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# The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity\*

Janet Wolff

## Abstract

The literature of modernity, describing the fleeting, anonymous, ephemeral encounters of life in the metropolis, mainly accounts for the experiences of men. It ignores the concomitant separation of public and private spheres from the mid-nineteenth century, and the increasing segregation of the sexes around that separation. The influential writings of Baudelaire, Simmel, Benjamin and, more recently, Richard Sennett and Marshall Berman, by equating the *modern* with the *public*, thus fail to describe women's experience of modernity. The central figure of the *flâneur* in the literature of modernity can only be male. What is required, therefore, is a feminist sociology of modernity to supplement these texts.

## The Experience of Modernity

The literature of modernity describes the experience of men. It is essentially a literature about transformations in the public world and in its associated consciousness. The actual date of the advent of 'the modern' varies in different accounts, and so do the characteristics of 'modernity' identified by different writers. But what nearly all the accounts have in common is their concern with the public world of work, politics and city life. And these are areas from which women were excluded, or in which they were practically invisible. For example, if the chief characteristic of modernity is the Weberian idea of increasing rationalisation, then the major institutions affected by this process were the factory, the office, and the government department. There have, of course, always been women working in factories; the growth of bureaucracies was also to some extent dependent on the development of a new female work force of clerks and secretaries. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to talk of this world as a 'male' world, for two reasons. First, the institutions were run by men, for men (owners, industrialists, managers, financiers), and they were dominated by men in their operation and hierarchical structure. Secondly, the development of the factory and, later, the bureaucracy coincides with that process, by now well documented, of the 'separation of spheres', and the increasing restriction of women to the 'private' sphere of the home and the suburb. (Hall 1981; Davidoff and Hall 1983) Although lower middle-class and working-class women continued to go out to work throughout the nineteenth century, the ideology of women's place in the domestic realm permeated the whole of society, at least in England, as evidenced by the working-class demand for a 'family wage' for men (Land 1980; Barrett and McIntosh 1980).<sup>1</sup> The public sphere, then, despite the presence of some women in certain contained areas of it, was a masculine domain. And insofar as the experience of 'the modern' occurred mainly in the public sphere, it was primarily men's experience.

In this essay, however, I shall not pursue the more orthodox sociological analyses of

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modernity, which discuss the phenomenon in terms of the rationalisation process (or perhaps the 'civilising process' - this, of course, places the event at a much earlier date). I want to consider the more impressionistic and essayistic contributions of those writers who locate the specifically 'modern' in city life: in the fleeting, ephemeral, impersonal nature of encounters in the urban environment, and in the particular world-view which the city-dweller develops. This focus is not foreign to sociology: the essays of Georg Simmel (1950; 1950b) immediately come to mind as studies in the social psychology of city life (1950a; 1950b), and the more recent sociology of Richard Sennett has revived interest in the diagnosis of the modern urban personality (1974). But a particular concern for the experience of modernity has also run through literary criticism; here its early prophet was Charles Baudelaire (1964), the poet of mid-nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin's (1973) essays on Baudelaire, written in the 1930's, provide a fascinating (though typically cryptic and fragmentary) series of reflections on Baudelaire's views on 'the modern'. As a starting-point for the investigation of this particular literature of modernity, I take Baudelaire's (1964, p 13) statement, in the essay written in 1859-60, *The Painter of Modern Life*:

By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.

This is echoed in Marshall Berman's (1983, p 15) recent book on the experience of modernity, which describes the 'paradoxical unity' of modernity:

A unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'

It also recalls Simmel's (1950b, p 409-10) account of the metropolitan personality:

The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli (Italics in original).

For Simmel, this is closely related to the money economy, dominant by the late nineteenth century. It is worth stressing that, although cities were not new in the nineteenth century, the critics (and defenders) of modernity believed that urban existence took on an entirely different character around the middle of the nineteenth century. Though any such dating is, to some extent, arbitrary (and will vary, anyway, from Paris to London to Berlin)<sup>3</sup>, I think it is useful to take this period of accelerated urbanisation, coupled with the transformations in work, housing and social relations brought about by the rise of industrial capitalism, as the crucial years of the birth of 'modernity'. Berman (1983, pp 16-17 and ch 1) gives modernity a pre-history, in those elements of the modern which began to appear in the period before the French Revolution and which found their expression in Goethe's *Faust* Bradbury and McFarlane (1976, p 36), who focus on the later period of 1890 to 1930, credit Baudelaire as an 'initiator' of modernism. But they are writing about the rather different phenomenon of modernism in the arts; although 'modernism' and 'modernity' are often conflated, I do not think anyone has claimed that Baudelaire was a modernist poet, in the sense of revolutionising poetic language and form.<sup>4</sup> There is no contradiction in locating the early experience of 'modernity' in the mid-nineteenth century, and its later expression in the arts at the end of the century.

The peculiar characteristics of modernity, then, consist in the transient and 'fugitive' nature of encounters and impressions made in the city. A sociology of modernity must, ultimately, be able to identify the origins of these new patterns of behaviour and experience, in the social and material aspects of the contemporary society. Simmel, as I have said, relates the metropolitan personality and what he calls the 'blasé attitude' to the money economy. Marshall Berman, beginning from Marx's account of the 'melting vision'<sup>5</sup>, seems to take over

at the same time Marx's analysis of the basis of this vision in the radical changes wrought in society by the bourgeoisie and the capitalist mode of production. Baudelaire, on the other hand, considers the phenomenon itself, and not its causes. It is not my task here to provide a sociology of modernity, and so I shall not assess competing accounts of the social or economic base of the modern experience, nor even examine very closely the adequacy of the conceptions of 'modernity' I discuss. What I do want to do is to take those accounts, which do describe, more or less sociologically, the modern urban experience, and consider them from the point of view of gender divisions in nineteenth-century society. To that extent, it does not really matter whether a particular account is adequately grounded in a social-historical understanding of the period, or even whether an account is internally consistent. (As Berman (1983, pp 133-42) shows, Baudelaire employs several different conceptions of 'modernity', as well as changing evaluations of the phenomenon).

Baudelaire's comments on modernity are most explicit in his writings on art criticism, though the same themes can be found in his poetry and in his prose poems. An early reference appears at the end of his review of *The Salon of 1845*, appended almost as an afterthought in the final paragraph. Here he commends contemporary painting, but laments its lack of interest in the present.

No one is cocking his ear to tomorrow's wind; and yet the heroism of *modern life* surrounds and presses upon us. We are quite sufficiently choked by our true feelings for us to be able to recognize them. There is no lack of subjects, nor of colours, to make epics. The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking, will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today and can make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots. Next year let us hope that the true seekers may grant us the extraordinary delight of celebrating the advent of the *new*. (1965a, pp 31-32. Italics in original.)

But the following year was no better, and again Baudelaire bemoans the absence of any really contemporary art, concerned with modern themes and characters in the way that Balzac's novels are. This time he devotes several pages - the final section of the review of *The Salon of 1846* - to the theme of 'the heroism of modern life'. Modern life here begins to acquire some identifiable features: the uniform drabness of the colours of people's dress, the modern phenomenon of the 'dandy' who reacts against this, the 'private subjects' which Baudelaire extols (1965b, pp 118-19) as far more 'heroic' than the public and official subjects of painting:

The pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences - criminals and kept women - which drift about in the underworld of a great city; the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and the *Moniteur* all prove to us that we have only to open our eyes to recognize our heroism... The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects.

These subjects are itemised in more detail in *The Painter of Modern Life* of 1859-60. By this time, Baudelaire has found a painter he considers equal to the task of depicting the modern: Constantin Guys, the subject of the essay. Guys' watercolours and drawings are generally considered to be talented but superficial works, of little importance in the history of art - though judgments like these do, of course, beg all sorts of questions about critical assessment. Berman (1983, p 136) dismisses Guy's "slick renderings of the 'beautiful people' and their world, and wonders that Baudelaire should think so highly of an art which 'resembles nothing so much as Bonwit's or Bloomingdale's ads'". Nevertheless, the essay is interesting for its expansion of the notion of 'modernity'. Guys, the 'painter of modern life', goes out into the crowd and records the myriad impressions of day and night.

He goes and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty... 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... If a fashion or the cut of a garment

has been slightly modified, if bows and curls have been supplanted by cockades, if *bavolets* have been enlarged and *chignons* have dropped a fraction towards the nape of the neck, if waists have been raised and skirts have become fuller, be very sure that his eagle eye will already have spotted it from however great a distance. (Baudelaire 1964, p 11)

This is the passage Berman dismisses as 'advertising copy'. But if it is an inventory of the superficial and the merely fashionable, then that is the point - the modern consciousness consists in the parade of impressions, the particular beauty appropriate to the modern age. And, more importantly, it is in this essay that Baudelaire suggests the formal features of the modern mind, which grasps 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent'. The dandy appears again, to be compared and also contrasted with Guys, similar in their concern for appearance and for personal originality, divided by the blasé and insensitive attitude of the former which Guys (according to Baudelaire (1964, pp 9 and 26-29)) abhors. Guys is the *flâneur*, in his element in the crowd - at the centre of the world and at the same time hidden from the world (Baudelaire 1964, p 9).

The *flâneur* - the stroller - is a central figure in Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris. The streets and arcades of the city are the home of the *flâneur*, who, in Benjamin's (1973, p 36) phrase, "goes botanizing on the asphalt". The anonymity of the crowd provides an asylum for the person on the margins of society; here Benjamin (1973, p 40 and 170)<sup>6</sup> includes both Baudelaire himself as a *flâneur*, and the victims and murderers of Poe's detective stories (which Baudelaire translated into French). For Benjamin, however, the city of the *flâneur* is historically more limited than for Baudelaire. Neither London nor Berlin offers precisely the conditions of involvement/non-involvement in which the Parisian *flâneur* flourishes; nor does the Paris of a slightly later period, when a 'network of controls' has made escape into anonymity impossible (Benjamin 1973, p 49, 128, 47). (Baudelaire, and Berman (1983, pp 150-155), on the contrary argue that the Paris increasingly opened up by Haussmann's boulevards, which broke down the social and geographical divisions between the classes, is even more the site of the modern gaze, the ambit of the *flâneur*).

The *flâneur* is the modern hero; his experience, like that of Guys, is that of a freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others. A related figure in the literature of modernity is the *stranger*. One of Baudelaire's (1967, p 33) prose poems, *Paris Spleen*, is entitled *L'étranger*. It is a short dialogue, in which an 'enigmatic man' is asked what or whom he loves - his father, mother, sister, brother? his friends, his country, beauty, gold? To all of these he answers in the negative, affirming that he simply loves the passing clouds. For Simmel, the stranger is not a man without attachments and involvements, however. He is characterised by a particular kind of 'inorganic' membership of the group, not having been a member from its beginning, but having settled down in a new place. He is 'the person who comes today and stays tomorrow' (Simmel 1950a, p 402); in this he differs from both the *flâneur* and Baudelaire's *étranger*, neither of whom will settle down or even make contact with those around him. But Simmel's (1950a, p 402) stranger is always a 'potential wanderer': "Although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going". These heroes of modernity thus share the possibility and the prospect of lone travel, of voluntary up-rooting, of anonymous arrival at a new place. They are, of course, all men.

## Women and Public Life

It is no accident, and no fault of a careless patriarchal use of language, that Richard Sennett's book on modernity is called *The Fall of Public Man*. The 'public' person of the eighteenth century and earlier, whose demise is charted, and who passed the time in coffee houses, paraded in the streets and at the theatre, and addressed strangers freely in public places, was clearly male. (Although Sennett (1974, p 86) says that it was quite proper to

address strange women in the parks or the street, as long as men did not thereby assume that a reply meant they might call on the woman at home, there is no suggestion that *women* might address strangers.) In the nineteenth-century city, no longer the arena of that public life, the *flâneur* makes his appearance - to be watched, but not addressed (Sennett 1974, pp 125-213). Men and women may have shared the privatisation of personality, the careful anonymity and withdrawal in public life; but the line drawn increasingly sharply between the public and private was also one which confined women to the private, while men retained the freedom to move in the crowd or to frequent cafés and pubs. The men's clubs replaced the coffee houses of earlier years.

None of the authors I have discussed is unaware of the different experience of women in the modern city. Sennett, (1974, p 217) for example, recognises that "(the) right to escape to public privacy was unequally enjoyed by the sexes", since even by the late nineteenth century, women could not go alone to a café in Paris or a restaurant in London.<sup>7</sup> As he says: "'The lonely crowd' was a realm of privatized freedom, and the male, whether simply out of domination or greater need, was more likely to escape in it". He notes, too, that in the earlier period of 'public life' women had to take a good deal more care about the 'signs' of their dress, which would be scrutinised for an indication of their social rank; in the nineteenth century, the scrutiny would be in order to differentiate 'respectable' from 'loose' women (Sennett 1974, p 68 and 166).<sup>8</sup> Simmel, whose essayistic sociology I have used very selectively, also paid much attention elsewhere to the condition of women. He wrote essays on the position of women, the psychology of women, female culture, and the women's movement and social democracy (Frisby 1981, pp 15, 17, 27, 139). He was one of the first to permit women in his private seminars, long before they were admitted as full students at the University of Berlin (Frisby 1981, p 28). Berman, too, considers women, acknowledging somewhat belatedly (on page 322 of his book) that they have a totally different experience of the city from that of men. He suggests that Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* gives a "fully articulated woman's view of the city" (Berman 1983, p 322). Published in 1961, Jacobs' book describes her own daily life in the city - a life of neighbours, shopkeepers, and young children, as well as work. The importance of the book, says Berman (1983, p 323), is that it reveals that "women had something to tell us about the city and the life we shared, and that we had impoverished our own lives as well as theirs by not listening to them till now".

The problem is, though, that it is also the literature of modernity which has been impoverished by ignoring the lives of women. The dandy, the *flâneur*, the hero, the stranger - all figures invoked to epitomise the experience of modern life - are invariably male figures. In 1831, when George Sand wanted to experience Paris life and to learn about the ideas and arts of her time, she dressed as a boy, to give herself the freedom she knew women could not share:

So I had made for myself a *redingote-guérite* in heavy gray cloth, pants and vest to match. With a gray hat and large woollen cravat, I was a perfect first-year student. I can't express the pleasure my boots gave me: I would gladly have slept with them, as my brother did in his young age, when he got his first pair. With those little iron-shod heels, I was solid on the pavement. I flew from one end of Paris to the other. It seemed to me that I could go round the world. And then, my clothes feared nothing. I ran out in every kind of weather, I came home at every sort of hour, I sat in the pit at the theatre. No one paid attention to me, and no one guessed at my disguise... No one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me; I was an atom lost in that immense crowd. (Quoted in Moers 1977, p 12).

The disguise made the life of the *flâneur* available to her; as she knew very well, she could not adopt the non-existent role of a *flâneuse*. Women could not stroll alone in the city.

In Baudelaire's essays and poems, women appear very often. Modernity breeds, or makes visible, a number of categories of female city-dwellers. Among those most prominent in these texts are: the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the



passing unknown woman. Indeed, according to Benjamin, the lesbian was for Baudelaire the heroine of modernism; certainly it is known that he originally intended to give the title *Les lesbiennes* to the poems which became *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Benjamin 1973, p 90; Richardson 1975, p 12). (Yet, as Benjamin (1973, p 923) also points out, in the major poem about lesbians of the series, *Delphine et Hippolyte*, Baudelaire (1975, p 224, concludes by condemning the women as "lamentable victims", bound for hell. The prostitute, the subject of the poem *Crépuscule du Soir* and also discussed in a section of *The Painter of Modern Life* (Baudelaire 1967, p 185; 1964, pp 34-40), elicits a similarly ambivalent attitude of admiration and disgust (the poem comparing prostitution to an anthill, and to a worm stealing a man's food). More unequivocal is Baudelaire's (1975, p 166; 1967, pp 63-65) sympathy for those other marginal women, the old woman and the widow; the former he "watches tenderly from afar" like a father, the latter he observes with a sensitivity to her pride, pain and poverty. But none of these women meet the poet as his equal. They are subjects of his gaze, objects of his 'botanising'. The nearest he comes to a direct encounter, with a woman who is not either marginal or debased, is in the poem, *À Une Passante* (Baudelaire 1975, p 170). (Even here, it is worth noting that the woman in question is in mourning - *en grand deuil*.) The tall, majestic woman passes him in the busy street; their eyes meet for a moment before she continues her journey, and the poet remains to ask whether they will only meet again in eternity. Her return of his gaze is confirmed in the last line: "O toi que j'eusse aimée, o toi qui le savais". Benjamin's interpretation of this poem is that it is the very elusiveness of the passing encounter which fascinates Baudelaire (1973, p 45): "The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first sight as love at last sight". The meeting is characterised by the peculiarly modern feature of 'shock' (Benjamin 1973, p 125; also pp 118 and 134). (But if this is the rare exception of a woman sharing the urban experience, we may also ask whether a 'respectable' woman, in the 1850s would have met the gaze of a strange man.)

There is, in any case, an apparently common assumption that women who do participate in 'the public' on anything like the same terms as men somehow manifest masculine traits. One of the widows observed by Baudelaire (1967, p 64) is described as having mannerisms of a masculine character. His mixed admiration for the lesbian has much to do with her (supposed) 'mannishness', according to Benjamin (1973, p 90). Benjamin (1973, p 93) himself explains that, as women in the nineteenth century had to go out to work in factories, "in the course of time masculine traits were bound to manifest themselves in these women". Even Richard Sennett (1974, p 190) (without much evidence, and despite the benefit of contemporary perspectives on the construction of gender) claims that women at the end of the nineteenth century who were "ideologically committed to emancipation" dressed like men and developed bodily gestures which were 'mannish'. But perhaps this perception of the 'masculine' in women who were visible in a man's world is only the displaced recognition of women's overall exclusion from that world. Baudelaire's general views on women, in his letters and his prose, are illuminating as a context for his poetic expressions of fascination with 'women of the city'. This is his own admission, in a letter to one of the women he idolised and idealised: "I have hateful prejudices about women. In fact, *I have no faith*; you have a fine soul, but, when all is said, it is the soul of a woman". (Letter to Apollonie Sabatier, quoted in Richardson 1975, p 14. *Italics in original*). Woman as non-person is extolled in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

Woman, in a word, for the artist in general, and Monsieur G in particular, is far more than just the female of Man. Rather she is a divinity, a star, which presides at all the conceptions of the brain of man; a glittering conglomeration of all the graces of Nature, condensed into a single being; the object of the keenest admiration and curiosity that the picture of life can offer its contemplator. She is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching, who holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance...Everything that adorns woman, everything that serves to show off her beauty, is part of herself; and those artists who have made a particular study of this enigmatic being dote no less on all

the details of the *mundus muliebris* than on Woman herself... What poet, in sitting down to paint the pleasure caused by the sight of a beautiful woman, would venture to separate her from her costume? (Baudelaire 1964, pp 30-31).

The classic misogynist duality, of woman as idealised-but-vapid/real-and-sensual-but-detested, which Baudelaire displays (and to which his biographers attest) is clearly related to the particular parade of women we observe in this literature of modernity.

But the other authors I have discussed were not misogynists; they were or are, on the contrary, sympathetic to women's condition and to the cause of women's emancipation and equality with men. We need to look deeper than particular prejudices to explain the invisibility of women in the literature of modernity. The explanation is three-fold, and lies in (1) the nature of sociological investigation, (2) the consequently partial conception of 'modernity', and (3) the reality of women's place in society. Much of this has been discussed in the recent work of feminist sociologists and historians, but it is worth rehearsing here in the specific context of the problem of modernity.

## The Invisibility of Women in the Literature of Modernity

The rise and development of sociology in the nineteenth century was closely related to the growth and increasing separation of 'public' and 'private' spheres of activity in western industrial societies. The condition for this was the separation of work from home, with the development of factories and offices. By the mid-nineteenth century, this had made possible the move to the suburbs in some major cities (for example, the industrial cities of England, like Manchester and Birmingham (Spiers 1976; Davidoff and Hall 1983)). Although women had never been engaged on equal terms (financial, legal or otherwise) with men, this physical separation put an end to their close and important involvement in what had often been a family concern - whether in trade, production, or even professional work. Their gradual confinement to the domestic world of the home and the suburb was strongly reinforced by an ideology of separate spheres (Hall 1979). At the same time, a new public world was in process of formation, of business organisations, political and financial establishments, and social and cultural institutions. These were almost invariably male institutions, though women might occasionally be granted some sort of honorary membership or allowed minimal participation as guests on particular occasions. In the second half of the century, the rise of the professions excluded women from other expanding areas of activity, some of which they had traditionally been engaged in (like medicine), some of which had already excluded them (like the law and academic occupations), and some of which were new (the education of artists, for example). The two major implications for sociology as a new discipline were, first, that it was dominated by men, and secondly, that it was primarily concerned with the 'public' spheres of work, politics and the market place (Stacey 1981; Delamont 1980, Ch 1). Indeed, women appear in the classic texts of sociology only insofar as they relate to men, in the family, or in minor roles in the public sphere. As David Morgan (1981, p 93) has said about Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

It cannot have escaped many people's attention, at least in recent years, that women are very much hidden from this particular history; the lead parts - Franklin, Luther, Calvin, Baxter and Wesley - are all played by men and women only appear on the stage fleetingly in the guise of German factory workers with rather traditional orientations to work.

And, to the extent that the 'separation of spheres' was a very incomplete process, many women still having to go to work to earn a living (though a very high proportion of these did so in domestic service), even these women, in their factories, mills, schools and offices, have been invisible in traditional sociological texts. The public institutions in which they did participate were rarely those accorded most importance by analysts of contemporary society.



This also meant that the particular experience of 'modernity' was, for the most part, equated with experience *in* the public arena. The accelerated growth of the city, the shock of the proximity of the very rich and the destitute poor (documented by Engels - and in some cities avoided and alleviated by the creation of suburbs), and the novelty of the fleeting and impersonal contacts in public life, provided the concern and the fascination for the authors of 'the modern', sociologists and other social commentators who documented their observations in academic essays, literary prose or poetry. To some extent, of course, these transformations of social life affected everyone, regardless of sex and class, though they did so differently for different groups. But the literature of modernity ignores the private sphere, and to that extent is silent on the subject of women's primary domain. This silence is not only detrimental to any understanding of the lives of the female sex; it obscures a crucial part of the lives of men, too, by abstracting one part of their experience and failing to explore the interrelation of public and private spheres. For men inhabited both of these. Moreover, the public could only be constituted as a particular set of institutions and practices on the basis of the removal of other areas of social life to the invisible arena of the private.<sup>9</sup> The literature of modernity, like most sociology of its period, suffers from 'what has recently been called 'the oversocialisation of the public sphere' (Gamarnikow and Purvis 1983, p 2). The skewed vision of its authors explains why women only appear in this literature through their relationships with men in the public sphere, and via their illegitimate or eccentric routes into this male arena - that is, in the role of whore, widow or murder victim.<sup>10</sup>

The real situation of women in the second half of the nineteenth century was more complex than one of straightforward confinement to the home. It varied from one social class to another, and even from one geographical region to another, depending on the local industry, the degree of industrialisation, and numerous other factors. And, although the solitary and independent life of the *flâneur* was not open to women, women clearly *were* active and visible in other ways in the public arena. Sennett, as I have already mentioned, refers to the importance of careful attention to dress which women must maintain, a point made much earlier by Thorstein Veblen (1970, p 126):

It has in the course of economic development become the office of the woman to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view. It has come about that obviously productive labor is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women's dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work.

Here, the particular visibility of women is that of sign of their husbands' position. Their important role in consumption is stressed:

At the stage of economic development at which the women were still in the full sense the property of the men, the performance of conspicuous leisure and consumption came to be part of the services required of them. The women being not their own masters, obvious expenditure and leisure on their part would redound to the credit of their master rather than to their own credit; and therefore the more expensive and the more obviously unproductive the women of the household are, the more creditable and more effective for the purpose of reputability of the household or its head will their life be (Veblen 1970 pp 126-127).

The establishment of the department store in the 1850s and 1860s provided an important new arena for the legitimate public appearance of middle-class women (Thorne 1980, p 236). However, although consumerism is a central aspect of modernity, and moreover mediated the public/private division, the peculiar characteristics of 'the modern' which I have been considering - the fleeting, anonymous encounter and the purposeless strolling - do not apply to shopping, or to women's activities either as public signs of their husband's wealth or as consumers.

We are beginning to find out more about the lives of women who were limited to the

domestic existence of the suburbs (Davidoff and Hall 1983; Hall 1982); about women who went into domestic service in large numbers (Davidoff 1974); and about the lives of working-class women (Pinchbeck 1977; Alexander 1976). The advent of the modern era affected all these women, transforming their experience of home and work. The recovery of women's experience is part of the project of retrieving what has been hidden, and attempting to fill the gaps in the classic accounts. The feminist revision of sociology and social history means the gradual opening up of areas of social life and experience which to date have been obscured by the partial perspective and particular bias of mainstream sociology.

It is not at all clear what a feminist sociology of modernity would look like. There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century. Nor is it appropriate to reject totally the existing literature on modernity, for the experiences it describes certainly defined a good deal of the lives of men, and were also (but far less centrally) a part of the experience of women. What is missing in this literature is any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of 'the modern' in its private manifestations, and also of the very different nature of the experience of those women who *did* appear in the public arena: a poem written by 'la femme passante' about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps.

## Notes

\*This article was written during a period of research leave, funded by the ESRC in connection with a larger project investigating nineteenth-century middle-class culture. The ideas developed here, while not central to that project, draw on work done in relation to that research.

<sup>1</sup> The ideology of separate spheres, and even of the equation of male/public/rational has persisted to the present day, its recent sociological expression being found in Parsonian theories of the family (Parsons 1956).

<sup>2</sup> For Baudelaire's other writings on modernity, see below.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin (1973, pp 128-131), for example, argues that conditions in the three cities were significantly different.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Joanna Richardson, translator of Baudelaire's poems, says in her introduction of *Baudelaire: Selected Poems* (1975, p 20): "Les Fleurs du Mal may not be technically original. The only poem in which Baudelaire really seems to have invented his rhythm is *L'invitation au voyage*. His one revolutionary innovation is in the versification, it is the complete suppression of the auditive caesura in a certain number of lines".

<sup>5</sup> The title of his book, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, is a quotation from the *Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>6</sup> However, elsewhere Benjamin (1975, p 69) argues that Baudelaire is *not* the archetypal *flâneur* (1973, p 69).

<sup>7</sup> However, there were exceptions to this: see Thorne (1980, p 243).

<sup>8</sup> In these references to Sennett's book, I am again considering fairly uncritically (from any other point of view) a text on modernity. For a critical review of his use of evidence, his historical method, and his sociological explanation for the changes in manners, see Wolin (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Sennett (1974, pp 66-67) does discuss, in passing, some changes in the home - for example, the development of a 'private' form of dress - but his central focus is on the public sphere, and he does not present a systematic account of the private or of the relationship between the two spheres.

<sup>10</sup> References to the murder victim, whom I have not discussed, originate in Poe's detective stories, which greatly influenced Baudelaire. (See Benjamin 1973, pp 42-44).

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