist. Moreover, he sometimes changes his opinion at different stages of his work.⁴⁶ In fact, generally speaking Benjamin’s conceptualization of the flâneur is at best ambiguous.⁴⁷ On the one hand, he conflates the socio-historical with the literary flâneur. Benjamin examines the urban stroller from a sociological perspective while usually finding his examples in literature; therefore, his arguments seem at times incoherent.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Benjamin re-examines his characterization of the flâneur over a period of thirteen years, and, as a result, the description is contradictory and, at some stages, even wrong.⁴⁹ From the publication of the essay “The Return of the Flâneur” (1929) to *The Arcades Project* (1927–40), Benjamin transforms the figure of the flâneur into a concept whose meaning notably differs from the original

⁴⁵ In this essay, Benjamin refers to “panorama literature” as “dioramic literature”.

⁴⁶ Christel Hollevoet, *The Flâneur: Genealogy of a Modernist Icon*, Ph.D. diss. (The City University of New York, 2001), 447.

⁴⁷ Parsons, *Streetwalking*, 33–4. Cf. Tester, *Flâneur*, 13; Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 20–21; Rignall, *Realist Fiction*, 9; Martina Lauster, “Walter Benjamin’s Myth of the *Flâneur*”, *The Modern Language Review* 102, 1 (2007), 139. The latter criticizes Benjamin’s writings on the flâneur—the relationship with commodity fetishism, his carelessness with the sources and the notion of the streets as interiors—and concludes that the myth that the theorist creates is far from right and has had a negative impact on later research on the flâneur. Although Lauster’s criticism is often on point, it is necessary to bear in mind the different perspectives of research of Lauster’s and Benjamin’s works. While her argument stems from the modern approach of cultural studies, in which emphasis on popular culture is given, Benjamin has a philosophical and historical materialist position.

⁴⁸ Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 20. Cf. Parsons, *Streetwalking*, 33.

⁴⁹ Rignall, *Realist Fiction*, 13. Cf. Lauster, “Myth of the *Flâneur*”, 144; Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 441. As Lauster points out, Benjamin forgets to change some of the passages of the *Arcades* and contradicts himself.

sociological character⁵⁰ as well as from its literary counterpart of the early nineteenth century.⁵¹ For instance, although Benjamin states multiple times throughout his works that the flâneur is exclusively a Parisian type,⁵² in “The Return of the Flâneur” Benjamin claims that, despite the difficulties of practicing flânerie in Berlin, Franz Hessel’s *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929) can be considered a German instance of the flâneur: “The philosophy of the *flâneur* has never been more profoundly grasped than in these words of Hessel’s.”⁵³ In this text, Benjamin stretches the definition of the flâneur in order to accommodate Hessel’s narrator as an example of the aimless stroller outside nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin transforms the flâneur in his analysis almost into a modern myth which is emblematic of the epoch. Lauster asserts that Benjamin develops a correlation between observation of a reified urban environment and “an almost hallucinatory state” —in Benjamin’s terms, an intoxication—so as to stress the anxieties of modern existence, but his arguments remain rather ambiguous.⁵⁴ Indeed, Benjamin appropriates the urban peripatetic as a theoretical strategy in order to illustrate his theory of modernity,⁵⁵ turning the flâneur into a concept whose meaning notably differs from the original sociological character⁵⁶ as well as from its literary counterpart. As Rose points out, Benjamin takes the fictional type portrayed in the writings and physiologies of the 1830s and 1840s and in the works of Baudelaire as if it were a historical figure.⁵⁷

Particularly challenging is Benjamin’s discussion of the flâneur and the crowd, which is partly the result of his misunderstanding of Baudelaire’s essay *Le peintre de la vie moderne*. He mainly bases his analysis of the modern crowd on the flâneur works of Baudelaire and Poe. Following Baudelaire’s descriptions of the crowd as a place of joy,⁵⁸ Benjamin

⁵⁰ Sven Birkerts, “Walter Benjamin, Flâneur: A Flânerie”, *Iowa Review* 13, 3/4 (1982), 165, 179.

⁵¹ Hollevoet notes that Benjamin’s concept of the flâneur evolves after “The Return of the Flâneur” and starts a process of transformation which does not end until *The Arcades Project*. Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 426.

⁵² Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1931–1934*. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Transl. Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 263. Benjamin, *Arcades*, 417 [M1, 4].

⁵³ Benjamin, *Writings, Vol. 2*, 265.

⁵⁴ Lauster, “Myth of the *Flâneur*”, 143.

⁵⁵ Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 427.

⁵⁶ Birkerts, “A Flânerie”, 165, 179.

⁵⁷ Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 20.

⁵⁸ See Benjamin, *Arcades*, 290 [J34a, 3].

portrays the flâneur as a social outcast—or bohemian—who, paradoxically, only feels at ease amidst the turmoil of the city streets: “The flâneur is a man uprooted. He is at home neither in his class nor in his homeland, but only in the crowd. The crowd is his element.”⁵⁹ He states that the crowd is for Baudelaire’s flâneur an endless source of inspiration for his imagination and curiosity, claiming that

he is also the explorer of the crowd. Within the man who abandons himself to it, the crowd inspires a sort of drunkenness, one accompanied by very specific illusions: the man flatters himself that, on seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him, seen straight through to the innermost recesses of his soul—all on the basis of his external appearance. (21)

Benjamin compares the flâneur as a physiologist with a scientist who investigates and classifies the different specimens he finds in his travels. The urban inhabitants become a riddle the flâneur can solve by means of observation. The flâneur’s interest in classifying and ordering the urban space is common in nineteenth-century literature, which is illustrated in the literary genre of the physiologies. The urban crowd is all the flâneur needs to spend his idle time with, since his “thirst for the new is quenched by the crowd” (345 [J66, 1]). According to Gilloch, Benjamin’s description of Baudelaire’s artist-flâneur as the observer of modern society in the quote is the “haughty bourgeois” who ambles around the streets in order to entertain himself.⁶⁰ Benjamin portrays Baudelaire’s artist-flâneur as the gentleman of leisure who, intoxicated by the fascinating crowd, can move among the passers-by and discover all their secrets and, on occasion, empathise with them.⁶¹

If, on the one hand, Benjamin suggests that the flâneur is only at home in the crowd, on the other hand, he describes the nineteenth-century urban crowd as a menace for the flâneur. Benjamin explains that the urban crowd in texts such as Engels’s *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1848) or Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” is depicted as a threat to individuality (121). Despite being surrounded by people, the metropolitan dweller is left with a feeling of isolation and indifference that reflects the alienation of man in the capitalist production system. The hustling masses of strangers that inhabit the big city have a negative effect on the individual’s personality. In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”,

⁵⁹ “Early draft of the *exposé* of 1935”, Benjamin, *Arcades*, 895.

⁶⁰ Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 152.

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 55.

Benjamin compares the representation of the flâneur and the crowd in Poe's text with that in Baudelaire's writings, concluding that Poe's flâneur is, unlike Baudelaire's, "someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company" or an "asocial person" (48). As recent criticism has noted, Benjamin seems to have misread Baudelaire's analysis of Poe's short story in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*.⁶² When Baudelaire states that the flâneur is, similarly to Poe's peripatetic, a "man of the crowd", he is referring to the narrator of the story. However, Benjamin believes that Baudelaire likens the flâneur to the stranger the narrator chases, claiming that Baudelaire's flâneur does not truly resemble Poe's stranger. Hollevoet points out that Benjamin's mistake is "symptomatic of how little attention Benjamin paid to the *flâneur*'s pivotal act of looking"⁶³. Since Baudelaire emphasises throughout the essay the essential role of the flâneur as an observer, it is only logical that the "man of the crowd" be the convalescent who observes the crowd and the mysterious stranger.

Benjamin tries to correct his misreading in "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", yet he is unsuccessful. Instead of realising that he had misunderstood Baudelaire's text, he concludes that Baudelaire's statement must be wrong, for the flâneur could never be the old man of Poe's story. He concludes that the "manic behaviour" of the stranger in "The Man of the Crowd" is the result of the decay of the milieu of the flâneur and it forecasts the disappearance of this figure.⁶⁴ The flâneur, Benjamin says, ultimately retires to the arcades in order to avoid the traffic and crowds of the city streets: the flâneur "demanded elbow room"⁶⁵. As later chapters will show, the flâneur's relationship with the crowd is very complex, for it evolves and changes as the metropolis grows in terms of space and population.

Finally, Benjamin's portrayal of the flâneur is too strongly tied to a concrete time and place, that is, nineteenth-century Paris.⁶⁶ He claims several times that the flâneur is a type exclusively Parisian that belongs to a specific milieu and disappears with the growth of industrial capitalism and the fall of the arcades towards the end of the nineteenth century. As critics such as Michael Hollington, Margaret Rose, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson or Dana Brand have shown, the figure of the flâneur was represented in the literary realm of France, England and North America

⁶² Rignall, *Realist Fiction*, 13. Cf. Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 441; Lauster, "Myth of the *Flâneur*", 144; Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 145–7.

⁶³ Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 441.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 128.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁶ Tester, *Flâneur*, 1.

well before and after Baudelaire's flaneur. The range of texts Benjamin includes in his analysis of the flaneur is very limited and he often wields his sources at his convenience. He appropriates the urban stroller as a theoretical strategy in order to illustrate his theory of modernity and discards the aspects which are not relevant to his research.⁶⁷ For instance, although he acknowledges that the flaneur is a common character of the physiologies of the 1830s and 1840s and notes that the kind of urban experience they depict will be further developed in the flaneur writings of Poe and Baudelaire,⁶⁸ Benjamin ignores the way in which the urban stroller is represented in these texts. The flaneur of the humorous urban sketches before the mid-nineteenth century is the leisured observer of the trifles of everyday urban life and not the paradoxical artist-flaneur described by Baudelaire. Benjamin ultimately chooses to ignore the physiologies of the *feuilleton* because he considers them a short-lived, petit-bourgeois genre with little aesthetic value.⁶⁹ Likewise, he overlooks all the instances of the literary flaneur before the 1830s and fails to trace a reliable development of this urban type. For Benjamin, the flaneur is mainly born with Baudelaire and disappears with Louis Aragon.

Although Benjamin skilfully grasps essential traits and paradoxes of flanerier, both the social and literary history of the figure are too complex to be reduced to Benjamin's interpretation. As scholars such as Parsons have pointed out, a redefinition of the flaneur which does not just rely on Benjamin's study is necessary. His characterisation is too vague and too exclusive, which becomes especially problematic in the context of gender.⁷⁰ Similarly, James V. Werner proposes to expand conventional definitions of the urban character. He maintains that the representation of the flaneur has changed through times and it has also been differently represented in literature.⁷¹ An extensive discussion of the flaneur should include a wider range of primary and secondary sources in order to properly cover the rich tradition of the flaneur. Therefore, a redefinition of the flaneur which is not exclusively based on Benjamin's work is essential in the investigation of the flaneur, especially in the literary realm. Lauster believes that Benjamin's conceptualisation of the flaneur is not just inconsistent, but it has also had a negative impact on later research on the

⁶⁷ Hollevoet, *Genealogy*, 427.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 803–4 [m3a, 2].

⁶⁹ Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 18. Cf. Lauster, "Myth of the *Flâneur*", 149.

⁷⁰ Parsons, 5. Cf. Michael Hollington, "Nickleby, Flanerier, Reverie: The View from Cheerybles", *Dickens Studies Annual* 35 (2005), 22, 34.

⁷¹ Werner, *American Flaneur*, 2–3; Tester, *Flâneur*, 13. Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 20–3.

type.⁷² But Benjamin's analysis, despite basing his theories on writers such as Baudelaire or Poe, is not actually aimed at providing a literary or cultural theory of flânerie. His research is an eclectic overview of modern times which combines aesthetic as well as social, economic and historical elements. Therefore, it may be as much a problem of Benjamin's shortcomings as of the use contemporary criticism has made of his works. In Margaret Rose's words,

the popularity of Benjamin's work has served to maintain interest in the figure of the flâneur and to provide a new theoretical base from which (despite—and sometimes even because of—its contradictions and inconsistencies) that figure has evolved further.⁷³

Despite the limitations of Benjamin's theories, his contribution to the research of the flâneur is still of great value. His elucidations on diverse aspects of the topic of flânerie are often adduced in the course of the present study.

As a point of departure to use as a working definition of the literary flâneur in this study, the type can be defined as a person—in the nineteenth century usually male—who goes for a stroll around the city with no particular purpose or destination. Often in an idle mood, the explorer of the modern metropolis saunters around the streets, observing and describing the urban environment and reflecting on it. The existence of the flâneur is paradoxical, since he is in the crowd but is not really a part of it. He is detached from the masses and acts as a spectator who experiences society in his own way. In the anonymity of the streets, the flâneur finds the best atmosphere to let his thoughts run free, for what he observes induces thought processes in him. This working definition follows Auguste de Lacroix's essay "The Flâneur". Lacroix's text has been chosen because it presents a very consistent description of the type from both a socio-historical and a literary perspective. Lacroix's essay examines all the essential traits of a flâneur: the flâneur as an anonymous and meditative observer of urban life who walks about the city in solitude, the flâneur in contrast with other urban peripatetic types, and the close link between flânerie and literature. Moreover, even if Lacroix asserts that the flâneur is certainly a Parisian type, he admits the likelihood of flânerie in foreign countries, thus also opening the possibility of a British version of the flâneur.

⁷² Lauster, "Myth of the *Flâneur*", 139.

⁷³ Rose, *Flâneurs and Idlers*, 73.

1.2. The Figure of the Flaneur in Nineteenth-Century Literature

The Nineteenth-Century Flaneur in Paris: A Brief Look at the French Tradition

The flaneur, particularly in the nineteenth century, has been considered as an eminently French type. The very fact that we refer to the phenomenon in most languages using the entirely untranslatable French term *flâneur* indicates the significant connection between the figure and French culture. Moreover, even if the practice of the flaneur may appear in British literature earlier than in French, the close connection between France and Britain during the nineteenth century would have considerable influence in the conceptualisation and reception of the type in Britain. Therefore, a short summary of the origins and transformations of the term and the concept of the flaneur in French culture and literature is absolutely necessary in order to have a better understanding of the development of the British analogue.⁷⁴ The hitherto largely unknown achievement of British flaneur culture of the nineteenth century can only be appreciated in conjunction with its French counterpart.

The origins of the French flaneur can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. Despite the hostile disposition of Paris for pedestrians at the time, strolling up and down the city and enjoying the urban scene had been a common activity in France since the Baroque period.⁷⁵ Towards the end of the eighteenth century the French capital, which had been gradually growing in population,⁷⁶ already offered a brimming spectacle that would entice the city dweller to observe the turmoil of an emerging urban life. Literary expositions of Paris such as Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781-88) or Nicolas-Edmé Rétif de la Bretonne's *Les Nuits de Paris* (1788-90) evince a new approach towards

⁷⁴ When summarising a complete literary tradition in just a few pages, one may unwillingly fall into reductionism. The texts adduced in this section are very complex and they play key roles in the development of flaneur literature in France. For a close analysis of French flanerie see Isabel Vila-Cabanes, *Re-Imagining the Streets of Paris: The French Flaneur in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Trier: WVT, 2016).

⁷⁵ Joseph Anthony Amato, *On Foot: A History of Walking* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 84.

⁷⁶ The population of Paris rose from 425,000 inhabitants in 1684 to 500,000 in 1750 and 545,756 in 1801. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 50, 131.