

"The *Flâneur* off Meridian: A Taste of Disdain"
The Indianapolis Literary Club, 7 November 2011

My application for membership in this august body made no secret of my academic past, so the Secretary has admonished me to read an essay to you rather than proclaiming a lecture at you. He neglected to proscribe a handout! I admit that only an academic would bring so outmoded and useless a figure as the *flâneur* into such distinguished company. I do so in hopes that some of you who had the good sense not to while away your lives on a campus will find him somewhat intriguing. In any case, you are about to hear a good many words you have not heard since you left campus, words like "bourgeois," "post-modern," "phantasmagoria," "aesthetic," and "commodified," as well as some lengthy quotations of the kind they specialize in there. All this is to elucidate some ideas about Paris in the mid nineteenth century in comparison with Indianapolis in the twenty-first. By way of compensation, I will show you a few impressionist paintings.

I chose the *flâneur* for my topic partly to celebrate my own departure from campus and my arrival here. In the five years since my wife and I moved from West Lafayette into a condo downtown, we have strolled the sidewalks of Indianapolis almost every day, seeking impressions of this city and those who go about it. As many of you will have known, or learned from our Secretary's excellent Letter announcing tonight's meeting, the *flâneur* got his name from the French verb *flâner*, to stroll, though he, and he was almost always a he, seldom did so in the company of his wife, if he had one. He did so in the Paris of the Second Empire, before almost all of those who went about in a city did so in cars, hurriedly, and cut off from one another and the few pedestrians they sped by. Somehow it occurred to me to examine, which I take to be the task of an essay rather than a lecture, what a *flâneur* might have made of our downtown, and what, in turn, this select assembly of literate Hoosiers ought to make of him.

Coming at him as I do having read far too many books written in or about London in the Eighteenth century, books by Addison, Fielding, Chesterfield, Johnson, and Gibbon, among others, I have some doubts about the *flâneur*. I make him out to be a striking, but derisory, figure, indolent, aloof, and exceedingly French, the specious hero of the idlest era of an idle culture, and one that has always thought too highly of itself. Unselectively observant, irretrievably metropolitan, solitary, modern, and bored, he lingered wherever the bourgeoisie shopped or the more colorful members of the more disreputable classes worked or dwelled. He did so out of curiosity, and as the deputy, as it were, of the artist and the intellectual, who remained behind in the studio or the café, worrying about the onset of modernity.

His fashionable attire and leisurely manner caught the eye of the impressionist painters, while his aloof inspection of those around him betrayed him into the hands of a restless poet, Baudelaire, a high modern theorist, Walter Benjamin, and numerous post-modern, cultural critics. But tonight, his luck has run out, and he has me to set him before you. As my title suggests, I shall deflect back onto the *flâneur* some of the disdain he is supposed to have bestowed on his fellow Parisians. While not completely to my taste, the *flâneur* still intrigues me, so I go on to consider and modify some of the disdain he would undoubtedly have bestowed on this city, in which, as I like to put it, I have recently enrolled.

Baudelaire

The *flâneur* strides out from the pages of Baudelaire's 1859 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life", exceedingly well dressed, aesthetically passionate, and in search of chance encounters. He is the champion of particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance, contemporary and urban circumstance, and the manners he sees before him. Every inch an aesthete, he is also leisured, philosophical, observant, quick, and modern.

[The next few sentences are quotations from Baudelaire; I spare you both my public high school French and my academic finger wiggles.]

You will know it is Baudelaire, though in translation, when the language gets noticeably better, more intricate and more passionate.]

“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.” “The mainspring of his genius is *curiosity*”, and he is a “passionate lover of crowds and incognitos.” So much so that “he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him.” “His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator [notice how often Baudelaire invokes “passion”], 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.”

Baudelaire purported to find all these powers and propensities in one Constantin Guys, an obscure provider of sketches for magazines, whom he treats as the prototype of the *flâneur* and the grandfather of Impressionism:

So out he goes [Baudelaire writes of Guys] and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities [Baudelaire follows Guys through the Capitals of England, France, Bulgaria, Turkey, the Crimea, and Spain, [but not, for some reason, Indiana!], a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom. He gazes upon the landscapes of the great city—landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun. He delights in fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed—in a word, he delights in universal life.

Guys had an especially sharp eye for horses and carriages and a deep understanding of the latest fashions (especially in military uniforms and the cut of the skirt and the bodice, and the arrangement of pleats). He would linger late on the streets, “wherever a passion can pose before him, wherever natural man and conventional man display themselves in a strange beauty.”

At the end of a long day of passionate observing, Guys would stay up late in his studio, working feverishly and fast until his “phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature.” (“Phantasmagoria,” which also appears in the passage our Secretary provided you, is Baudelaire’s most essential aesthetic term. I will neither apologize for it, nor attempt to explain it.) As a student of “modernity,” Guys made “it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.” He recorded his observations of ordinary, but significant particulars in quick sketches. **[I’ll show you one in a minute; this is Baudelaire again]:** “For the sketch of manners, the depiction of bourgeois life and the pageant of fashion, the technical means that is the most expeditious and the least costly will obviously be the best.”

Somehow this sharp eye and feverish mind which Baudelaire saw evidence of in the sketches of Constantin Guys was transplanted to the flâneur, who would, for the rest of the 19th century, stroll the boulevards and arcades of Paris, scrutinizing the faces, costumes, and manners of the strangers he encountered for subtle indications of their class and taste, and their social standing and moral stature. These were strangers he would encounter only once, but whose “every gait, glance, and gesture” he would remember, and somehow make memorable.

Baudelaire distinguishes the flâneur from his English cousin, the “dandy,” who was more outrageously dressed, even more blasé, and more aristocratic. I see Oscar Wilde as the best example of the Dandy, and of the flâneur gone to seed. Eager to astonish by his attire, demeanor, and utterances, the dandy is not a figure I can, or want to, picture on, or just off Meridian St.

I mention Oscar Wilde, though he was too late and too English to be a flaneur, because of Baudelaire's striking insight that "Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall, so that when the Dandy does appear, he is "the last spark of heroism amid decadence." This suggests to me (and this is more of what I hope makes this an essay instead of a lecture) that France had flâneurs, but not dandy's, because it disposed of its aristocracy by way of the guillotine, and that we did not have either dandies or *flâneurs* in America because of our Puritan forefathers and our Revolutionary War.

To show you the affinities between Baudelaire's poetry and his criticism of the *flâneur* I turn, very briefly, to the lines from *Les fleurs du mal*, "a une passant", or To a Passing Woman." This passage, #2 on the handout, also fascinated Walter Benjamin:

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
 Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
 Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
 Soulevant, balançant le festoon et l'ourlet;
 Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
 Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
 Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
 La douceur que fascine et le plaisir qui tue.
 [The street around me roared, deafening.
 Tall, slender, in deep mourning, majestic in her grief,
 A woman passed—with imposing hand
 Gathering up a scalloped hem--
 Agile and noble, her leg like a statue's.
 And as for me, twitching like one possessed, I drank
 From her eyes—livid sky brewing a storm--
 The sweetness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills.]

Notice the roaring street, the passing woman, majestic in her figure and her mourning, the scalloped hem, the quick glimpse, and the complex

sentimentality of the response. All these aspects of the poem seem to me vivid, urban, French, and Romantic. They suggest and encapsulate the curious, brief, and intense observations and elaborate responses Baudelaire, and every critic since him, attributed to the flâneur—without supplying any supporting evidence.

To clear the air and your minds after that short dose of poetry, and as a means of transition to the impressionist painters, **LET ME SHOW YOU ONE OF CONSTANTIN GUYS'S SKETCHES "TAKING THE AIR"—SLIDE 1:**



15. GUYS: *Taking the air*. Pen and ink and water-colour. London, Mr. Tom Girtin.

This is how Baudelaire described such sketches:

Monsieur G. starts with a few slight indications in pencil, which hardly do more than mark the position which objects are to occupy in space. The principal planes are then sketched ... vaguely and lightly.... At the last minute the contour of the objects is once and for all outlined in ink,. Without having seen them, it would be impossible to imagine the astonishing effects he can obtain by this method which is so simple that it is almost elementary. It possesses one outstanding virtue, which is that, at no matter what stage in its execution each drawing has a sufficiently 'finished' look; call it a 'study' if you will, but you will have to admit that it is a perfect study.

Caillebotte and Manet—

Elegant Figures and Aesthetic Impressions

Baudelaire's criticism and poetry convinced the artists of the period that the flâneur saw and thought like an artist. They removed him from the crowds Baudelaire thought he craved to depict him strolling the boulevards and lounging in the parks and cafes of Haussman's Paris, elegant and observant, and full of taste and disdain, on the edges of select and colorful groups. Some of the painters went further, dressing and disporting themselves as *flâneurs*. **THIS IS FANTIN-LATOUR'S PORTRAIT OF MANET**, posed and attired as the embodiment of good taste, with penetrating eyes and *beaucoup savoir-faire*. (Can you picture this guy in a Starbucks?)



This portrait hangs in the Art Institute—probably as close as any flaneur ever got to Indianapolis before tonight! I haven't found any paintings or sketches like this one or the other one I am about to show you at the IMA! The behavior

and the paintings of the Impressionists imparted vividness and plausibility to this fantastic figure, making him very modish in the city that invented "*la mode*." As a recent art historian asserts: <<Passage #3>>

In his British top hat and formal clothes, however, the *flâneur* was not immediately distinguished from the mass of French upper-class men of the Second Empire. In other words, an aloof manner, fastidious dress, absorption in newspapers and current gossip, and strolling along public thoroughfares formed the exterior that most upper-class men presented to Parisian society. The *flâneur*, to those who knew him, could nonetheless be distinguished from his look-alikes by the subtlety of his observations and by the use to which he put them. His conversations were rich in things esthetic and elegant, not in such mundane matters as sales or investments, and he flaunted his wit in artful phrases whose irony was fully appreciated only by the inner circle of writers, painters, musicians, intellectuals, and *fashionables* to whom they were addressed.

Much as I love the paintings, I cannot see in them evidence of the complex aesthetic interiority Baudelaire had asserted that *flâneur* must have possessed and exhibited. Yet, as in the passage we just looked at, recent art historians have informed and improved our understanding of this continually fascinating figure. They emphasize his theatricality (evident in Manet's costume and pose), his connections to journalism and affinities with the newspaper and gossip, and the disdain with which he treated the bourgeoisie. According to them the impressionist painters and the *flâneur* all cast appreciative eyes on women and their attire, and displayed an informed interest in the class, the fabric, and the style they carried about with them on the streets, though without much apparent concern for the economic circumstances and conditions that will preoccupy Walter Benjamin

Caillebotte's stunning *Le Pont de l'Europe* <Slide #3> is an exquisite encounter of strangers, an exercise in distance and desire, and a study of materials and structures as well as light.



It is always read as an emblem of *flanerie*. The setting is the road bridge over the rail yards at Gare Saint-Lazare—a busily modern and urban space that fascinated several of the Impressionists. You can tell which one is the *flâneur*, and I can tell you that the face under that high hat is said to be Caillebotte's own. You may wonder, as we all must, at the connection, or rather, the distance, between him and the well-dressed woman with the umbrella he has just strolled past. The differences in dress, class, occupation, and pace in all the figures are carefully observed and rendered. (Even the dog has his own trot, tempo, breed, and direction!) If you find yourself attributing different mental states to these figures, even the dog, and awarding the finest, subtlest, state to the *flâneur*, perhaps you should sell your car and get yourself one of those top hats and a cane!

BENJAMIN

Which brings us to Walter Benjamin, whom I know many of you have been waiting eagerly for me to get to! A methodical German, and a more than usually gloomy economic philosopher, Benjamin had a surprising tolerance for idleness. He made Baudelaire's passionately artistic flâneur less of an aesthete and more of a Marxist. While Baudelaire did not have many nice days, almost every page that Benjamin wrote, snipped, or admired is infused with isolation, melancholy, and dismay. For him all transactions are commodified, and most encounters are both commodified and eroticized, though pointlessly so, as they come to nothing. As Benjamin's editor puts it [Think back to the lines on the passerby as you listen to this passage]:

The edges, fragments, silences, and murk of Baudelaire's poetry mattered to Benjamin because they meant so little: And within the linguistic spaces so opened, Benjamin saw that experience of the utter meaninglessness of the modern world might arise—that, in other words, the phantasmagoria might be broken down and exposed for what it is.

You will have noticed that Benjamin has taken over Baudelaire's term "phantasmagoria" and made it his own. And that this figure I have undertaken to introduce to you has now become an emblem of, and spokesman for, "the utter meaninglessness of the modern world"! Bear with me!

For Benjamin, this much estranged figure sought out strangers, strange strangers, in a city made stranger by modernity. He treasured and stored the fragments, real and imagined, he gathered from these isolated encounters. If Baudelaire had a gift for making such meaningless encounters vivid, Benjamin made many of them suggestive. Consider his observation that the flâneur goes about leisurely "botanizing on the asphalt." First used in 1824, asphalt soon became, and seems to me still to remain, a splendid emblem of the modern city. But picture, as Benjamin's clever "botanizing" asks us to do, what sorts of flowers will grow on asphalt. I suppose we could call them "*fleurs du mal*."

Benjamin reconsidered and extended the economic components of the *flâneur's* concern with: absinthe, prostitutes, the gas light, the telegraph, and

gossipy journalism. These are the devices, modish, quick, and potent, which set the intellectual tone of Paris during the Second Empire.

Passage #4 paints our new friend not in the lush, blue-green, haze of Impressionism, but in the glare of estrangement and modernity:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air. (M1,3)

The next, and next to last, passage, #5, introduces a moral problem, perhaps the primary moral problem, that modern cities, including ours, continue to contend with—the weakening of an individual's morality when he finds himself among strangers. The passage ends with Edgar Allen Poe—with whom Benjamin and Baudelaire were both, unaccountably, fascinated—and abandons the aesthete and the economist, to turn the city back into a wilderness, and the *flâneur* into a werewolf! Benjamin does not make dull reading:

One must make an effort to grasp the altogether fascinating moral constitution of the passionate flâneur. The police—who here, as on so many of the subjects we are treating, appear as experts—provide the following indication in the report of a Paris secret agent from October 1798(?): “It is almost impossible to summon and maintain good moral character in a thickly massed population where each individual, unbeknownst to all the others, hides in the crowd, so to speak, and blushes before the eyes of no one.” The

case in which the flâneur completely distances himself from the type of *the philosophical promenader*, and takes on the features of the werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness, was fixed for the first time and forever afterward by Poe in his story "The Man of the Crowd." (Convolute M1,6)

Neither over-dressed nor leisurely, Walter Benjamin was not himself much of a *flâneur*. He spent little time on the asphalt. He died, morbidly and under mysterious circumstances, in 1940, and spent most of the last twenty years of his life in the reading room of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, where he gathered, assembled, and reassembled scraps of information about and interpretations of the *flâneur* for *Das Passagen-Werk*, *the Arcades Project*, which he never finished. An intellectual scrapbook of over 1,000 pages <<SHOW IT>>, it devotes 160 pages to Baudelaire and 40 to the *flâneur*.

These arcades of which Benjamin became the chronicler and philosopher, were lavish mercantile galleries, and another prevalent and striking feature of Paris of the Second Empire. They drew the *flâneur* inside, off the asphalt and out of the parks, to better views of more stylish shoppers. Few Arcades survived the rise of the department store. <<SLIDE 4>> Here is one, lavishly restored a few years ago.



Benjamin's take on the *flâneur's* leisure, doubtless his most evident, attractive, and irritating attribute, is typically subtle, suggestive, economic, and political. Passage 6, one last chunk of Benjamin, ignores the aesthetic considerations that have concerned us so far, and articulates matters of labor, value, and class.

There was the pedestrian who wedged himself into the crowd, but there was also the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure. He goes his leisurely way as a personality; in this manner he protests against the division of labor which makes people into specialists. He protests no less against their industriousness. Around 1840 [This is the kind of tidbit, both classy and preposterous, that Benjamin spent all those years in the *Bibliothèque National* unearthing, preserving, and contemplating] <<Around 1840> it was briefly fashionable to take tortoises for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the tortoises set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. (*Writer Modern Life*, 84)

When Department Stores succeeded the Arcade as the place where the bourgeoisie shopped, or, as he put it, satisfied their "intoxication for commodities," Benjamin followed the *flâneur* into them, pronouncing the Department store the *flâneur's* last promenade.

<<Flâneur Off Meridian>>

Let us now imagine this idle, discarded, and I hope some of you will agree, intriguing figure botanizing on the asphalt of our city, to see what his presence here might suggest about him, it, and us? Picture, if you will, this "passionate spectator of the passing moment" heading south from the main library, strolling

along and between the sidewalks of Pennsylvania and Meridian Streets in the direction of his "last promenade," the Department Stores.

It is fitting to see him with his back to the library, as this is one institution, and gathering place, to which the *flâneur* must always have been indifferent, if not antipathetic. It is too sedentary, too quiet, and too private to suit his purposes. Those in it are absorbed in books, and, now, computer screens, rather than one another, and they have probably not come dressed to display their wealth, their style, or their social standing. Benjamin may have spent years in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* reading and thinking about the *flâneur*, but there wouldn't have been any of them in there for him to look at! (On the other hand, the glorious atrium of our new library might well remind the *flâneur* of the Arcades!)

What would he make of the traffic rushing past him on those two busy streets, noisy, hurried, and impersonal, not to mention indifferent, unstylish, and menacing? (One must assume that it was the automobile that put an end to the *flâneur*, early in the last century.) If the boulevards themselves are hectic and hurried with traffic, the malls between them, wide, green, and inviting though they should be, are not crowded with pedestrians, purveyors of foods and trinkets, or citizens sitting on the benches watching the few passers by. Those with something to do, and therefore worth watching while they do it, are on their way to do it in cars! That leaves, in my experience, only the destitute, the retired, and the recently parental to enjoy these spaces. Without chance encounters with more vivid and intriguing strangers than this, the *flâneur* might just as well stay between the pages of a book!

Then there are all those monuments, designed to stir the memory rather than the imagination. The monumental buildings that surround them are designed to house bureaucrats, who are in no way intriguing or picturesque. These are not Baudelaire's "landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun." Our public spaces, the American Legion Mall, the Veterans Memorial Plaza, and the Indiana War Memorial Plaza, do not look, sound, or feel like parks, so they do not draw the crowds that would attract the *flâneur*.

(Benjamin suggested the *flâneur* originated in Paris rather than Rome because “that city [was] too full of temples, enclosed squares, national shrines, to be able to enter ... into the passerby’s dream” [M14].

Let us therefore, however improperly, hurry around the World War Memorial Building and cross University Square to the DePew Fountain. This elegant and frisky fountain might well detain a *flâneur*, though it seldom attracts enough passersby to make it worth his while to linger there. I wish it did! Especially when the sun is shining and the water is spraying, this lovely site has grace and style, and even, in its nascent nubility, a little tasteful eroticism.

As you can tell, this is one of my favorite places in the city. I do not suggest that Indianapolis should contrive a dozen spaces that would bring back, or over, the *flâneur*, but a few spaces that might bring out the *flâneur* in all of us would not go amiss! I was going to include a photograph of the fountain, on the assumption that while all of you know it, few of you have seen it recently, except through a windshield! I decided not to, in order to tempt you to park your cars and stroll around it.

Incidentally, the setting of this statue, University Park, was supposed to have been the campus of the State University. A university campus is one other place where the *flâneur* simply doesn’t belong, and wouldn’t have been found, except in books and the odd lecture!

I move on to one last Monument, the one with its own Circle. Like all the circles in Paris and London, this one is now filled with traffic, and, alas, likely to remain that way. Nor does Monument circle offer much in the way of architecture, though Christ Church Cathedral is a little gem, and the Chase Tower looks OK from a distance.

The two main features of the circle that I notice, from my frequent post in front of the South Bend Chocolate Company, are motorcycles and carriages—proof positive of the utter erasure of the *flâneur* from this time and this space. The motorcycles themselves are shiny and stylish, but also fast and loud. And I doubt that those who operate them, however elaborately attired, can be assigned subtle and elaborate mental processes.

The carriages are, of course, rented, and by tourists, which would have produced paragraphs of withering economic and social analysis from Benjamin. Furthermore, they are drawn ploddingly through the heavy traffic by draft horses. These are not the fine carriages and proud horses that caught the eye of Constantin Guys.

Curiously, the two places on the circle that my wife and I consider among the brightest spots in the city, because they provide such glorious music, would have no appeal for the *flâneur*, who listened only for snatches of conversation.

Since the original Department Stores have, along with Borders Bookstore, departed, I shall end our imagined stroll, and my paper, here. I doubt the *flâneur* would be grieving over the current woes further south, at Conseco Field House and Lucas Oil Stadium!

This will leave the shopping Mall, which has siphoned off the bourgeoisie that the Department Stores had drawn from the Arcades, for the Hour Exam:

“Part One, 30 minutes: ‘Discuss the proposition that the *flâneur*, as Baudelaire and Benjamin presented him, and the Impressionist painters depicted him, would not be found in the Circle City Mall, however much time he had to waste.’”