FLÂNEUR/FLÂNERIE

A figure popularized by CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, the *FLÂNEUR* is the representative figure of urban MODERNITY. French for one who strolls or saunters about on a wandering *FLÂNERIE*, the *flâneur* is associated with the act of street-walking in the modern city. He drifts among the street crowds, observing them and blending in while still maintaining a delicate mental detachment from them. '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', writes Baudelaire, is to experience the MODERNITY of the city as the *flâneur*.

This critical distance also marks the *flâneur* as an ideal figure for the modern urban poet, an idea supported by Baudelaire's continued use of the poet-*flâneur* in his own work and its profound influence on other MODERNISTS such as LOUIS ARAGON and ROBERT MUSIL and other aesthetic movements such as SURREALISM. WALTER BENJAMIN, the most famous modernist critic of Baudelaire, analyzed the *flâneur*'s relationship to the aesthetic and economic environment of nineteenth-century Paris. Analyzing Baudelaire's poetry, he argued that capitalism progressively diminished the spatial and mental autonomy of the *flâneur*, eventually rendering him obsolete. More recently, however, critics have begun to challenge the historical, gender, and ethnic specificity of the figure of the *flâneur*, suggesting a place for *flânerie* beyond either the confines of nineteenth-century Paris or the activities of white men.