Europe’s cities changed dramatically after the industrial revolution. New kinds of buildings were designed, most famously the shopping Arcades with wide central passages lined on both sides by shops. As the middle-class grew richer, new diversions emerged, particularly cafés and other semi-public spaces. These new spaces offered what Christopher Prendergast calls “a special kind of visual field, peculiarly open to the mobile gaze and unforeseen encounter” (3). The eighteenth century had seen literary depictions of watchful walkers savouring the city’s sights (Mazlish; Parsons, Streetwalking 18–19) but the nineteenth-century changes saw a new aesthetic and a new subject position: the flâneur, the stroller who savours urban spectacle.

Although Charles Baudelaire himself does not use the term flâneur, his collections Les fleurs du mal (1857) and Le spleen du Paris (1869) catalogue the various urban spectators that have come to define the category: the passionate artist, the wistful poet, the exhibitionist dandy, the detective, the journalist, the criminal and the “rag-picker” or harvester of trash. The definite article is misleading, for Baudelaire offers not one flâneur, but several, noting that these “independent, intense, and impartial spirits ... do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions” (Selected 400). Benjamin seeks to clarify Baudelaire’s classifications, but the flâneur remains a complex and contradictory creature. Nonetheless, four qualities of the watchful walker have acquired the label of flânerie through decades of critical commentary. The flâneur savours the spectacle of the city, has a fraught relationship with capitalism, craves to be amidst crowds but feels solitary within them, and does imaginative work on what he sees on the streets.

Today, literary analysis of urban representation often tends to distance itself from the concept of flânerie, with its outdated focus on
the privileged perspective of an individual. Instead, recent criticism is increasingly influenced by what Mimi Sheller and John Urry call the “mobility turn,” a developing body of theory which seeks to articulate how multiple members of a society move through and use urban (and other) spaces in a complex variety of ways. Despite flânerie’s anachronistic emphasis on the privileged perspective of a poetic individual, however, it remains a useful literary framework for one particular kind of investigation: exploration of the fantasies that commodities accrete in particular late capitalist contexts.\(^{15}\) Benjamin is the most famous critic to note the provocative connections between Baudelaire’s sociohistorical milieu and the new form of urban spectatorship he espoused Hailing Baudelaire as “A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,” Benjamin discerns in Baudelaire’s flâneur the attributes which characterised the commodity in nineteenth-century Paris (55). This chapter examines two Second World War texts in search of fractures in capitalism’s grand narratives of consumption, arguing that these texts reveal some of the secret suffering underlying commodity circulations in mid-twentieth-century Britain.

The flâneur’s use of the city

Flânerie relied on new architectures of commodity display, and Baudelaire’s flânerie delights in urban spectacle: “it is as though an ever more luminous light kept making each object glitter with an ever more dazzling splendour ... as though the heat, making the perfumes visible, were drawing them up to the sun like smoke” (Spleen 10). Synaesthesia subsumes other senses to vision. Similarly, “Parisian Dream” is a fantasia of the city’s visual delights, sound fading as the poem progresses: “These marvels all were for the eye, / And there was nothing for the ear” (Flowers 51). For the flâneur, Benjamin notes, “the joy of watching is triumphant” (Baudelaire 69). He dismisses the city of Brussels on the grounds that it lacks enough shop windows: “There is nothing to see, and the streets are unusable” (qtd. in Benjamin, Baudelaire 50).

Yet although the flâneur looks at commodities, he is not an eager consumer. Baudelaire scorns bourgeois aspirations. The narrator of his prose fragment “The Temptations of Eros, Plutos and Fame” encounters a Satanic personification of capitalism:

He was a man of vast proportions, with an eyeless countenance. ... [H]is skin was gilded ... with masses of little hurrying figures, representing numerous forms of universal misery. There were lean