



## Flânerie or Flimflamery? — The Urban Myth of the Flâneur and Turtle-Walking

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Toward the end of the twentieth century, German philosopher, cultural critic, literary scholar, and essayist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) rose to prominence in first Europe, and then the Americas, for his writings about aesthetic theory, literary criticism, and historical materialism (Osborne and Charles 2021). Benjamin was also known for his essays on French poet Charles Baudelaire, German writer Franz Kafka, and French novelist Marcel Proust. In the last of his projects, Benjamin assembled what later amounted to over a thousand printed pages of fragmentary notes about city life in nineteenth century Paris, France, that would become his unfinished *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-werk*), which remained unpublished for more than 40 years after his death. Benjamin's opus on urban Parisian culture not only paid special attention to the *Passages couverts de Paris*, Paris' renowned glass roof-covered, gaslit passages that composed the city's extensive shopping arcades (Solibakke 2009), but also those that dwelled there. In his writing, Benjamin gave new flesh to "*flânerie*", the art of walking. But perhaps more importantly, in what could easily have been dismissed as a footnote, he also refashioned a character known as the "*flâneur*". The flâneur was an idler who became personified as a young man walking about the arcades of Paris with a turtle or tortoise on a leash to set his pace. Inexplicably, Benjamin's turtle-walking flâneur became an indelible motif in art and literature, making a splash whose ripples are still felt today.

One prominent example of the flâneur's emblematic permanence can be found in the art world. On December 12, 2004, Ottoman artist Osman Hamdi Bey's 1906 painting "The Tortoise Trainer" (oil on canvas; 221.5 x 120 cm) was sold at auction for 5 trillion Turkish lira (\$3,793,500 USD, ca. 3 M €), setting a record at that time as the highest price paid for a painting by a Turkish artist. While the inspiration and source material for this painting is debated to this day, one long trot out and unflagging interpretation in the search for hidden meaning and symbolism in his work suggests that Osman Hamdi may have been referencing Benjamin's turtle-walking flâneur (see Bettelheim and Taskavak 2006, Bettelheim 2020). This interpretation persists to this day despite the absence of a leash in the painting (not to mention the inconsistent chronology; more on that later), hinging instead on metaphor alone.

Even today, the turtle-walking flâneur regularly appears in works of fiction (see Caparrós 2008; p 202, Dey 2008; p 139) and non-fiction (see Cooke 1990; p 15, Solnit 2000;

p 199–200, Federle 2001; p 41, Hodgkinson 2007; p 101, Kendall 2008; p 178, Rhodes 2010; pp 229–230, Rodriguez and Rink 2011; p 106, Coverley 2012; p 175), the arts (Milne 2017; 120–122, Jönsson 2019; 53–54, Roddier 2020; 125–140), fashion (see Anonymous 1950; p 3), and luxury items such as the winery Flâneur Wines (see [www.flaneurwines.com](http://www.flaneurwines.com)) which features a turtle-walking flâneur on its wine labels or the boutique hotel The Tortue, Hamburg (Germany) that celebrates "the delightful art of living, never hurrying!" with a statue of a tortoise in the lobby to greet guests (see [www.tortue.de](http://www.tortue.de)).

Under increasing scrutiny, however, some historians have begun to question whether the "flâneur" ever existed. If the flâneur is fiction, might so be his turtle on a leash? It is only through close examination that we can begin to unravel the urban myth of turtle walking to determine whether Benjamin's man of the streets with a turtle on leash was more documentation or mere fabrication.

### THE FLÂNEUR, DEFINED

What, then, is a flâneur? The flâneur first set foot on the streets of Paris in the early 1800s, referring in popular usage at that time to a lazybones, a deviant, a loafer, or an idler. But the vulgar connotations soon gave way to a more bourgeois interpretation that gained a life of its own (Ferguson 1994). By the 1830s and 1840s, the flâneur had become layered like an onion, itself a symbol of modernity and urbanity; the artist and the poet; a figure marked by grandeur and decadence; and overall emblematic of nineteenth century Paris (Ferguson 1994). The flâneur's respectable dress code called for a black frock coat, top hat, and in hand either a cigar, walking cane, or umbrella. The haunts of the flâneur were the city's boulevards, arcades, parks, restaurants, and cafes (Gluck 2003) (Figs. 1 and 2). The flâneur was an observer and a spectator, popular and avant-garde, heroic and ironic, nostalgic and introspective:

*The flâneur* is the individual sovereign of the order of things who, as the poet or as the artist, is able to transform faces and things so that they have only that meaning which he attributes to them...  
*The flâneur* is the secret spectator of the spectacle of the spaces and places of the city... going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his other-



**Fig. 1.** A lithograph featuring two “flâneurs” as portrayed in Charles Philipon’s *Les ridicules* series (ca. 1825). The flâneur was both an idler and an artist, a man of the crowd and an aristocrat. (Courtesy of the Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris [CC0 1.0 Universal])

wise incomplete identity... Because the *flâneur* is fundamentally a figure who can only be known through the activities of *flânerie*, a certain mystery is intrinsic to his identity (Tester 1994).

It was the mid-century flâneur that captured so many imaginations with Benjamin’s inclusion of a turtle at the end a leash. Benjamin’s flâneur was inspired by his reading and critique of Charles Baudelaire, and Baudelaire was inspired in turn by the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Without labeling him as such, in Poe’s 1840 short story “The Man of the Crowd,” the nameless narrator becomes the embodiment of the flâneur as he tails an old man for a night from a coffee shop into the winding streets of London:

I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. “How wild a history,” I said to myself, “is written within that bosom!” Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him. Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane,



**Fig. 2.** This pencil drawing of *le flâneur (the idler)* (1855) by Paul Gavarni depicts the typical flâneur in costume: a black frock coat, top hat, and walking cane. Hands in pocket, the idler has nothing but time on his hands to contemplate world passing by. (Courtesy of the Maroni Collection, Boston Public Library)

I made my way into the street, and pushed through the crowd... and followed him closely, yet cautiously, so as not to attract his attention... I resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go (Poe 1840).

Baudelaire, fixated on “the powerful pen” of Poe and his man of the crowd, fixed the flâneur further in reader’s imaginations in his famous 1863 essay, “*Le Peintre de la Vie moderne*” (“The Painter of Modern Life”), in which he rebranded the flâneur a “passionate observer” blessed with the “genius of infancy,” characteristics best described today as curiosity (Baudelaire 1863a,b,c,d):

The crowd is his domain, as the air is that of the birds, and the water the fishes. His passion, and profession, is to espouse the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it is

an immense joy to take up one's dwelling among the multitude, amidst undulation, movement, the fugitive, the infinite. To be absent from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home; to view the world, to be at the heart of the world, and yet hidden from the world, such are some of the least pleasures of those independent spirits, passionate and impartial, that language can only inadequately define. The spectator is a prince who rejoices everywhere in his incognito. The lover of life makes the world his family (Baudelaire 1863a,b,c,d).

The mid-century flâneur's passionate spectatorship was veiled, though, behind a mask of neutral objectivity; the flâneur was disengaged, disinterested, dispassionate, anonymous, and unremarkable (Ferguson 1994). This was the height of the flâneur, the "perambulating Panopticon," the leisured dandy "protesting with his sometimes feigned idleness the bourgeois work ethic and clinging to the remnants of an aristocratic aura" (Mazlish 1994), as well as "a gastronome, a connoisseur" and "aristocratic (at least in spirit)" (Shaya 2004). The flâneur was the "artist, writer, journalist, intellectual, social scientist or detective," but also "'the artist who doesn't paint,' 'the writer who will one day write a book'" (Featherstone 1998).

By the late 1870s, however, the flâneur had again lost its lacquer, shedding most of its ties with the idea of the artist-poet adrift in the bustling city streets to reemerge in the private sphere of the indoors and the department store (Ferguson 1994). The late flâneur—falling victim to mercantile capitalism, commodification, and the automobile—lost its distinction and decadence and was once again ascribed an aimless idler: immobile, estranged, alienated, and detached (Ferguson 1994). The flâneur had fallen out of fashion.

Despite the rise and fall of the *flâneur*, the pointed nuances that defined the figure became homogenized with the passing of time. In the 1872 edition of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle*, the editors' long-winded entry for flâneur carried on thusly:

Le flâneur est une variété du paresseux; à ce titre, les lecteurs du Grand Dictionnaire n'ont pas besoin que nous leur exposions la répugnance que nous inspire ce type inutile qui encombre les rues des grandes villes et y gêne la circulation. Toutefois, il y a dans la paresse du flâneur un côté original, artistique... Il y a mille formes et mille causes de flânerie dans Paris... et cette ville où règne une vie, une circulation, une activité sans égales, est aussi, par un singulier contraste, celle où l'on trouve le plus d'oisifs, de paresseux et de badauds... A côté de ce flâneur inconscient, dans l'esprit duquel tous les objets viennent se réfléchir comme dans un miroir et sans y laisser plus de traces, il y a le flâneur intelligent, pour qui la promenade sans but, l'inaction apparente, est un repos nécessaire, une détente des facultés, après le travail.

The flâneur is a variety of the lazy; as such, the readers of the Grand Dictionnaire do not need us to explain to them the repugnance we feel for this useless guy who clutters the streets of big cities and hinders traffic. However, there is an original,

artistic side to the laziness of the flâneur... There are a thousand forms and a thousand causes of flânerie through Paris... and this city where reigns a life, a circulation, an activity without equal, is also, by a singular contrast, the one where we find the most idlers, lazy and onlookers... Beside this unconscious flâneur, in whose mind all objects come to reflect as in a mirror and without leaving more traces, there is the intelligent flâneur, for whom the aimless walk, inaction apparent, is a necessary rest, a relaxation of faculties, after work (Larousse 1872).

Carrying on loquaciously in a dictionary entry that approaches half a page, the editors went on to describe the several species of flâneur: "*les flâneurs du boulevard*" (the boulevard flâneurs), "*le flâneur des jardins publics*" (the public garden flâneurs), "*le flâneur des quais*" (the flâneur of quays). These varieties of artists, poets, and philosophers haunted the streets and gardens and docks in meditative silence to allow ideas to ripen, develop, and grow (Larousse 1872).

By 1939, Webster's *New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd ed.) defined a flâneur to be "One who strolls aimlessly; hence, an intellectual trifler" and flânerie as "strolling; hence, aimlessness; idleness; as, intellectual *flânerie*" (Nielson et al. 1939). With age, the flâneur had again become synonymous with Paris, intellectual idleness, the sidewalk botanizer, the artist-poet, the well-dressed dandy.

Half a century or more after the fall of the *flâneur*, when Benjamin revisited the elusive figure to pen his 1940 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," he had his own take on the flâneur:

Baudelaire saw fit to equate the man of the crowd, whom Poe's narrator follows through the length and breadth of nocturnal London, with the *flâneur*. It is hard to accept this view. The man of the crowd is no *flâneur*. In him, composure has given way to manic behavior. Hence he exemplifies, rather, what had to become of the flâneur once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged... the *flâneur* demand[s] elbowroom and [is] unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure. Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the *flâneur* only if as such he is already out of place (Benjamin 1955).

One of Benjamin's later essays, "*Der Flaneur*," written in 1938 before his death and published posthumously in 1967 (also, later published as part of the essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"), marks what art professor Tom McDonough has described as "nothing less than the second coming of the flâneur" (McDonough 2002). This resurgence of interest in Benjamin and the flâneur was due, in no small part, to a 1968 profile by Hannah Arendt in *The New Yorker* magazine (see Arendt 2006), which figured the flâneur as the key to understanding Benjamin's work (McDonough 2002).

In Benjamin's section devoted to the flâneur in "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," where he memorably

described the flâneur as one “who goes botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin 2006), he recast the flâneur as a gentleman detective (Frisby 1994, Shields 1994, McDonough 2002, Benjamin 2006). It was at this time that flânerie was “tied to the emergence of the popular genre of the detective novel and also to the literary practice... of journalists” (Shields 1994). “If the flâneur is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it legitimates his idleness,” Benjamin explains (Benjamin 2006).

In trying to understand the etymology of the word flâneur, the only constant is change. In his introduction to *The Flâneur*, sociologist Keith Tester’s treatise of essays on the topic of flânerie, Tester cautions that the “precise meaning and significance of flânerie remains more than a little elusive” (Tester 1994):

... definitions are at best difficult and, at worst, a contradiction of what the *flâneur* means. In himself, the *flâneur* is, in fact, a very obscure thing. And therefore, he cannot be defined in himself as very much more than a tautology (the *flâneur* is the man who indulges in *flânerie*; *flânerie* is the activity of the *flâneur*).

Simply put: a flâneur is as a flâneur does.

### PASSAGENS—WRITTEN WALKWAYS

One could wax poetic for pages on the many nuanced interpretations of the flâneur and flânerie (and clearly many literary critics do), but the genesis of the flâneur figure is most important here to help establish the historical backdrop and cultural milieu in which Benjamin introduces the flâneur’s notable turtle companion.

Benjamin’s first mention of a flâneur walking a turtle in the Parisian arcades appears in the fragmentary notes to his unfinished work, the *Arcades Project*, and again later in one of several essays that arose from those copious notes, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”

In 1839 it was considered elegant to take a tortoise out walking. This gives us an idea of the tempo of flânerie in the arcades ([M3,8]; Benjamin 1999).

Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obligated to accommodate itself to this pace (Note 6; Benjamin 1955).

Note that Benjamin specifies the reptile in question to be a “tortoise” in the written notes for the *Arcades Project*, but a “turtle” in his published essays. An interesting distinction, but likely immaterial since the two words appear to have been so often interchanged by experts.

Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* has been described by one researcher as textual “montages” and “fragments” whose epis-

temological range and “failure to limit his data” overwhelms readers with “the spoils of his research,” noting that some have called the *Arcades Project* a failure for its incompleteness (Solibakke 2009). Sieburth describes it as “a massive fragment or monumental ruin meticulously constructed over the course of thirteen years” that “appeared to be governed by a law of infinite expansibility” (Sieburth 1989). Truth be told, Benjamin had undertaken a Sisyphean task when he set out to methodically record every detail of Paris; from the beginning, it was a project without end. The montages and fragments, assembled between 1927 and 1940 (Ferris 2009), were excerpted from 850 secondary sources, in addition to original commentaries, observations, and glosses (“footnotes”) (Solibakke 2009) amounting to over a quarter of a million words (Sieburth 1989).

The *Arcades Project* was, in essence, a series of loose sheets of paper, organized into sections under overarching subjects Benjamin referred to as “convolutes” (roughly equivalent to “files” or “folders” in English) which became the umbrella for any number of notes on that subject (Benjamin 1999).

For example, Benjamin’s note on tortoises, “M3,8” was filed under convolute M, “The Flâneur,” and presented in a smaller (rather than a larger) typeface, a notation style he devised that indicated a factual “citation” (written in either French or German) rather than a personal “reflection” (written in his native German). Unfortunately (especially for future fact-checkers), each convolute was a quotation or citation removed from its context and then casually assigned an order irrespective to the text that bookended it (Benjamin 1999).

Point in case: of the convolutes that bookend M3,8, Convolute M3,7 is a citation that quotes a passage about the astral gaslights of Passage Colbert; convolute M3,9 is a reflection on a quote about the day Paris becomes dethroned by cliché (Benjamin 1999). To this day, no one is certain whether Benjamin intended the final product to be a series of montages and fragments (as it was published posthumously), or assembled into a more discursive form (Ferris 2008).

Sieburth explains that the *Arcades Projects* was an attempt by Benjamin to historicize the “mythic energies latent in the arcades... that is, of reading cultural archetypes... not as timeless essences but as the products of concrete social and economic relations.” This reversal of “myth into history” can be equated to moving from “sleep to waking” (1988). With every convolute Benjamin recorded, it was another myth made real. In some ways, the task Benjamin set for himself was not unlike the Brothers Grimm and their collection of German-European folk tales from an oral to written form, except that Benjamin was collecting the minutiae of the Parisian arcades.

Comparative literature professor David Ferris points out that it isn’t uncommon for Benjamin’s work to be taken out of context. A “small selection of his works” tends to be cited (notably, the *Arcades Project*), and there is a “tendency to extract those sentences and phrases that lend themselves to citation as authoritative insights” (Ferris 2008). Such a statement could just as well have been made about Benjamin’s tortoise convolute.

To wit, Benjamin's mention of turtles in the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" appears as a footnote to the following main passage text: "Arcades where the *flâneur* would not be exposed to the sight of carriages that did not recognize pedestrians as rivals were enjoying undiminished popularity<sup>67</sup>" (Benjamin 1955). The turtles were an aside, not a defining characteristic of the *flâneur* worthy of mention in the running text. Nevertheless, it is the turtle that left a lasting impression on readers.

### OFT CITED, RARELY SEEN

The *Arcades Project* was assembled between 1927 and Benjamin's death in 1940, while "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" was published in 1940. These dates reflect the passage of time ranging from as little as 87 to over 100 years between when the purportedly fleeting practice of turtle-walking took place (1839–1840) and when Benjamin recorded it. In all this time, Benjamin is the first and only historian to document this practice. And he did so—as, admittedly, was his style—in a footnote.

In *Wanderlust—A History of Walking*, writer and historian Rebecca Solnit questions the primordial basis for the *flâneur*, especially one with a turtle, explaining:

The only problem with the *flâneur* is that he did not exist, except as a type, an ideal, and a character in literature... no literary detective has found and named an actual individual who took a tortoise on a walk, and all who refer to this practice use Benjamin as their source (Solnit 2000).

Shields argues that the *flâneur* is imaginary or, as he calls it, literary "myth" or "gloss" — "a mythological ideal-type found more in discourse than in everyday life" (Shields 1994):

*Flânerie* was therefore always as much mythic as it was actual. It has something of the quality of oral tradition and bizarre urban myth... In truth, it must be acknowledged that nineteenth-century visitors and travelogues do not appear to reference *flânerie* other than as an urban myth (Shields 1994).

Throughout Benjamin's notes, for example, he only afforded the status of *flâneur* to one living person: German fantasy and gothic horror artist E. T. A. (Ernst Theodor Amadeus) Hoffman. The *flâneur* and *flânerie* were fundamentally fictional flourishes that thrived between the pages of novels and thus, in the minds and imaginations of authors and their readers (Shields 1994); the true *flâneur*, if he existed, was a rare bird indeed (Fig. 3).

According to Goebel, "Benjamin's *flâneur* is less a historical figure or individual subject than a perspectival medium, reading the collective memory of the city... the *flâneur* functions as the translator of the silent language of topographic sites into the conceptual language of the modern urbanite" (Goebel 2009).



Figure 2 The definitive dandy.

Fig. 3. "The definitive dandy" (1990) by Penni Bestic, as featured in Phillip Nicholas Cooke's *Back to the Future: Modernity, post-modernity and locality*, is one of the few, albeit modern, published illustrations of a *flâneur* walking a turtle through the streets of Paris. The curious additions of a turtle ribbon (or purse ??), muff, and lady's hat — not to mention the leashed turtle's own top hat — are clearly artistic flourishes. To date, no historical representations of a *flâneur* and his turtle, in art or in photograph, are known to exist.

Benjamin biographer Michael Jennings confirms that Benjamin's notes contain no source material for the tortoise convolute (Jennings, Michael W. E-mail to the author. 5 Jan. 2021). For all intents and purposes, Benjamin was the originator of the turtle-walking *flâneur*. That's not to say that Benjamin fabricated this practice; if anything, Benjamin was the quintessential *flâneur* himself, forever observing and recording the milieu of Paris on scraps of paper. But to the best of our knowledge, before Benjamin, there was no turtle of which to speak.

### CONSIDER THE LOBSTER

Faux or no, the one animal-on-a-leash anecdote that is paired unfailingly with the turtle-walking *flâneur* concerns French

author Gérard de Nerval, who was said to take his pet lobster “Thibault” for a walk on a blue silk ribbon in the gardens of the Palais-Royal in Paris sometime before 1875 (Holmes 1986, Horton 2008). Nerval had rescued Thibault from some lobster nets during a seaside visit to the town of La Rochelle. Often and easily written off as a fashionable show of eccentricity or flamboyance, or as an act to make a name for himself or shock the middle-class, the investigative work of Richard Holmes suggests that, despite any deliberate myth-making surrounding Nerval, his lobster-leash street performance has been misinterpreted (Holmes 1986).

According to Nerval’s friend Théophile Gautier, Nerval was not a showman but rather a retiring and secretive person, instead obsessed with symbolism and “the extraordinary power of his inner imaginative life.” Some have even advanced that Nerval’s fascination with the lobster spilled over from his exploration into the occult and Tarot (see Holmes 1986, Dery 2003). Whatever the reason, Nerval thought it was a “perfectly reasonable thing to do” (Holmes 1986), arguing:

Why should a lobster be any more ridiculous than a dog? Or a cat, or a gazelle, or a lion, or any other animal that one chooses to take for a walk? I have a liking for lobsters. They are peaceful, serious creatures. They know the secrets of the sea, they don’t bark, and they don’t gobble up your *monadic* privacy like dogs do (Holmes 1986; see also Gautier 1881).

Nerval was fond of creatures, featured them frequently in his stories, and was known in his later years to leave messages in the form of animals—a parrot or a lobster—for his friends at the concierge as presents (Holmes 1986). In Nerval’s mind, this was neither performance nor art. He was simply perambulating the promenades of the Palais-Royal with his pet lobster.

In an effort to get to the truth behind Nerval’s lobster of legend, author and cultural critic Mark Dery queried marine scientists to understand whether a lobster could survive out of water, much less walk the streets on a leash. The general consensus reached by experts was that despite its exposed gills (which remove oxygen from seawater, or less optimally, air), a lobster could survive out of water for a short time in cool temperatures with high humidity, but is otherwise vulnerable to suffocation if the conditions are anything other than cool and moist. As to the question of their mobility on land, it was thought possible, but certainly stressful on the lobster itself. Regarding a lobster’s suitability as a pet in captivity, Nerval would have needed a cool, aerated seawater tank to keep it alive for any length of time (Dery 2013). Certainly not out of the question, but great lengths indeed to keep a lobster as a pet in post-Napoleonic France.

### THE TURTLE AS A PROP

Casting the lobster aside, *are* there additional recorded examples of turtles on leashes? One example can be found in

Lucien Huard’s 1884 fictional adventure *Les Trois Majors* (The Three Majors). Therein, a comedic encounter takes place whereby Major Fritz unwittingly falls asleep on the beach atop a giant sea turtle only to wake up and find he’s being carried to the ocean. Later in their adventures, Fritz—having since become enamored with the idea of owning a turtle—sneaks out one morning to visit a bric-a-brac shop where he had seen a turtle the day before. With the help of a translator, Fritz gets swindled into paying twenty times its value after being told the turtle hunts mice like a cat and follows her master like a dog. Fitting his new friend with “*un petit licou*” (a little halter), Fritz finds that the turtle he’s named “Chosephine” does indeed follow, only slowly, forcing him to take her at long last under his arm and race to the docks to catch their departing ship (Huard 1884).

Upon Fritz and Chosephine’s arrival, the three majors become entangled in “*la ficelle*” (literally, “the piece of string,” aka leash) while boarding, causing them to disparage turtles as “*dissimulé*” (sneaky, underhanded).

*L’histoire en donne cent preuves, c’est une tortue qui est cause de la prise de Troie... C’est une tortue qui a occasionné le déluge universel... c’est une tortue qui a mis le feu à la bibliothèque d’Alexandrie.*

History gives a hundred proofs, it is a turtle that is the cause of taking Troy... It was a turtle that caused the great flood... it was a turtle that set fire to the Library of Alexandria (Huard 1884).

The majors’ misadventures are illustrated by a series of vignettes that show Chosephine on a leash (Figs. 4 and 5). But here the turtle-on-a-leash is played for comedic effect—as a sight gag, as a silly purchase, and as a prop in a race to the finish—rather than in any obvious reference to the flâneur.

Two more contemporary examples come closer to hitting the mark. French author Alfred Jarry purportedly “demonstrated his eccentricity by leading a tortoise on a leash” (Glicksberg 1976; p 345); however, the date on which he did so during his lifetime (1873–1907) isn’t specified. And in the biography of German mathematician Richard Courant, Nazi party member Wilmar Hermann Erhard Tornier “embarrasses the mathematics faculty by being pictured in the newspaper walking on a fashionable boulevard with a notorious prostitute on his arm and a tame tortoise on a leash” in Berlin ca. 1935 (Reid 1996; p 178). Both incidents straddle the rise-and-fall of the flâneur, but—other than a dose of eccentricity—neither carries the resonance or implied intent of flânerie.

### LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Historical geographer Philip Howell describes the dog “lead” or “leash” as an important regulatory form of opening up public spaces to dogs and their owners in Victorian (1837–1901) and Edwardian London (1901–1910). The leash facilitates a “code of conduct” for the responsible pet owner, putting the



Il en avait aperçu une chez un marchand de bric à brac. Page 272.



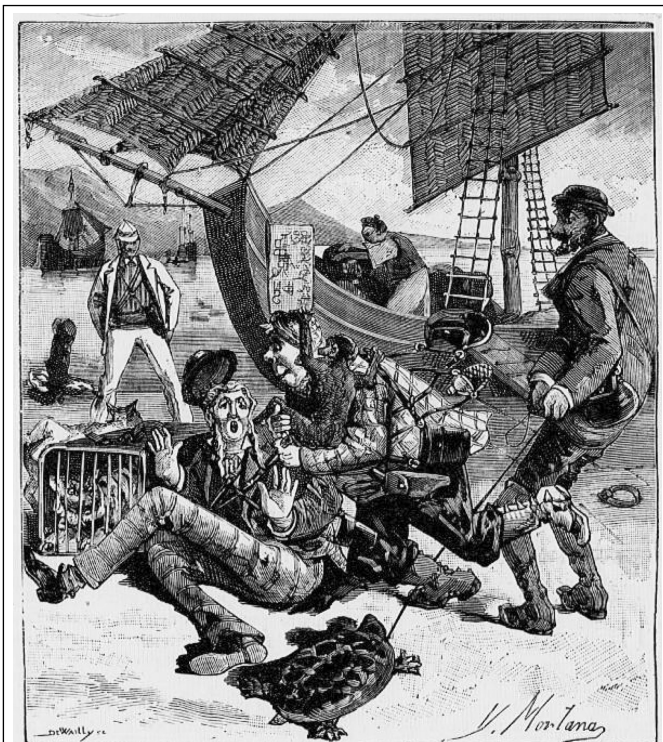
Tirée par le licou, la tortue suivait très bien. Page 272.

**Fig. 4.** In Lucien Huard's *Les Trois Majors* (The Three Majors), Major Fritz purchases a turtle from a junk shop and, fitting his new friend "Chosephine" with "un petit licou" (a little halter), and sets off to meet his companions at the docks. The captions read: "Il en avait aperçu une chez un marchand de bric à brac." (He had seen one at a junk shop) (left) and "Tirée par le licou, la tortue suivait très bien." (Pulled by the halter, the turtle followed very well) (right) (Huard 1884).

responsibility in the hands of the owner, or more precisely, the "responsible humans and their equally responsabilized animals." The leash represents the domestication of not only the animal, but also the urban space it inhabits (Howell 2012, Howell 2015).

Howell asks whether the act of dog walking is a distinctively modern practice linked to humankind's history of domesticating animals and keeping pets (Howell 2015). Presumably, restraints such as leads, leashes, halters, and saddles have a long history in our evolving relationship with livestock (e.g. horses, cows, sheep) and pets (e.g. dogs, cats), not to mention other wildlife species like turtles (and lobsters). Can't the same question about domestication be asked about turtles? Arguably, Parisian flâneurs were not the first to put a turtle on a leash. So to better understand the urban myth of turtle walking, we must cast a broader net beyond the arcades of Paris.

In the Edo period of Japan (1603 to 1867), Japanese artists frequently depicted turtles on a different sort of leash. The woodcut print *Mannen Bridge, Fukagawa* (*Fukagawa Mannenbashi*) No. 56 (1857), by Utagawa (Andō) Hiroshige (Fig. 6), is perhaps the most iconic representation of this practice (see also Figs. 7 and 8). Hiroshige's *Mannen Bridge, Fukagawa*, was one of a series of 119 ukiyo-e landscape prints from the popular *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (*Meisho Edo Hyakkei*). In the Fukagawa district of Edo (present day Tokyo), turtles and fish were bred to be sold later near waterways so that the buyers could release them and obtain karma. Across Japan, market vendors displayed live turtles either balanced atop bamboo stalks (as was the method in Osaka) or suspended from string (as was the method in Edo) (see Bettelheim 2021). The bridge's name—"Mannen"—



La pauvre bête avait manqué son entrée. Page 273.

**Fig. 5.** As recounted in Lucien Huard's *Les Trois Majors* (The Three Majors), after purchasing a turtle ("Chosephine") from a junk shop, Major Fritz rushes to the docks to meet his companions. Upon Fritz and Chosephine's arrival, the three majors become entangled in "la ficelle" (literally, "the piece of string," aka leash) while boarding. The caption reads: "La pauvre bête avait manqué son entrée." (The poor beast had missed its entry.) (Huard 1884).



**Fig. 6.** The Edo period woodcut print *Mannen Bridge, Fukagawa (Fukagawa Mannenbashi)* No. 56 (1857), by Utagawa (Andō) Hiroshige (1797–1858), is one of a series of 119 ukiyo-e landscape prints from the popular *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo Hyakkei)*. The bridge’s name — “Mannen” — translates to “ten thousand years,” which may have been a visual/verbal reference to the turtle as a symbol of longevity. The Fukagawa district was also a common place where turtles and fish were bred, to be sold later near waterways so that the buyers could release them nearby and obtain karma.

translates to “ten thousand years,” which may have been a visual/verbal reference to the turtle as a symbol of longevity. In Japan, the tortoise is known for, and has become emblematic of, longevity and wisdom (July 1908, Allen 1917, Ball 1920).

The Edo period woodblock print *Onden no suisha (The Waterwheel at Onden)* (ca. 1830–1832), from the series *Fugaku sanjūrokkei (Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji)* by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) (Fig. 9), features among other characters a boy pulling a turtle by a string in a scene set against the backdrop of Mount Fuji. A second piece by Hokusai, *Poem by Harumichi no Tsuraki* (1835) from the series *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki (One-Hundred Poems as Explained by the Nurse)* (Fig. 10), also depicts a boy pulling a turtle on a string—clearly a common motif in his work.

The 1879 engraving “A Fishing Party” (Fig. 11) appeared in Thomas Wallace Knox’s semi-autobiographical account



**Fig. 7.** The Edo period woodblock print *Enshi juroku josen (Sixteen Female Sennin Charming Creatures)* (circa 1847), by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, features a woman wearing a floral-patterned blue robe who is holding an open fan while looking at two turtles for sale suspended by strings; in the inset (top right), the sennin (“Immortal”) Roko is depicting riding a tortoise that represents longevity. (Courtesy of the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

of his travels in Asia, *The Boy Travellers in the Far East: Adventures of Two Youths in a Journey to Japan and China*. The Japanese family pictured there was returning from a fishing expedition, and the six to eight year old boy was dragging a live “tortoise” by a string (Knox 1879). In all of these instances, the turtles appear to be unwilling participants as suggested by their tugging at their restraints.

There is a common thread, if you will, that connects the turtles for sale in the markets of Edo and the depiction of turtles being dragged along by boys in these Japanese images. It makes sense that a turtle sold by a street vendor would come with a string attached, not unlike a contemporary hawker selling balloons. Unless the turtle was released immediately (as was the custom, traditionally), the turtle might otherwise have become a pet and the string, by default, a leash. But in all of these depictions, the children are dragging the turtles.



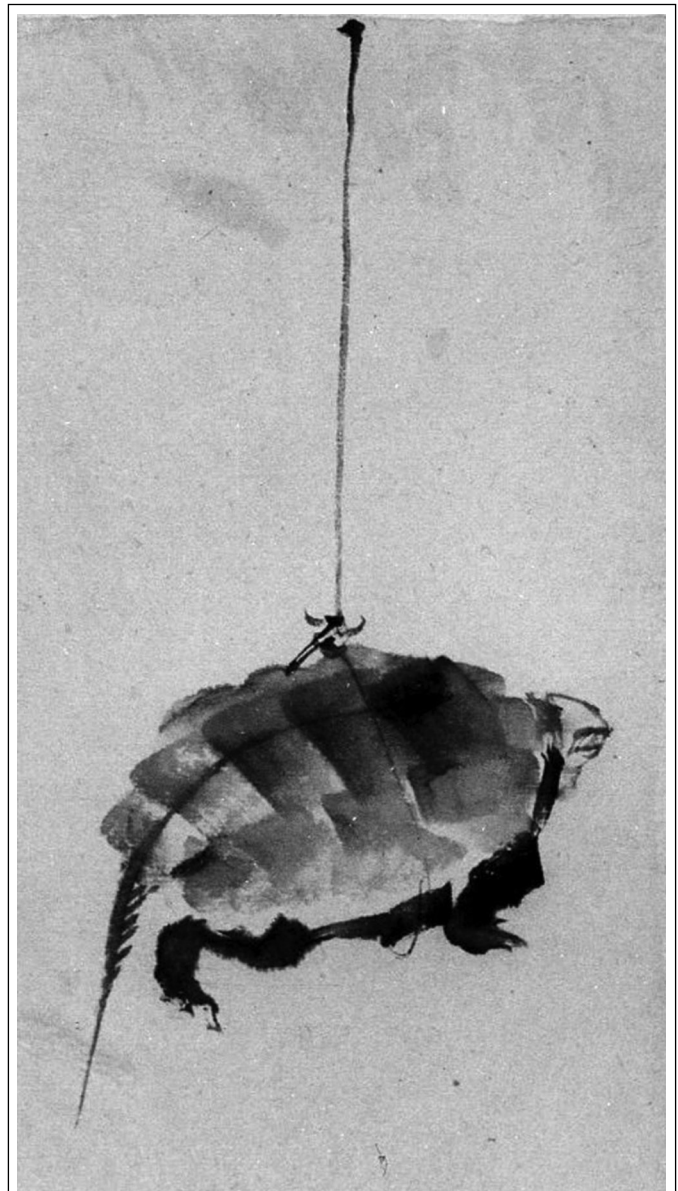
It is the boys that are setting the pace, not the turtles, a relationship that is altogether antithetical to the spirit of flânerie.

According to Dr. Hugh Stannus Stannus of the British Museum, among the Yao (waYao) people of southeast Africa near Lake Nyasa, there is the saying, “one who carries a tortoise (on a string over his back) is likely to get his clothes soiled” (Stannus 1922). This could be interpreted as an early variation on today’s western idioms like “You reap what you sow” or “A taste of your own medicine.” Although this example may very well pre-date the Parisian flâneur, this Yao idiom was used in reference to a tribesman that committed adultery with his chief’s wife (Stannus 1922) and has little bearing on flânerie except for the imagery of a turtle and string.

In the United States, among the more common portrayals of turtles on leash can be found on trade cards, a predecessor of the contemporary business card that first arose in late 17th-century Europe and became popular in America in the mid-19th century. In the two examples shown here (Figs. 12 and 13), beribboned Victorian-era children in smocks and sailor suits lead turtles on leashes like pets. One card bears an advertisement for the Vaseline company—“the Elixir Vitæ”—out of New Jersey, the other for businessperson M.M. Kittredge on a trade card issued by Ketterlinus Co. Printing House out of Philadelphia. Although the illustration on the former trade card appears to have been restricted to Vaseline advertisements, the illustration on the latter trade card appears to have circulated more indiscriminately for companies and products like “Mack’s Milk Chocolate” and “Tule Carpet Lining.” If anything, their cosmopolitan applications suggest these images bear a closer resemblance to “stock imagery” whose content matters less than their aesthetic appeal. In all cases, however, the turtles on leash appear to be incidental to the services being sold.

Another purportedly Asian image with less certain bona fides can be found on a blank trade card published by Farmer, Livermore & Co., Prov. R.I. (Providence, Rhode Island, USA)” (Fig. 14). In what may be another example of Orientalism or Japonisme (the monetization of the mystique of “the Orient” in western consumer culture; see Bettelheim 2021), this Victorian-era trade card features a steel plate engraving depicting a man with a fishing net over his right shoulder, leading a turtle on a leash. The depiction of a fisherman and turtle together could be a westernized allusion to the Japanese legend of Urashima Tarō in which a fisherman is rewarded for saving a turtle (Joly 1908, Seki 1966, Ashkenazi 2003).

Other cards published by this advertising agency featured mostly western images like pastoral scenes of grazing cattle, woodland panoramas, wave-tossed rocky coastlines, snow-draped fields, sailing ships, and hunting dogs, and were circulated as advertisements for companies and products such as “Goff’s dressmaker braid,” “The Sunday School Times,” “Topical Reparation” (medicine), “Huntoon & Gorham wholesale Tobacconists,” and “Edward B. Hanes, Traveling Agent.” Any meaningful connection between Farmer, Livermore & Co., their customer base, and turtles appears



**Fig. 8.** This Edo period ink on paper painting *Tortoise Suspended By String*, by Katsushika Hokusai (school of), depicts a market turtle displayed for sale. (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (CC0 1.0 Universal)).

unlikely. Like the aforementioned trade cards, this too may be an example of stock imagery. Therefore, without more contextual clues, the significance of this turtle on a leash is unclear at best.

### FLÂNERIE OR FLIMFLAMMERY?

Without any clear precedence set for flâneurs and turtle-walking pre- or post-Paris, Benjamin’s convolute appears to represent the first and last instance when the practice of turtle-walking flânerie took place. But if the flâneur alone was a fabulous work of fiction rather than a historical figure, the likelihood of a flâneur walking a turtle becomes more remote than ever. If



**Fig. 9.** The Edo period woodblock print *Onden no suisha (The Waterwheel at Onden)* (ca. 1830-1832) from the series *Fugaku sanjūrokkei (Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji)*, by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), features a boy pulling a tortoise by a string (expanded view on right), a woman with a bucket, a woman washing herbs in the stream, and two men climbing with bundles over their shoulders, set against the backdrop of Mount Fuji. (Courtesy of TheMet, Henry L. Phillips Collection, Bequest of Henry L. Phillips, 1939).



**Fig. 10.** The Edo period woodblock print *Poem by Harumichi no Tsuraki (1835)* from the series *Hyakunin issu uba ga etoki (One-Hundred Poems as Explained by the Nurse)*, by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), is an illustration meant to accompany a poem by a tenth-century provincial governor. The poem reads: “Ah, the weir / that the wind has flung / across the mountain stream / is the autumn foliage that / cannot flow on, even though it would.” The image shows the everyday life of peasants: men cutting boards, a fisherman, and a woman and child, who is dragging a turtle on a leash (expanded view on right). (Courtesy of the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

the flâneur never existed, then perhaps what Benjamin meant to convey in his convolute was not that the flâneur *took* turtles for a walk, but that the flâneur was one who *might* take turtles for a walk, a nuanced but important difference.

Did Benjamin fabricate the flâneur and turtle? There’s no evidence to suggest as much. Benjamin was a consummate observer and recorder whose integrity has not been challenged. A more likely explanation is that someone may very well have taken a turtle for a walk on a leash once upon a

time, once or twice, and that such a happening inexplicably found its way to Benjamin’s ear and caught his attention as a flourish worthy of a footnote. Still, the evidence suggests it is highly unlikely turtle-walking was an actual *thing* that one did. More likely, it was something that *may* have taken place but with no more regularity than a neighborhood eccentric or an itinerant street performer or an indulgent father on a Sunday stroll standing patiently on a street corner holding his daughter’s pet turtle on a leash while she chased butterflies



**Fig. 11.** The 1879 engraving “A Fishing Party” appeared in the semi-autobiographical account of Thomas Wallace Knox in *The Boy Travellers in the Far East: Adventures of Two Youths in a Journey to Japan and China*. Pictured here is a Japanese family returning from a fishing expedition. The woman is carrying a basket of fish while nursing a child, the man is carrying fishing tackle, and the six to eight year old boy is dragging a live tortoise by a string (Knox 1879).

in the park or made a wish on a dandelion. In all likelihood, turtle-walking by flâneurs happened with no more regularity than it did by African tribesmen or Nazis or French poets. That is to say, a chance encounter with a chance occurrence that caught someone’s attention long enough to become trapped in time in a footnote that—one hundred years later—still manages to capture the world’s attention.

This revelation has some real-world applications worth considering. For example, if the flâneur was fictional and the turtle-walking flâneur fantasy, then this imagery that fledged from Benjamin’s writings any time after 1927 couldn’t have been the inspiration for Osman Hamdi Bey’s 1906 painting “The Tortoise Trainer.” In the art world, this understanding makes room for other interpretations of Osman Hamdi’s work, allowing art historians to focus on more practical explanations.

The permanence of Benjamin’s lasting legacy is a product of humankind’s need to find meaning in the mundane, to look for symbolism, to find fodder to fuel our collective mythology. In this case: mythmaking born from a footnote. Ironic indeed for a man who set out to translate myth into history.



**Fig. 12.** This trade card for the Vaseline company — “the Elixir Vitæ” — out of New Jersey, depicts two Victorian-era children in smocks and sailor suits watching a turtle on a leash.



**Fig. 13.** This trade card for businessperson M.M. Kittredge, on a card issued by Ketterlinus Co. Printing House out of Philadelphia, also depicts two Victorian-era children watching a turtle on a leash. The illustration on this card seems to have circulated more indiscriminately for companies and products like “Mack’s Milk Chocolate” and “Tule Carpet Lining.”

There is something undeniably enchanting about a mysterious gentleman dressed to the nines with a turtle on a leash, a gentleman willing to let the turtle set his pace. At the end of the day, the turtle on a leash represents not an example of, but the epitome of, the apex flâneur. But even at his apex, the flâneur was more of a caricature than a character whom, whether or not he walked the streets, certainly thrived between paper sheets. Benjamin’s turtle-walking flâneur lived and died in the ink shed on book pages almost a century ago—only to spring to life again in our imagination as a modern myth.

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**Fig. 14.** This steel plate engraving on an otherwise blank trade card, published by Farmer, Livermore & Co., Prov. R.I. (Providence, Rhode Island, USA), depicts a fisherman with a fishing net over his right shoulder, leading a turtle on a leash. The illustration may be an allusion to the Japanese legend of Urashima Tarō, in which a fisherman is rewarded for saving a turtle.

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