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My Pace Provokes My Thoughts

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Introduction

Poetry is avocation. It is not a career but a calling. For as long as I can remember I have associated that calling, my life's work, with walking. I love the leisurely amplitude, the spaciousness, of taking a walk, of heading somewhere, anywhere, on foot. I love the sheer adventure of it, setting out and taking off. You cross a threshold and you're on your way. Time is suspended. Writing poetry is such an intense experience that it helps to start the process in a casual or wayward frame of mind. Poetry is written from the body as well as the mind, and the rhythm and pace of a walk–the physical activity–can get you going and keep you grounded. It's a kind of light meditation. Daydreaming is one of the key sources of poetry–a poem often starts as a daydream that finds its way into language–and walking seems to bring a different sort of alertness, an associative kind of thinking, a drifting state of mind.

A walk is a way of entering the body, and also of leaving it. I am both here and there, betwixt and between, strolling along, observing things, thinking of something else. I move in a liminal space. I recognize that walking often quickens my thoughts, inducing a flow of ideas, and that, as Paul Valéry puts it in "Poetry and Abstract Thought," "there is a certain reciprocity between my pace and my thoughts–my thoughts modify my pace; my pace provokes my thoughts." I am an urban poet and welcome the stimulus of the street, but the reciprocal connection between moving and thinking tends to operate whether you're walking in the city or the country, whether you're on a path or off it. The physical experience activates the imagination. This is true, say, for the cosmopolitan Frank O'Hara, our Apollinaire, who liked to mingle with Manhattan crowds on his lunch hour and committed his poems to rapid, carefree, uncommitted movement. "It's my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored / cabs," he declares in "A Step Away from Them." It is equally true for the gentleman farmer Robert Frost, our Horace, who often needed to rove out to the edge of the woods that surrounded his land and treated poetry as a local form of exploration, an experience that begins in delight and ends in wisdom. "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day," he recalls in "The Wood-pile," "I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here. / No, I will go farther–and we shall see.'"

A walk, like a poem, takes place for its own sake. It is what Gary Snyder calls "the first meditation." In his meandering, magisterial piece on "Walking," Thoreau playfully suggests "you must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast which ruminates when walking." Thoreau thought of walking in ideological terms as "a sort of crusade" preached by a hermit within each of us, a secular experience with a religious aura. It was a commitment to "the wild." Indeed, Thoreau's essay on walking grew out of one of his favorite lectures, which was first entitled "The Wild," and later called "Walking, or the Wild." The word sauntering , he fancied, derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going à la Sainte Terre , to the Holy Land …" The word saunter comes from santer , meaning "to muse," to "be in a reverie," which is how I take it, a way of ruminating, of musing, a form of labor without laboring, of what Kant calls "purposiveness without purpose." The adventure parallels reading and writing, where you also saunter off into the unknown, heading into strange terrain. One moment you're following a leisurely trail; the next you're staring into the abyss.

Wandering, reading, writing–these three adventures are for me intimately linked. They are all ways of observing both the inner and outer weather, of being carried away, of getting lost and returning. It startles me to remember that I first started my solitary rambles more than forty years ago. At seventeen, I had begun to write poetry with fierce energy and determination. I was overwhelmed by feelings I couldn't understand. I seemed to be perpetually stunned–desolate, exuberant. I needed vessels and containers for those feelings. I was probably grief-stricken over the losses of my childhood, but I wouldn't have understood that then. My brain was teeming with ideas, but there couldn't have been more than two clear thoughts in my head. I was intoxicated by poetry but didn't know a single other person who wrote or read the stuff. How could one devote oneself to poetry in a culture that cared so little about it? I had no way of knowing that this question would be a recurring agon of American poetry–from Anne Bradstreet to John Berryman.

I was devastated by loneliness, and reading lonely poems made me feel less lonely. So did walking out into the night. There was a park across the street from our suburban tract house and I used to climb out of our basement window to escape the family circle and then circle the park in darkness. The trees along the way were only a little older than I was and the scrawny branches barely hid the songbirds. It was a small park that somehow held the night and opened up the mystery of the starry sky. That's when I found myself reciting Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night."

I didn't much like the cracker-barrel Yankee image of Frost that we had picked up at school, but this poem seemed to have been written out of a darker inner spirit. It had a simple directness, a moody undertow, that appealed to me. There was something respectful about the word acquainted paired with the word night . It had dignity. It wasn't overly familiar. It kept its privacy, its wit. I liked the way the speaker of the poem walked out into the night, the way he confronted and coped with darkness. He didn't explain his feelings away, or apologize for them. I didn't yet know that the poem was a terza rima sonnet or that Dante's rhyme scheme had been adapted to an American solitude, but I felt the music working inside me. I reread "Acquainted with the Night" so often I memorized it without realizing I was learning it. I used to say it to myself as I walked around the empty park at night. I also remember lying on my back in the forlorn darkness of my teenage room and reciting it aloud.

ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,
But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

"Acquainted with the Night" begins and ends in the same essential place, with the same sentence and line. Later, I would come to be troubled by its static quality (it turns out that I like my alienation mobile, fluid, transformative), but at the time it confirmed my own isolate feeling. I felt recognized.

My acquaintance with the night has continued through every stage of my writing life. I started to get serious about poetry in the late sixties when I was a freshman at Grinnell College. That was one beginning. I was so excited and riven by my literary discoveries that I sometimes had to step out into the spacious Iowa night to steady myself and think about what I'd read, to go over the words and repeat the phrases to myself. The eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon word walking meant "to roll about and toss," and that, too, was part of my experience, though I was far from the sea, desperately inland. I

would soon be immersed in the earliest English poetry. I was studying the English Metaphysical poets then (John Donne, George Herbert) and trying to learn something from the English Romantics, who proved to be prodigious walkers.

Some nights I ended up on the edge of town where the darkness widens and the cornfields stretch into the moony distance; other nights I'd circle back and sneak into Burling Library just before closing. It was a modern two-story building and poetry was stacked on the second floor, which was where I perched. The librarians would turn off the lights but fifteen minutes later the cleaning staff would come in and turn them on again. I'd just wait in the dark and then spend the night in a cubicle poring over the texts. I had stopped in the library but now my walks continued on another plane. I walked with the beguiled Wordsworth at Cambridge ("I was the Dreamer; they the dream; I roamed / Delighted through the motley spectacle") and with the gloom-stricken Eliot in London ("A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/I had not thought death had undone so many"). I walked with the holy eccentrics of English poetry, such as Thomas Traherne ("To walk is by a thought to go; / To move in spirit to and fro") and William Blake ("I wander thro' each charter'd street"). I walked in New York with Whitman, who was intimate with night ("I am he that walks with the tender and growing night") and in Hartford with Stevens, who was massively solitary ("In my room, the world is beyond my understanding; / But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud"). I was on fire with the movement of words. In the early morning, I'd step out into the breaking day, startled by the cold Midwestern light, suddenly alone again in a flat country–exhausted, exhilarated.

I spent a year on a fellowship in Europe after I graduated from college and that's how I began my lifelong habit of working in coffee shops and cafes, sometimes downgraded to fast food joints. I stayed in hostels and walked constantly. That's when I discovered the work of Charles Baudelaire, who inaugurated our modernity, and his notion of the flâneur, a stroller in the city. The concept of the flâneur, whom Baudelaire calls a "passionate spectator," gave me license to abandon myself to the crowd and to treat the street as a dwelling, "to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world." The flâneur, as Walter Benjamin explains,

> is as much at home among the facades of houses
> as a citizen is in his four walls.... The walls
> are the desk against which he presses his notebooks;
> news-stands are his libraries and the
> terraces of cafes are the balconies from which
> he looks down on his household after his work

is done.
Baudelaire, and the poets who followed in his footsteps, the post-symbolists, such as Léon-Paul Fargue, the self-styled "pedestrian of Paris" (le pieton de Paris), and the Surrealists, such as Louis Aragon, the "Paris Peasant" (le paisant de Paris), helped me to consider one kind of poet, my kind, as a walker in a modern city, whatever that city is, even a city devoted to automobiles, where walking itself can seem suspect, alien, surrealistic. The Baudelairean poet moves through the crowd alone and pauses to note a line to himself ("the walls are the desk …"). He savors estrangement and surprise, "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent." Later, he surveys the world from a café with an open book and a sheet of paper, where he tries to turn what is transient into something permanent, immutable.

Walking is so common that the able-bodied often forget about it for long stretches of time. It disappears in plain sight, too pedestrian (i.e., commonplace) to notice. Yet the very act of walking, a simple unconscious use of the body, can become, as Milaly Csikszentmihaly calls it in Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience , "a complex flow activity, almost an art form." It is a non-volitional act that can be turned into utilitarian exercise (the morning power walk, the nightly constitutional). It can be creatively stylized into an individual art (Charlie Chaplin made the walk of the Tramp indelible), or a collective one, as in marching bands. It has been militarized in distinct ways (the North Korean army marches differently than the South Korean one). It is socially marshaled into communal rituals, as in festivals, pilgrimages, protests.

Walking has its vernacular, which we use situationally. We speak of walking on water, walking on air, walking on eggshells and walking the plank . We tell someone to take a hike . We let others know we are hoofing it . We say something is a cakewalk . (The term cakewalk comes from a traditional African American dance, an amended two-step, which originated among Southern slaves. Roger Abrahams points out in Singing the Master that it was also called the walkabout or the strut , and had its origins in the chalkline walk .) We recognize the lingo of popular song ("I Walk the Line," "Walkin' to New Orleans," "These Boots Were Made for Walking"). The British, who coined the term shank's pony , invented a form of competitive speed walking known as heel and toe . They gambled on it, like horse racing. We make poetic meters with feet . We marvel at sleepwalkers , who literalize unconscious wandering. We collect folk stories–and spread urban legends–about Nightwalkers , who dwell in the fearsome shadows. Walking is older than the oldest profession, which we call streetwalking , and as new as the latest Walkathon. To walk in a West Indian parade, as I did once, is to experience just how culturally determined walking can be (I stood up and out).

Walking is marked by age, by gender, by race, by region, by class. In the street we read other walkers with remarkable fluency. We interpret (and misinterpret) them at a glance. Walking is part of the history of migration, travel, ethnography, tourism, and work. It is also part of the history of poetry–whole schools of poets were connected to walking (the Italian podestà-troubadours, the Gaelic hedge school poets). There were itinerant scholars, such as the Goliards, who flourished in the twelfth and thirteen centuries. There are still itinerant professions, like street musicians in Romania, or corpse walkers in rural China, who walk the dead home to their native provinces. So, too, the nomadic way of life has always been grounded in walking (and thus especially susceptible to the vagaries of weather). There are forced walks, in which walking is a sign of displacement, as it is for refugees, who trudge along under heavy burdens, both visible and invisible, and seem to have, as Adam Zagajewski writes, a "special slouch, as if leaning toward another, better planet" (" Refugees"). Walking is our most fundamental mode of transportation, an ordinary act with a long human history, whether you commence that history some six million years ago with the origins of bipedalism (Plato called man "a featherless biped") or religion ("And they heard the voice of the LORD GOD walking in the garden in the cool of the day," Genesis 3:8).

Walking has an evolutionary history that is even older than human beings, but the history of walking as a conscious creative and cultural act, an activity rather than a means to an end, is a relatively recent European phenomenon. It generally dates to the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who confessed, "I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs." Rousseau treated walking as a stimulus for reverie and invented romantic pedestrianism. Numerous passages in The Confessions , the Dialogues , the third letter to Malesherbes, and his final book, The Reveries of the Solitary Walker , which is structured as a series of "Promenades," suggest that for Rousseau walking induces a sort of hypnosis, a trance-like state. It opens a void and takes him to another plane of being. As Jean Starobinski explains in a book on Rousseau: "The mind loses its grip on reality and abandons itself to its own exuberance. Reveries unfold inwardly without involving the will. The body becomes absorbed in the rhythm of walking to such a degree that conscious reflection is curtailed or eliminated, allowing the images of the reverie to appear, as it were, spontaneously, gratuitously, effortlessly."

There is a long tradition that associates walking and thinking in philosophy. Rebecca Solnit explains in her history of walking that for centuries it was believed that the classical Greek Aristotelians called the Peripatetics–the term means "the ones walking about"–were so named because they walked around as they philosophized under a

covered colonnade (peripatos). Indeed, it was an established, if somewhat spurious notion, that the ancients walked to think. As John Thelwall claims in his massive 1793 tome, The Peripatetic , "In one respect, at least, I may boast of a resemblance to the simplicity of the ancient sages: I pursue my meditations on foot." But Rousseau also goes to great pains to distinguish his particular form of wandering from the analytical purposefulness of philosophical thinking. He is not like the ancients. As he puts it in the "Seventh Walk":

> Reverie relaxes and amuses me; reflection tires
> and saddens me; thinking always was a painful
> and charmless occupation for me. Sometimes
> my reveries end in meditation, but more
> often my meditations end in reverie; and during
> these wanderings, my soul rambles and glides
> through the universe on the wings of imagination,
> in ecstasies which surpass every other enjoyment.

By relating walking to reverie Rousseau created the space for a type of dream-work, a form of associative thinking, that is one of the hallmarks of romantic meditation, especially romantic poetry.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge liked to compose poems while walking. Wordsworth's favored method of composition was to walk back and forth in his garden murmuring to himself in a singsong voice, "booing and hawing" in five-beat lines, creating and memorizing his poems, which he later dictated at home. Here is how "the quondam gardener's boy" described him on the grass walk at Rydal Mount: "He would set his head a bit forrad and put his hands behint his back, and then he would start a bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then bum, bum, bum reet down till t'other end, and then he'd set down & git a bit o' paper and write a bit." Wordsworth's mode of pacing back and forth helps to create a dreamy rhythm and relates poetry to physical action, perhaps even to physical labor. In a key passage of The Prelude (1805, Book XIII, 399-403), Wordsworth also recalls walking and composing with Coleridge in 1797 when the two were writing Lyrical Ballads :

> And I, associate in such labour, walked
> Murmuring of him, who, joyous hap, was found,
> After the perils of his moonlight ride,
> Near the loud waterfall, or her who sate
> In misery near the miserable Thorn.

Wordsworth speaks a few lines later (414) of how the two of them "Together wantoned in wild poesy."

Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journals are filled with stories of constant walking, a staple of their lives. Cross-country walks for pleasure, for the simple joy of rhythmic movement, were fairly rare before Wordsworth, who coined the word pedestrian , and he used them to poetic advantage. Walking is one of the organizing fundamentals of The Prelude . "The lonely roads / Were schools to me in which I daily read/With most delight the passions of mankind," he said, and he counted on his encounters on public roads ("I love a public road: few sights there are/That please me more") to fill his poems. Think of Peter Bell, a peddler, the Female Vagrant in "Guilt and Sorrow," and the Wanderer in "The Excursion." Think of "Resolution and Independence" ("My course I stopped as soon as I espied/That Old Man in that naked wilderness") and "The Old Cumberland Beggar" ("I saw an aged Beggar on my walk"). Think, too, of Wordsworth's poems of reminiscence and return, such as "Home at Grasmere" and "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798," which he composed on a four, day walk with his sister from Tintern to Bristol. He composed the last twenty lines as they walked down the hill from Clifton, which has caused a controversy in Wordsworth circles, since he must have known, but did not acknowledge, the homeless beggars and vagrants camping in the abbey. He ignored what didn't suit his meditation. Wordsworth murmured lines to himself on his long walking journeys, which he took by day and by night ("starlight nights and winter winds are his delight," Dorothy noted), but mostly he loved to turn over verses as he turned back and forth in his own garden.

There are many contemporary records of how Wordsworth and Coleridge linked the composition of poetry with the experience of walking. One of my favorites is by William Hazlitt, who also wrote the first essay specifically on walking, "On Going a Journey" (1821), and thereby founded a genre. In "My First Acquaintance with Poets," Hazlitt recalled:

> There is a chaunt
> in the recitation of both Coleridge
> and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell
> upon the hearer, and disarms the judgment....
> Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to
> compose over uneven ground, or breaking
> through the straggling branches of a copse
> wood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he
> could) walking up and down a straight gravelwalk,
> or on some spot where the continuity of
> his verse met with no collateral interruption.

It is tempting to use this story to help explain the contrast between Wordsworth's conversational, even-keeled rhythms and Coleridge's more mercurial rhythmic music.

Paul Valéry has left us a self-conscious account of how the rhythm of walking leads to–and is countered by–the rhythm of poetic creation. "I had left my house to relax from some tedious piece of work by walking and by a consequent change of scene. As I went along the street where I live, I was suddenly gripped by a rhythm which took possession of me and soon gave me the impression of some force outside myself. It was as though someone else were making use of my living-machine . Then another rhythm overtook and combined with the first, and certain strange transverse relations were set up between these two principles (I am explaining myself as best I can). They combined the movement of my walking legs and some kind of song I was murmuring or rather which was being murmured through me ." Valéry identifies a tension, even a conflict, between two different kinds of rhythms–one the predictable rhythm of a walk, the other the unpredictable rhythm of a poem, which is sudden and unexpected. (Susan Stewart suggests in Poetry and the Fate of the Senses that "Valéry's description of the 'transverse' relations of two rhythms is particularly useful in its suggestion of a contrast between two different kinds of poetic 'feet'…. Poems on walking often juxtapose two meters.") A third dynamic rhythm is created. Valéry also finds "a vague collaboration" between "what we call the External World , what we call Our Body , and what we call Our Mind ." He triangulates these forces, "these three great powers."

There are two key subjects in play when we talk about poetry and walking–one is the contingent experience of walking itself and how it stimulates the imagination, the other is the representation of walking in poetry. The Romantic poets reinvented the genre of the walking poem, which has its precursors in the pastoral tradition, especially the Idylls of Theocritus and the Georgics of Virgil. To leave the urban realm for a rustic natural country is to seek a simpler world, something more innocent, charming, picturesque. The literary pastoral longs to return us to a friendlier natural home. If I were walking you through a history of the walk poem–I am not–we would begin with the walk enlarged into a journey (The Odyssey provides the prototype) and linger over various allegorical pilgrimages, from Dante's Commedia to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales . We would pause, too, over different Middle English poems– Pearl, Piers Plowman, The Legend of Good Women –where the protagonist starts out walking through a natural landscape before falling into a visionary slumber. It's as if the medieval convention embodied and enacted the way that walking can cross the threshold into visionary dreaming. The Romantic poets took the communal nature of pilgrimage (Pilgrim's Progress, The Canterbury Tales) and replaced it with solitary walks of imagination. The individual had become a different kind of entity, a separate interior consciousness.

Thus, “That longen folk to goon pilgrimages” transforms into “I wandered lonely as a Cloud/That floats on high o’er Vales and Hills.” The guides become internal.

I am especially interested in the way that walking instigates and embodies a certain type of flow. It encourages associative thinking. It invites daydreaming into the poem and welcomes digressions. It leads to other subjects. But the act of representing walking in poetry, which includes such elements as intentional meter and rhythm, a particular attention to the interacting sounds and qualities of words, etc., also brings together an unconscious kind of musing with a more conscious formal attention. Walking is akin to letting the mind roam free. It liberates the unconscious. But the end of a wander invariably leads home and the return requires moving in an intentional direction, which is also necessary for poetry. An aimless meandering intermingles with–it is transformed into–a type of intentional and revisionary thinking. Rousseau’s final book, The Reveries of the Solitary Walker , is prototypical of walking literature in this regard, since it actually contains, as Marcel Raymond observes, very “few reveries in the proper sense of the word.” What we are reading is not reverie in its pure state, an inward journal, the language of daydreams, but a kind of roaming meditation on the liberating pleasures of dreaming itself.

The wanderer as an origin of artistic creation is a central Romantic trope. There may be walks in nature, which help to heal our brokenness, but there are no natural walks in literature. The representation of walking, as opposed to the activity itself, is self-conscious, thoughtful, retrospective. “Those walks did now like a returning Spring/ Come back on me again,” Wordsworth writes. The poem of walking, however innocent or spontaneous it may seem, is always a linguistic construction. It is a walk made out of words, which are materially conditioned and made possible by the language of its time. It is saturated with cultural meaning. It is also a form of speech in conversation with previous poems. Take, for example, the first book of The Prelude , where Wordsworth sets out on his liberating journey:

> The earth is all before me. With a heart
> Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
> I look about; and should the chosen guide
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!

Wordsworth is glad to be outside the city again, elated to be turning away from other people. Yet as he sets forth on his journey, he also echoes that fateful, determining moment at the end of Paradise Lost when Adam and Eve step out of the timeless world of Eden and walk right into the realm of history, of time itself.

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and
slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Wordsworth cues and models himself on Milton but reverses the fundamental meaning of the imagery of expulsion and entry. The Wordsworthian walk reverses the direction of the Miltonic one: whereas, Adam and Eve leave the natural world and enter the historical realm, heading toward some future urban civilization, Wordsworth leaves the historical world and enters the natural one, abandoning the time-bound urban realm for the seemingly timeless garden. Milton's passage also wells up, only to be revised, at the opening of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road":

Alone and light-hearted I take to the open road
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading
wherever I choose.

Walking in nature through poetry is not simply a question of roaming free. It is also subject to historical forces. Whitman's light-hearted fantasy of taking to the open road, for example, opened a space for many American writers, such as the Beats, but it is also related to nineteenth-century American expansionism. The weight of historical pressure is painfully evident, say, in the romantic walking poetry of John Clare, who was born in the village of Helpston, Northamptonshire, in the eastern flatlands of England, and found his poetry in the woods and fields, in the intricate nests of birds and the avid renewal of wild flowers, in "a language that is ever green" ("Pastoral Poesy"). He was enabled by what he read–James Thompson's poem The Seasons inspired him to become a poet–and often wandered through the fields with a book jammed in his pocket. "The fields were our church," he later recalled, "and we seemed to feel a religious feeling in our haunts on the sabbath." A secular religious sensibility animates his work.

Clare was a prodigious walker, a solitary who sought out the secret recesses of nature, a hidden, under-appreciated, overlooked country, which he detailed with a sharp eye and a naturalist's sensibility. Accuracy was a scrupulous habit, a moral imperative. He had a powerful capacity to identify with what he observed. Whereas a poet such as Traherne dematerialized walking ("To walk abroad is, not with eyes, / But thoughts, the fields to see and prize," he writes in "Walking"), Clare re-embodied it. He physicalized thought.

Clare's poetry intimately chronicles a world that was rapidly disappearing, that was systematically divided up into rectangular plots of land, fenced off and restricted, enclosed. Commons and walkways were increasingly closed off as more and more land was appropriated for commercial farming. This gives particular social and political relevance to his highly personal first subject, the lost Eden of childhood, a world that he never forgot but that seemed to abandon him. It also gives additional poignancy to his love poems, which are typically invitations, like "The Invitation" itself: "Let us go in the fields, love, and see the green tree; / Let's go in the meadows and hear the wild bee; / There's plenty of pleasure for you, love, and me / In the mirth and the music of nature."

We'll down the green meadow and up the lone
glen
And down the woodside far away from all men,
And there we'll talk over our love-tales again
Where last year the nightingale sung.

Clare loved to roam so freely through open fields, through wilds and waste places, through uncultivated regions, that it comes as something of a shock to find him suddenly looking back over his shoulder for magistrates and gamekeepers.

I dreaded walking where there was no path
And pressed with cautious tread the meadow
swath
And always turned to look with wary eye
And always feared the owner coming by;
Yet everything about where I had gone
Appeared so beautiful I ventured on
And when I gained the road where all are free
I fancied every stranger frowned at me
And every kinder look appeared to say
"You've been on trespass in your walk today."
I've often thought, the day appeared so fine,
How beautiful if such a place were mine,
But, having naught, I never feel alone
And cannot use another's as my own.

Clare was alert both to social and economic alienation. He was devastated by the loss of communal lands to the acts of enclosure. His unfettered natural walks became unnaturally regulated and his walking poems took on the force of "ecological protest" (the phrase is E. P. Thompson's). Poets who later walk with abandon and care

through the countryside–Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, Seamus Heaney–follow in the footsteps of both Wordsworth and Clare.

American walking poems veer off in a couple of different directions. Thoreau leads the way to the country ("When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods") and to such poets as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, who posit a continuity, a unity, between human beings and the natural world. Snyder used his western walks to re-imagine the American nature poem by turning eastward, especially in The Back Country (1968), where he imitates the walking idiom of the ancient Chinese and Japanese poets, like Basho, whose book Narrow Road to the Far North is one of the mountaintops of walking literature. When it comes to American urban poetry, Whitman leads the way to the metropolis ("I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island") and to such poets as Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gerald Stern, and Galway Kinnell, who relish the energy and excitement of being on foot in the city. The Harlem Renaissance poets turned walking into a jazz idiom ("Come,/Let us roam the night together/Singing," Langston Hughes writes in "Harlem Night Song"). Whitman also inspired expansive walking poets from other countries, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky ("Brooklyn Bridge"), Blaise Cendrars ("Easter in New York"), Pablo Neruda ("Walking Around"), Ernesto Cardenal ("Trip to New York"), and Saadi Youseff, whose poem "America, America" borrows a refrain line from the Blues and gives it a Palestinian resonance:

> How long must I walk to Sacramento?
> How long must I walk to Sacramento?
> How long will I walk to reach my home?

I myself have always been partial to the American seashore lyric, where the poet walks neither in the city nor the country but down to the sea, which holds its own abysmal enchantments. Whitman created the romantic prototype in his incantatory lyric "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which was originally called "A Word Out of the Sea" and comes from a section of Leaves of Grass called "Sea-Drift." The poem creates the very rhythm of a reminiscence emerging from the sea waves and the rocking cradle. It dramatizes the formative experience of a boy leaving the safety of his bed and walking down to the Paumanok seashore in August. He exchanges the protection of the indoors for the peril of the outdoors, facing his own vague yearnings and the misty void, mixing his own tears and the salt spray of the ocean. He recalls a moment in some past May when he encountered two birds from Alabama, at first bound joyfully together, united as one, and then painfully separated by death. The speaker becomes again the boy standing alone on the shore, the boundary line between life and death. This discovery of death instigates his vocation:

Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of my dusky demon and
brother,
That he sang to me in the moonlight on
Paumanok's gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs at random,
My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the
waves,
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping
to my feet,
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle,
swathed in sweet garments, bending aside,)
The sea whisper'd me.

There is an element of lullaby in "Out of the Cradle," where the walker feels lulled by the motion of the waves, the cadence of the sea, the memory of the cradle's first unity. The rhythmic repetitions loosen the intellect for reverie. Whitman's poem creates a moment, a passage, which is both an action and a dream. The walk down to the sea becomes a journey to the edge of the world, the edge of the vast unknown, and the speaker enters the space where the self suddenly confronts the looming void. "There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each," Emerson wrote in his Journals , "but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,– I and the Abyss ." This is the space of the American sublime.

Whitman's poem led directly to Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," where the notion of order is incarnated by a solitary woman singing and striding along the sea. This in turn helped foster Sylvia Plath's "Berck-Plage" ("This is the sea then, this great abeyance"), Elizabeth Bishop's "The End of March" and A. R. Ammons' "Corsons Inlet," which begins with the physical aspects of a walk:

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf
rounded a naked headland
and returned
along the inlet shore:

Ammons' poem, like Bishop's, frames an entire walk. Originally entitled "A Nature Walk," it brings together the data of an actual walk–what he sees, where he goes–with

a meditative stream of consciousness. The walk liberates him from the rigidities of thought ("I was released from forms") into the shadings of sight. He refuses to be pinned down ("I have reached no conclusions, have erected no / boundaries") and gives himself up to the flow, to the nature of movement itself, to a limited viewpoint, a shifting field of action. His fluid line lengths, uneven margins, and visual detours enact his sense of"the form of a motion":

I will try
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder,
widening
scope, but enjoying the freedom that
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of
vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.

No one has done more to secure the identity between a poem and a walk than Ammons, who once gave a talk called "A Poem Is a Walk." "Corson's Inlet" is a poetic manifesto that can stand for dozens of his poems that take walking to be what he calls "the externalization of an interior seeking," a way of proceeding, a form of quest.

Ammons created one version of the modern walk poem, a lyric that aspires to a spontaneous immediacy. It has a documentary quality. It unfolds in time and can't be reproduced. It is present to itself, to its own making, which is why it often takes place in the present tense. "And now into the fields I go, / Where thousand flaming flowers glow," John Dyer announced in his eighteenth-century poem, "The Country Walk," which Roger Gilbert calls "the first true specimen of the walk poem." From Wordsworth's "An Evening Walk" to Randall Jarrell's "A Man Meets a Woman in the Street" to John Ashbery's "Grand Gallop," which John Hollander terms "a great walk through urban dreck," the walking poem in the present tense repeatedly seeks the freedom of motion, the impulse of a moment. It blends the particulars of perception with the license of reflection and enables the poet to feel he has become, as Michael Ryan puts it in "Pedestrian Pastoral," "a pure observer,/ for once oblivious//to the spurs of ego and desire." It can be diary-like and quickly change direction, which is one reason it has been so appealing to the New York poets, especially Frank O'Hara (I do this, I do that). So, too, there is often a tension in such poems between stopping, which threatens to bring thinking to a halt, and moving on, which seems to liberate it. Think of how the word Walking acts as a recurring touchstone, a refrain, in Book Two of Paterson , where the poet-speaker keeps stumbling up against the reality that

Outside

outside myself
there is a world ...

He approaches that world concretely. There is an element of transcription in Williams' step-like poem, which above all means to keep going. Walking is both its thematic–it is a working-class Sunday in the park–and its model, how one foot follows the other in a new measure.

Walking takes us into the world but it also brings us home. We come back restored from nature or refreshed by the city. Sometimes we return depleted, sometimes elated. We may meet others on our walks, but most of all we keep bumping into ourselves. As Conrad Aiken recognizes in "The Walk in the Garden":

For in this walk, this voyage,
it is yourself, the profound history of your 'self,'
that now as always you encounter.

Some of my own first characteristic poems were pieces in which I imagined walking around the city with beloved poets as guides. My model was the way that Dante called on Virgil to lead him through the terrifying circles of hell. And so I called on the Peruvian poet César Vallejo to walk with me in Paris, where he had written his deeply human poems (Poemas humanos) and died in poverty, and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca to walk with me on the Upper West Side of New York City, where he had spent a critical year of his life, which resulted in his startling testament, Poet in New York (Poeta en Nueva York). These were the poems of my apprenticeship, and in the end my guides deserted me, as all guides must, and left me to my own devices.

Now I walk in Prospect Park, which is near my apartment in Brooklyn. In April, I coast along under the trees, which seem poised on the edge of a great transformation, and try to stay away from the shadowy edges that seem stuck somewhere in mid-March. I walk past some middle-aged Jamaicans staking out the space for a cricket match, and the tired young parents pushing along empty strollers while their children dawdle on the path, and the first eager fliers unfurling their colorful kites. In the distance, I can spy the power walkers, dressed like bicyclists, speeding into the day ("Of all exercises walking is the best," Thomas Jefferson said: "The object of walking is to relax the mind"). Soon the community organizers will be staking out the barbecue pits and the road that circles the park will be thick with joggers running toward ruddy health.

I leave the park and cross under the arches, as calm as a Parisian, and let the wind push me down Flatbush Avenue, where the last drunks of the night are plastered against the closed bars and the first shoppers are marching purposefully toward the waiting mall. I am glad to be alone, turning here and there, casually floating along, sometimes

muttering to myself. I stroll over Brooklyn Bridge, which so inspired Hart Crane, Marianne Moore and Vladimir Mayakovsky, and make my way to the lower East Side, where my grandfather first stayed when he came to the New World. One morning I sat in an empty coffee shop in the early morning and tried to write a poem about walking with my grandfather on the bridge over the Chicago River when I was eight years old. It was our last walk before he died. I remembered eating cotton candy and marveling at the bridge. Suddenly the memory of taking his hand became so physically overwhelming that I had to get up and roam around for a while. I was walking in two places at once. Then I came back and revised the lines. For a poet, that's the writing life.

NOTE

This essay grew out of a short piece that I wrote for the column "The Writing Life," in The Washington Post Book World (April 23-26, 2008). I am grateful to others who have walked before me in thinking about walking and poetry. I have learned especially from two histories, Joseph A. Amato, On Foot: A History of Walking (New York: New York University Press, 2004), and Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A History of Walking (New York: Viking, 2000). Other books that have left their footprints on my work are Morris Marples, Shank's Pony: A Study of WalkingOkla (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1959); Jeffrey Robinson, The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image (Norman, OK: University of homa Press, 1989); John Elder, Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), especially his chapter on Wordsworth and Basho; and Roger Gilbert, Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Susan Stewart's Poetry and the Fate of the Senses (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) has been a companion.

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