

## Book Review

### A Philosophy of Walking

Frederic Gros, translation by J. Howe ; London: Verso, 2014.



This best selling volume in France has been translated into English. Frederic Gros touts the many advantages of walking for the spirit, the body, and especially the creative mind. Walking gets us outside, away from our daily routine, into wilderness or urban landscapes, and slows down our minds.

Gros delves into the memoirs of many writers to sort out these benefits.

*[In old age] when there is really nothing left to do or believe, except to remember, walking helps retrieve the absolute simplicity of presence, beyond all hope, before any expectations.*

~ J. J. Rousseau

*Think while walking, walk while thinking, and let writing be but the light pause, as the body on a walk rests in contemplation of wide open spaces.*

~ F. Nietzsche

*During long, easy walks, on well-traced routes, when all you have to do is follow an interminable set of hairpins, you hatch a thousand plans, invent a thousand tales. ... As you follow the wide, single, clearly marked route, a thousand bifurcations swarm in your mind. The heart takes one and renounces another, then chooses a third. It wanders away, comes back.*

~ J. J. Rousseau

*When you are walking in the springtime, or at dawn, you are watchful, alert, mind stretched towards the rising day, and nothing matters but that slow affirmation.*

~ Henry David Thoreau

Walking slows the mind. Days of slow walking can be very long: they lengthen the moments of your life, hence making you live longer. Gros and others suggest that walking is the best way to go more slowly.

You can maintain the solitude of walking with even three or four if you walk companionably without talking. Each person walks at his own speed, gaps develop, and leader pauses periodically to check on everyone. The rhythms come and go – this way of walking “allows for moments of shared solitude. For solitude too can be shared, like bread and daylight.”

Gros argues that walking, by resting on the earth with every step, is very like a continuous breathing in of energy. A definite joy comes from feeling how the body is made for this movement, “the way in which it finds in each pace the resource for the next.” This sentiment is the foundation of another new book on walking – David Rubinstein’s *Born to walk: The transformative power of a pedestrian act*.

Walks, especially daily walks, have three features that feed the creative spirit. The monotonous, steady rhythm frees the mind. The regularity of the daily walk can symbolize for the creative writer or painter the way in which daily effort of hours spent accumulates, at the end of it all, into a significant work. Finally, walking is a relaxation through a change in rhythm and a change in perspective.

Many authors write about the availability of mind while walking – whether one is on promenade to socialize and be seen, whether one is absorbed within the countryside and nature, or whether one saunters with an open mind, ready for anything. This openness of mind is valuable in itself, and for creativity as well.

One of my favourite authors on creativity, Julia Cameron (2002) specifically promotes a daily walk [in addition to her famous *morning pages*] as a key practice to support creative work –to maintain the sense of wonder in the world that fuels inspiration.

This volume is a welcome companion to Rebecca Solnit’s 2001 *Wanderlust*. She too examines the profound relationship between walking and thinking, and adds the discussion of the impact of walking on culture, and vice versa.

## References

- Cameron, J. (2002). *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Solnit, R. (2001). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin.

Books about walking are boring. Lovers of Wainwright's pictorial works on the peaks and lakes may disagree but pinning a walk down to words is usually more field guide than philosophy, and rarely is it art. And when it is – Laurie Lee, Kerouac, Wordsworth – it's the diversions from the walk that provide interest, something that the author Frédéric Gros admits. Yet this philosophy professor's book on the subject has sold more than 40,000 copies in France; it is far from pedestrian. Is this physiologically symbolic of their philosophies? Gros isn't simplistic enough to suggest so but in walking through the day-to-day existence of poets and thinkers, he shows that mile and poetic meter, pace and philosophical formulas are inexorably intertwined. In *A Philosophy of Walking*, a bestseller in France, leading thinker Frédéric Gros charts the many different ways we get from A to B – the pilgrimage, the promenade, the protest march, the nature ramble – and reveals what they say about us. Gros draws attention to other thinkers who also saw walking as something central to their practice. On his travels he ponders Thoreau's eager seclusion in Walden Woods; the reason Rimbaud walked in a fury, while Nerval rambled to cure his melancholy. – *A Philosophy of Walking* moved me to think in greater depth about my walks. The book, written with great clarity, conveys Gros' thoughts about walking, and a discussion of various thinkers (Thoreau, Kant, Rousseau) for whom walking was essentially a contemplative act. – Leonard Quart.