

ASCETICS AND ARTISTS ON FOOT

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a text suggested by CORNELIA LAUF / curator, Rome
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In her later years when she visited Japan, **Marguerite Yourcenar** was invited to give a talk on the subject of travel. The text of her talk has been unpublished until now (2007). Regarding travel, in its wider and more general aspect, she writes: "...each intelligent journey ... becomes a school of resistance, of wonder, almost a mystical practice, a means through which to lose ones certainties by comparing them with those of others." Even more intere-sting is the fact that the examples she uses to prove how necessary it is to approach any trip with a completely open mind, pertain to people who have traveled extensively on foot. One of these people is the Roman emperor **Hadrian**. He was the first man known to us to climb to the top of a mountain (Mount Etna) on foot purely for aesthetic pleasure and for the scientific curiosity of seeing the sun rise from that altitude, rather than for religious reasons. A second character Yourcenar brings up as an example is the poet and Zen monk **Matsuo Bashō**, the most famous composer of *haikai*, who lived in Japan in the seventeenth century. Bashō continuously took journeys on foot, in a sort of "mystical and poetic wandering." In his elderly years he became seriously ill while preparing for a journey. He never made it. He was buried by his disciples on a small piece of land marked by a stone that had his name and his beginning and end dates, the drawing of a labyrinth and his famous *haiku* which read: "Each day of life is a journey; and the journey itself is the home of man."

I wish I knew of Yourcenar's text when I journeyed on foot from Assisi to Bologna during the month of August in 1981 for my university degree thesis, for it would have confirmed, at least in principle, my own approach.

I must at this point specify that although the title indicates a subject which is so to speak "external" and "objective," and refers to a category of ascetics and artists who walk, this talk is tied to a real experience and to observations which are entirely subjective. Today I will attempt to tie that journey on foot to narratives which come from biographies of certain artists and also of pilgrims, mystics and worshippers, without excluding cases of extreme, if not mad, behavior.

Getting back to the thesis, I convinced my thesis advisor that a journey on foot could be a gesture that would offer material for a semiotic analysis.

I was interested in non-verbal communication so I could see that, even without a more noble cause, the journey on foot could be analyzed according to a whole series of body stances and therefore movements, directions, vectors, pauses, rhythms; but also footsteps, traces, signs, contacts; and stimuli from the surrounding environment along with interactions with the environment: in other words, the act of walking set off a whole series of feelings, perceptions and observations which would serve to build a hypothetical body-language whose immediate goal was not communication as much as the self-awareness of what I was doing.

The not quite academic nature of the choice of my thesis topic also had another purpose. My hometown, Assisi, is a sanctuary where for immemorial time pilgrims have come to visit the tomb of Saint Francis. The University of Bologna, the oldest university in the Western world, metaphorically became another kind of goal for another kind of pilgrimage as in my eyes it was the citadel of education and knowledge and I felt as much a student as a devotee.

Lastly, I wasn't hiding myself the modest ambition that my gesture, simple as it was, maybe even be considered an artistic performance, following the line of thought of the German artist **Joseph Beuys** who stated: "We are all artists." To which he added that each of our lives has an intrinsic uniqueness that makes of it an extraordinary event, a masterpiece.

The journey in negative (which it was not)

If I look back, at the journey taken so long ago, it is difficult to avoid the dangerous suggestion to attribute to it more reasons and values than there were in reality. I think it is useful, in the meantime, to establish that which it was not.

- Not an athletic feat. Much less, it was not an experiment of solitary survival or a strenuous measuring of my own physical and mental energies.
- Not an escape: either literally or as an escape from modern civilization and its comforts.
- Neither an act of madness, nor the rational attempt to free oneself from an obsession.
- Not an excursion for the enjoyment of the landscape, neither as a poetic or literary experience. In fact I did not want to keep a diary, nor did I believe that the material I collected would be useful to put together a practical guide. I did not even bring a camera with me.
- Not an exploration of a certain territory. Perhaps it's better if I dedicate some space to these digressions with stories that have journeys on foot as their main theme, although they do not have much in common with my experience, if not for the mere act of walking towards a goal that has nothing to do with ordinary existence.

1. Limits of survival

Of the many brave deeds, or "acts of physical resistance," about which one continuously reads in the news, I will limit myself to report the extraordinary feat of

five English women. A press agency photograph dated January 26, 2000, shows them, exultant, after having reached the South Pole, walking amidst the sea ice with terrible obstacles to overcome for two months and 1.100 kilometers. Congratulations; but this is not the type of success that drove me to walk.

2. Walking while escaping, in the true sense of the word

This is the case of **Slavomir Rawicz**. This young Polish official was kept in a prisoners' camp in Siberia in 1941, during the second world war. In the depth of winter, together with seven other inmates, he managed to escape. From northern Siberia, across the Taiga, the Gobi desert, Tibet and the Himalayas, this small group of fugitives armed only with an axe and a knife and the power of desperation, managed to finally reach India. This, to put it mildly, incredible escape was narrated forty years later in his book *Between Us and Freedom*. The author places his memories in a simple sequence and the writing lives via the strength of the events. To which the reader latches on in a violent motion of empathy. Having safely arrived in a garrison in India, the survivors, four I believe, separated to never see one another again. The last lines are not less dramatic: "*All of a sudden I felt deprived of my friends, deprived of everything, the loneliest of men.*"

3.Dromomania (Escape from the world and from oneself). Obsession.

A philosophy scholar, Ian Hacking, compiled a series of amazing stories in his book *Mad Travellers* (1998). Specifically he talks about the life and travels of a one Albert Dedas from Bordeaux who lived during the second half of the 1800s. An employee of the gas company, one fine day he left everything and went traveling. First he went to Algeria, then to Moscow and finally to Istanbul, traveling only on foot: sometimes up to seventy kilometers a day. Exhausted and estranged he didn't have documents with him nor did he know where he was. He was arrested many times for wandering. Once he was repatriated he said he could not remember where he had been. Under hypnosis he talked about everything in minute detail. The pathology described by the doctors of the time was "*automatisme ambulatoire*," then as "dromomania" or "poriomania." There is a certain fascinating attraction towards this Albert Dedas, a certain beauty that can be understood through the freedom of the limitless crossing of frontiers. But I must say that this uncontrollable need to walk does not match my interests.

Impulsive, disorderly, obsessive and in some ways violent and mad walking is written about by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud. He walked amidst the mists of northern France and Belgium, across the French-Italian Alps, and in thousands of other places in the world of which we cannot be sure about. But it is known that in 1885 as an arms dealer and perhaps even slave trader, he walked across the charred lands of Abyssinia about fifteen times, from the city of Harar on the plateau to the Eritrean coast under impossible conditions due to the inhospitality of the territory, lack of water, ferocious heat and what is worst, towards the end, plagued by a cancer of the knee.

4. Literary Experience and nostalgia

Herman Hesse, the German writer, was a traveler who alternated walks, even lengthy ones, with train journeys. A collection of his writings about his journeys, mostly on foot, contains various picturesque stories in this regard. Memory, once he is back at the working desk, is always seen through a lens of nostalgia: for the Canton of Grigioni without dust, for an Italy without automobiles, for the wanderings between 1901 and 1914 in the green region of Umbria. In *Peter Camenzind*, he writes "In those days it could still be a pleasure to walk along a national road on foot; at the time I didn't realize that my small travel joys belonged for the most part to a world whose glory was now on the wane and which quite quickly would be lost." It is difficult not to share his nostalgia.

5. Explorations and journeys

From the bibliographic notes of the historian Dione Cassio on the Roman emperor **Hadrian**, we know that he led a frugal life in a military style and that he traveled incessantly to see, and know first-hand, the provinces and the cities of the empire: but only on foot or horseback, refusing the comfort of a cart or sedan-chair. He was, actually, an indefatigable walker, like his predecessor Trajan.

More than eighteen centuries later, in 1973 exactly, a student called **Peter Jenkins**, upset by the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal and racial tensions that were happening in his country, the United States, decided to walk across the American continent with the sole purpose of better under-

standing and knowing it. His faithful dog Cooper kept him company. The journey lasted for five years and became a memorable experience for the people he encountered and whose stories he patiently listened to. The report of these walks across the continent is recorded in two books [*A Walk across America* and *The Walk West*] that are still read in American schools today.

The examples of the great emperor and of the young student are nothing but a mere portion of similar cases, sometimes not even recorded in a collective memory, and which have formed over the centuries, but particularly in these last twenty years, a literary genre of its own.

Mystics on the road

As I already mentioned, I did not completely abandon the idea of having my experience match, at least in part, some very special cases: the journeys on foot made by the asce-tics and artists.

But before any well known name or story, I would like to show the image of an ex-voto found in the temple of Bellona, the goddess of war, in Ostia Antica. It is a terracotta tablet that shows in relief four feet as they were objects hung on a wall: two go in one direction, the other two in the opposite one. Such an ex-voto describes visually the ritual formula "*pro itu et reditu*," literally "for the journey and return," a protective prayer at departure for a journey and for thanking a safe return. The feet make us think of a journey on foot, but even in a different case, the image is a powerful symbol of our body in movement.

A case in point, is that of the Buddhist Monk **Tich Nhat Hanh** well known for his method of walking and meditating. His poem "Walking Meditation" (from *Call Me by My True Names, The Collected Poems of Tich Nhat Hanh*, 1999) thoroughly synthesizes his philosophy and pacifist behavior. But going back in time, the mystical journey par excellence because of its hey day in Christian Medieval times is the pilgrimage to **Santiago de Compostela** - the most famous and frequented sanctuary by the faithful, after Rome and Jerusalem. To understand the reasons behind a true pilgrimage means to put oneself in synch with an enormous amount of anonymous people who had the courage to carry out an individual and memorable action; since that pilgrimage was unique and unrepeatable and marked the life of those who did it: humbly and in poverty, as **Francis of Assisi** did.

And mainly without being sensational, I would like to observe that the pilgrim is the opposite of the heroic figure. He or she is a person of faith who out of devotion offers or spends a portion of his or her life visiting the tomb of a saint or a martyr. Therefore an act that does not wish to call the attention of others, nor proposes itself as a gesture of vanity.

Of all, perhaps the most profound example of a pilgrimage is that of the anonymous wayfarer who is the author of *Tales of a Russian Pilgrimage*. The stops along his continual journeys, among other things difficult to retrace in a narrative sequence, are not important, but what characterizes this human feat is the incessant as well as ardent practice of praying and walking, stopping and praying in a spiritual refinement where the body, kept busy, cannot distract the mind from its prayers with its needs.

Less mystical and more pragmatic, but with equal faith and not to be forgotten was a Quaker woman of great courage called **Mary Fisher**. In 1658, at the age of thirty-five, she felt the need to meet and talk to the Turkish sultan Mohammed IV, and so she did. She departed from England, crossed Europe and arrived at Smirne where though the English consul considered her project impossible and made her set sail for Venice from whence she was to return to her homeland. A storm, or according to another version, her persistence with the ship's captain, allowed her to go ashore in a Greek harbor. From here she walked towards Adrianopolis, where the Sultan had camped with his army. How she made the journey of about six hundred miles on foot, and how she managed to approach and to persuade the Gran Visir to arrange a meeting with the Sultan Muhammed VI, remains a mystery. The Sultan treated her as an ambassador and carefully listened to everything she had to say to him. At the end, Mary asked whether he had understood her. The Sultan responded: "Yes, each word," even if he obviously did not speak English. Not only, he invited her to stay and have further talks with him. Mary returned to England fully satisfied with her mission.

An incredible strength of spirit lives within the German movie director **Werner Herzog**. In November of 1974 he received a phone call which announced that his friend, the film critic Lotte Eisner was hospitalized in Paris in serious conditions. Herzog, who lived in Munich, in Germany, decided to visit her immediately. Once he put the phone receiver down, he threw a few things into a sack, put on a heavy jacket and a robust pair of boots and left for Paris. "I made my way to Paris the shortest way possible, with the certainty that if I traveled on foot she would have lived". He arrived three weeks later, having crossed the German and French countryside battling the rain, snow and fog. He was welcomed by his now recovered friend's smile. This is Herzog's strength. Incomparable.

The artists: five easy stories, in part true, in part literary fiction.

In the life of **Brunelleschi**, Giorgio Vasari narrates that one morning Filippo was in the Piazza Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence and approached a group of people to whom Donatello was talking to. He was recounting that on his trip back from Rome, while passing Cortona, he had entered the Pieve and had seen a beautiful sarcophagus, "upon which there was a scene carved in marble with the most perfect mastery." This aroused in Filippo such a desire to see it that dressed as he was, in his cloak, hood and wooden clogs, without telling anyone where he was going he set off on foot and willingly allowed himself to be carried off to Cortona by his love for the art of sculpture. This testimony, even though Vasari does not emphasize it enough, is extraordinary and speaks of a desire which can be measured only while thinking of the length of the trip (120 km = 75 ml).

Laurence Sterne, in one of the many digressions in his novel *The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (II, XIV) has one of his characters tell that the astronomer Nicholas de Peiresc was overtaken by the irresistible urge to see a very fast cart with sails invented by the Flemish mathematician and engineer Stevinus (1548-1620). So he went by foot from Paris to Scheveninge, on the Northern Sea shore and back covering a total of five hundred miles to see this wonder in action. Scientific curiosity stirs the mind as much as the artistic one.

A similar episode is that in the life of **Emile Bernard**, told by the famous art dealer Ambroise Vollard. The young painter, having heard news about what was happening in the artistic community which had formed in Pont-Aven, in Brittany, departed without delay on foot to meet Paul Gauguin and the group of Nabis painters who had established themselves there to paint while coming up with new ideas on art. It's surprising that such a walk is reported by Vollard as being completely normal.

Poetic creation and walking make up the creative process of the English poet **William Wordsworth** (1770-1850). He alternated journeys on foot across great distances to brief walks. Thomas De Quincey in his memoirs calculated that Wordsworth could have covered up to 300.000 miles in his life! His trip to the continent in 1790 together with his friend Robert Jones just when he was meant to be preparing for his exams at Cambridge shows his urgency for a journey on foot. He crossed France and the Alps, barely touched Italy, went all around the Como lake and returned home through Switzerland and Germany in an extraordinary tour-de-force. It must be emphasized that to move on foot was already then an unconventional, unacceptable, way to travel, because seen by English literary circles - but also European - as a way to draw the poet closer to the everyday life of the uneducated and the poor. We also know that when he couldn't face journeys or lengthy walks in the Lake District in the North of England, Wordsworth was in the habit of pacing back and forth in his back yard. And, as he proceeded, he found a rhythm - an oniric rhythmic is how a critic defines him - who tuned in to the music of words that his state of mind brought forth.

Constantin Brancusi is rather a special case. Disappointed at not having been accepted at the Rumanian Academy in Rome, he decided to change his route and go to Paris, the undisputed art capital at the time. Brancusi was respected also for his simple lifestyle, for having innate common sense and for his true love for nature. A photograph of the time shows him before his departure. He has a short and thick beard. He wears a brimmed hat, a jacket, knickerbockers, heavy knee-high socks and boots. He is carrying a mountaineering knapsack (in which he had put his inseparable wooden flute). It's the portrait of a handsome youth, elegant in his own way, who gazes straight into the camera's lens. The way he carries himself shows absolute determination and self-confidence.

The sculptor told the story of this extraordinary adventure many times: emphasizing that he had covered this distance on foot. He traveled at night and slept during the day; he stopped often though to perform random jobs. He was always welcomed with gaiety in the villages he passed through, where people gave him food and drink. While he walked he sang about joy and happiness. He even sold his watch and a jacket to buy food and to pay for the boat on the Lake of Constance. In Alsace he ran into a torrential down-pour and became so sick as to despair of ever reaching Paris.

Nevertheless, the story is not completely true. Stefan Popescu, a painter who had come to know him personally, remembers that Brancusi would walk until he found work and could earn some money which would allow him to travel for a few days and to pay for his train ticket. Once his money ran out, he would find work again and would then take the train and so on. Certainly - added Popescu - Brancusi was not just anybody, with his iron will he could overcome any test, but...these qualities were coupled with much cunning, theatricality and boasting. For the love of truth it must be said that the last stretch, from Langres to Paris was done on the train with money for the ticket having been sent by a friend who waited on tables in the French capital.

In other words, Brancusi is an able creator of self-mythopoeia. He knows how to play the cards of the "modern" artist whose everyday life is that of a "primitive:" the long journey on foot gave him a titanic and romantic

stature that had a hold over the urban and cosmopolitan public of the Paris of the time.

Walking as a performance

Artists, perhaps before scientists have felt the danger that our planet risks owing to the abuse in the exploitation of its resources. That which falls under the term "Land Art," along with other aesthetic propositions, has this newfound sensibility towards the environment. The English **Richard Long** is a very well-known name, since the 1960s, he used walking as an artistic medium and along the way he would leave "artistic traces." At the same time another Englishman, **Hamish Fulton**, covered long stretches of land on foot, carefully studied and then documented with drawings in his notebook or with photographs. Of the two my preference is for Fulton who judged the interventions with "traces" or changes to the landscape too invasive. Fulton preferred a discreet presence and did not want to leave traces of his presence. I do not resonate with his need to photographically document his performance but I do find myself in accord with the emphasis he places on inner journeys.

Marina Abramovic and Ulay (Uve Leysiepen) did a sensational walk along the great wall of China in 1988, which as we know unwinds for over four thousand kilometers. The project kept them occupied for various years, and it was not at all easy to carry out, due to bureaucratic obstacles from the Chinese government. They finally departed. Ulay, from the western side of Gobi desert, and Marina from the Oriental border, the Yellow Sea. The intent was to meet one another exactly halfway. According to a story that has not been confirmed, at that precise moment in that exact place, they would get married. According to a more accredited version, instead, that was to have been the way to end their long relationship. They touched, after 89 days, June 27, 1988, on a mountain pass near Shennu in an area of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian temples. They did not marry, in fact that was their good-bye encounter. The semantic and symbolic merits of their act would take up a good portion of time that I will leave to the curiosity of the audience. However I find the aspect of failure in the performance equally, if not more interesting. Not only the missed wedding: evidently love had stopped on the doorstep of the big move, but also for small infractions which spoiled Ulay's walk. For example, he skipped various conjunctions between the arrival of the end of one day and the departure of the next. Or otherwise the general confusion caused by translators, hotel staff, government officials, doctors and even massage therapists. All were ready to take advantage of the publicity caused by the event, regardless of the symbolic purity that the two artists wanted it to have. In other words the artists had been crushed by the same organizational machine that they themselves had put into action.

Nevertheless, **Marina Abramovic** is an artist who knows how to surprise us with each new creation, always on the lookout for experiences capable of expanding our sensory and perceptive faculties. Invited to teach a course about her artistic experiences at the Ratti Foundation in Como (2001), Marina forced her young students not to talk, eat or least to fast almost entirely and to remain chaste. To this preparation she added physical exercises, and in between, long walks to free the energy of the mind through the body.

Historical detachment with the walking populace

If, for example, we read the hygienic suggestions to people who travel by foot made by the Bolognese doctor **Guiglielmo Grataroli** who lived in the XVII century, or the observations on etiquette made by the philosopher **Friedric Hegel** or those made by the writer **Herman Hesse** during their travels on foot, we do not get the sense that they consider walking on foot as something special which distinguishes them from other people. In spite of what has been said about prejudices within certain cultured circles regarding the poet William Wordsworth's practice of walking, migratory waves, armies, merchants, pilgrims and travelers of all sorts have always used their bodies to get from one place to another. If the wealthy could afford a mount or a cart, or even a sedan chair, their escort would travel on foot. Ships, trains, automobiles, airplanes, even bicycles are expensive means of travel and only recently introduced in the history of humanity. A novelty that, in the Western world, at least, places itself within the flow of the industrial revolution and at the start of transportation of the masses, that is, at the end of the XIX century. Personally, I remember an older colleague of mine, Giovanni Rossetti, who told me that in the immediate aftermath of World War II he sometimes found himself walking from Assisi to Perugia (16 m. each way) to sit for his University classes since public transportation did not function regularly.

These examples allow one to loosely determine the moment in which we stopped using our body as an auto-motor system, for long distances as well. That moment increasingly marked the release of the physical practice of walking (for too long) and the carrying of weights (heavy and or cumbersome). It has certainly favored both the convenience in our lives as well as added time at our disposal for other activities. From that moment walking took on a whole new meaning: athletics, amusement, escape, hygienic culture.

To approach these subjects means touching upon areas of knowledge which are pertinent to social studies in a broader sense, and this was not part of the point neither of the thesis nor of this presentation. Much less does one want to make ethical judgments, whether the transformation of our lives under the acceleration produced by scientific and technological advances is always a good thing. This is another array of problems which really does not have its place in this room.

The activation of body sensors: time, space

The simple ascertainment that our habits, in the way we move, have profoundly changed creates a simple certainty: our way of processing the surrounding world has changed. This has happened mainly because the sensors in our bodies stopped working in the same way as when we habitually traveled on foot.

It is the case to be a little more precise. Not quite recent medical studies have shown that our sensory system does not exhaust itself within the five Aristotelian senses, but is "integrated" by a complex of "minor" senses or sensors distributed throughout the entire body, which provide the brain with a network of information regarding our state. Natural and "intuitive" gifts such as the famous sixth sense, or that which we call an "indistinct feeling" are the "warnings" which protect us, but also form a comprehensive perceptive "system" which has still not yet been entirely investigated.

This means, for those who walk, returning to activating, to the maximum degree of potential, all of these sensors that have ceased to be used in modern day life. Or have at least been neglected or used differently. The consequences may seem negligible. And for many they are, because they do not affect their daily lives. In fact, we are able to rediscover an infinite range of new perceptions in very fine gradations, received as by radar, so to speak, along the way: brushing against the branch of a tree; the contact with breezes and winds, the smells, sometimes acrid in the air; sounds, noises; the warmth of the sun, its position in the sky, the continual change of lights and shadows, the spectrum of colors; images captured by vision; images which take over the mind; but mainly the pure, physical, tangible touching with feet, putting ones soles on the road, on the ground - doesn't Tich Nhat Hanh's poem say this when it says: "*Each step makes a flower bloom under our feet?*"

Each minimal refinement of perception places us in front of new state of our being. We have entered a state, I'd say an exciting one, which allows us to understand that we have made a mental leap into a little known biopsychological-physical dimension.

Basically, walking permits us to constitute a renewed perception of space that we cross and of time which we cover. Such notions then form an indelible impression on the sediment of our memory. And memory is for everyone, I believe, the generator of every stimulus in the succession of life's experiences.

The sacred contact with the earth

While walking, progressively, we consciously establish a new relationship between our body, our mind, our spirit and the world in which we live. Walking gives rise to a whole new, yet natural relationship with the environment. It seems to us to be, to return to being? - a sensible part of nature, of the universe if you will.

I will stop for a moment the act of walking. I need to pause to better understand where I am and the things that are around me. The German painter Caspar David Friedrich can speak for me when he says: I have to stay alone in order to fully contemplate and feel nature in full; I have to surrender myself to what encircles me, I have to merge with my clouds and rocks in order to be what I am. Solitude is indispensable for my dialogue with nature (1821).

I don't know if I may speak for every one of those artists and mystics whom I have mentioned before; however, in my case, however episodic and of limited duration, I felt that the act of walking mutated into an act of reciprocal acceptance.

We recognize and respect the earth. The earth, Gaia, seems to notice us and welcome us in an unexpected way. In order to create this harmonious state, we should, however, aspire to reach the state of serenity which made Matsuo Bashō and Francesco of Assisi rejoice. The humble acceptance of life of the anonymous Rusciano pilgrim. The euphoria which overtook Brunelleschi or Emile Bernard. The purity of Hamish Fulton's artistic performance. The silence Marina Abramovic imposed on her students.