

**FRÉDÉRIC GROS (2014) *A PHILOSOPHY OF WALKING*. TRANS. BY JOHN HOWE. LONDON, NEW YORK: VERSO. ISBN: 978-1-7816-8270-8.**

**Angeliki Sioli**

A close-up image of a cobble-stoned path in the countryside seems to adorn the cover of Frédéric Gros' *A Philosophy of Walking*. A more careful examination reveals that the loosely set white stones of the path are actually pages from a book. Eight pages in total, strewn about on a receding bed of grass, create the impression of a path following someone's imaginative footsteps and reveal the nature of the walk Gros' book invites the reader to follow; a walk that can take place in many different ways, as the pages, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be from the *Philosophy of Walking* itself. The readers can set one foot in front of the other, taking each page in a linear manner and read from beginning to end. But they can also cross through the path horizontally, choosing to step selectively on any of the pages or chapters. The gaps of grass between the pages also imply that they can step off the path at anytime and divert to their own personal itineraries, following spontaneously emerging thoughts on walking, or indulging in memories of past wanderings. Rousseau's famous declaration 'I like to walk at my ease, and to stop when I like' (80), seems to be one of the main organizing principles of the book's structure.

Gros' book appears at a time of renewed and increasing interest in the simple but fascinating act of walking. It follows upon publications that vary from comprehensive historical approaches like Joseph Armato's *On Foot; A History of Walking* (2004) and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A history of Walking* (2001), to specialized approaches like Karen O'Rourke's *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (2013), or more unconventional and personal accounts on the topic like Geoff Nicholson's *The Lost Art of Walking; the History, Science, Philosophy, and Literature of Pedestrianism* (2004). Gros' narrative follows a selective and particularly focused emphasis on the topic, diving into details of walking's philosophical and existential aspects.

As the book's title claims, it is indeed a *philosophy*, the word understood here as a set of views and theories of a particular philosopher concerning the study of the fundamental nature of reality. A number of small, concise and deeply introspective chapters with titles like 'Slowness,' 'Solitude,' 'Silences,' 'Energy,' or 'Gravity' unpack philosophical aspects of walking. They praise its slow pace, arguing how days of slow walking can be very long and make you live longer, questioning the commonly held belief - for Gros an illusion - that speed saves time (37). They focus on walking's unavoidable solitary nature, but propose solitude as an element that can be shared with a walking companion, like bread and daylight (54). They look into its bodily limitations, bringing to light issues of gravity, fatigue, and repetition, emphasizing how 'walking means resigning yourself to being an ambulant, forward-leaning body' (187). While some of these chapters deal with short urban strolls, the majority focus on long walks in nature, which may last for hours or even days. Under these circumstances walking 'means living a life scoured bare (social varnish burned off), unburdened, divested of social skills, purged of futility and masks' (190). Walking is understood as a means of personal freedom that leads to states of joy, happiness, or serenity. These short chapters can be of course read independently, but if someone chooses to follow the cover's suggestive cobbled path in a linear fashion, it becomes obvious that they actually prepare the way for the encounter with some significantly more substantial and different in character chapters, that follow on the way Gros suggestively lays out for the reader.

The *Philosophy of Walking* focuses selectively on eight historical figures, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Rousseau, Thoreau, Nerval, Kant and Gandhi, all passionate walkers who persuasively advocated in favor of walking's benefits. Gros dives into the details of these figures' lives, details related to their walking habits, and further illuminates the different and fascinating dimensions of this simple practice. He engages in a biographical story-telling mode of writing, offering the reader selective snapshots of these figures' personal paths, looking into the difficulties they had to overcome, the passions that drove them, the interests that fascinated them, always through the prism of their diverse passions for walking and how these passions assisted them under different circumstances. He further explores how their walking habits changed character over time, according to important life events and other historical or biographical circumstances. This mode of narration through stories, employed across all these chapters, provokes the readers' imagination; we can start picturing Nietzsche walking beside 'Lake Léman, with his 'friend Carl von

Gersdorff, six hours a day' (15); Kant walking on his own through Königsberg for 'he wanted to breathe through his nose all the way, with his mouth closed, which he believed to be excellent for the body' (156); or Nerval deliriously wandering through 'engine sounds, bells, snatches of speech and the drumming of thousands of feet on the pavement' (150) in the sonically overwhelming city of Paris. Through the focus on this personal element, these accounts begin to resemble parables. In an indirect way, the readers are almost offered philosophical advice on how the simple act of putting one step in front of the other can enrich and meaningfully alter their lives.

Indulging in the descriptions of Nietzsche's passionate long daily walks for the sake of clear thinking, we are encouraged to 'sit as little as possible' and not 'believe any idea that was not born in the open air and of free movement' (11). We are advised to question any knowledge emerging solely from extensive studies in libraries but that is disconnected from any real live-experience. Following Rimbaud's peripatetic, rebellious and short life we acquire a 'sense of walking as flight. That deep joy one always feels when walking, to be leaving behind' (52), with no question of going back. We are stimulated to consider life's impermanent nature and our own mortality, our walks as passings through the world. Reading about Rousseau's conviction that walking can enable us to find in ourselves 'the man fresh from the hands of Nature, the absolute primitive' (73), we can grasp the meditative character of walking, its capacity to retrieve for us the absolute simplicity of presence. Comprehending Thoreau's active criticism of the emerging capitalistic society and his anticipation of the 'vandalism of Nature being treated as a free source of lucre' (89), we feel determined to enjoy even more the seeming uselessness of walking. 'What in traditional economic terms is time wasted' (89), for Thoreau is an invaluable opportunity to feel 'the vegetable, mineral and animal aspects in ourselves' (96). Nerval's melancholic urban strolls can guide our way to deal with and transform sadness as 'walking cradles the mind, all tossed about by renascent memories' (148), and the story on Kant's daily lonely strolls at 5:00pm sharp on the same itinerary reminds us that the interesting secret of monotony 'is that it constitutes a remedy for boredom. ... The repetitiveness of walking eliminates boredom, for, with the body active, the mind is no longer affected by its lassitude' (157). Lastly, with Gandhi and his apprehension of walking as a means of political action, we tangibly grasp walking's power to oppose the world with the infinite peace of slow, humble, unending and gentle effort it calls for. 'Walking drains anger away, it purifies' (202) and at the same time obliges you 'to hold

yourself to account: ... correct yourself, ... challenge yourself, ... assess yourself' (196).

Gros' book closes with a feeling that the conversation on walking can and should keep going. Even if repetitions will inevitably be involved, the very nature of the conversation's topic welcomes them like a generously looped ramble. 'Walking is dull, repetitive and monotonous. That is all too true. But for that reason it is never tiresome' (207), as Gros admits, having proved that a philosophically-derived discussion about walking can also be repetitive, monotonous and even simplistic at times, but for these reasons, not tiresome at all. Gros' approach on the topic respects walking's astonishing profoundness: 'You are doing nothing when you walk, nothing but walking. But having nothing to do but walk makes it possible to recover the pure sensation of being, to rediscover the simple joy of existing, the joy that permeates the whole of childhood' (83). His poetic and clear writing imparts a feeling that even if a light breeze will disturb the pages that constitute the cobbled path of the cover, the walking itself cannot be imperiled. Rather, the author seems to have left the pages on the grass as a reminder of the things we may instinctively know, and, thanks to our common experiences, already be able to apprehend. This might have been done, in part, as an attempt to enrich our understanding of them and deepen our perceptions, but also mainly I surmise to encourage us to engage in our own personal walking habits and explore them further. It is only by engaging ourselves in walking, and chasing that unseen horizon where a walk can so often lead, that a conversation about walking, philosophical or otherwise, can actually be meaningful.

## References

Armato, J. (2004) *On Foot: A History of Walking*. New York: New York University Press.

Nicholson, G. (2004) *The Lost Art of Walking: The History, Science, Philosophy, and Literature of Pedestrianism*. New York: Riverhead Books.

O'Rourke, K. (2013) *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Thoreau, H. D. (2008) *Walking: An Essay*. Edited and annotated by Andrew Steeves. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press.

Solnit, R. (2001) *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books.