Walking, There Is a Path and a Map

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Walking amongst others is a cognitive activity that allows us to learn the spheres of the presence of the other, the contexts of belonging and areas of existential reference. Walking in the city means learning to find our own way and our own place in a forest of people.

Walking is an activity with a dual nature: we walk in the world and we walk amongst the other walkers of the world. Both mark through action, for walking involves making a mark, making a physical map of the world with our own body - with our own body amongst the others who are walking. Both also involve exploration, discovering the world and tracing on it a map at a scale that comes closest to that of the body.

The first activity is that of walking as gait, a way in which the body moves forward rhythmically, at a pace that allows it constant mobility. Walking is scanning the rhythm of our gait, in a way that perhaps comes close to our other vital rhythms, the pulse, the heart-beat, until it becomes almost automatic. The body walks on its own. This is well known by marathon runners and other athletes, walking and running activating a mechanism that makes the limbs work almost independently of our will. If you watch marathon runners, you will notice that, at a certain point, particularly if the race is one of fifty or one hundred kilometres, it is as if the runner, absorbed by the movement, was not there. He or she is absent or, perhaps, becomes at one with the movement.

At a lower level, at which the pace is rhythmic but not intent on pursuit, walking becomes a catalyst for thought; thought has its own pace, it follows its own scansion. Pulse, pace and thought go together. Thought does not race precisely because it moves at its own pace, the movement of thought. This was explained by Rousseau, but also by Stevenson, Benjamin Constant, and Rimbaud, and Bruce Chatwin synthesised it in his beautiful *Songlines*. It is something that any of us can do: go for a stroll to clarify our ideas.

There is an important relation between thinking and walking, as recalled by Rebecca Solnit in her *Wanderlust: a History of Walking*. Because walking certainly helps the process of thinking; it simulates movement towards the truth or towards clarity; but in addition it adds to thought an element that this does not contain: a body. Anyone who walks moves their whole body, moves arms, chest, legs, head, and above all, does so in a way that makes all this the object of an equilibrium that must be recomposed at every step. In addition, walking means being able to stop, or to wander, being able to amble along in no particular direction, demonstrating that thought does not always have to reach a conclusion, that it might also want to seize a steep path, take short cuts, turn off in directions that make no more sense than the simple fact of choosing them. Anyone who wanders with no fixed direction does so because the surprise that awaits them at every step might be more interesting than any final destination. Wandering aimlessly precedes the *flâneur* by several centuries, before Baudelaire or Walser discovered the rather draining nature of this kind of strolling, which disperses the subject in the world he or she traverses, whether this be a metropolitan jungle or a true forest.

Those who wander aimlessly deny the urgency of goals, refuse to compete with the path and, instead, concentrate on the digression, on losing themselves in the meanders of details, for there is a joy in wandering aimlessly that, later, the *flâneur* will lose. Rereading *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K. Jerome gives us the sense of lightness that conquering the world with gentle strolls must have had at the beginning of the 20th century. All this activity of walking through the world is cognitive, whether we be wandering, or striding purposefully towards a particular end; at the same time it is cartography, in outline, connected with paradigms of uncertainty, or else it is like a column of ants moving from one hole to another. For the town planners walking must be something like that, marking out ant tracks on the safe and stable

terrain of their plans. Shadows that move in Indian file along previously signposted routes. But planners in general are sad people who seldom lose themselves wandering the streets.

Walking is an epistemological activity, one that develops knowledge, not only because it is literally, physically that, in the sense of exploring and opening up the world, but also in the sense that the very fact of walking marks out paths, marks the world with our footsteps, thereby rendering it more explorable. Stevenson was a great master of the art of walking, an art he lived as an anti-Victorian remedy, not only for his body, which was continually threatened by tuberculosis, but also as an antidote to the phantoms of closure and the supposition of knowledge.

Those who move on foot discover that the world is far more complicated in its details than it appears to be from a distance. I will not say that walking is thinking with your feet, but rather that it gives food for thought, that it transforms our thoughts, rooting them in the ground, becoming thoughts that adhere to the landscape we pass through, that which I call the "local mind", an activity in which subject and territory interact in a very intimate way. When the Spaniards sing *"caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar"* (Walker, there is no path to follow, you make the path by walking), they are only trying to express the concept that amidst the intricacies of the indistinct, by taking those first uncertain steps, a person begins to construct a direction. In Stalker, Tarkovski gives us a magnificent illustration of this idea. Two subjects, lost, move through a desolate landscape, abandoned and deserted, with only the ruins of its industrial past. The only way to proceed is by following the handkerchief that one of them ties to a heavy object and then throws, time after time. Landing, it indicates the path to follow. This reminds me of the totemic pole of some groups of Australian Aborigines, whose inclination in the morning showed them the direction of the path they should take.

We might say that this way of walking alone is topographical. The walker, by walking, traces a preferred direction, opens a road. The first cartography is that made by footsteps on the grass, the fact of repeated walking to and fro. In the history of explorations, this walking is precisely discovering, step by step, unknown landscapes, unexpected openings. Discovering the world means covering it on foot. Peter Hopkirk's false pilgrims are spies in the service of Her Majesty in the great diplomatic game between Russia and the United Kingdom. They move clandestinely through unknown Tibet, tracing a map with their footsteps, marking distances with their rosary beads. These are to become the charts the British will later use in their attempt to invade Tibet. However, it may be that epistemological activity and hermeneutical activity overlap. The walking body discovers and marks at the same time, like an eternal Hansel who scatters breadcrumbs as he moves along so as to be able to find his way home again.

The other form of walking is walking ‘amongst', walking as moving between other people, the democratic walking of the person who moves through the city and meets acquaintances and strangers. This kind of walking is a source of spaces, it creates places by walking through them, determines extensions, squares, entrances, doorways and passages. The city is nothing more than the criss-crossing of the everyday itineraries of those who inhabit it. The nature of these footpaths that make up the civic space is like one of Calvino's invisible cities. This is made evident when the city is covered in snow, when its habitual physical appearance is cancelled and redesigned by the footsteps in the snow, steps that define the preferred itineraries, the best ways round obstacles. This form of walking traces maps of diverse kinds. Walking seems less rectilinear, more uncertain; the paths are interrupted, juxtaposed and forked, criss-crossing with others.

If we were to trace on a map of a city the preferred routes of the inhabitants of a particular neighbourhood, a certain number of constant directions would emerge, but also doodles, returns to starting points after aimless strolls, juxtaposed with, and differentiated from, the more defined lines. The town planners do not comprehend - for they are sad people - that

buildings, and often streets too, are irrelevant, and that the determining factors in public spaces used for walking, and being, are combinations of motivations, caprices, necessities, attractions and avoidances, that taken together produce the walking of bodies amongst bodies. The open-air markets in Palermo resist amongst the ruins of derelict buildings because they constitute the repeated activity that keeps these spaces alive, that redefines them despite the decrepit, abandoned buildings. A map that is still to be made is that of the time after, of what remains when a market is taken down, or a fair comes to an end, or a rock concert. The signs of what has taken place, of the coming together - the tins, letters, manifestos, flyers, lost property; the legacy of a presence that can be felt in the noise of absence.

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In this sense, the statement by Rebecca Solnit is truer than ever. Democracy is being able to walk amongst strangers while feeling safe. Cities are the result of this project and stop being cities when walking becomes obsolete or when it is obstructed by the burdensome presence of motorised traffic.

We must learn to draw maps of the criss-crossed paths; it would be especially interesting to map the city on the basis of these routes, make the city faithful to the cartography sketched out by our democratic footsteps. How could it be done while still staying faithful to the magnificent uncertainty of human walking? It could be done by registering, day by day, variations and persistences, repetitions and deviations. It could be done using Perec's eye, capable of distinguishing itineraries, understanding male and female preferences, the unpredictability of children playing and the concealment of adolescents who search out spots that are hidden from adult eyes.

Every day the city is full of the activity of those who are there and who walk. Their itineraries explain stories that are trivial or dramatic, explain customs, practices, sometimes options, or else the mere sense of everyday normality, which the rhythm of footsteps matches so well. Following a person, a favourite activity amongst renowned artists, has also always been the activity of those who are curious: where will the eye we have just caught go now? Where will that man or woman get off the bus, and where will they go next? In a short story by Cortázar, the narrator plays a game with himself on the metro in Paris. Will the women to whom he is attracted, and who has already made the same changes of train, really get off at the same station as him? Only if this happens will he try to detain her, speak to her. Walking behind or beside someone is the means of courting and seducing in the democratic city, but it is also the source of fear, anxiety and suspicion of others. How many maps of danger have been drawn on the basis of this falsehood, as if the security of a city was not based precisely on the proliferation of paths and bodies! The more crowded a street at any time, the less danger there will be. A trivial truth that the powerful never understand with their helmeted police watching over us and their flat footed plodding.

On the other hand, the city is the place *par excellence* in which walking is first and foremost about seeing and being seen, where the itinerary becomes a promenade, a figure of the body that will shift from a promenade to a waltz. Walking means moving the hips, pivoting gently on the heels, *"annacarsi"*, as the Sicilians say; that is, moving the hips as if they were a gently rocking cradle. Human walking, both male and female, is like this, luckily; luckily, it is still like this.

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