

PARIS

CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

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Capital of Alienation



IN 1859, from the island of Jersey, Victor Hugo wrote to Charles Baudelaire about *Les Fleurs du mal*: “I fully understand your philosophy (for, like all poets, you have a philosophy). I more than understand it, I accept it, but I shall cling to my own. I never said, Art for Art’s sake; I always said, Art for progress. At bottom, this comes to the same thing, and your mind is too penetrating not to realize this. Forward! is the slogan of progress. It is always the cry of Art.”

Was ever a literary judgment more bizarre than this one? Progress! And to speak of such a thing in a letter to Baudelaire, who believed that “the great industrial folly” had ruined “the pleasure of dreaming” and that “the great chimera of modern times” was “the inflatable monster of perfectibility and progress”; who called the belief in progress “a lazy man’s doctrine, a doctrine for *Belgians*”; and who wrote to Manet in June 1865 that he didn’t “give a fig about the human race” and to his mother that he hoped “to set the entire human race against me . . . that would give me pleasure enough to console me for everything else.” Three years earlier, moreover, in August 1862, he had described Hugo’s *Les Misérables* as “a vile and inept book” and added: “About this subject I’ve demonstrated that I know how to lie.”¹

The vaguely social-democratic idea of modernity on which Hugo prided himself was antithetical to Baudelaire’s idea of Parisian modernity and, in a roundabout way, rather similar to Haussmann’s. For Haussmann, modernity meant the apotheosis of standardized, homoge-



nized urbanism, or, to put it another way, the victory of a scientific moral order. To be sure, Hugo's modernity was far milder than Haussmann's, but between these two worldviews there was a clear family resemblance. Neither, moreover, shared the sense of dispossession and alienation that made its first appearance in the work of the Parisian Baudelaire long before Vienna, Prague, or Berlin had even heard of modernism.

With Baudelaire, then, we come to a third episode in the history of the mythical definition of the self, of the cosmogonic Parisian interpretation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European individualism. What is an individual? Do individuals express themselves through civil society or against it? Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Perhaps as early as 1750, and certainly by 1830, mythified Paris was offering a variety of responses to these vexing questions.

To restate the sequence, in the years leading up to the Revolution, in the Enlightenment Paris of salons and salonnières, in the capital of the Republic of Letters, individualism and the public good were initially seen as complementary values. The Jacobins of 1789 preserved that unifying civic ideal, which remains to this day, though in a much attenuated form, the touchstone of French political culture, just as the pluralistic, multicultural, yet still republican Madisonian interpretation of the U.S. Constitution of 1787 (also in a much attenuated form) remains the touchstone of American political culture.

Then, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Paris witnessed the emergence of a new form of individualism, an individualism charged with the energy needed to build a new world—call it Promethean individualism. This was the Paris of the triumphant bourgeoisie, a Paris that had broken with its medieval past. It was this Paris that found prostitution so threatening: indeed, it was precisely because prostitution symbolized the terrifying survival of the rejected past that Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet combated it so strenuously.

Before 1848 this second individualism found relatively tepid political expression in the July Monarchy, which took tentative steps to reorganize the French economy on the basis of individuated economics—

or capitalism, if you will. And after 1848 a far more potent form of this same individualism was incorporated into the Hausmannian ideal. Hausmann's railway stations and arrow-straight boulevards symbolized the expansion of individual capabilities and the rationalized deployment of individual energies. The ultimate expression of this new ideal was the Universal Exposition of 1889, which made the Eiffel Tower the very symbol of Paris. The reign of the stock exchange also began around this time, as the "cash nexus" began to influence all aspects of urban life: in 1863 art lovers, consumers of commercialized sexual favors as well as consumers of commercialized art, could gape at Manet's *Olympia*, which depicted a woman who perhaps could not be bought but who certainly could be rented by the hour.

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This same self-assured individualism gave literary Paris young Rastignac's celebrated (and endlessly cited) apostrophe to the heartless, multifarious capitalistic capital of Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1834) as he looks down on the city from the heights of Père-Lachaise. Below, he sees the Faubourg Saint-Germain and its antithesis, the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève—the one fabulously noble, the other unspeakably wretched, yet each in its own way a monument to self-interest. (Indeed, one could see the Pension Vauquer on today's rue Tournefort as a salon of sorts, whose habitués were prepared to do whatever it took to get ahead.)

Parisian individualism had transformed Rastignac, the innocent young provincial; and the prestige of Paris in the early decades of the nineteenth century hinged in no small measure on its supposed ability to transform ordinary men (and women, such as George Sand or the socialist writer Flora Tristan) into world-historical artists and visionaries. With his "whiff of grapeshot" on the steps of the church of Saint Roche in 1795, Bonaparte started to become Napoleon; just as his self-appointed intellectual nemesis, Chateaubriand, on his return to Paris from the banks of the Mississippi, chose to become René, the embodiment par excellence of the "mal du siècle." When the painter Ingres declared that his role model, Raphael, had been of divine and Christlike essence, he was also making a statement about his own place in the world and about the amplifying power of Parisian spectacle.

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EVERY TRIUMPHAL MYTH engenders opposition, and the triumphal myth of Parisian individualism was no exception. It engendered a third (and Baudelairean) phase in the history of Parisian individualism: the phase of self-alienation as a reaction to the commodity fetishism of a city whose bourgeois modernity left the poet feeling stripped of his humanity. (And by "poet" I mean what Baudelaire meant, namely, any human being who shared the pain of his *semblables et frères*, of all humanity.)

Baudelaire, but also Flaubert. Baudelaire, the artist-*flâneur* who wrote *Les Fleurs du mal* (Flowers of Evil), remained in spite of everything Parisian to the core, and was intimately tied to the new Paris, which, however much he detested it, he could not do without. By contrast, Frédéric Moreau, the hero of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869), eventually became bored with everything, including Paris. A native of Nogent-sur-Marne (that is, of nowhere), Frédéric ultimately returns there to while away his last years in ennui after spending ten equally tedious years in the capital. It is noteworthy, moreover, that the (anti)hero of this greatest of French novels makes his first appearance as he is about to leave the city. For Flaubert, absence marks the experience (or non-experience) of love, politics, and the city. It is not in Paris but in the forest of Fontainebleau that Frédéric and his mistress Rosanette experience the *journées* of June 1848.

The advent of alienation thus marks a third era in the mechanism of Parisian myth. This theme of alienation, of denaturing, was coupled with praise for marginal individuals of many kinds: not only the *poète maudit*, Baudelaire's "swan," but anyone unable to feel at home in modernity. Indeed, this myth of alienated man had wide import for the history of nineteenth-century Paris: it figures as the last-born of the great Parisian myths. It is a myth that still touches us today, and perhaps more so than any other aspect of the Parisian culture of that time, because it survives in two distinct forms: in our existential fear of boredom and our anxieties; but also, and more subtly, in the curious way it has been adapted by the indestructible, all-encompassing entrepreneurial capitalism of our time. The ideal twenty-first-century "manager" no longer resembles the acquisitive Rastignac. Today's young urban professional is more likely to rent property than to own it; the modern-day



Frédéric Moreau is reconciled to his fate. He is adaptable, active, and easy-going. He is "plugged in" to many different "networks" and prefers to avoid obstacles rather than to confront them. He adjusts his economic strategy in response to unpredictable events, and his fluid personality is also a work in progress, forever shifting to suit the changing needs of the moment. In short, a sensibility that emerged in Paris in the 1850s and that was seen in the 1890s as a pathology of modernism has been transformed by the "regenerated" capitalism of the new millennium into a civic virtue.²

In another context, the mid-nineteenth-century myth of alienation can be viewed as occupying the middle ground between two distinct eras in the long history of Paris—the era of ambient myth (from 1750 onward) and the subsequent era of phantasmagoria (after the 1890s). The advent of an insuperable sense of self marked a first turning point in the history of the capital: from 1750 on, every great Parisian myth had led inexorably to another—from Paris, capital of the modern self and of the Republic of Letters, to Paris, capital of revolution, to the Paris of Haussmannian modernity, crime, women, and fashion. By contrast, the new myth of Paris, capital of alienation and self-doubt, though it did occasion various responses (modern managerialism being ironically one of them), did not engender any counter-myth as its predecessors had done. Baudelaire railed against his times, but he did not hold out the prospect of a new or better world. (I shall come back to this point.) He simply pointed out that Hugo was in some ways a fool: a fool of genius, perhaps, and of national significance; no doubt an incomparable technician, but still a fool. Furthermore, it was of little concern to Baudelaire whether or not anyone agreed with him about this.

This set of attitudes is of general significance for Western culture, but it can also be seen as marking an important step in the demythification of Haussmannian Paris, the Paris of the bourgeoisie. It takes us toward the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, which the Surrealists at once devalued and overvalued. And more mundanely, it also takes us toward the politically demythified Paris of the 1950s and 1960s, when leading Paris intellectuals turned their backs on the city—no longer the carrier of a world-message—and focused instead on the Third World, to the detri-



ment, as it happens, of both the Third World and the capital of France. Abandoned by those who should have wished to defend it, this great city was delivered into the hands of indifferent politicians and avid speculators, whose great collective achievement was the brutalization of the city, with the banks of the Seine transformed into expressways and the skyline defaced by high-rise office towers at the Gare Montparnasse and the Porte d'Italie. We may hope, incidentally, that this sad phase in Parisian history has finally come to an end with the completion of the regrettable, soulless, and depressing Bibliothèque Nationale de France-François Mitterrand.

ALIENATION AND DENATURING: the sense of living a life that is not one's own. Louis XIV's Bishop Bossuet also used the word "alienation," which strikes us as so apt for capturing the state of mind of certain Parisians during the Second Empire, but in a quite different sense: "O, mortal body, with which I can be neither at war nor at peace, for I must forever be coming to terms with it and forever spurning those terms! O, inconceivable union, and no less surprising alienation!" At issue here is the classic religious, and later Cartesian, distinction between soul and body.

The word "alienation" can also be found in Emile Littré's dictionary of the 1860s, but again the definition is not useful. "Alienation," Littré tells us, can refer to the alienation of a piece of property (as in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, book 1, chapter 4) or to a separation, in the sense of an aversion that one feels, not from one's true nature, but, classically, from others.

Despite this gap in the lexicon, in 1850 alienation as we understand it today was not an entirely new theme in Paris. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and many others had felt isolated in the capital. Recall from Chapter 2 that in 1788 Vittorio Alfieri compared Paris to a "fetid sewer," and that in 1790 the city made N. M. Karamzin feel like "but a grain of sand in a dizzying torrent or whirlwind."³ For these men, however, the situation they deplored was more sociological than metaphysical. Outside of Paris skittish poets still hoped to return to a state of grace by taking solitary walks during which they would

achieve harmony with daffodils (why not?) and perhaps with humanity as well.

The experience of alienation in nineteenth-century Paris was far more profound. Alfred de Musset, in a sonnet published in 1829, was perhaps the first writer to exhibit a modern and Parisian sense of alienation, to which he gave voice by describing the Paris of his dreams, a more personal, individualized Paris radically different from the vast, troubling, overwhelming, unnatural city that the capital had become.⁴ Within twenty years such anxieties had become commonplace, as Théophile Gautier, the fine craftsman of art for art's sake, noted in 1847 in an essay on the Bals de l'Opéra, the lavish dances that Manet would later portray in a famous painting:

At the opera, one must give up all claim to individuality, all privacy. You are but an atom in a whirlwind. You may be handsome or hideous, stupid or witty, clad in rags or in satin; you may dance like a bear or like Carlotta Grisi in *La Favorite*. It's all the same. Stay, go: your presence or absence makes no difference. Even if your lungs were made of brass, your voice would be lost in the general tumult. Though you were Hercules, you could not struggle against the current. You must surrender and stay in line. Therein lies the beauty of the Bals de l'Opéra as well as the drawback: there are so many people around that no one is really there.

Twenty years later the Goncourts recorded the view of a boulevardier named Lavoix: "In Paris one is really only a third of oneself. So many impressions, ideas, thoughts, and things come to you from other people that I go to Brittany to replenish my personality and become entirely myself again."⁵

Writers were quick to exploit this latest existential deficiency in a variety of ways. For Jules Michelet, the Paris crowd had been an ambiguous source of riches: the alert Parisian could learn something by observing it, but from a distance. "In order to judge movement," he wrote, "you have to be both in it and not in it. You have to be both *solitary* and *informed*. You have to see the crowd without becoming caught up in its whirl and made dizzy by it . . . In the midst of Paris there are populous solitudes. There you can experience great impressions."⁶

Charles de Sainte-Beuve's character Joseph Delorme also experienced





the crowds, but in a different way: "Soon, in the unfamiliar crowd, [he] would drown his sorrow." But even this, Victor Hugo's friend and enemy Sainte-Beuve was quick to add, would offer only momentary relief. What came next? Only the sound of singing, loud voices, drunken brawls,

Ou qu'amours en plein air, et baisers sans vergogne,
Et publiques faveurs.

Je rentre: sur ma route on se presse, on se rue;
Toute la nuit j'entends se traîner dans ma rue
Et hurler les buveurs.

(Or outdoor lovemaking, shameless kisses,
and public favors.

I head home: on my way people gather in crowds or hasten along.

All night long I hear drinkers loitering in my street
and screaming.)⁷

And from the crowd as enemy of the self it was but a short step to the theme of urban solitude, the Dickensian paradox of loneliness in a crowded city—loneliness of an unprecedented kind and therefore all the more painful, loneliness henceforth characteristic of the bruised sensibilities of a speeded-up Paris (ironically) organized by Haussmann in such a way as to promote more rapid transit.

Balzac, for his part, often interpreted this isolation in terms of Catholic "familyism": it was foreordained, for example, in the *Human Comedy* that women could find fulfillment only in the bosom of the family. Spinsterhood was essentially incomplete semi-humans. Solitude, Balzac believed, caused a woman's character to deteriorate steadily, and lonely women inevitably became cantankerous or even wicked. In rather coarse terms, Joris Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) lamented the fate of the unmarried man, but in a somewhat unusual context. His Parisian bachelor is having dinner in a restaurant when he suddenly recalls a young woman he might have married ten years earlier: "He sees himself married to her, eating a nice, solid piece of meat and drinking a good, clean Burgundy . . . Those deceptive slices of roast beef and illusory oven-cooked legs of lamb that you find in restaurants fill the embittered souls of old bachelors with airy thoughts of former mistresses."⁸

We should note that this literary trope of Parisian isolation and of the capital's hostility to marriage, and hence to happiness, was not without material foundation. As it happens, in real life as well as in literature, many Parisians were indeed reluctant to have large families or even to marry. "The bourgeois of Paris," wrote the political commentator A. Bazin in 1833, "has two [children], no more: a son and a daughter was what he wanted, and after that, he says, 'I called it quits.' He repeats this phrase so often that his wife has finally gotten used to it." Statistically, abstention from procreation was more common in Paris than in any other city of Western Europe or North America. In 1885, 323 of 1,000 Parisian couples were childless.¹⁰ In this connection, it is enlightening to compare Edgar Degas's glacial depictions of family life with his representations of the warm if sordid intimacy of the capital's bordellos.

Parisian solitude led to sterility and also, for observers of sensibility, to Parisian boredom, as an ironic Flaubert explained in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (Dictionary of Accepted Ideas): in Paris, ennui was the mark of a distinguished sensibility and an elevated mind. Despite—or perhaps because of—the multitude of distractions available, the capital of the imperial feast was also a city in which the idle liked to think of themselves as being bored to death. One commentator on Parisian ways, Mme Ancelot, invoked boredom to explain the deeper meaning of the Parisian salon: it was more pleasant to be bored in company than to be bored alone. Alphonse Daudet referred to Sunday as that "dreadful day"; many Parisians, he believed, suffered from a "fear of Sundays." Other Parisians at the time were also afraid of the alienating boredom of routinized labor. As early as 1840 Michelet was denouncing "the infernal boredom" of textile work in particular. "Again, again, again: that is the word that rumbles in our ears from the machinery that makes the floor vibrate beneath our feet. You never get used to it." Alphonse de Lamartine's France also knew boredom: middle-of-the-road politics, thought this Romantic poet, could not satisfy the French.

Roger Caillois theorized this point nicely. "Romanticism," he argued, "pointed toward a theory of boredom [by acknowledging] man's growing awareness of a series of instincts that society has a powerful interest in repressing; but in large part, romanticism . . . reflected the abandon-

ment of the struggle . . . The romantic writer went in for a poetry of refuge and escape." But what Balzac and Baudelaire attempted was exactly the reverse, he continues, since they now "tended to integrate into life yearnings that the Romantics resigned themselves to satisfying solely in the realm of art. Their project was therefore closely related to myth, which always signifies an increase in the role of the imagination in life."¹¹

This is a brilliant insight, which is tantamount to saying that Parisian boredom, first contemplated as a distant ideological or social phenomenon, soon became an existential one. In this same frame, the fear of boredom, that is to say, the sense that one is living someone else's life, led inexorably to escapist solutions, as exemplified by the many substitutes with which Baudelaire attempted to take his mind off the capital's hateful but unavoidable modernity: paid sex, hashish, idleness, cruelty (in the parable of the wicked glazier), and perhaps homosexuality as well, all of which could be seen by a moralist as modern incarnations of Pascal's hated *divertissement*. Boredom is also the central theme of a whole section of Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, a self-styled Marxist work that contains this remark: "It may be important to find out what the dialectical opposite of boredom is." To which question the proper Marxist response would surely be that boredom is a form of bourgeois false consciousness. To be bored, for the Marxist, must be the fate in this world of those alienated souls who are lucid enough to understand the emptiness of the society of spectacle but are unable to embrace the only true remedy, namely a dialectical conception of revolution, politics, and community.

PARISIAN ENNUI and idleness were all the more painful because they were linked, paradoxically, to the deceptive agitation of the city's social life. For Edmond About, writing in the *Paris guide* in 1867, "big cities, in the current state of civilization, are nothing but concentrations of people in a hurry." In a less sociological, more direct way, the Goncourts, Huysmans, and Henri Rochefort also pondered the idea that in Paris the excitement of modernity had somehow gone wrong. To the-

orize this sensibility, Marx, more critically and also more grandly, wrote of "the agitation of modern life," as Nietzsche did of its "overexcited worldliness." Benjamin, in his description of the period, took a more sociological approach, distinguishing between superficial *Erlebnis* (typical of this age) and the more profound *Erfahrung*: mere experience was unable to bring comprehension. Only Marxist-inspired rumination—or for that matter, dialectical dreaming—could point to a way out.¹²

Historians who have studied the myth of alienation as it took shape in Paris around 1860 have also dwelt on various themes, such as that of the flâneur—or that of the collector (described in Chapter 3), who was in this domain a critical archetype, observing life carefully but from outside, without really participating in it. The hallmark of the collector is that this lover of objects is quite incapable of producing anything. The collector buys, but as La Rochefoucauld pointed out in the seventeenth century, it is easier to buy than to sell, and his purchases do no more than create an illusion of existing. The collector, Benjamin wrote, "dreams that he is in a better world . . . in which things are exempt from the chore of being useful . . . He transfigures objects in order to make them his own. His task is Sisyphean."¹³ In the disillusioned 1930s Jean Renoir, in his film *La Règle du jeu* (The Rules of the Game), used the collector as a symbol for the Parisian upper class as a whole: the charming marquis de La Chesnaye is an elegant and philandering banker who collects automata and watches—that is, things that are artificially alive—and whose artificiality reflects his own human disabilities.

Collectors then, but especially flâneurs. In *Paris, ou le livre des cent-et-un* (Paris, or the Book of 101), we are told that "the flâneur can be born anywhere, but he knows how to live only in Paris." A certain type of flâneur was already a familiar figure in Paris in the First Empire. In 1806, for example, he had made an appearance in the title of a thirty-page pamphlet: *Le Flâneur au salon ou M. Bon-Homme: Examen joyeux des tableaux mêlé de Vaudevilles* (The Flâneur in Mr. Everyman's Salon: A Joyful Look at Sketches and Vaudevilles). But this precocious flâneur wore a "Jansenist" hat and a brown suit. At bottom he was merely an idle bourgeois. This was not enough to establish him as a permanent fixture of modern alienated life; and it was not until the era of the "physiologies"



that the flâneur really became a familiar figure. Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage* (1826) awarded him his Parisian patents of nobility: his habit was to stroll about the capital observing the lives of other people, who took little notice of his presence. He "cultivated the science of the sensual" and indulged in "visual gastronomy." Other Balzacian flâneurs appear in *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (The Girl with the Golden Eyes) and *Ferragus*.

The typical Balzac character succumbs to the temptations of the world or to his own passions, each reinforcing the other. By contrast, what is distinctive about the flâneur in Balzac's works is that he has no passion: he lives a life of retirement, as an observer, a failure. Some of Balzac's flâneurs freely choose to live this way. Others, like the artist Wenceslas Steinbock in *La Cousine Bette* (1846), slip into *flânerie* out of indolence or inadequacy: in the Human Comedy, the flâneur is the antithesis of the artist, who is heroic, creative, and Promethean. Despite certain affinities of sensibility, these two types are completely different because the flâneur is totally unfit for the work as well as for the suffering that Balzac believed indispensable to the creation of art. By contrast, the Balzacian artists, such as Daniel d'Arthez and the painter Joseph Bridau, though they do stop work from time to time, do so only in order to do better work later on. Balzacian *flânerie* was quite the opposite of an ascetic existence.

This was an incomplete view, but far in advance of the celebrated and yet banal contemporary description of the flâneur by Louis Huart. In his *Physiologie du flâneur* (1842), Huart drew a series of distinctions between the flâneur and other figures of the Paris streets (*le badaud*, or gawker, *le musard*, or dawdler, and *le batteur de pavé*, or pavement pounder). But Huart's categorization was a mere typology of Parisian indolence, in which the flâneur was nothing more than a "mobile spirit" who sniffed about the streets in search of city life but without really understanding what it was all about, and the pavement pounder was really just a beggar in disguise, waiting for a handout that would never come. For Huart, in the end, flâneurs were a "happy, spineless species" whose members were "the only truly happy people in Paris, savoring its moving poetry at all hours."

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Louis Huart, illustration from *Physiologie du flâneur*, 1841. Huart's flâneur is more elegant and far less desperate than that of Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Indeed, this aristocratized observer is more above society than beside it. He is still an idler, as flâneurs have always been, but his self-distancing idleness has taken on a quasi-metaphysical dimension. Reproduced by permission of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



With Ferdinand Gall, in *Les Parisiens* (1845), we move forward again. The flâneur, he tells us, "is always in full possession of his individuality. That of the gawker, on the contrary, disappears, absorbed by the outside world."¹⁴

But it was Flaubert and Baudelaire, as one might expect, whose analyses of the flâneur's aberrant individuality crystallized this Parisian social type. In their work the flâneur finally became the incarnation of the alienated self, hence a more important but also more somber figure.

Strictly speaking, Frédéric Moreau is not a flâneur. In any case, Flaubert never applies that term directly to the hero of *L'Education sentimentale*, which is largely set during the revolution of 1848. But he is an indolent youth, sensitive as well as ineffectual, and thus has all the characteristics of the flâneur. What is more, much of the action of the novel unfolds as Frédéric moves aimlessly about the city. The young provincial's pointless Parisian peregrinations are doubly revealing, because they have nothing in common with the precise and invariably instructive promenades that took Balzac's young Rastignac in the 1830s from the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève and Mme Vauquer's sordid pension to the heavenly *hôtels particuliers* of that promised land, the Faubourg Saint-Germain. For Balzac, the Left Bank and the Right Bank were very distinct places, as were the capital's various *quartiers*: some stood for the nobility and the past, others for capitalism and the future, and still others for poverty. By contrast, Frédéric Moreau wanders from one anonymous place to another, often without knowing precisely what street or neighborhood he is in: "In the air he heard what sounded vaguely like the refrains of dance tunes. His swaying as he walked left him feeling slightly giddy. He found himself on the Pont de la Concorde."¹⁵

As a flâneur, Frédéric is also keenly sensitive to fashion, an essentially feminine preoccupation which Flaubert's hero internalized completely: in a world shaped by "commodity fetishism," women who had nothing to do and who needed a dowry and trousseau in order to marry, had instinctively gravitated toward the department stores and the world of fashion (in the literature of the period at any rate). Revealingly, Frédéric likewise dresses very carefully and decorates his apartments with refined, delicate taste. The German sociologist Georg Simmel, a contem-



porary of Thorstein Veblen, explained Frédéric to us at the turn of the twentieth century, even though he had probably never heard of the young Parisian. Fashion, Simmel wrote, exerts a powerful fascination on rootless modern men and women because they are more susceptible to "life's transitory and vacillating elements."¹⁶

THE FLÂNEUR was bourgeois and in some cases quite wealthy. Frédéric Moreau certainly was. Vaguely ill at ease in modernity, the bourgeois spectator could easily recognize himself in this cultural type, in whom his own anxieties were magnified out of all proportion. But the theme of alienation also took a more material form, translating the apprehensions of the bourgeoisie to the other extreme of the social spectrum. Out of this came a new fascination with the social outcasts of the capital: tramps, homeless people, and street people. The flâneur was close to the dandy ("as a downwardly aristocratic and gentry figure"), but conceptually he was also close to the bohemian and the plainly marginal; and, inevitably, these social types now came into their own as well.¹⁷

There had always been outcasts in Paris, but the excluded now took on a mythical image as the new incarnation of "the other," so different from, but also so similar to, the bourgeois observer, who feared that he too might one day be excluded by modernity. This was truly new. The Parisian outcasts of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries whom Bronislaw Geremek describes in his beautiful book *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris* were simply poor. But with Baudelaire, Manet, and their contemporaries, outcasts came to share many of the characteristics of flâneurs: they too were spectators, maladapted individuals who took social failure to be a moral victory. In pre-revolutionary Paris outcasts were people who, born poor, had grown even poorer. The new outcasts were in their own way visionaries, not unlike the jesters and fools who both entertained and troubled the princes of the Renaissance by their insights into human nature as it had been defined by their times.

From the marginal flâneur to the marginalized outcast was then but a short step. Champfleury (Jules Husson), for example, the author of *La*



Mascarade de la vie parisienne, assumed that one could not understand the all-important “masquerade” of what we might call “premodernist” Parisian life without also understanding its underside. “There,” wrote Alexandre Privat d’Anglemont, “far away, in a remote corner of an impossible faubourg . . . in a neighborhood that no one has ever visited, there exists something terrifying and strange and charming, appalling and admirable . . . It is a city within a city, a people lost in the midst of another people.”¹⁸ These were not workers, declared enemies of society, or even criminals, but creatures of another sort entirely, who presented no concrete danger but whose existence was nonetheless troubling.

In the work of the anthropologist and mythographer Mary Douglas, the great modern city is defined not by what it produces but by what it rejects, by its refuse. This was also the theme of Privat and Champfleury, and one also finds it at about the same time in Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend*, where London is explained not so much by what Londoners want or by what they buy—the positive aspects of their existence—as by what they throw away as garbage.

Parisians now renewed their interest in the wretched of the earth, in marginal street performers, jugglers, acrobats, and the like. From Champfleury we know that many of these remarkable but sad social outcasts lived in the vicinity of the Gobelins. In 1845 Privat d’Anglemont honored them with a sonnet, “A une jeune saltimbanque” (To a Young Street Performer). Later came Baudelaire’s prose poem “Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” about a man who is described as friendless, homeless, childless, and penniless, degraded by misery and public ingratitude, “whose hovel an oblivious world disdains to enter.”

A whole literature grew up around the existence in Paris of these strange people and occupations, curious—and curiously symbolic—exceptions to the bourgeois order of social life. Jules Janin described them in 1839: porters, scrapers, messengers, coconut sellers, public writers, professional rhymesters, and usurers, to name a few. “Paris,” Janin tells us, “is full of workers who belong exclusively to the big city, whose work makes no sense outside the walls. They work in the industries of the sewer and the street corner, the attic and the gutter. Or in the industry of chance, which has its apprentices and masters and central head-



quarters. Or in the industry of rags, old nails, and broken glasses, of epic poems and vaudevilles." Frédéric Soulié began the fifth volume of his *Nouveau tableau de Paris* with an article on the capital's "problematic existences." Included under this heading were pimps, front men, and "professional corrupters." In an essay entitled "Le Festin des Titans" (1848), Théodore de Banville told the story of a wealthy English lord who allegedly offered a prize of 10,000 francs to the person with the most unusual occupation. Among the contestants was the "syringe man," who was employed by cheap restaurants to sprinkle oil on vegetable soup to make it look like beef bouillon; the "polisher of turkey claws," whose job was to make the birds look fresher than they were; and the "indoor goatherd," who raised goats in his sixth-floor apartment. The prize, however, went to a "lyric poet [who lived] by his writing," an exceptional accomplishment for any poet but especially for a lyric poet. This one earned his keep by writing verse for weddings and baptisms.¹⁹

Street performers, poets, and above all—among what Victor Fournel called "the *infiniment petits* of Parisian industry . . . who come to sit at, or rather under, the Parisian table wherever they can so as to fight over the crumbs that fall"—the ragpickers.²⁰ Ragpickers too were by no means newcomers to the Paris scene: as early as 1698 there had been an ordinance regulating their movements. Still, we may assume that the royal officials who issued that early legislation did not see the fate of these broken people as a cautionary tale that had a bearing on their own monarchic status.

Parisians of the 1850s were fascinated by the lives of these ragpickers, by the cafés they frequented (in the Place Maubert and the Place de la Contrescarpe) and the dishes they ate (veal bouillon at one sou per liter). As Pierre Citron reminds us, the ragpicker was an "important personage for all [Paris] *noctambules*, or night people, in the middle of the [nineteenth] century."²¹ Jean Pons Viennet was among the first to recognize their existence in his *Epître aux chiffonniers sur les crimes de la presse* (Epistle to Ragpickers on the Crimes of the Press; 1827). Baudelaire soon followed suit with his *Vin des chiffonniers* (The Ragpickers' Wine). Between 1848 and 1852 one might have noticed the existence of a so-called Villa

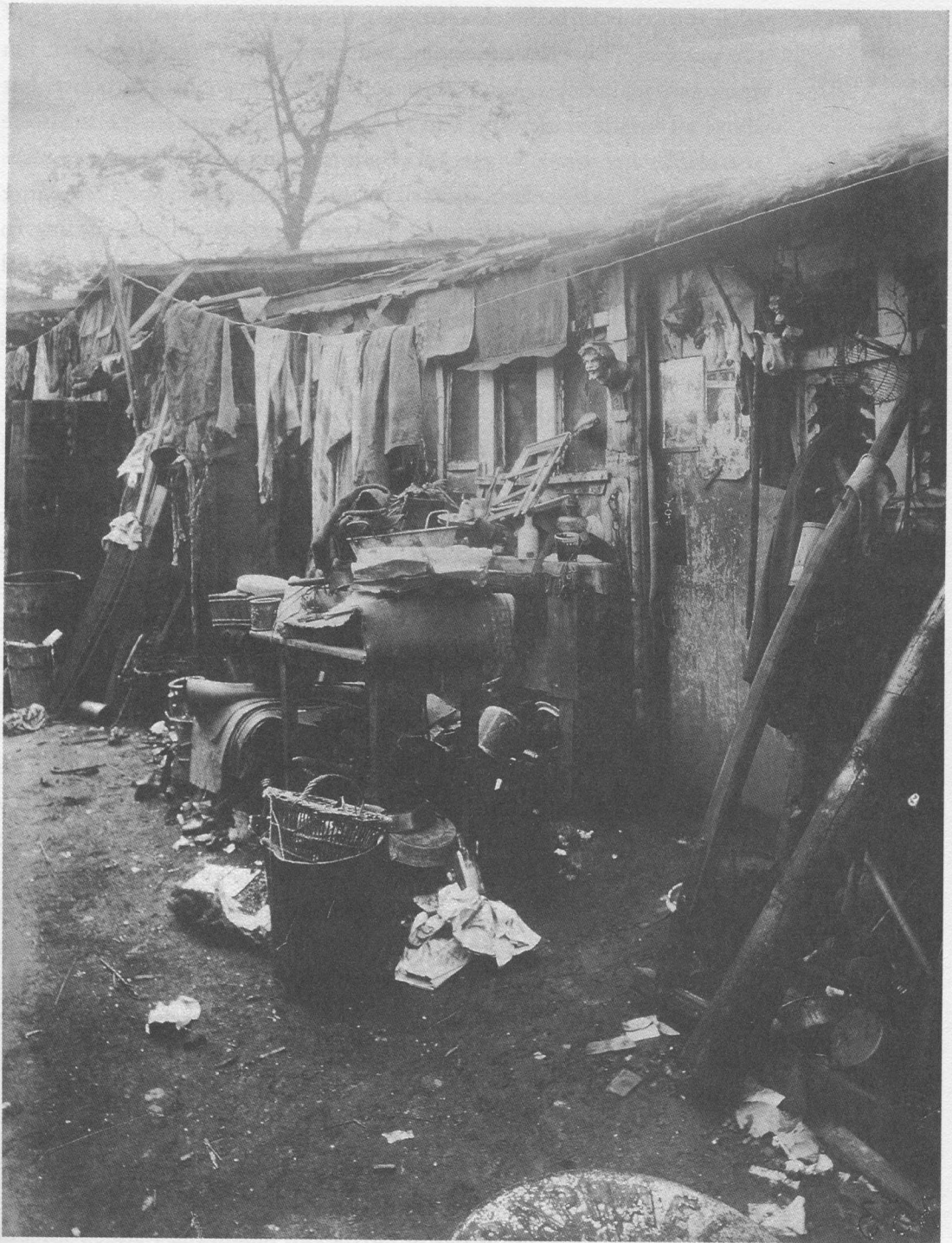


des Chiffonniers, and a whole body of folklore (or anxieties) grew up around this social category.

Félix Pyat, who did more than anyone else to make Marianne the symbol of republicanism and who later became a Communard deputy, wrote a play in 1869 called *Le Chiffonnier de Paris*. It was an enormous success, with Frédéric Lemaître in the role of Father Jean, a sort of philosophical ragpicker and latter-day Diogenes. In it, Pyat seemed almost astonished by what he had only recently discovered: "It isn't much, Paris as seen in a ragpicker's basket . . . Just think, I've got all Paris there in that basket."²² The lithographer Gavarni (Sulpice Guillaume Chevalier) had made the same point metaphorically in a frontispiece he did in 1844 for an edition of *Le Diable à Paris* (one of the many collections of essays on life in Paris that appeared after 1840): the Devil is shown trampling on a map of Paris and peering through opera glasses at the city's invisible inhabitants. He is clearly modeled on the publisher Jules Hetzel, known for his editions of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. In his left hand this literary devil holds the kind of stick that was used by garbage pickers. He is also holding a magic lantern of the sort used to create illusions. His ragpicker's basket is overflowing with books, no doubt infallible guides for understanding what had become of sociability in the harsh and calculating city.

Elaborate typologies of ragpickers became commonplace: first, we are told, were nighttime ragpickers and *chiffonniers gadouilleurs*, or sewage rakers. Also of consequence were the *chiffonniers coureurs*, *chiffonniers du tombereau*, *ouvriers chiffonniers*, and *chiffonniers placiers*, who paid concierges for the privilege of examining garbage before it was put out on the street. In 1854 Alexandre Dumas *fils* wrote in *Les Mobicans de Paris* about a "*chiffonnier ravageur* . . . so called because of the nature of his business, which was not to pick through the usual rubbish heaps but to

Eugène Atget, *The Ragpicker's Hut, Paris*, ca. 1910–1914. Flâneurs, street performers, and below them in the bourgeois social scheme the *chiffonniers* or ragpickers, who live in the geographically androgynous area beyond the city's limits, actual or metaphorical. Fascinated by the unusual, Atget repeatedly photographed these people, and his work appealed to the anti-Haussmannian Surrealists. Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Gérard Blot. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.



Slum, with a person in the background and a line of laundry.



stick the point of his hook into the gaps between the paving stones of the gutter." This class of worker had disappeared "some eight to ten years earlier, partly because they had been banned by the police but above all because sidewalks had replaced the old avenues." There were also *chiffonniers trieurs*, whose job was to sort through what others gathered, as well as *chiffonniers chineurs*, *picqueurs*, and *sacquiers*, all belonging to the Orders of the Ogres, those master ragpickers who, according to the *Petit journal*, in some cases were so rich that they could afford carriages and boxes at the Opéra. L.-A. Berthaud, in the third volume of *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (The French Painted by Themselves; 1841), described one master ragpicker named Bertrand as a "chiffonnier héroïque," "among the bravest of his fellows," and reported that his fellows had named him General Bertrand, "like the austere companion of our great Emperor Napoleon."²³

Eugène Poubelle was the prefect who required that all refuse be placed in trash cans before being put out on the street for collection, an order that ensured his immortality, since his name, *poubelle*, has since come to mean "trash can" in French. But he also complicated the work of the ragpickers, especially after another regulation was issued stipulating that the cans were not to be placed on the street more than fifteen minutes before the arrival of the trash collectors. With the tacit consent of the public, however, this quarter of an hour quickly stretched to an hour or more. Ultimately, the bureaucrats even made it lawful to empty the contents of trash cans briefly onto pieces of canvas. In fact, the 1,800 Parisian ragpickers at work in 1832 do seem to have constituted a fairly structured society. Their number had increased to 12,000 by 1870, and in 1903 there were still as many as 5,000–6,000 when Etienne Atget photographed them at the base of the city's fortifications in the area known as "the zone," which was in some ways close to Paris proper, but in other ways quite remote.

SINCE PLATO, indeed since the Chosen People of Israel wandered the desert in tribes, a central tenet of Western culture has been the assumption that for man, by nature divine but fallen, the visible reality of this world is merely the representation of another reality that is remote

and abstract and more difficult to interpret. This other reality is for some eternal and divine, for others secular, cultural, and/or political. For all, our true being is not of this world as it now exists. To live in the world is to feel estranged from another kind of nature that is more distant but also truer than the nature we know.

In the Paris of the 1860s, the myth of alienation drew on this classic theme. In this respect there was nothing very remarkable about it. But there was something new about the Parisian variant of the eternal myth of Job on his bed of straw. Now what mattered was not the metaphysics of the case but, more (or less?) simply, the commercial modernity of nineteenth-century capitalism. One was no longer dealing with the incomprehensible mystery of things or the just wrath of the gods. Baudelaire may have been a Christian poet in disguise, but he was certainly a poet of modernity. In his work, which was of such crucial importance for Walter Benjamin, the prostitute, as a commodity, symbolizes not only the nature of things but also the essence of the new era, the same new era that the propertied flâneur, at the other end of the social spectrum, also rejected. The new society was a society of the marketplace, and in Paris its traces were everywhere. The Parisian prostitute, wrote Benjamin, was "saleswoman and wares in one."

CAPITAL
OF
ALIENATION

