



Street Phantoms

One November evening, an urban wanderer absconds from his Midtown office to find a city draped in an unseasonably balmy darkness. Having nowhere he especially needs to go, he heads downtown, sidestepping a pair of women in matching mesh visors who are deciding whether to enter a minuscule ramen shop. Since securing a job, the *flâneur* can only haunt the streets by night, like a true ghost. Apparitions of half-registered forms flit by as he saunters along: a wispy haired man in an oversized hat and boxy overalls; a half-grinning girl in a fur-lined suede coat, completely bored by the voice droning through her cell phone; a one-legged man with bug-eyed glasses and a cigarette stump adhered to his lower lip; a small child, her pointing hand outstretched and her face lined with fugitive ice cream, led along by her mother, who is hunched and smiling.

Gliding onwards, plunging his hands into the pockets of his billowing overcoat, the *flâneur* thinks of his forebear Baudelaire, that cursed madman of early modernity. "Along the old street on whose cottages are hung," he mumbles to himself. Hung with what? He can't remember. But he skips the forgotten lines and continues: "I go alone to try my fanciful fencing, / Scenting in every corner the chance of a rhyme, / Stumbling over words as over paving stones, / Colliding at times with lines dreamed of long ago." Though he too treads "alone," traveling through memory as much as physical reality, the *flâneur* peoples the insular theater of his mind, taking in the heaving masses and placing them onstage. He recalls a sentence from one of Baudelaire's prose poems: "It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art." Like his predecessor he is also a paradoxical figure, both participant in and imaginative observer of the metropolitan throng, remaining an isolated, often melancholic individual while simultaneously striving to bestow a generous helping of empathy upon everyone and everything in close proximity. He grins

at a flock of children dashing past, is moved by a bespectacled man stooping over an ivory cane, and grows concerned when he encounters a strident lovers' quarrel. He is unhurried, retains a constant creative engagement with his environment, and is willing to envision himself as a minor character on the fringes of the action he scrutinizes.

And yet, seeing a young man hunchbacking across an intersection with his face illuminated by the pale blue beacon of an undersized computer monitor, and watching with alarm as he narrowly avoids a collision with a bike messenger, the wanderer can't help but doubt whether true *flânerie* is even possible in the contemporary city. Besides, *flânerie* has always been considered a decidedly Parisian pastime, perfect for the French capital's web of streets lined with structures that "do not seem made to be lived in, but are like stone sets for people to walk between," in the words of Walter Benjamin, who popularized the archetype of the *flâneur* in his writings about Baudelaire. Unlike freethinking France, the U.S. is propelled by its obsessive work ethic and proclivity for emphasizing individual gain while simultaneously restricting personal individuality—eccentric rambler be damned!



Then again, present day New York isn't quite Puritan Plymouth Colony, either. As a whole New York City is a vast, cosmopolitan metropolis, with the (for now) varied population and multi-layered history essential to the *flâneur's* sustenance. Unlike most of America, the Empire City is decidedly unfriendly to automobiles, making ambulation a very legitimate form of transportation. And while Manhattan's largely gridded layout may not be as alluring as, say, the labyrinthine Marais district in Paris, the knotty *melée* of the island's older southern portion readily induces a kaleidoscopic enchantment for the imaginative wanderer. And across the East River, at the end of the promenade in Brooklyn Heights, one can find, for example, a marker commemorating the defeat of George Washington's troops during the Battle of Brooklyn, the first major clash to take place after America announced its independence from Great Britain. An exploration of the surrounding blocks reveals the intricate chronological layering that has accumulated between then and now, with outcroppings of steel-clad structures leaping upwards between historic brownstones

built over a century after Washington's time, when the neighborhood was only a small hamlet.

For the *flâneuse*—yes, despite consistent omission by scholars, women stride observantly too—a fierce desire to understand her surrounding city as a time-patinaed palimpsest is equally as important as experiencing the fluidity of the present moment. While her vision pans across any given street, she adds a final layer to her surroundings: her own conception of them. In her essay "Street Haunting," Virginia Woolf notes that in these moments,

the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall.

Once we've read Woolf's essay, we can't encounter London without her vision being a layer in our experience. In the same way, Baudelaire's phantasmagorical, often melancholic conception of Paris remains highly influential to this day. More or less concurrently, his American contemporary Walt Whitman concocted a vision of an energetic, exhilarating New York that has proved similarly steadfast. While a generous paternal inheritance granted the young Baudelaire ample time to stroll (as well as the chance to pursue, for a short time, a dandy-ish, free-spending lifestyle), Whitman came to the field of loitering amidst turns as an editor, printer, schoolteacher, typesetter, house builder, bookstore manager, and journalist. In 1842, after two months as the chief editor of the *New York Aurora*, Whitman was fired, accused by the publishers of "indolence, incompetence, loaferism, and blackguard habits."

As he bound about the city during those years—taking residence in quarters all over Manhattan and Brooklyn—Whitman was defined equally by his willingness to work and his affinity for idling, a paradox that makes him the consummate American *flâneur*. Regardless of his profession at any given time, chronic loaferism informs Whitman's poetry. "Loaf" appears twice within the first five lines of "Song of Myself," and modulates the mystical progression of this famous poem. In a later work, "Sparkles from the Wheel," a meandering Whitman pauses to watch the "copious golden jets" of sparks that emanate from

a knife-grinder's wheel in "diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting" showers. Whitman has stopped to watch this enthralling street scene while "the city's ceaseless crowd moves on, the live-long day." Even more telling is that the "withdrawn" Whitman has joined "a group of children watching," which compels us to consider a child's wondrous view of the world as a central aspect of the *flâneur's* psyche. Finding his attention completely seized by the sparkling tableaux in front of him, Whitman, self-described as an "effusing and fluid . . . phantom curiously floating," suddenly finds himself to be corporeally present. Unlike the incessant crowd of New Yorkers, Whitman is an inquisitive, youthful ghost, an outsider who actualizes himself through concentrated physical examination. Hovering by his side, we discover that it is during such an "act of attention"—a phrase D. H. Lawrence used to define an individual poem—that human beings are most fully alive.

Beyond a shared tendency to imbue their poems with observations made while wandering, Whitman and Baudelaire are bound together by their residencies along society's fringes. For Baudelaire an inclination towards gloomy atmospherics and a willingness to concentrate on "low-class" figures makes this tendency clear. After squandering a great deal of his inheritance within a two-year period, Baudelaire was placed on a minuscule monthly allowance by his mother, leaving him impoverished and in debt for the rest of his life. Over a decade later, his reputation as a *poète maudit* surged when the Ministry of the Interior took him to trial over the vulgar content of several poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*; six of them were condemned until after World War II. And while he did seem to enjoy life on the margins, often playing up his erratic behavior, his death at age forty-six is commonly attributed to the syphilis he'd contracted from one of many dalliances with prostitutes. For Whitman outsider status arrived with the public's general inability to understand his oracular ambitions. He endured the inherent letdown of any self-proclaimed prophet and likely felt his homoerotic tendencies to be restricted despite his frank (and controversial) handling of physical desire in *Leaves of Grass*.

Today, these two poets appear clearly as shepherds of modernity, men whose styles of writing and living reached far into the future. And yet, both were clever enough to recognize that creative inspiration comes from all angles, and their shared status as card-carrying *flâneurs* indicates a penchant for peeling back the layers of the past. Though

there are innumerable ways to become an outsider, feeling unbound by time is certainly high among them. Decades later, in the prologue to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the exiled title character realizes that amidst his otherwise constraining underground existence, "instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of the nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around." Though Ellison's unnamed hero has been chased into isolation by specters of racial oppression, he reaches this disenchantment after extensively strolling through an increasingly nightmarish Harlem. While reflecting on the path that has led to his isolation, he pinpoints the anachronistic standing of all *flâneurs*, their shared need to find, loiter in, and examine fissures both temporal and literal.



Such fissures are still available to the contemporary *flâneur*, if he is looking hard enough for them. Even now, we find him gliding through what Whitman called "the mystical moist night air," reaching a gated square flanked by gothic townhouses. Two ax-wielding knights serve as sentinels of one of the buildings, a red carpet unfurling between them and leading to an entryway adorned with tiny angels. The *flâneur's* gaze scans upward, beyond the flickering candlelit streetlights and projecting oriel windows, along an ascendant rope of spiral molding towards a set of gargoyles perched on the building's upper cornice. When a man walking a goateed terrier passes by our protagonist, he realizes that he has been gawking for some time. He shakes his head and starts off again.

The *flâneur* strides past dimly lit bistros, well-heeled couples buried in superfluous scarves, the saloon where O. Henry supposedly wrote "The Gift of the Magi." He glances at a soirée inside the radiant, near-full Goethe Institut, and wishes his German were stronger. When his vision snaps forward he locks eyes with a stocky man in business casual. "You're an outlaw," the man mouths, though the *flâneur* doesn't believe it at first, having seen these words more than heard them. Wouldn't a true outlaw feel more imposing, a bit more self-assured? "Is it the boots?" he thinks to ask too late, having reached the cacophony of 14th Street, his prior reverie almost completely dissolved.



These days, though, the fissures are harder to find, as aesthetically tone-deaf elites and narcissistic starchitects continue their efforts to smooth over New York's prior eccentricities. While the movement towards a slick blandness impacts the city's most endangered residents as much as its architecture, the vapidness of many recently erected buildings is astounding. Venerable watering holes are superseded by glass boxes housing lonely rows of ATMs, historic bookstores are crushed by luxury towers, and hastily constructed condos replace centuries-old brownstones, their tenants shoved aside by covetous landlords. Even the High Line in Chelsea, a project that has successfully incorporated the city's historical armature and encourages strolling, doesn't allow for any spontaneous detours and seems governed as much by commercial purposes as by the imagination.

One does not need to self-identify as a *flâneur* to feel disenchanting with the sweeping tide of insipid tastelessness that has engulfed New York and countless other cultural epicenters. And yet, a discerning urban observer is not so easily deterred. The human imagination has always functioned as an instrument of self-preservation, a means of "pressing back against the pressure of reality," in the words of Wallace Stevens. So if the chaotic, swarming energy of New York is being unjustly hemmed in, we must search for ways to free it.

Strangely enough, pressing back effectively often involves letting go. To truly perceive a surrounding landscape one must temporarily abandon the self and recede into a new mindset that shuts off familiar facets of the brain while switching new ones on. As Virginia Woolf observes, any receptive wanderer must be willing to remove the fickle "shell-like covering" that protects his or her inner spirit, so that it can realize its potential as a "central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye." It is in this liberated state that the "the eye" becomes "sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances." The truly unfettered loiterer thus sees things both more and less clearly, toggling at will between accuracy and imagination. Accordingly, the undulating rusted form of a multimillion-dollar arena transforms into a barnacled ship washed ashore, a half-finished high-rise becomes a layer cake of hovering candles. One begins to notice latched peepholes in church doors,

slabs of curb inlaid with backlit glass disks, an entire avenue block lined with florists, their verdant outcroppings spilling into misty partitions that run along the sidewalk's edge.

Simultaneously, the unguarded Rambler drafts origin stories for each face that flutters by, completely intoxicated by the flourishing tangle of humanity. An aspiring cellist turned fifth grade teacher brushes by a mustachioed panhandler who was once a bayou fisherman, his face contorting before slipping out of sight. In these fleeting moments, we burrow inside the shelter of another life, going "far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others," in Woolf's words. There is an inherent vulnerability in this pursuit, a legitimate fear of feeling too much and suppressing oneself to the point of disappearance. Yet this Protean attribute—which allows urban wanderers to transform like the city that envelops them—encourages compassion, for the self and for others. No form of technology has been able to bolster our capacity for empathy, and none will eliminate our chronological and spatial limitations: we only have so much time on earth, and we can only be in one place at once. The *flâneur's* job has always involved pushing against these binding restraints, wandering about the Daedalian labyrinth of human life while trying to forge artistry from it. And though the endless quest to see more, to feel more, often pushes the *flâneur* outside of society's constant churn, sometimes it sends him upwards, above the city like a gargoyles atop a cathedral, allowing him to look backwards, forwards, and straight down on the ever-changing happenings below.