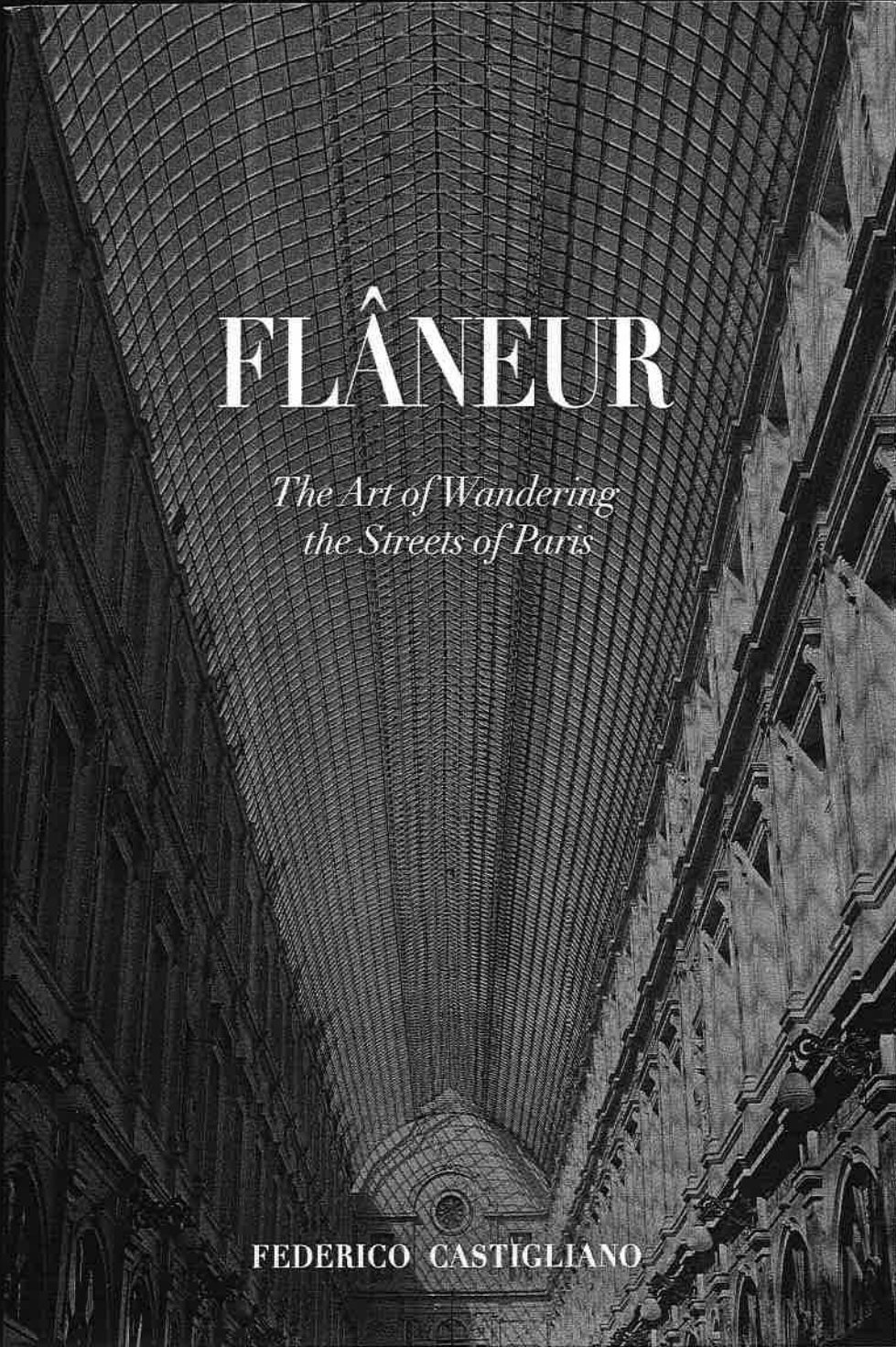




FLÂNEUR

*The Art of Wandering
the Streets of Paris*

FEDERICO CASTIGLIANO

projects himself on the façades of the buildings, on the shop windows sparkling in their sequence, on the faces of the people who pass by. It is precisely this ability to annul oneself, to come out from the stifling prison of the inner life, this is the science and the skill of the flâneur. "Not finding the road that you are looking for," – said Walter Benjamin, the writer who initiated the study of flânerie at the beginning of the twentieth century – "does not mean much. But to lose one's way in the city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling."¹

¹ Whoever decides to study the historical, social and cultural origins of the flâneur, is obliged to venture into treacherous territory, on the boundaries between literary criticism, urban studies and sociology. The posthumous publication of *Das Passagen-Werk* (1982), the collection of notes in which Walter Benjamin considered the flâneur as a representative figure of the modern era, did indeed instigate a stream of particularly fruitful studies, to the point that reference to the practice of flânerie spread, starting in the 1990s, in literary studies as well as in social sciences, relating to disparate disciplines. Despite all this, the flâneur remains an indistinct and elusive character who offers some resistance to those attempting to classify him in prevalently theoretical discourse.

2.

How to be a true flâneur

To be a true flâneur you must first forget every commonplace, ignore the banalities and the mundane things seen on television or read in the newspapers. The flâneur must be himself in the city just as the first man was himself before Nature. To his gaze the city appears as a grand spectacle without purpose, without meaning. Paris presents itself to the flâneur as the realm of the possible, the ideal place in which all experiences are theoretically achievable. In exploring a city, some prefer to follow a maniacal scheme, visiting roads or monuments in alphabetical order, moving around with a compass or with a pedometer. Others love to follow in a prosaic manner the instructions of tourist guides, or the suggestions they have heard from friends or acquaintances. Nevertheless, although it may appear paradoxical, in order to acquire a profound view of things, you must first of all move randomly. This is the

founding dogma and, I would dare say, the "gnoseological principle" of flânerie.

The flâneur moves through the city with neither a map nor a plan. He has to feel himself to be free and alone, ready and willing for the imponderable. The attitude of the true flâneur consists of not establishing a hierarchy between what most people consider important and what instead, normally, is not of any interest to anyone. There exists a mysterious energy in chance, a secret correspondence that connects the elements of the outside world with the inner being of the walking man. It is therefore indispensable to push oneself towards ever-new realities, to do that which the ordinary person, normally, would never do. One can, eyes closed, put a finger on the map and take oneself off to an unknown place. Or choose an underground or bus station completely randomly and explore the area in which it sits. The suburbs, wastelands or building sites are not to be neglected. River paths must be followed, airports and the great railway stations visited. The leaves on the trees, the greater or lesser flow of cars along a road, must be observed. Consecrate oneself to the reading of the faces and the gaits of passers-by.

At this point let us clear up a fundamental question: flânerie is not to be confused hastily with tourism, nor with the pathetic coming and going along the city streets. It would be ingenuous to think that. It would be puerile to believe that a simple walk along the Champs-Élysées might be defined as a flânerie. Most people are completely incapable of walking without a destination and exploring the undersides of

a city. It is difficult to find a true flâneur, i.e. a person capable of freeing himself from the chain of material requirements and needs to the point of acquiring a vision of the world that is not strictly functional. Only the flâneur is able to establish an intimate relationship with the city that leads him to adapt his own mood, his own interior being, to that of the place. The city belongs to the flâneur, but the flâneur becomes, in his turn, part of the city. There is something of him that remains, like a shadow, on the sculpted stone, on the pavements of the roads he walks along. The city is the home and territory of the flâneur. Along the boulevards of Paris, the crowds tire themselves among the shops – harried, loaded with anxiety and bags, while the flâneur walks lightly and observes the urban scene, almost ecstatic. His gaze encompasses a wider-ranging reality than that of the common man.

But at times there is something febrile, sick, in the flâneur's gait. He wanders through the city, seems to be on a quest for a chimera. His destination is confused or is unattainable. His steps become nervous, exasperated: he looks like a man on the run. The flâneur flees from the ordinariness of common life. He flees from the memories and the ghosts of his own interior. The glowing phenomenal appearance fills the empty cavity of his ego. The flâneur is a man cast out onto the street by a restlessness, by an impatience for the quest that haunts him and sets him apart from those who remain seated at tables simply enjoying their coffee. The flâneur wanders restless through the city like an untamed beast. He succumbs to the crowd like

a wreck to the waves, letting himself be overcome by the liberating breath of anarchy. There is something voluptuous, almost orgiastic, in this dissolution.

The flâneur is he who consecrates his own life to the instant, to ephemeral things. The treasures he searches for exist for a brief moment, but then, like spectacular butterflies, they fly away. Of the atmosphere he savors so enthusiastically today, tomorrow nothing will remain. The flâneur aspires to ubiquity, but there is always some detail, some aspect of the world that eludes him. His regret is in not being able to see all that is visible, not being able to live all imaginable experiences. You cannot enjoy a beautiful sunset simultaneously from the Sacré Coeur and from the top of the Tour Montparnasse. You cannot love two women at the same time. From the disparity between the immensity of the possible and the smallness of the human being there springs the torment and the energy of the flâneur. Persecuted by frustration, he is sentenced to a sort of perpetual motion.

There are some flâneurs who do nothing more than walk like madmen and use up all their energy in the simple gesture of wandering and observing. These are pure flâneurs. Others, instead, seek to attribute a further sense to their walking and cultivate artistic ambitions. The flâneur deludes himself into thinking that the beauty of the world might contain a message, something profound and ineffable for most people. Creative activity is thus an attempt to freeze the moment, to block the chaos. With a photograph one seeks to transform an instant into the eternal. With a novel

one seeks to trace a destiny, to attribute a higher sense to the random flow of events of which he is spectator. The flâneur is an author in search of his characters and his intrigue. Music too can be born of flânerie, if the steps of the walking man manage to fall into time with the melody of the city, with the urban rhythm. With its noises, with its silences.

Let us now consider the physical side of the flâneur. Walking ceaselessly, especially in the rainy and unwholesome climate of Paris, requires good physical shape. You have to go several hours without eating and without resting. The flâneur is an ascetic who manages to ignore things lacking in importance and to concentrate on what is essential. Rarely will anyone who is inclined to comforts and bad habits be capable of wandering aimlessly through the city for hours. The pace of the flâneur may be slow or fast, according to his mood and the weather in the city. There are moments in which you can experiment with a slow walk, so as to caress the ground of your most loved road with your foot. People should be considered with detachment if they get annoyed and complain when you are a nuisance for their progress. Even when he walks slowly against the current of the busy, the flâneur will never appear hesitant or, even worse, dull-witted like the simply idle person. There are other moments, however, when the flâneur feels the need to plant his feet firmly on the ground: advancing quickly, his shoulders rolling, his gaze fixed ahead, displaying confidence. People move to one side, intimidated, the road opens before him. In the specific case of contem-

porary Paris, in order to be able to practice flânerie with full tranquility it would be best to have a physical constitution of some robustness, so as to discourage assaults from delinquents and pick-pockets.

As for the look and style of clothing most appropriate for the flâneur, there could be some controversy over any proposed guidelines. In the past the flâneur was a dandy. In his desire to stand out from the crowds of clerks and workers, he sported a *recherché* style and expensive clothes. But nothing could be more absurd, today, than to seek to dress better than others in order to stand out from the mass. Especially in Paris, where everyone is a self-elected arbiter of good taste and fashion expert. Thus there are no particular recommendations regarding how the flâneur should dress. In my opinion, the best solution is to appear neither too smart, nor too casual, so as to pass unobserved. The flâneur is fundamentally a lone wolf – complete freedom of movement and autonomy in decision-making are the features that define his operations. Flânerie is therefore an activity to be carried out alone. In some very rare cases one can be a flâneur with a companion: in the company of a person with whom one has developed a profound communion of spirit and with whom one has therefore a feeling that is now close to solitude. Walking in a group, however, can never be considered as flânerie. Expressions such as, *Come for some flânerie with us through the shops of Marais*, or *Sunday: flânerie by bike on the Loire*, used by some travel agencies specialized in “cultured” or elite tourism, are completely absurd.

Flânerie is certainly not an activity that can be engaged in only in Paris. Indeed, the most common error consists of thinking that in order to enjoy a walk in freedom you have to go to a place renowned for tourism, or to some place of particular historical or artistic interest. Of course, the city where the flânerie is engaged in should ideally be large enough, and its structure sufficiently complex and various, so as to allow for full advantage to be taken of the activity. However, I have never come across, and I do not believe such a place exists, an urban area so ordinary or lacking in interest that flânerie is rendered impossible there. What distinguishes the flâneur, the element that elevates him above ordinary people, is indeed the particular relationship that he establishes with the space surrounding him. The very fact of wishing to travel continuously is if anything a symptom of an incapacity to appreciate the richness of details and therefore the splendor of the world. The day in which you decline an invitation to see a film or a concert in order to walk along roads that you already know, the day in which you say no to a journey to some island paradise so as to contemplate the greyness of your own city in the rain... well, that's the day you will know you are a true flâneur.

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