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“Les Yeux de Paris: the act of looking and the visual in Baudelaire’s prose poetry.”  
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## Contents

I Introduction .................................................. 3

II The *flâneur’s* gaze and the “family of eyes.” .......... 8

III Visions of women and “the grave of the ideal.” ......... 18

IV The prose poem as fine art and the “vast picture gallery.” 31

V Conclusion .................................................... 38

Bibliography .................................................... 40
Introduction

A finely-dressed man stands at the balcony of a Paris apartment, gazing at the city. Gustave Caillebotte’s 1875 painting *Jeune homme à la fenêtre* captures the man from behind and the viewer cannot see his face. He invites the viewer to observe him but he defiantly hides his identity. There is another figure in the scene, framed in the window and whom the dandy’s steady line of sight appears to meet. An unidentified woman stands on the empty boulevard, wearing a fashionable draped bustle skirt in a dark colour in contrast with the pale architecture. She is unaware of her audience, but through this framing and the eye sight of the man at the window, the viewer is drawn to her. Other artworks of the era show the streets of Paris writhing with activity but here all distractions are removed; the lone man gazing at the lone woman on the street is the only interaction, the only sign of life in the work. Whereas the man is safe in his anonymity, a willing and active observer, the woman becomes an exposed art object, unwillingly gazed at and evaluated not only by the man at the window, but the artist himself and the multitude of art gallery visitors who continue to gaze upon her. The painting is an urban landscape and a portrait of two strangers, a man looking and a woman being seen. One is placed on the streets and the other above them, tucked away in his own, contained piece of the city. The piece is also an artwork about the nature of selecting, containing and framing of objects essential to the artistic process, and the inherent hierarchy of the artistic gaze which searches and judges.

Several of the concepts in Caillebotte’s painting can be found in Charles Baudelaire’s collection of prose poetry, *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose*, published posthumously in 1869. Both are defined by the act of searching and looking for art’s sake, relying on this hierarchy of the dominating voyeur and dominated object. The following thesis discussion is concerned with the visual processes and the narrator’s gaze in the work. It is of great significance that Baudelaire engaged in both poetry and art criticism; the two are intertwined and at times interchangeable. Given the focus on the visual register, as well as Baudelaire’s active role in the art world, the discussion of the visual processes and themes of the prose poetry alongside nineteenth-century fine artworks serves to establish new inter-disciplinary connections. The collection’s themes and innovations frequently overlap with those being made in fine art during the same time, and although a historical reading of the texts is not the focus, together they serve to contextualise the role of the artist and his gaze, the nature of the modern city and artistic poetic priorities at the time. Baudelaire’s own influential art criticism can be seen as a theoretical outline for his own
creative pursuits. In Baudelaire’s prose poetry, the visual register, fine art and concepts of modernity intersect with the written word, and the collection can be seen as a literary incarnation of a visual act.

Caillebotte’s painting represents the practice of Baudelaire’s prose poetic protagonist, the flâneur, and his relationship to the newly-renovated Paris cityscape and its inhabitants. The first discussion point is the flâneur, the ubiquitous modern urban figure defined by the act of walking to leisurely look at the cityscape, who engages in the process of observing and transforming the everyday into art.¹ Flânerie is inextricably linked with field of the gaze, and the power hierarchy between observer and the observed.² Similar to the man in Caillebotte’s painting, the modernist flâneur possesses power and freedom not only to walk alone in the city confidently and without fear, but to actively view others. In Baudelaire’s work the flâneur’s powerful gaze is combined with the artistic aims of the poet. This artist-flâneur, who narrates the prose poems under various voices, engages in an urban scopophilia and frames objects under his gaze, seeking the fulfilment of his poetic intentions. He aims to observe the transitory reality of everyday Paris and heighten it, to transform it into a lofty art object. The artist-flâneur privileges his own gaze and believes in a personal art; he is only person capable of revealing these scenes. Baudelaire’s narrator tirelessly writes himself into the stories of Parisian passersby, attempting to make sense of the things that he sees and find potential mirrors for his own desires. In practising this act of scopophilia, one-sided voyeurism, and poetic transformation the flâneur possesses and dominates the city and its inhabitants.

The scope of this discussion will only include Baudelaire’s prose poetry and art criticism, omitting study of the poet’s biography. As Maria Scott discusses, it is a common assumption in literary criticism that the narrator’s paradoxical journey and opinions align with those of the poet. The layers of meaning and irony within these works make discerning authorial intent difficult.³ His narrator figure is anonymous and unstable, and discussion of the flâneur as poet and narrator is not improved by ‘knowing’ who he is, or if the stories are true or not. Despite drawing a comparison between Baudelaire’s creative and critical works, the assumption that Le Spleen de Paris is in any way autobiographical is problematic and does not aid this discussion. The narrator mentioned throughout the thesis is a fictional, unknown figure identified through his perspective and practices as a flâneur and poet.
The second main discussion point concerns the most frequently viewed object in the city: women. Caillebotte’s painting appears as a visual representation of Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze, the artistic extension of Jacques Lacan’s theories of looking. This posits an inherent gender power imbalance in the narrative arts favouring the heterosexual, cisgendered male. The many female figures in the *Le Spleen de Paris*, both symbolic and literal, are defined by a dominant male experience and gaze. The narrator’s depiction of women is not one of reality, but of fantasy; women are poetic devices, symbols for the artist’s struggles, hopes and fears in the modernised city. Here he continues a long-standing tradition in the visual arts of casting the woman as muse and art object. The collection contains a binary vision of woman, depending on their position in the *flâneur’s* world and their awareness of and ability to acknowledge the gaze.

Finally, after exploring the nature of the gaze in terms of the prose poetry’s themes, perspective and subjects, the final section of the thesis will engage with linguistic and stylistic issues of seeing. As *flânerie* is by definition a visual act, so too is Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris* inextricably linked to the visual arts. The narrator employs stylistic elements of Impressionism, attempting to describe his vision of modern reality. The narrator’s descriptions of sight and illusory sensation, the perceived movement of light and time as the *flâneur* attempts to capture transitory moments, and the deliberate composition or framing of images in the prose poetry are all references to this art movement. Baudelaire’s prose poetry contains not only *le spleen de Paris*, but also *les yeux*, the *flâneur’s* empowered gaze attempting to capture and control the ephemeral, modern urban experience.

Peter Collier and Robert Lethbridge have argued that “literary texts cannot be viewed independently of visual art; for not only is this part of a shared cultural context but it constitutes one of the informing conditions of verbal expression.” Although the study of art is in this discussion limited to the artistic movements of the mid-nineteenth century, however the focus is not to simply link together texts with shared historical and cultural contexts. Rather, this interest in the fine art of the same time as Baudelaire’s literary work is that they behave in similar ways, viewing the same city in a similar way, employing similar artistic themes and processes. They appear to inform one another, as Collier and Lethbridge assert, and constitute a larger artistic language. The combining of literary and art theory is engaging and suitable for the study of the prose poetic texts, which rely on the visual register of the narrator. Looking at how the narrator’s vision in relation to the fine art that
was created in the same city during the same time, assists the discussion of difficulties and issues of reality, the gaze and looking in the collection.

Baudelaire’s own criticism will support the study of his prose poetry. His definition of modern beauty, as summarised in his own art criticism, permeates the collection.\(^5\) As the prose poetry aims to find the beauty of modern life, in the famous text “On the Heroism of Modern Life” he asserts that “all forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, contain an element of the eternal and an element of the transitory – of the absolute and the particular.”\(^6\) This is manifested in the artist-flâneur’s practice, as he attempts to reconcile notions of timeless, abstract beauty and harsh, ephemeral modern reality. He seeks a transcendent artistic ideal on the modern streets of Paris, and is often disappointed and resorts to creating fictions that satisfy his desires; he states earlier in the Salon review that “there are two ways of understanding portraiture – either as history or as fiction.”\(^7\) The flâneur either captures the transitory and creates a prose poem from history, or otherwise resorts to constructing his own vision of reality to create a fictional portrait and alleviate his perpetual disappointment with modernity. By selecting and framing certain scenes the poet-flâneur attempts to raise the everyday into the realm of fine art, to transform the ephemeral urban reality laid before him into poetic fantasy. This notion, influenced by Baudelaire’s art criticism, affects the prose poetic narrator’s gaze and his processes of looking and creating art.

There are several reasons to limit the scope of study to Baudelaire’s prose poems. Firstly, the inherent confusion of the prose poetic style lends itself to looking at the interdisciplinary morphing and oxymoronic clashing of styles, personas and visions in the work. The individual pieces share very little in common except for a narrator’s voice and the theme of Parisian life, as the title suggests. This provides a great deal of freedom in looking at the themes, personas and vision in the work. In terms of practicality, the collection is relatively small, consisting of 51 short pieces, making the close reading process more contained and focused. There is no intended overarching narrative, no attempt at common themes apart from the narrator’s visions of Parisian life. As such, each individual prose poem can be considered as a separate entity, rather than part of a deliberate series. In the introduction to \textit{Le Spleen de Paris}, addressed to Arsène Houssaye, Baudelaire insists that the pieces are not arranged in any deliberate order and can be read as such; the reader of the work may “take away one vertebra and the two ends of this twisted fantasia will rejoin themselves without any trouble. Chop it up into many fragments, and you will see that each one can exist in isolation.”\(^8\) The clashing of styles and influences is immediately evident,
and each contains a unique, whole scene. Free from attempting to find any semblance of continuity, this discussion will approach the prose poems as separate artworks, haphazard and hung to the ceiling as in the Salon des Refusés. Whilst comparisons will be drawn between poems which share themes or features, they will be considered without reference to their seemingly arbitrary published order. Finally, whilst a tremendous amount of engaging scholarship on Baudelaire’s literary work exists, study of his famous verse volume Les Fleurs du Mal far outweighs that of his lesser known prose poetry. Whilst not denying the former work’s presence, this ensuing discussion will deliberately focus on Le Spleen de Paris in order to make new connections and build the work’s own presence in the field of Baudelairean literary criticism.

In the close study of the nineteenth-century prose poetry collection alongside its artistic counterparts and contemporary theories of the gaze and the visual register, the flâneur and gender, literary and fine art studies, this thesis discussion will aim to forge original connections between texts, and shed light on the unique prose poetic voice in Baudelaire’s work.

7 Ibid. 93.
The flâneur’s gaze and the “family of eyes.”

Fine artists of modernity turned to the cityscape and everyday life as their inspiration, attempting to capture its reality. Similarly, Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris* trawls the cityscape for meaning, and together these creators turned the act of observing modern Paris into an art form. Although a historical sociological reading of the texts is not the focus of this discussion, it is relevant that Baudelaire’s prose poetry is situated in a rapidly moving city; the Haussmannisation of Paris transformed the city into a landscape of communal, interior-like spaces; boulevards, arcades, street cafes and department stores. ¹ Thus the daily lives of Parisians were played out in public, an ever-increasing population of performers against a backdrop of gas lamp-lit cobblestone. The dreamy phantasmagoria of shop window displays and enticing, glittering business advertisements brought a new kind of consumer art into everyday life, perhaps at its most extreme with prostitution, women placing themselves on the street as living commodity. ² The city which captures Baudelaire and his contemporaries is a spectacle of sights.

*Le Spleen de Paris* is most simply a collection of poems about looking at this city and describing its ephemeral nature in memories, dreamscapes and horrors. However, Baudelaire’s prose poetry is also about the personal artistic process and the modern artistic preoccupation with observing and capturing the city. This requires a purposeful narrator figure to gaze upon the city and draw aesthetic conclusions. Despite guiding the reader’s visions of the city and sharing his innermost demons, the narrator of *Le Spleen de Paris* remains ambiguous; like the man with his back to the artist in Caillebotte’s painting, we are led to view the narrator as a part of the city, yet as autonomously separate from it. This archetypical flâneur, “that fundamental paradigm of the subject in modernity,” becomes the ideal lens through which to begin discussing the gaze of the narrator persona in Baudelaire’s prose poetry. ³ Flânerie, certainly a main narrative device in the collection, is merged with Baudelaire’s poet figure. ⁴ This artist-flâneur, not only observes the city, but steps back to describe it, to attempt to capture its essence through a singular viewpoint.

In the study of the flâneur, it is important to mention Walter Benjamin’s seminal study. Benjamin describes the figure as a product of modern capitalism, comparing placing flânerie in Haussmann’s newly-built Parisian arcades as a consumer in the “marketplace.” ⁵ This is a persuasive reading, effectively expressing the flâneur’s insatiable gaze and characterising him as a consumer looking at objects. However, the cultural context implied by Benjamin’s
work, a Marxist reading of modernity grounded in nineteenth-century, is beyond the scope of this essay. Conversely, Tester asserts that the flâneur finds pleasure in looking with an artist’s eye, “by calling forth of poetic – and a poet’s – vision of the public places and spaces of Paris.” The notion of the flâneur is a common theme in Baudelaire’s art criticism, and his poetic narrative voice can be seen as a creative, literary embodiment of his critical descriptions. Baudelaire’s flâneur was both the “discoverer of, and a spectator of” the urban modern experience, the poet employing “the device of the flâneur to explore the visual qualities of the city.” Perceptions of this nineteenth-century artist-flâneur, when linked to twentieth-century notions of the gaze, reveal the hierarchy of looking, the favouring of the visual register in Le Spleen de Paris and the ways in which looking and reality are affected by the narrator. The flâneur, the poet and the visual artist become a single entity, establishing Baudelaire’s poetry as a literary incarnation of a visual act.

It is important to note that, despite the exploration of the female in Le Spleen de Paris in the next chapter, for the sake of this discussion the flâneur will be referred to as a male figure. Scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel describe a “gendered urban observer” that is undoubtedly male. In reaction to this, feminist scholars such as Anne Friedberg have aimed to find a space for female flânerie, such as in department store shopping. Conversely, Janet Wolff suggests that female flânerie is near impossible in modernity because women did not historically possess the autonomy to roam the “public sphere” alone unlike men. However, the discussion of this female flânerie tends to rely on historical sociological reading of nineteenth-century gender inequality and women in the city, which is engaging but neither the focus nor an enhancement to this chapters’ particular argument. The aforementioned gender power imbalance is self-evident within Baudelaire’s text, and will be discussed later. Within this thesis the purpose of the study of the flâneur is to shed light on the role of the narrator in Le Spleen de Paris in order to interrogate the visual practices and the act of artistic ‘seeing’ in the work. In Baudelaire’s work, the poet narrator is resolutely pronounced as male within the text in his interactions with other men and in referring to himself. Therefore, the search for a historical female flânerie (or the flâneuse) does not enrich the discussion and the following analysis will work under the assumption of the narrator’s male gender identity.

In his famed art critical text of 1863, “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire characterises the flâneur as a “passionate spectator.” Although experiencing the city firsthand, the flâneur remains at a controlled distance from the movement of the city, and therefore the majority of his inferences are visual. Baudelaire describes the flâneur as one who must capture reality rather than simply experience it, stating that the flâneur aims “to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world.” The flâneur’s relationship to the reality of city life is one of confused opposition, for he aims to live authentically within it
in order to understand it, but must also remain at an aloof distance. In *Le Spleen de Paris* he is always present as a spectator, however he is also the constant outsider, an anonymous and purposeful observer passing judgement and searching for the potential for poetic beauty.

In his critical and poetic work the *flâneur* is cast as an extraordinary individual, afforded a great deal of power and unique pleasure; Baudelaire asserts that “the observer is a prince who always rejoices in his incognito”.\(^{15}\) He maintains a self-aware anonymity which allows him access to every corner of the city, and he possesses the leisure time and social autonomy to amble the streets and sit at street cafes. He is a privileged, princely figure, a monarch in control of defining and qualifying his surroundings. He is the only figure in the city with the ability to both live within the city and properly observe it, and represent it in art. Griselda Pollock asserts that the *flâneur* “symbolises the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze.”\(^{16}\) The *flâneur* asserts power over the rest of Paris’s inhabitants by actively controlling the gaze and his own experiences. He has not been exiled, nor he is incapable of assimilating into Parisian society, but rather he chooses to remain on the perceived edge of society. He places himself in his stories and allows himself to be viewed as a unique, poetic individual, distanced from the landscape he describes rather than an assimilated part of it.\(^ {17}\) The gaze of the *flâneur* is subjective and mobile as he is allowed to fluidly wander through public and private spheres with ease, maintaining a self-aware, empowered anonymity and recording snippets of daily life for his own aesthetic pursuits.\(^{18}\)

In an attempt at denying poetic tradition, the prose poetics have much in common with the art world. The poet-*flâneur*’s experience of the city is akin to an artist scoping out a scene to paint.\(^{19}\) The artist-*flâneur* looks in order to find aesthetic potential, “an author in search of characters and intrigue.”\(^ {20}\) Baudelaire’s *flâneur* places himself both within and above the modern incarnation of Paris, and indeed above all other Parisians, and as he gazes over the city he dominates it, forcing it to be moulded, metamorphosed into an artistic image. The artist-*flâneur*’s process begins by searching, and the city as an increasingly commercial, commoditised space encourages the artist-*flâneur* to carefully select his artistic objects. The *flâneur* then injects his own personal judgements and poetic intentions upon the scene, transforming real life through his personal artistic medium. Baudelaire refers to the artist figure as “Man of the World, Man of the Crowd.”\(^{21}\) Keith Tester identifies the difference between “the man of the crowd as opposed to the man in the crowd”; the artist as *flâneur* is not just a figure within the bustle of city life but the one at its centre, defining its meaning.
The resulting prose poetry represents “an order of things of his own making.” This is explicitly reflected upon in the prose poem “Les Foules” [“Crowds”], which appears to act as the flâneur’s manifesto. The narrator states that “for him alone, all is vacant;” the artist-flâneur sees everyday life as a void he alone can fill, imbuing reality with the poetic significance and aesthetic romanticism he seeks and transforming transient, nihilistic ‘vacantness’ into a meaningful tableau worthy of his appreciation. The flâneur as artist may ideally wish only to look for the sake of looking and experiencing, but in reality the purpose of looking is primarily to find aesthetic beauty, and to dominate, judge and ultimately to transform the inhabitants and experiences of Paris into art. This is another paradox of the creative flâneur; he wishes to capture reality, yet find himself at its centre, controlling and defining it.

The piece “Les Fenêtres” [“Windows”] describes the flâneur’s dominating, transforming voyeurism. The narrator looks freely through a woman’s window, gaining anonymous, unpermitted access to the private sphere from the vantage point of the public streets, the flâneur’s kingdom. He describes creating a personal narrative for her life, employing his self-important process of poetic transformation: “With her face, her clothing, her gestures, with almost nothing, I have refashioned that woman’s history, or rather her legend... And I go to bed, proud of having lived and suffered in others than myself.” He reflects upon whether or not it matter that this woman’s life has become his own fiction, deciding that the reality of others does not matter, that the world he gazes upon is only of use to him if it aids his artistic process: “Does it matter what the reality located outside of me might be, if it has helped me to live, to feel that I am and what I am?” Baudelaire’s poetic flâneur aims to possess the city and its inhabitants and transform it into art. He does not truly depict the reality of his gaze but heightens it, informed by his own interests and essentially writes himself into the lives of anonymous Parisians.

Indeed, many of the poems initially appear to be about Paris, but on deeper inspection are actually more about the poet, his own visual experiences and the artistic process. The artist-flâneur transforms his visions into art and in doing so injects personal meaning into it, transforming the description into a self-reflexive analysis of poetry and the artist. Oddrun Sæter describes that the “cultivated landscape, the urban space, prompts the flâneur to ask: ‘What could have happened here?’ The dreams of the flâneur illustrate the possibilities that can be envisioned.” The poet readily inhabits others, transforming strangers’ lives to suit his own artistic interests. This is referenced in “Les Foules,” the narrator describing that “the
poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able, at will, to be himself and another. Like those wandering souls seeking a body, he enters, when he wants, into everyone’s character.” Although the title of “Les Yeux des Pauvres” [“The Eyes of the Poor”] suggests a literal glance through the perspective of another, the “pauvres” described merely become a vehicle for the poet-flâneur’s own artistic musings. He aims to see himself, his own passion for art and a poetic heightened reality, in everyone and everything within the city. His gaze searches, demands to find his own eternal art within the transitory urban wasteland, and ultimately the works say more about the artist than the city.

In “Les Yeux des Pauvres” the narrator and his lover sit at a café. The importance of the visual register to the narrator is first revealed in the sensory description of lighting, such as the "sparkling" gold cornices, "blindingly" white walls and “dazzling” mirrors of the café. The narrator here is the flâneur enjoying leisurely gazing out at the city from a comfortable vantage point, and the poem is concerned with the egotistical superiority of the artist-flâneur’s thoughts. He sees a group, the man and two children "dressed in rags" and staring at the café he himself is in, yet his perceived pity for these people only results in a series of hyperbolic, poetic statements which he imagines them to be thinking, reflecting on awe, pleasure and visual beauty (“How beautiful!”). He tries to look through the eyes of others, but paradoxically only sees himself and his own poetic interests reflected back. The artist sees an opportunity for an artistic tableau here, a scene of Parisian reality, and transforms the unknowing, unconsenting passersby into poetic “pauvres”, using them to make a statement about his own overwhelming emotions. His perceived pity or empathy for others does not reach beyond the pages of his prose poetry collection; as is described in “Les Foules,” the artist-flâneur is “he who can go on a binge of vitality, at the expense of the human species.” The family’s voices are never heard and are irrelevant; the prose poem exists to mirror the personal thoughts and gaze of the flâneur. The narrator wishes to share his thoughts with his lover, “and that our two souls would henceforth form but one”, yet this companion exists in the narrator’s poetic universe purely to mirror his own thoughts back to him: “I turned my gaze toward yours, dear love, in order to read my thought there.” When she expresses disgust at the group, the man is forced to recognise that his ‘mirror’ is in fact a self-governing human being like himself, one who reflects the cruel reality of the urban world, and he criticises her imperviousness. The artist-flâneur places himself intellectually and artistically above the city and its inhabitants, and in doing so can never truly find an equal, doomed to a solitary life.
This prose poem also highlights the importance of looking and the visual to the poet-flâneur; the narrator attempts to ‘read’ the eyes of the three passersby for insight to their minds and souls. The artist-flâneur “projects his own aestheticizing vision on to the eyes he regards;” through his dominating gaze and assessment and he describes them as a “family of eyes.” This family’s eyes are described as “wide open like entrance gates”; this imagery suggests that the eyes are a kind of visual arcade, easily accessed and considered. The narrator believes that a ‘stroll’ through the eyes, the consideration of one’s outward, visual expression of emotion, reveals not only what the strangers, but how they perceive it and are affected by it. The flâneur discovers art because he searches for art, finding emotion in the poor family’s eyes that reveals poetic tragedy. The flâneur assigns himself moral and aesthetic superiority to his mistress and the pauvres and is thus free to walk easily into the imagined psyche of another, as if walking down through an open entrance gateway. Ultimately the narrator is disappointed that his mistress cannot read the eyes of others as he believes he can; Geraldine Friedman suggests that he “charges her with being a bad reader” as she has failed to ‘correctly’ and sensitively interpret “the texts of his and the family's faces.”

Eyes are a recurring symbol in Le Spleen de Paris, a way for the narrator to equate visual appearance with mental and moral standing, such as in the "mute eloquence" of the poor man's eyes and narrator’s friend’s eyes "shining with unquestionable candor" in “La Fausse Monnaie” [“The Counterfeit Coin”]. The importance of the eyes to the artist-flâneur, his own eyes gazing at others’, represents the importance of a visual experience of Paris.

The viewer of Édouard Manet's 1882 painting Un bar aux Folies Bergère observes the scene from the viewpoint of Baudelaire's artist-flâneur. Simultaneously a portrait of a barmaid and a self-portrait, the painting is famous for its play on perspective and mirroring. The mirrored wall behind the woman reflects the crowded hall, a blur of anonymous, artificially-lit Parisian partygoers. Yet to the right of the woman the viewer can see her reflection as well as the reflection of a finely-dressed male patron, an impossible view as these mirrored images should be directly behind them and obscured by the woman’s real image. The man gazes at the woman but she does not meet his look, her eyes aimed downwards in an expression of either non-recognition or intimidation. The view of this reflected man’s gaze is also the view of the artist. But on top of what the man sees in reality, we are given a view of the woman’s back also, observing her from multiple angles. There are inconsistencies between the reality of the woman and the reflections in the mirror, suggesting a tampering with reality. The artist has defied reality and literally placed himself into the scene as an omniscient, spectral visual
presence. The art viewer sees not only what the man sees, but the confident, autonomous man himself. The artist takes control of the woman and transforms her into his own art.

The artist-flâneur has a privileged individual gaze which searches for the ideal expression of art. He seeks the eternal within the transitory, the sublime found within the mundane. As the flâneur narrator searches for poetic inspiration in the modern city, he is constantly informed by the artistic past. There is a split in prose poetics, a chasm between poetic fantasy and modern reality, as the narrator struggles to cope with the forgotten, idealised past and redefining his role as an artist in modernity. The collection contains a confusion of influences and goals: Baudelaire “wished both fusion and apartness and ended up extolling an anti-modernism at the core of his modernism”, found in the Romantic and mythological elements of the work.27 Pupils of academic art schools such as L’Académie des beaux-arts aimed for a synthesis of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, mimicking in style and subject matter the art of classical antiquity. By the mid-nineteenth century these traditions were growing increasingly irrelevant, and these traces of an idealised and mythologised epic past began to erode. Baudelaire’s work “falls chronologically into the middle group of nineteenth-century poets”, and as an “heir to a Romantic tradition, his restlessly inventive spirit drove him to question its presumptions; an enervating sense of guilt inspired in him a despair which was mocked by his visions of beauty.”28 This mixture of guilt and wistfulness for the idealised Romantic past permeates the prose poetics. Rather than denying the existence of the past, he mourns its loss; as the city and its art history were being erased, he identifies the fashionable black frock coat as a symbol of “perpetual mourning”, as “we are each of us celebrating some funeral” for something lost.29 Time is a persistent, destructive force, moving faster and more carelessly against a sprawling modern backdrop. This mourning becomes coupled with a sense of freedom from historical restraints; Baudelaire’s modernity contains the past as a memory and the present as an inescapable truth. The artist-flâneur is struck with the shock of reality; the Paris of memory was mutated into “a mythology”, and the modern Paris “that met his senses morphed ever faster into a space that was not his.”30 In his art criticism Baudelaire attempts to fuse to two by championing a modern interpretation of poetic beauty, the ancient hero replaced by the dandy: “our age is no less fertile in sublime themes than past ages.”31 The past and present become intertwined; the café in “Les Yeux des Pauvres” rises from rubble and debris, suggesting the swift destruction of one structure and formation of another, shining with “unfinished splendors.” The flâneur narrator possesses a
privileged gaze and limitless access to the city streets, and charges himself with the mission of inventing a new modern urban language.

This process is exemplified in “Perte d'Auréole” [“Loss of Halo”]. One of the speakers in the prose poem describes losing his halo in the chaos of a busy boulevard, a horse-drawn carriage shocking him. This man was first described as an “eater of ambrosia”, the use of a Greek mythological reference to immortality an immediate classical symbol. The character says that surely “bad luck is always good for something”, and that now, although he is no longer an angel or immortal, at least he can wander the streets “incognito” and indulge his desires in the city, giving himself up to “filthy debauchery, like simple mortals.” The other man in the conversation comes up with a perfectly pragmatic modern solution at odds with the mythological situation of a lost halo, suggesting an advertisement or a police report. The angel has joined the modern world and become mortal, and the mortal man with whom he speaks has no way of truly knowing what it means to be a part of an ancient myth or to have a halo and live forever without sin. The prose poetry is “shaped by modernity and memory,” and the artist-flâneur seeks new ways of looking in the modern landscape.32

Whilst the modern flâneur adores the cobblestone and glass-roofed arcades of modern Paris, Le Spleen de Paris also contains descriptions of the natural world, a typically Romantic trait. The male protagonists of several poems glorify the nature as a symbol of eternal artistic meaning and beauty, and are overcome by its expansiveness in a mirror of the notion of the Romantic sublime. Clouds are a recurring symbol, as the “enigmatic man” in “L'Étranger” [“The Stranger”] expresses love only for "the passing clouds.” This idealised beauty is inaccessible for the flâneur, with his feet firmly on the ground, yet he grasps for them as they always exist “over there... over there.” The drifting clouds of the sublime Romantic landscape mimic the moving crowds on the street. The man in “La Soupe et les Nuages” [“The Soup and the Clouds”] contemplates the clouds, “the marvellous constructions of the impalpable,” through an open window, and attempts to reconcile this sublime, Romantic vision with the modern world around him, by comparing the beauty of the clouds to, in the style of the artist-flâneur, the eyes of his lover. Once again, this companion figure cannot correctly interpret his thoughts and berates him, calling him a "cloud salesman" in the perfect combining of artistic beauty and modern commerce. The flâneur’s appreciation of an eternal beauty, that of the natural world, cannot be understood in modernity; his interest must be that of a salesman, looking upon the clouds as merchandise. The artist-flâneur, standing in awe and fascination in Paris boulevards, is similar to the explorer of Caspar David Friedrich’s 1817 painting
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, an example of Romantic art’s use of the epic landscapes of the natural world as an expression of the sublime. Baudelaire’s narrator experiences this sublime in the city, and casts himself as Friedrich’s explorer, seeking new interpretations of the artistic ideals and enjoying a privileged visual experience of the world.

Le Spleen de Paris is concerned with the visual register, and the act of looking at the city that defines the modern artist-flâneur. He gazes openly upon the sights and passersby of Parisian life, relying upon a hierarchy privileging the powerful, scopophilic voyeur over the passive object. This hierarchy of looking pervades the prose poetry collection, affecting the vision of reality given to the reader. The crowd functions as a shroud, disguising his look and allowing him to move freely and leave no traces. The flâneur narrator seeks lofty poetic inspiration and writes his own meaning and substance into the lives of others, subjugating, judging and transforming them into an image that best satisfies his desires or his disappointments in modernity. The ephemeral “fragments of experience and memory” are contained in a “harmonious whole.” The collection is at once a narrated, subjective look at everyday modern life and a study of the flâneur’s visual and literary practice, beliefs and powerful gaze.

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6 Tester 1.
7 Sæter 184.
10 Friedberg 36.
12 Tester 2.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
18 Friedberg 29.
19 Ibid. 16.
22 Tester 3.
23 Charles Baudelaire, The Parisian Prowler: Le Spleen de Paris, Petits Poèmes en prose, trans. Edward K. Kaplan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 93. All of the prose poem quotes throughout the text will be printed in English, using Kaplan’s well-regarded translation. It is a faithful translation, retaining the tone and spirit of Baudelaire’s original French language text. Translations of the prose poem titles, provided after the first mention of each poem, are also taken from Kaplan.
24 Seter 184.
28 Grant Rees, Baudelaire, Sartre and Camus (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), 5.
Visions of women and “the grave of the ideal.”

As the artistic flâneur narrator of Le Spleen de Paris gazes upon the city as a visual spectacle of poetic potential, there is one figure continually placed at its centre. The woman is a major part of the “urban drama” that draws the artist-flâneur in and inspires him, and his visual “botanising” experience of the cityscape is habitually engaged with gazing upon and qualifying female figures.¹ The notion of difference and hierarchy, as discussed in the previous chapter, is at its most extreme in the positioning of female characters in the flâneur’s look. Gender differences and a preconceived binary vision of male/female gender in the text form much of the flâneur’s hierarchy of looking.² The flâneur’s gaze searches for artistic inspiration, constantly judging and comparing everything he sees, and in the collection women are made objects “to be ‘consumed’ and ‘enjoyed’ along with the rest of the sights that the city affords.”³ The narrator employs literal and figurative female personas as artistic symbols. Maria Scott identifies the narrator of the text as “pleasure-seeking aesthete” and this is particularly true in a scopophilic sense, at its most heightened state with the pleasure in searching for and looking at female figures and beauty.⁴ Although originally written for film criticism, Laura Mulvey’s famous article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” examines the nature of the male gaze, visual artistry and the viewer experience, and its thesis lends itself to the study of female figures and the gaze in Baudelaire’s work. She defines an active heterosexual male gaze in the creation of narrative visual art, setting up binary codes of gender and looking. Baudelaire’s work “presupposes a masculine narrator or observer,” therefore the gaze is inherently male.⁵ Mulvey’s suggestion of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” appears as a recurring theme in Le Spleen de Paris, with woman transformed into aesthetic, static images, further establishing the prose poetry as a literary form of visual art⁶. The positioning and roles of women in the prose poetry can also be found mirrored in fine artworks from the same period. Like the art gallery viewer, the flâneur views women on the street like passive objects on display to be considered and appraised, and in the case of Baudelaire’s narrator, reduced and transformed into a poetic image.

However, within the city of Le Spleen de Paris are two main categories of women, those who indulge or confuse his act of looking and whom the artist-flâneur approaches and treats differently. The first category is the modern Parisian woman on the street, the weak woman of reality who is disempowered by the anonymity and power of the flâneur’s voyeurism and unable to look back. This woman is most easily observed and manipulated by his gaze, and becomes a conduit through which the narrator can project his own judgements and beliefs.
The second is the immortal, figurative woman of poetic fantasy, the artistic muse that appears to the narrator in the throes of fantasy, who can and does freely gaze back. The flâneur’s dominating gaze relies on the anonymity that the cityscape affords, and the assumption that the gaze is one-sided; when confronted by the goddess woman’s returned gaze, the artist-flâneur is immobilised and his practice is momentarily destroyed. However, the female prostitute refuses to be placed comfortably in either of these worlds, a figure of reality who aspires in her artificial aesthetic to a higher state, and who stands as a defiant mirror of the artist and flâneur. The prostitute is the only woman on the streets who possesses the autonomy and power to gaze steadily back at the male narrator. Woman are revered and hated in equal measures; revered for their beauty and potential for artistic inspiration, hated either for their mythical aloofness or disappointing ‘realness’ (such as the woman who fails to interpret the narrator’s thoughts in “Les Yeux des Pauvres”). These female figures become a mirror of the confused opposition of timeless poetic beauty and transient urban reality that permeates Baudelaire’s work, and the poet must approach them differently according to their ability to gaze back.

The first main female object in Le Spleen de Paris is the Parisian woman of reality, viewed on the streets of the modernised city. Here the gaze is “split between active/male and passive/female”, as Mulvey outlines. The male flâneur gazes actively upon the passive female who, lost in the crowd, is unaware and does not possess the ability to return the gaze. Priscilla Parkhurst describes illustrations in Louis Huart’s satirical work Physiologie du flâneur from 1841 which depict the top-hatted flâneur trailing women on the street, and chapter 11, titled “Les Petits Bonheurs de la flânerie,” details methods “to novice flâneurs in the art of discretion when pursuing any woman in the street.” The artist-flâneur’s unique mission and his required distance from the objects of his attention mean that the urban gaze is necessarily one-sided and discreet.

In his power and anonymity the urban-dwelling artist-flâneur is free to watch and indeed follow women on the streets. In “Les Veuves” [“Widows”] he contemplates female widows identified purely on their outer appearance, with black mourning dress and what the narrator perceives as an air of sadness. He describes the widows’ eyes before anything else, once again emphasising them as an external metre of internal state; looking into their eyes “immediately deciphers innumerable legends.” He describes trailing behind one woman in particular, gazing openly and freely upon her (“I followed her into a reading room; and I watched her closely for a long time”). He sympathises with her, but not as an equal; this
woman is still an object of his looking, and her life is still transformed into heightened, even hyperbolic poetic raptures, as the narrator describes: "disappointed ambition... thwarted fame... shattered hearts." Once again he injects his own meaning into the object of his vision. These Parisian women exist in the prose poetry as objects to be gazed upon, and as such the flâneur approaches them as empty vessels, potential poetic symbols. The prose poem “Les Fenêtres” exemplifies this, as through the act of looking the artist-flâneur possesses the woman. He is able to rewrite the story of her life by gazing upon her only because she does not gaze back nor acknowledge his attention. His practice of transformation, as acted out in “Les Veuves” and “Les Fenêtres” for example, is dependent on being the active observer of a passive object. The flâneur’s pleasure is due to this power; the narrator of “Les Fenêtres” describes that “he who looks through an open window from the outside, never sees as many things as he who gazes at a closed window”. The flâneur grants himself permission to freely observe, even enter the lives of modern women, through his purposefully one-sided gaze. He judges elderly and widowed women specifically for the perceived loss of their beauty and sexuality; to the artist-flâneur these women represent the cursed passing of time, damned as they are “past the age to please” as he describes in “Le Désespoir de la Vieille” [“The Old Woman’s Despair”]. In this sense these elderly women represent the ravages of fast-paced, idealised modernity, in mourning like the flâneur for an ideal past.

The prose poetic narrator employs the real Parisian women he views as a critique of modern life and (im)morality. They are inferior to the educated man, the artist-flâneur, as they are seemingly incapable of experiencing ‘real’, heightened emotion or artistic awe. Woman is pragmatic and uncaring, shown through the companion in “Les Yeux de Pauvres.” He searches for a mirror of his own poetic intentions and emotions, and as the women he encounters on the streets do not view Paris through his own deliberate, poetic gaze they are therefore unevolved and inferior. This voyeuristic judgement becomes most literal in “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” [“The Wild Woman and the Affected Coquette”]. The prose poem’s tone is mocking and exaggerated, as a woman is literally caged on a public street “like a beast,” stripped of her freedom and observed and controlled by her husband, whose dialogue constitutes part of the poem. The remainder of the poem is narrated by an onlooker unfamiliar with the couple, part of a crowd around the cage. Although the woman’s shrieking is recounted by the two male narrators, the woman herself does not speak and is described purely as an image, both for the onlookers within the poem and for the reader. Her husband “displays her;” she is a static objet d’art from which the flâneur narrator can reap
insight and inspiration. Here the flâneur’s act of looking at woman on the streets can be assessed alongside Laura Mulvey’s notion of the “exhibitionist role” for women. She suggests that woman is “displayed” to combine “spectacle and narrative.” In “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” this is decided and controlled by male figures. Despite the absurd nature of the display, the sentiment of her husband is not mocked. He expresses that he is weary of her melodramatic behaviour and is intellectually superior, telling her “you weary me beyond all measure and without pity.” He ridicules women’s expressions of melancholy and “precious whining” as weak and affected, and wishes to teach her “what real unhappiness is.” In this sense the narrator becomes like the artist-flâneur, believing that he is capable of feeling sublime and evil emotion far greater and deeper than others. Woman is reduced to savage animal to remind her of her own primitive capacities and cruelty, and caged to be observed like a spectacle or sideshow to allow others to openly gaze and judge as dominant voyeurs. Although clearly a sensational, imagined scene, it begins to characterise one of the narrator’s two dominant views of women; that of the anonymous, simple object to be gazed upon, an inferior “empty bottle” to be defined by an outside male eye.

Whilst the male characters on the streets speak endlessly, their conversations constituting many individual poems (often on the subject of women), female characters speak very little, if at all. Women are viewed and are therefore required in the poetry only as images. When they do speak, it is often to display their inferior mindset and lack of sensitivity. In “La Soupe et les Nuages” the male narrator’s wife becomes a “monstrous madwoman” too, as she fails to correctly interpret his look, as in “Les Yeux des Pauvres.” Whilst he rapturously gazes up to the heavens, she hits him out of his reverie and sends him back into modern reality. The narrator wants to understand women entirely, to believe that in gazing at them he can see into their soul, regardless of whether or not, in the case of “Les Fenêtres,” it is true. In “Mademoiselle Bistouri” [“Miss Scalpel”] the woman is literally unable to communicate coherently with the artist-flâneur, and he reflects that “I passionately love a mystery, because I always hope to untangle it.” The city becomes a backdrop for the flâneur to create crimes and solve mysteries. Here his mission is to reveal the mysterious psyche of this female object. He is eventually angered at her bizarre train of thought and dismisses her as a madwoman.

The women of reality in Le Spleen de Paris are cruel and unfeeling. In “La Corde” [“The Rope”] a painter recounts the story of a young boy’s death, describing in poetic detail the anguish he felt upon discovering the body and his dread at the task of telling the boy’s
mother. He imagines her mirroring his own feelings, being lifted to the state of poetic tragedy of “horror and astonishment” that he feels, but is shocked and experiences horror again, this time because of her indifference. He attempts to hide the rope and nail that hung the boy, “those last vestiges of the misfortune,” but to his surprise the woman wants to keep them, and “more women than men” write to him asking to have them also, not as a “horrible and cherished relic” as he assumes but because they are now collectable consumer objects. The narrator, disappointed by the shattered illusion of lofty maternal love, decides that they are cruel and consoled by “trade” and commerce, unable to comprehend the rope’s poetic symbolism. Once again woman is incapable of reaching the artist-flâneur’s ideals, and he is able to observe and judge without fear of being overpowered.

In Le Spleen de Paris the artist-flâneur engages in the fruitless search for the immortal and beautiful female goddess, as expressed and glorified in artistic and poetic history, in the modern cityscape. She represents an element of the eternal that Baudelaire seeks to find in the transitory city, that pure, distilled art “to be sought in a new and personal version of Beauty.”12 This muse represents the personal, transcendental art experience that the narrator craves, and pervades the collection as an abstraction, a veiled and idealised image of feminine beauty and perfection. She is the “goddess and immortal” Beauty in “L’Étranger,” a divine symbol of art. In looking at the city he seeks expression of an eternal ideal and his own artistic sentiment, which in Le Spleen de Paris takes the form of the feminine.

In the flâneur’s process of seeking the muse, the real, modern woman becomes objectified and segmented. In prose poem “Un Hémisphère dans une Chevelure” [“A Hemisphere in Tresses”] the anonymous woman's hair becomes a disembodied abstraction, an object symbolising beauty. The flâneur finds himself and his own poetic intentions in his experience of the woman's hair, and he begs to experience it, desperate for inspiration “like a thirsting man” seeking “the water of a spring.” The woman's long hair becomes a symbol of femininity and is therefore of artistic interest to the narrator; her identity is irrelevant, disappeared entirely but her aesthetic inspires lofty artistic visions. The female body becomes a disparate object, the immortal muse found in a mortal lover's hair. The description of her hair evokes narratives and dreams, “huge seas whose monsoons carry me toward enchanting climes.” In this segmentation or framing of the female form into its most ‘useful’ or symbolic parts, woman is reduced to a signifier for something unreal; her visual appearance is a vessel to be filled with meaning. In direct comparison to Baudelaire’s prose poem, Gustave Courbet’s 1866 oil painting L’origine du monde segments the female model’s body. Though,
whilst the former’s woman becomes a head of hair, a symbol of beauty, the anonymous
woman in Courbet’s painting is reduced to a crotch and torso, an essential symbol of sex and
eroticism. In gazing at the passing woman on the street, only the most important elements are
emphasised, and “woman's form is nearly dissolved in an allegorical process.” The female
form is continually edited and reduced by the artist-flâneur’s gaze, framed as a segmented
object and allegorical abstraction.

Woman as the eternal artistic muse, characterised by her supernatural qualities and distance
from the real world, does appear to the artist-flâneur on more than one occasion. She appears
suddenly in a dream state or found within something else. This female figure exists to inspire,
and possesses the power to bestow great pleasure or even greater pain upon the artist-flâneur
who seeks her. This pain is partly “the shock of the unexpected” in the returned gaze, as the
goddess acknowledges the voyeur and looks back and Baudelaire’s all-seeing narrator
experiences a gaze returning his own. The artist-flâneur’s gaze is deliberately distanced and
if the art object spies its viewer and returns the gaze, then the artist-flâneur’s practice is
destroyed. In the prose poem “Le Désir de peindre” [“The Desire to Paint”] the female muse
appears abruptly and unexpectedly; she who “appeared to me so rarely” and is “more than
beautiful; she is surprising.” In “La Chambre Double” [“The Double Room”] the muse
appears before him in the throughs of an inspiring, drug-induced fever dreamscape, and in the
shock of her sudden appearance he is reduced to babbling prose-like questions: “But how did
she get here? Who brought her? What magical power set her on this throne of reverie and
voluptuousness?” The “feminine object's gaze fatally hits” him just as he begins his own
process of looking. Mulvey’s split between passive female object and active male subject or
viewer undergoes a slight shift; the female remains passive object but gains some power in
her self-awareness, and the active male gaze is acknowledged. This figurative woman appears
before him to inspire, a “magnificent flower budding in volcanic ground” at odds with the
modern landscape around her and far more exciting than the women on the streets. Through
his gaze he attempts to subjugate, to placate this potential female object into poetic
subservience as he does so easily does to the women of reality. However, the muse possesses
her own controlling gaze, and her eyes are compared to an “explosion,” as “her gaze
illumines like lightning.” In “La Chambre Double” the poet describes the shock of the female
gaze as a “flame” in the goddess’s eyes. He cannot contemplate her eyes as they “devour the
gaze of anyone reckless enough to contemplate them.” Her look contains “frightful malice”
and is “terrifying” because the artist-flâneur finds the female object of his inspiration looking
back at him, dominating and stripping him of his own privilege of looking by matching it. The usually vital distance between the flâneur and his subject is undermined and forgotten, as the narrator is petrified, staring openly at his knowing object (“I relish minute by minute, second by second”). In these two works the female muse possesses a momentary power as the poet’s gaze relies on not being seen, but this exchange is invited by the narrator because these muse figures possess something he wants: eternal artistic enlightenment (“all that she inspires is... deep”). The narrator allows himself to enter those immortal eyes as they enter his, and in this moment he perceives that time has stopped (“No! There are no more minutes... Time has disappeared. Eternity now reigns, an eternity of delights!”). The narrator is both fearful and rapturously inspired by the muse’s gaze, and through it he becomes immobilised, the rushed pace of modernity and the thoughtful, practiced walk of the flâneur grinding to a fatal halt.

The power that the artist-flâneur’s gaze holds on the streets is nullified. Unlike the eyes of the pauvres and the women on the street, in “Le Désir de peindre” the poet cannot penetrate or ‘read’ the muse’s cavernous eyes, “glittering with mystery.” The goddess muse in these poems both inspires art and brings it to a halt, and although the artist constantly searches for her, once she appears the shock of the gaze paralyses him.

This knowing muse of Baudelaire’s work behaves similarly to the female figure in Édouard Manet’s 1862-3 painting Le déjeuner sur l’herbe. The female nude is a familiar classical symbol, a ubiquitous artistic subject and inspiration, yet in this work she is startlingly at odds with her surroundings. She sits with two men in distinctly modern clothes who are engaged in conversation, seeming not to notice the woman. The woman appears as a shock, not just her nakedness amongst clothed men but her eyes, which knowingly and deliberately penetrate the viewer’s gaze. Her gaze is self-aware, as if the woman realises that she is a timeless artistic object, and it destroys the illusion of the artistic scene, revealing its artifice. The two men are perhaps too engaged in intellectual pursuits to see her, but the viewer of the artwork itself becomes subjugated by her, the female nude no longer a passive muse but a controlling figure aware of her own power. The artist-flâneur’s “pleasure in looking” at women is destroyed with the return of the look as it becomes a self-conscious exchange rather than a voyeuristic indulgence. The final line of “Le Désir de peindre” compares the real women the artist-flâneur gazes upon on the streets to the unreachable, eternal female embodiment of art. The former are easily subjugated by his look and “inspire the need to defeat them and take full pleasure from them,” whilst the latter “arouses the desire to die slowly under her gaze.”
In *Le Spleen de Paris* the artist-flâneur’s binary vision of woman as belonging to either the immutable world of poetic fantasy or the transient and cruel urban world is often challenged. As the fine art world aimed to rewrite traditions of style and subject to suit the modernised landscape, the artist-flâneur struggles to reconcile the mythical muse in his head with the reality of the woman on the street. The pros poetic narrator aims to fuse the worlds of art and modernity, to bring poetry “down from the abstract objectivity of the Heavens into the mundane city streets.” Just as the idealised poetic form is tempered with informal prose, he attempts to subjugate the muse and pull her towards Paris. Despite the momentary power of the goddess’s gaze in “La Chambre Double” and “Le Désir de peindre,” her allegorical beauty cannot exist for longer than an imagined moment in the narrator’s eye, and he can only glimpse at her for a few moments before he is tossed back to the modern world of “Time.” The goddess becomes both a patron of art and ecstasy and a cruel reminder of the real, modern world and mortality, a harbinger of death, epitomising Baudelaire’s confused vision of modern life.

The narrator struggles to combine the fleeting and the permanent in his vision of woman. The women of reality cannot compare or co-exist with this immortal goddess, who is ushered away as quickly as she appeared. This confusion is exemplified in the prose poem “*Laquelle est la vraie?*” [“Which Is the True One?”] with the artist-flâneur confronted with the impossibility of immortal beauty in modern reality. The poem’s Benedicta initially represents the muse, emanating “the ideal” and whose eyes “spread the desire for grandeur, beauty… and everything which makes us believe in immortality.” These abstract suggestions of feeling and beauty are similar to the inspiration found in woman’s hair in “Le Désir de peindre,” which the narrator attempts to find everywhere. At first she is a “miraculous girl”, astonishing because she appeared to bring immortal beauty to the real world, yet this cannot truly exist forever; “too beautiful to live a long time,” her grand, poetic beauty is an abstraction and an illusion that cannot survive in urban modernity. The narrator attempts to protect the memory of his own longing by placing her in a “tightly sealed… rot-proof” coffin; even when he buries her, he wants her image to remain, an idealised muse kept from the ravages of mortal time. The final sentences emphasise the artist-flâneur’s conflicted experience of modernity, where the beautiful goddesses of an ideal artistic dreamscape cannot comfortably exist and where women of reality are disappointing and terrifyingly real. The woman’s corpse jumps out of her casket in the poet’s vision, shouting “It is I, the true Benedicta! …To punish your madness and your blindness, you will love me as I am!” He is terrified, once again with the
shock of the returned, empowered gaze and also with the shock of reality and death, modern beauty so quick to be lost. Although he preferred to think of her are pure, beautiful, alive and immortal, instead she represents what the narrator perceives as the downfall of woman in reality, all “hysterical and weird”, spiteful and cruel. The ideals of the poet are crushed, the notion of the muse destroyed. Jean-Paul Sartre’s reading of Baudelaire’s life and work overlaps here with the prose poetic artist-flâneur’s mindset, which is one of perpetual dissatisfaction; “nothing on this earth” can truly “satisfy the desires” or gaze of this figure.18 His look is never satisfied by the women on the streets whom he can control, yet he cannot truly coexist with abstract beauty. The reality of modernity fails to meet his poetic desires, and the artist-flâneur admits, “I remain fettered, forever perhaps, to the grave of the ideal.”

In “Le Fou et la Vénus” [“The Fool and the Venus”] the female muse is similarly stuck between the modern and eternal worlds. The poet becomes a jester, a sincere figure scorned by society for his extraordinary sensibility. He expresses the disappointment of his gaze which seeks beauty in ordinary things: “I am the lowest … most lonely of humans, deprived of love and of friendship... However I am made… to understand and to feel immortal Beauty!” Whilst in “La Chambre Double” and “Le Désir de peindre” the female figures of poetic beauty and inspiration escape quickly, disappearing from the gaze, in “Le Fou et la Vénus” the muse attempts to find a space in modern Paris. This is doomed and ultimately she is trapped, unable to fully assimilate into the crowd or exist comfortably as an eternal inspiration. The jester looks with “tear-filled eyes toward the immortal Goddess”, but the “colossal Venus” cannot communicate with him as she has become a sculpture, forced into an ancient physical, artistic form. She cannot gaze back at the jester narrator, neither to inspire nor subjugate, as to exist in the modern world she must have “eyes of marble.” Benedicta and Venus’s struggles represent the limited visions of women in Le Spleen de Paris, as they can comfortably exist only as one of two things; the depressing, transitory picture of reality to be controlled or spiteful, eternal muse, beautiful and inspiring but made fleeting in the modern city. Although the figurative muses of Le Spleen de Paris confront and deny the flâneur’s voyeurism, they can only exist for a moment, lest they be transformed into stone and made another object in the city.

In Le Spleen de Paris the prostitute appears as another conflicting image. She is positioned between object and muse, combining the stark reality of everyday modern woman as object,
with the attention to beauty, mystery and the knowing gaze of the muse. The prostitute is the female figure who most successfully overlaps the worlds of modern reality or poetic beauty, combining modern consumer culture with the practice of art and admiration of beauty. She is also the only figure of reality aware of the artist-\textit{flâneur}'s gaze. In “The Painter of Modern Life” Baudelaire makes the distinction between the “Women” of Paris and “Prostitutes” suggesting a fundamental difference between the two and ascribing the courtesan with a “provocative and barbaric sort of elegance” and aspirations towards a “better world.”\textsuperscript{19} She engages with artifice and aesthetic beauty, which Baudelaire perceives as an attempt to lift oneself from “Nature” and become and extraordinary “Idol”. He also hails cosmetic beauty as woman’s “duty.” Yet the prostitute’s external beauty is ultimately linked with modern consumerism and indulgence; she is “artificial and misleading,” a self-aware and counterfeit construction of emotion and love.\textsuperscript{20} She is aware that she is an object in the city, and in accepting this fate she can exhibit herself freely and “utterly without illusions,” and her gaze searching and deliberate like the \textit{flâneur}’s.\textsuperscript{21} Keith Tester describes that for Baudelaire, the female prostitute “came to symbolise for him not only his own situation… but also the fact that beauty was to be found in evil.” In Baudelaire’s own words the is an “image of vice”, a reflection of modern life and a “demon’s eye ambushed in the shadows”, but she is also “nothing but pure art… the beautiful amid the horrible.”\textsuperscript{22}

The prostitute confuses the \textit{flâneur}’s look as she is the figure with whom he has the most in common. Both share the freedom that comes from social exile, freedom to walk the streets and freedom gaze openly, aloofness despite a reliance on others and, as the narrator reflects upon, both are engaged in a kind of cold commerce intertwined with their own personal and aesthetic self of self.\textsuperscript{23} In “Les Foules” the prose poetic narrator compares \textit{flânerie} to “prostitution of the soul.” Both actively observe other people in the city, people of personal interest and worth to them. Like the \textit{flâneur} and the muse, the prostitute is aware of the outsider’s gaze and thus can control it; she makes herself visible or invisible depending on the viewer.\textsuperscript{24} The prostitute figure in the prose poetry typifies Laura Mulvey’s exhibitionist woman, a willing exhibitionist unlike the caged “\textit{femme sauvage},” and one whose appearance is “coded for strong visual and erotic impact.” Baudelaire’s interest in artificiality, fashion and cosmetics is intertwined with this theory, as these accoutrements “connote to-be-looked-at-ness,” to use Mulvey’s term.\textsuperscript{25} The modern courtesan, dressed and painted to designate her role as an exhibited object, enables the \textit{flâneur}’s gaze. The prostitute is aware of and therefore not disempowered by the gaze, unlike other women found in the urban landscape.
However, she belongs firmly to the real world of modernity and cannot truly return the flâneur’s look.

“La Belle Dorothée” [“Beautiful Dorothy”] is engaged with the interconnection of pleasure and evil, and of beauty and commerce. Although this narrator does not explicitly identify Dorothy as a prostitute, recent commentators have concluded that this is a valid reading given her interactions with men and interest in commerce. Dorothy is a symbol of vanity, yet this does not infuriate the observer as the traits of other everyday women do. Instead, he appears intrigued, wondering what “great purpose” makes Dorothy walk in the heat across painfully hot sand. In her beauty and vanity Dorothy is “strong and proud like the sun,” dominant and untouched by nature; she withholds the midday sun because she knows that she looks beautiful under its brilliance. Dorothy is constantly aware of her outward appearance and the cultivation of beauty; the narrator describes her smiling “as if glancing at a mirror…” reflecting her.” This walk is a willing, staged and artificial performance of beauty for the onlooker, unlike the movements of other women on the street in the collection.

The artist-flâneur spends the first half of the prose poem languorously gazing upon her as an object, segmenting her into beautiful, disparate parts as in “Un Hémisphère dans une Chevelure.” In this description of Dorothy as separate parts, the narrator sees almost fetishistic flashes of the artistic sublime; the breeze lifts her skirt to reveal her “gleaming… magnificent legs,” and in this fleeting glance he compares them to “the feet of the marble goddesses incarcerated in European museums.” The courtesan Dorothy is described as walking, yet her foot becomes still in the narrator’s eyes, turned to stone like the fated Venus. Time stands still as it does under the muse’s gaze, as he is seized by a moment of desire and awe. In the artist-flâneur eyes this liberated and self-consciously beautiful woman is momentarily transformed into a sculpture of classical antiquity. The “dazzling” light in the scene serves to emphasise this experience of inspiration, comparable to the shock of the muse’s sudden overpowering appearance. He transforms the transient, stolen glimpse into a stone sculpture, attempting to heighten the moment into artistic permanence. However, Dorothy continues to walk, and the poet begins to construct a narrative of her life, deciding that she does indeed belong in the modern world as she is “too miserly to understand any beauty other than that of cash!” Momentarily made into an immortal, lofty artwork, the prostitute Dorothy is soon plunged back into the world of reality, commerce and superficiality.
In discussing the prostitute in Baudelaire’s work and art historical context, is it impossible not to mention Édouard Manet’s 1863 oil painting *Olympia*. The courtesan in this painting is also aware of her audience, and she sits in a confident, staged pose and gazes out indifferently. Her pose is part of an artificial modern performance, matching the “aesthetics of artifice in the body as pose” of the prostitute Dorothy.\(^2\) The *flâneur’s* look is known and invited. The harsh dark background negates the traditional illusion of receding pictorial space, and bluntly emphasises the nakedness of the subject and the artificial, commercial aspect of the scene. Unlike the idealised nude, like Alexandre Cabanel’s *La naissance de Vénus* (painted in the same year in the tradition of Academic art), Olympia is stark, self-assured and exists firmly in the modern world. Both Dorothy and Olympia’s gazes are simultaneously available and aloof, and they are interested in both beauty and commerce.

In Le Spleen de Paris the city and its people are a spectacle, transformed into a work of visual art, with woman at its centre. As men are largely the creators of 19\(^{th}\) century art, they possess the power to control and openly gaze upon women as artistic objects and muses. Laura Woman is disempowered by this process, limited by the expectations of an outside male audience.\(^2\) All of Le Spleen de Paris’s female figures are defined by a dominant male experience and gaze. The artist-*flâneur* indulges his urban scopophilia by looking at women on the streets, and judging, evaluating and transforming them into poetic devices from afar. The figurative muse of his dreams confronts his gaze, thereby destroying his voyeuristic art practice, yet this eternal figure can only exist comfortably in the ephemeral city for a moment and the *flâneur’s* power is restored. The modern prostitute combines the disappointing nature of the real woman with the self-aware beauty of the muse, inviting and indulging the male gaze. Paris itself is likened to a woman in “Épilogue” [“Epilogue”], and woman comes to represent the modern city in its dissatisfying, bestial and beautiful nature. The artist-*flâneur’s* experience of the women of Paris and of the heavens relies on the visual register, and his visual experiences are detailed in the prose poetics.

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7 Ibid.
9 Mulvey 19.
10 Benjamin 72.
12 Lowe 18.
15 Ibid. 1026.
16 Mulvey 16.
22 Baudelaire 38.
24 Maria C. Scott 53.
26 Maria Scott 356.
27 Golsan 167.
28 Mulvey 14.
The prose poem as fine art and the “vast picture gallery.”

In his art criticism Charles Baudelaire describes life in Paris as a “vast picture-gallery,” and indeed through the voice of the artist narrator in *Le Spleen de Paris* he creates a gallery of images.¹ We understand that the *flâneur* narrator seeks inspiration through the act of looking, and possesses a distant, dominating and privileged gaze, creating his own vision of reality “based on his peripatetic observations.”² Previous chapters have established that Baudelaire’s prose poetics in *Le Spleen de Paris* are indeed a literary embodiment of a visual act; the prose poetry collection relies upon an “optical experience” of the city.³ This is apparent not only in descriptions of the people and sights of Paris, but stylistic decisions as well. The collection can be seen as an experiment with the “visual properties of language,” as works act out in literary terms what nineteenth-century fine art created visually.⁴ By mid-century the traditions of visual arts were becoming unstable; as the historical Paris gave way to a modern cityscape, so too did idealised Neoclassical and Romantic art crumble under the force of new, radical developments. Impressionism was one of these new movements, and saw artists scouring the cityscape for artistic scenes and capturing their own personal vision of modernity. It relied upon a knowing, deliberate and personal gaze to facilitate artistic creation. This discussion has drawn comparisons between the themes, perspectives and characterisation of figures in Impressionist artworks and Baudelaire’s prose poetry. However, the comparison can be extended to stylistic features of Impressionism manifested in the literature, and “not only what one sees, but how.”⁵ The artist-*flâneur* engages with this new visual gaze and language as he attempts to best express his individual vision, becoming a visual artist. He subjugates the objects of his looking, and employs visual tools and illusions to re-envision them as prose poetic images.

In *Le Spleen de Paris* the distinction between literary and visual forms is unclear, and the two become interchangeable. The collection contains an almost synesthetic vision of the arts, where it is possible to write a painting or paint a scene with words.⁶ In his 1861 essay on music, “Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris,” Baudelaire suggests that sound and colour, for example, are suitable “for the translation of ideas” and that the senses are intertwined and may be combined in “reciprocal analogy” to create and heighten meaning and best express the thoughts of the creative soul.⁷ The perceptions and imagination of the artist, in whatever form, are affected by these interrelated senses.⁸ He includes a poem as a literary translation of Wagner’s music, and he describes the composer as a visual artist, “painting space and depth.”⁹ This interest in the interconnectedness and fluidity of
different art forms suggests, before approaching the prose poetic texts at all, that Baudelaire’s work may in some capacity employ stylistic methods of the visual arts to convey feeling and meaning. The \flâneur\-artist’s eyes possess this individual power, and he is capable of transforming the object of his gaze into art, crossing boundaries of the literary and visual to create prose poetic images.

Baudelaire’s narrator encounters the dilemma of how to express his look with authenticity. The object of the \flâneur\’s gaze is the swiftly ever-changing masses of the city, and many of the prose poems endeavour to describe this transience and movement. As the narrator’s eye becomes bombarded with images he cannot realistically describe a second in time; the scene has already been pulled into the ebbing crowd on the boulevard and has only been observed for a moment. Therefore in his descriptions he resorts not only to ascribing the people he watches with his own qualifying fictions, as detailed throughout this discussion, but he also becomes concerned with illusions of sensation and sight. He mimics Impressionism, a style concerned with moments and movement in daily life, in an attempt to recreate his memories as authentically as possible. Many of the individual poems have an emphasis on the sensations of seeing and movement as a central element of the visual experience, including perspective and levels of light and their effects on colour and space. In this sense these poems can be seen as a literary translation, to use Baudelaire’s term, of an Impressionistic painting, in capturing conscious sensation as the truest expression of reality.

Impressionism was concerned with recreating the kaleidoscopic blur of urban movement, as in the chaos of the modern crowd “the composition… often changes so rapidly that at times the eye cannot fully grasp it.”¹⁰ In Claude Monet’s significant Impressionist work, Boulevard des Capucines from 1873-4, patterns of thick, painterly brushstrokes create an illusion of a moving crowd, mimicking the sensation of fast-paced movement on the eye and melding the individuals’ movements into an indistinct mass. The impression of movement is created on a static picture plane and a transient spectacle becomes permanent. The artist-\flâneur\ is similarly engaged with “the spectacle of movement,” in the words of the artist-\flâneur\ in “N’importe où hors du monde” [“Any Where Out of the World”], recreating sensations of movement. In the \flâneur\’s vision of crowds in “Les Foules,” multitude and solitude are “equal and interchangeable” as the crowd represents an indistinct, fragmentary mass of movement. In “Un plaisant” [“A Joker”], the artist-\flâneur\ cannot adequately describe the sight of the writhing crowd, describing it as an “explosion” and “glittering” with movement, footsteps creating “chaos of mud and snow.” Rather than describing the people he sees, the
poet foregrounds the sensation of mood that he identifies by looking at the people, describing the crowd as “swarming with cupidities and despairs.” He approaches the problem of “translating a sense of duration” with a visual artist’s eye; instead of using narrative language to create a sense of chronology, he removes time and creates the “instantaneous perception of the image.”

The sense of movement compressed into static image is reflected in Baudelaire’s art critical comment that “everything is in a state of perpetual vibration which causes lines to tremble and fulfils the law of eternal and universal movement.” Transient moments exist in the prose poetry as static, permanent images. In “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” [“The Old Acrobat”] the “crowd and the lights” become a mass, like “moving waves,” but there is no description of how, where, or when they move. The moving swell is an illusion, a static image suggesting movement like the blurred brushstrokes in Monet’s work. This vision of being separate from the crowd also serves to highlight the flâneur’s perceived difference and distance from other Parisians. The crowd of vacationers becomes a single, blurred mass, and the narrator describes the crowd as “they,” suggesting not only a privileged separation between the poet and the passersby, but that the crowd has become a homogenised entity, moving and behaving in similar patterns. The work contains snippets of description as the narrator focuses briefly on people who pass in front of his gaze, and he describes them as innumerable, abstract ideas rather than individuals (“Children hung onto their mothers’ skirts… or climbed up on their fathers' shoulders”); the crowd was “overflowing… circulating everywhere,” mimicking the scattered, hazy crowd in Monet’s work. The painting’s perspective appears to be from a rooftop or apartment window, and similar to this the artist-flâneur’s perspective of the crowd is from an apparent distance; he views the crowd as a distinct spectacle, indistinct and abstract to his eye. The poet describes his complex visual experiences through a subjective viewpoint, and in his attempts to show Paris crowds authentically he mimics the Impressionistic blurring of distant movement.

Impressionism’s interest in movement involves the play and angles of natural and modern artificial light and its effects on colour. This too becomes an important tool in the artist-flâneur’s prose poetry. Baudelaire’s art critical description describes colour as “the most natural and most visible thing In Boulevard des Capucines colours are affected by light, the scene painted in stylised, almost exaggerated grey and blue tones to visually create the impression of an overcast winter’s day. Another example is Monet’s “Impression, Sunrise,” which focuses on orange-toned sunlight and shadows, casting a coloured wash over the scene. In his art criticism Baudelaire lists colour as “the most natural and most visible
thing.” He emphasises light’s effects on colour and endless motion in the natural world, “where all things, variously coloured with their molecular structure, suffer continual alteration through the transposition of shadow and light.” Baudelaire’s narrator engages with light and colour in this archetypically Impressionist manner. “Les Vocations” describes colour as it is distorted by light. The setting is a garden where the “rays of an autumn sun… linger” in the sky, suggesting the late afternoon. The narrator creates an Impressionistic, painterly image as the colours of the scene reflect the half-light dappled through trees; the sky is “greenish” through leaves and the clouds “golden” in the afternoon light. In “Les Bienfaits de la Lune” [“The Moon’s Benefits”] the scene is distorted by moonlight; the narrator describes a figure as “extraordinarily pale” telling them that the moon has “placed her colours on your face.” This depiction of the flâneur’s unique sensations of the scene privileges his perceptions, whilst aiming to describe the scene as a true, recalled experience.

Like the paralysing “flame” lit in the muse goddess’s eyes, the artist-flâneur repeatedly associates bright, blinding light with the permanent artistic ideal, as in states of awe the modern poet’s gaze is overpowered. This appears in “La Belle Dorothée” as, in the midst of her arrival, the narrator recounts the sun overwhelming the scene with its “direct and fearsome… dazzling” light under which people “slackly collapse” into sleep. In “Le Fou et la Vénus” light represents the ascent towards immortal artistic beauty; the sun in the heavens is “burning” and bright, the modern park “swooning” under its spell The narrator describes an “ever-increasing light” as the objects in the scene aspire to be more vivid and more visually beautiful; the flowers are anthropomorphised as they wish to “rival the blue of the sky by the energy of their colours” and “mount towards the sky,” the ascent from the flower’s mortal, transitory modern beauty to the sky’s permanent, timeless beauty described as a physical journey upwards. The focus of the poem is sight and light; the poem removes other sensory experiences such as hearing, describing that “the universal ecstasy of things expresses itself in no noise” and scent, as the flowers desire to make their “perfumes visible;” the artist-flâneur’s perception of the beautiful ideal is visual alone. To engage all of the senses would require the flâneur to be closer, more involved in his scenes of Parisian life. In his visual practice he may remain a stranger, seeing but not being seen. The source of blinding light is not always natural. In “Les yeux des pauvres” it is the gaslight, a symbol of modernity and an object that enabled the flâneur’s freedom on the streets, that temporarily blinds the narrator before his poetic device, the family, emerges. This reliance on the subjective sensations of
seeing, including the effects of light, emphasises the artist-flâneur’s heightening of the visual experience and connects the work to Impressionism.

Individual poems contain several visual artistic inspirations. Often in the presence of an inspiring, beautiful scene the artist-flâneur reverts to a pastiche of influences in order to best describe his largely visual experience of the spectacle. “La Belle Dorothée” begins as a literary description of an Impressionistic visual scene. Colours are affected as the narrator’s gaze is altered by midday sunlight and focuses on the sensations of reality. Dorothy walks along an expanse of sand that seems “dazzling” under the bright light, confusing and distorting the narrator’s vision, and the sea appears like a “mirror” as light bounces from its surface. The focus on stunning light here emphasises the shock of artistic beauty as well as the returned gaze of a knowing female object, as detailed in the previous chapter. Given the light level, the poet can only make out the most distinct elements of the scene, and this affects the reader’s perception. Dorothy and the sky are both reduced to blocks of colour, “a spot brilliant and black” against “boundless azure.” Only as Dorothy comes furthers into the narrator’s vision do more details become clear; her hair is “almost blue” and her red parasol, “filtering the light,” makes the woman’s face dark red from the narrator’s perspective. The poet describes the scene in Impressionistic tradition, describing the perceived unnatural colour of his surroundings as his eyesight is altered by light and the weather. This scene so far has the qualities of an Impressionistic painting, focusing of the individual’s unique perception of reality.

However, the narrator becomes swept up in the image and in an instant Dorothy is transformed in her beauty from a modern prostitute into a Neoclassical figure. The poet reverts to these art historical images often to describe women, and as a way of expressing the heightened, unreal visions of beauty he sees where modern art styles seem to fail. The description of her dress, still affected by the light, has the clear tonal contrasts of classical chiaroscuro, emphasising the shadows that her body and the drape of her dress create. Although in reality she is walking, in the artist-flâneur’s mind she becomes still, the transient transformed into the permanent as he likens her to a Neoclassical “marble” sculpture of a goddess, now “cold as bronze.” In the prose poem Dorothy is the object of the gaze, and then she becomes an image. In combining seemingly opposing styles, the artist-flâneur attempts to forge a new “nineteenth-century urban imagination” that satiates his desire for both the transient and permanent, the modern and the ancient.
The flâneur narrator’s gaze is powerful but limited, and his perspective becomes like the illusory composition of a visual image. Individual scenes are composed and framed to highlight the salient features. Some parts of scenes appear to leak to the edges of the frame, whilst other parts are cut off or distorted by the artist-flâneur’s gaze, an invisible frame. Objects in the image are observed from the flâneur’s distance; they have no entry point or point of origin, they are simply there, whilst others pass out of frame and are half there, half disappeared. In “Chacun sa chimère” [“To Each His Chimera”] a group of men appear momentarily and are gone, and the narrator describes the “horizon’s atmosphere” where the landscape appear to descend and is hidden “from the curiosity of the human gaze.” This constitutes the edge of the narrator’s gaze from his singular station point as viewer or artist, which controls and defines what he sees. The work creates a limited pictorial space; despite walking along a “huge dusty plain” the narrator does not mention the men until they have met and are within speaking distance, and as soon as the men pass him they disappear, cropped from the image. The restricting rectangular frame of the canvas or photographic lens is here applied to the eye, as the artist-flâneur focuses keenly but momentarily on a single event, concentrating only on the object of his interest. After the men walk off the edge of his frame, the narrator spends several moments trying to understand what took place before him but “soon insurmountable Apathy” takes over. Although the moment has been composed, made into an image and prose poem, the reality of time has moved on and the transient scene is forgotten. Similar to people in a crowd, objects pass in and out of frame, with no perceivable entry or exit points. Gustave Caillebotte’s 1877 Impressionist work “Paris Street, Rainy Day” contains framing devices in a similar manner to “Chacun sa chimère.” Unlike the highly staged compositions of Academic art, where subjects poses knowingly and the composition is kept tidily within the bounds of the frame, here objects are partly cropped off the edges of the picture plane, with only one half of a man’s body visible, and only a single wheel of a carriage. It appears both realistic and contrived, as the artist stares detachedly at anonymous objects from his vantage point, allowing them to pass into and out of his view. Objects walk into the picture plane of the artist-flâneur’s gaze and are dragged from it or into the crowd when they are no longer of interest or poetic use.

Baudelaire’s Le Spleen de Paris is underpinned by the act of looking, and the urban scopophilia that intrigues the flâneur figure. The artist-flâneur narrator of these works possesses a powerful, singular gaze, and in his attempts to authentically express his privileged perspective, he aims for a synthesis of literary and visual languages, the poet and
In observing movement and strangers in the city, the artist-flâneur composes his literary images like visual artworks. His gaze becomes like that of the radical Impressionist visual artist, writing sensations of seeing, the play of light and perspective into his work. The collection consists of prose poetic images that mimic the narrator’s vision. This interaction with visual artistic tools brings the artist-flâneur closer to Baudelaire’s vision of modern beauty, that precious combination of the transient and permanent. The prose poem and the work of art contain a transformative element; these literary and visual artworks can essentially transmute an ephemeral period in time into a lasting artefact. This aids the narrator’s desire to subjugate the objects of his gaze. Whilst the woman on the street or the family gazing in awe at a café were only objects of the artist-flâneur’s gaze momentarily, through art they exist in permanent tableau.

2 Mazlish 53.
4 Collier and Lethbridge 3.
6 Collier and Lethbridge 7.
8 Collier and Lethbridge 3.
11 Collier and Lethbridge 5.
15 Ibid. 48.
16 Golsan 168.
17 Prendergast 22.
19 Prendergast 31.
20 Schlossman 1014.
21 Orr 59.
22 Golsan 165.
Conclusion

In the 1862 preface to *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire wrote that the collection intentionally has “neither head nor tail, since, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, alternatively and reciprocally.”¹ The ensuing works are, as promised, layered with possible meanings and impossible suggestions of the immortal existing within the ephemeral; the collection is deliberately dream-like, multi-sensory and dense with potential readings. These texts encourage equally varied, innovative critical readings. In this thesis discussion’s interdisciplinary study of the arts and critical literature, it has stayed true to Baudelaire’s headless and tailless intentions for *Le Spleen de Paris*.

Issues of *flânerie*, visual processes, modernity and urban life, gender, and fine art and literary theory are all intertwined in Baudelaire’s text. Close reading of the collection has revealed that the prose poetry works are underpinned by the visual register, and the act of voyeuristic looking detailed in twentieth-century sociological, art and film criticism. This visual reading relies on the uniquely privileged gaze of the *flâneur*, the omnipresent figure in modernity and critical study. The reader’s visions of modern urban reality are affected by the *flâneur* as he looks openly at passive urban passersby, injecting his own judgements into their lives. He transforms the objects of his gaze into poetic devices, seeking a mirror of his own soul in the city streets. The *flâneur*, the poet and the visual artist become a single entity, establishing Baudelaire’s poetry as a literary incarnation of a visual act.

Women in particular are caught under his gaze, and the artist-*flâneur* projects his judgements and desires onto their image. The scopophilic artist-*flâneur* seeks a vision of beauty that consists of the permanent and the transient. He finds the artistic ideal in the form of a woman, and in her otherworldly presence his practice is momentarily destroyed. However, his vision of immortal beauty cannot exist comfortably in modernity and she is soon vanquished, and the hierarchy of the male gaze is restored.

His work can be seen as a literary interpretation of a visual act. This is not only in its reliance on the visual gaze, but also in artist-*flâneur*’s use of Impressionist stylistic elements, as he attempts to record his subjective vision accurately. In the urban landscape his vision becomes obscured and distorted, and the essentially narrator paints these scenes. Ultimately the artist-*flâneur*’s practice realises the two elements of beauty that he desires, as the transitory, visual city scenes are made permanent by their transformation into literary description.
There remains a tremendous scope for future research surrounding these topics. Certainly, the study could potentially be extended to *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Baudelaire’s other works, comparing and contrasting the voice or voices to that the prose poetic narrator, including possible gendered voices, given that women and the female muse are common topics in this work. The analysis of the modern arcade and consumer culture, as pioneered by Walter Benjamin, would be an excellent means of analysing the visual and the gaze in the historical city, highlighting the narrator’s interest in windows and creation of visual displays.

Baudelaire’s urban setting and moving crowd imagery are also resonant in the contemporary city landscape, and the scope exists to connect the work to a contemporary literary setting, or to compare the visual language of the work to twentieth- or twenty-first-century fine art. Susan Blood has compared “À une passante” [“To a Woman Passerby”] from *Les Fleurs du Mal* to a photographic snapshot, and similar readings are possible in Baudelaire’s prose poetry. Using the ideas of the male *flâneur* narrator’s gaze and privileging of the visual as a starting point, there exists scope for thorough research and discussion.

By approaching the nineteenth-century texts with contemporary critical viewpoints, the aim is not to find one definitive meaning but to shed light and form new connections across critical disciplines within the prose poetry collection. The literary and visual critical fields are strengthened by one another, and together contribute to the diverse critical study of Baudelaire’s remarkable text.

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Bibliography


