

Walking and literature make sense together: when we walk, we trace space, and when we write, we create it. A walk down a city block is sometimes like a skim over a page in a book: whether we are purposeful or meandering about it, we take in certain details and swish by some others, and we make up a plot simply by going from A to B.

Lots of us walk and lots of us read, and some of us do both at the same time. But there is a figure in literature who makes a literary art of the stroll: he is the flaneur. I say he is a 'he' because the literary flaneur is almost exclusively a male character: if he were a woman he may be forced to address things like violence or fear or that ubiquitous and unruly male gaze. Such distractions get in the way of the leisurely meandering of the stroll, and it is the flaneur's role to languidly observe the quirks and qualities of the street.

The first flaneur to appear in the literary world was probably Charles Baudelaire. He described the flaneur as "the perfect idler" and "the passionate observer", and he fit his own descriptions. Baudelaire is also a favourite subject of Walter Benjamin, who is perhaps the authority on the subject of the flaneur. His *Arcades Project* turns the flaneur into a subject of academic discourse and gives him a place on the street and in literature. Benjamin's flaneur is a drifter, a man of some means and with a predilection for leisure, and someone who feels most inspired by the vast associations and confusions of the urban crowd. As well, he is specifically located on the streets of Paris, where the concept and the creature were born. Paris, after it was remodeled in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by Georges-Eugene Haussmann, was the perfect setting for the curious citizen with comfortable shoes and time on his hands. Its arcades and its throngs of people made it ideal for walks, and some of the clearest and most useful theories of flaneurie have come from there.

Benjamin's image of the flaneur, wandering the streets idly and with a dandy's wardrobe, was the one that stuck in the popular imagination until later theorists of walking – also, notably, from Paris – tweaked the idea a little. Michel de Certeau and Guy DeBord politicized the pedestrian, and turned him from a passive observer to an activist of sorts. Without making him *do* anything in particular – Certeau's and DeBord's flaneur is just as directionless and whimsical as Benjamin's – these later theorists showed how the simple act of walking makes a statement as loud as words. Certeau argues that a city – its buildings, streets, and crowds – is a language in itself, and that by taking a walk, the flaneur preserves this language and thus preserves the space itself. Guy DeBord, co-founder of the Situationists, turned walking into art and activism. Spawning a whole movement – which endures today, in Paris and Toronto and elsewhere – Guy DeBord and the Situationists coined the term "psychogeography" and gave a whole vocabulary to walking and the streets. After the Situationists, the flaneur had a purpose if not an itinerary.

The flaneur has had a place in literature since before there was a word to describe him. One of the first authors to write down the pedestrian was William Wordsworth. His autobiographical poem "The Prelude" is an enormous, wandering epic that starts on the ground and climbs to the tops of mountains; the speaker's voice changes with the altitude, his memory is marked by points along the landscape, and the poem itself is a perfect illustration of psychogeography. John Thelwall, an eccentric friend of the Wordsworth circle, wrote what could be called the earliest pedestrian manifesto, an epic essay called *The Peripatetic*. Years after Wordsworth had written his version of the idealized pedestrian, Thomas De Quincey picked up where he left off and brought the wanderer to the city. While Wordsworth strolled past sheepfolds

and daffodils, De Quincey made his way through crowds and markets, and smelled the smog of London. In his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincy stalks the darker streets of the city and mingles with its riff raff. If Wordsworth made a name for the pedestrian in English literature, De Quincey turned him into a flaneur.

Reading De Quincey is like reading an eerily intimate guidebook to London. Often, the diaries of a flaneur can serve as biographies of a city; many of us only know Dublin because we know Leopold Bloom, but we know Dublin intimately because of him. Virginia Woolf drew up an imaginative map of London in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Walt Whitman walked through New York and brought it home to the people who read his poems; he captured the feeling of walking in a crowd and made eye contact with strangers on everyone's behalf. Frank O'Hara drew maps of New York with his lines about walking through it, and some of the beat poets – when they weren't off on road trips – immortalized San Francisco and New York. Wandering through the streets and crowds is one way of mapping these things out; the flaneur is a cartographer and the literature of walking is an atlas of the world.

Paris and New York have more literary flaneurs per capita than anywhere else, it seems. Maybe one of our writers will emerge with a whole vocabulary for the city, with High Park as a love story and the viaduct as an epiphany, the Island as a digression and Spadina as a conversation. Toronto doesn't have its own flaneur just yet, but the streets are crowded with details and spread out like an open book.

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