Introduction: *Literary Walks, Slow Travel, and Eco-Awareness in Contemporary Literature*

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One of the benefits of the current global pandemic caused by the coronavirus is the widespread recuperation of nature as humanity is hunkering down at home. As we are being forced into domestic confinement dolphins are frolicking in Sardinian bays, we are told air pollution is down by up to fifty percent in some places, a portion of India can see the Himalayas from where they haven't been visible in thirty years, foxes and deer are traversing the streets of Dublin, and everywhere the sky is clear and noise-free, void of the familiar vapor streaks cutting across it. It seems that all of a sudden, the planet can breathe again. No doubt, the virus causes conditions of acute precarity, but at the same time it also has the power to diminish—alas only temporarily—the precarious progress of an ever-declining planet, its natural devastation and climate crisis.

We have considerably slowed down in the past few months. Not only has travel become slow travel in many cases it has also become no travel. Some of us are still in the lucky position to be able to walk, in solitude albeit, or at best with one other person, ideally from one's own family. We now live in an era of state-imposed mindfulness. Such slowing down makes the environment not only more sustainable but at the same time more readable in addition to other benefits. In particular walking and cycling inevitably result in an intense engagement with this planet and have the potential to contribute to its healing. World literature, and in particular twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers of literary texts and travel theorists, already focused on the effects of slow travel well before the onset of the virus. It is, as the following series of essays in this volume will demonstrate, especially various writers' insistence on giving up speed that determines the politics of slow travel in terms of identity construction, resistance, and social and environmental engagement.

With the slowing of physical mobility and the traveler's self-marginalization and constant crossing of boundaries, walking and other forms of slow travel—cycling, canoeing, ocean travel—contribute to reflection upon oneself as well as the world at large. They reveal a tendency to step to the edge of civilization as well as one's own personality, to its peripheries, while being acutely aware of what goes on in the center. This self-marginalization that happens during slow travel is primarily an act of resistance—resistance to comfort, trends, crowds. In his *Philosophy of Walking* (2009) Frédéric Gros ascribed this resistance to the very physicality of slowing down especially in walking, to the nature of the step, to putting a foot down on the ground and feeling the chthonic pressure underneath: "the principle of solidity, of resistance. When you walk you prove it with every step" (Gros 94).

There is a spate of literary authors who have engaged with the exploits of their long-distance walks, from W.G. Sebald via Rory Stewart to Robyn Davidson. Walking long distances can be an act of resistance to the temptations of the modern world. Resisting ill health, resisting the malaise of civilization: it is what motivated Rousseau walking in search of *l'homme naturel* 'natural man.' Gros emphasizes that

> the true direction of walking is not towards otherness (other worlds, other faces, other cultures, other civilisations); it is towards the edge of civilized worlds, whatever they may be. Walking is setting oneself apart at the edge of those who work, at the edges of high speed roads, at the edge of the producers of profit and property, exploiters, labourers, and at the edge of those serious people who always have something better to do than receive the pale gentleness of a winter sun or the freshness of a spring breeze (Gros 94).

Above all, walking reflects a resistance to ownership: "Walking is the antithesis of owning," says Rebecca Solnit (Solnit 162), sharing her defense of nomadism with the likes of Bruce Chatwin and Henry David Thoreau.

There is resistance in the very process of fluidity inherent to the walk, resistance to the striation of space and to accepting the political status quo. Prominently, Ernst Jünger explored this phenomenon in his 1951 philosophical text on the so-called *Waldgänger*, the one who walks through the forest, the forest being a metaphor for the obfuscation that comes with authoritarian government and the misery it creates for human life. Jünger's *Waldgänger* is a *homo viator* 'walking man' in his political defiance against the nation state and his/her rhizomatic web of walks can be seen in terms of resistance to the striation of national and urban space. We see this also in Henry David Thoreau's famous essay *Walking* (1861) which is ideologically tied to his thoughts on civil disobedience. He was among the pioneers at a time of rather unlimited possibilities of walking to foresee the great age of trespassing we now live in (Thoreau 33).

Thoreau's idea of walking as trespassing still holds true for many parts of the globe. In fact, slowing down, in spite of its obvious benefits to the planet, is frequently seen as a form of rebellion that incurs criticism or even violence from others who travel faster or feel threatened by this kind of vagabondage. I remember my days in Kansas when I used to walk by the side of the road outside of town and was either suspiciously eyed by home owners, barked at by their dogs, pulled over by the cops who would ask me if I was ok, or just plain harassed by passing drivers. Rebecca Solnit has eloquently described this phenomenon, especially the urban American landscape as a completely hostile environment where walking can be "a sign of powerlessness or low status, and new urban and suburban design disdains walkers" (Solnit 253). And in the eccentric words of Werner Herzog, *Of Walking in Ice* (1978), his walk from

Munich to Paris: “if only the shepherd dog—that is to say the Wolf! —wasn’t so hot for my blood” (Herzog 8).

The slow traveler engages intensely with liminal spaces and crosses boundaries and thresholds. Although stepping over the threshold into liminal space is relevant for the walking rhetorics, the walk is fluid. It is what in his novel *The Crossing* (1994) Cormac McCarthy has discussed as the ‘corrida’, ‘the way song can travel over time and space’ in the context of indigenous Mexico, and what Bruce Chatwin has called the ‘songline’ for aboriginal Australia: a rhizomatic line of flight away from, or across, the western world’s structured, regulated, culturally deeply arborescent spaces, anti-colonial in nature, nomadic in spirit, shunning all sedentary coercions.

Rebecca Solnit’s argument that walking “ideally is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned” (Solnit 5) may, however, break down for some of these literary walks and slow travel in general. It does so when the trip’s fluidity is disrupted and broken up, when the environment becomes too much to handle and reflects the traveler’s personal crisis. We see this happening in Charles Dickens’s nocturnal perambulations through London, his great restlessness and houselessness described in *Night Walks* (1860); we see it in W.G. Sebald’s character Austerlitz whose London night walks modelled on those of Dickens result from his childhood trauma; and we observe it in many other insomniac wanderers to whom the places in between become nightmarish, as they are caught between life and death, health and insanity, and indeed if we listen to Baudelaire’s ‘Le Crépuscule du Soir’ (‘Dusk’), between the human and the beast.

> Voici le soir charmant, ami du criminel;
> II vient comme un complice, à pas de loup; le ciel
> Se ferme lentement comme une grande alcôve,
> Et l’homme impatient se change en bête fauve.
>
> Sweet evening comes, friend of the criminal;
> Like an accomplice with a wolf’s steps;
> The sky shuts itself slowly like an immense alcove,
> And man turns beast with impatience.
> (Baudelaire 192-3)

“A pas de loup”—with the step of a wolf: in particular, travel with animals contributes to slowing down, making political statements as one engages intensely with psychogeography, the effects of the environment on human emotions and behavior, along the lines of Michel de Certeau’s theory that walking is a pedestrian speech act, “a spatial acting-out of the place just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language” (Certeau 98). For Robyn Davidson, her 1700-mile trek across the Australian outback from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean in the company of four camels and a dog was a feminist gesture, to say the least, a densely political journey in a land known for outback

machismo. Her *book Tracks* (1980) is a prime example for how a literary walk can destabilize engendered travel narratives.

For many of these travelers in literature walking is an act of communication with their fellow human beings from whom they may feel excluded, an act that confirms their humanness since to the animal "the word is denied" (Heidegger 155). And yet, quite a few of them do walk with animals. To slow down, as Solnit shows in her seminal *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), quoting Walter Benjamin, Parisian *flâneurs*—those famous city strollers – used to walk with turtles in the Arcades, the turtles determining the pace for them (Solnit 200). Such rituals were a gesture of refusing to partake of progress. Animals slow us down, they make us explore and they challenge the boundaries of our human identities, making us cross over into their world.

There are instances in literature, however, where slow travel may even extend to traveling by vehicle, especially when such travel happens with the kind of mindfulness that animals also produce in the traveler. In American literature, classical examples for slowing down on the great American road trip are John Steinbeck traveling in the company of his poodle Charlie, Robert Pirsig, who takes his son on a philosophical motor bike trip, and William Least Heat-Moon's various engagements with the American map.

As Renée Bryzik has shown, Least Heat-Moon's first travelogue *Blue Highways* (1982) made the transition in American travel literature from Kerouac-style egocentric (*On the Road,* 1957) speed trip to eco-centric slow travel, challenging monocultural assumptions about American identities and engaging with multi-perspectival narrative layers (Bryzik 666, 682). His journey along the blue highways, the small forgotten highways of America, is similar to Dickens and Wordsworth in their desire to showcase the lives of the under-privileged. Least-Heat-Moon has even developed a particular concept of mapping places. While America features as a flat map in *Blue Highways* full of random encounters in places like Nameless, Tennessee, what Kerouac arrogantly calls 'the middle of Coyote Nowhere' (Kerouac 226), his later book *PrairieErth* (1991) about Chase County, Kansas, experiments with the concept of the deep map. It focuses on travel that dwells in place and explores the many stories and multiple fossilized sediments within a small radius ('horizontal' versus 'vertical' travel [Cronin 19]; see also Barbara Siller's article below).

In *PrairieErth* the author is trying to demonstrate that one small county in the middle of the U.S, consisting mostly of rolling prairie, can yield a complexity and richness of stories similar to what his circular trip around the U.S. does in *Blue Highways.* Finally, there is his book *River-Horse* (1999) of his journey solely along waterways from New York City to Oregon, a trip that strengthened his belief that efforts to protect America's lands and waters are beginning to pay off. In all three cases slow travel is key to revealing a multiplicity of narratives that would otherwise be forgotten. Least Heat-Moon's books are extremely rhizomatic in nature, divulging a resistance to ownership, an embrace of letting things go; his road trips are part of that quintessential American experience of going to the frontier in search of the kind of freedom

that Thoreau and Kerouac once saw in going west. And yet, Sal Paradise, the narrator, and his buddies in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* keep forever 'balling' across that vast continent between New York City and Frisco. Least Heat-Moon, on the other hand, visits the in-between places, in search of people whose relationship with the landscape and environment still shows some authenticity. With Walt Whitman and Black Elk in tow the partly Native American author has thus created a series of travelogues that resist speed in their mindfulness of 'true' American identities and the lost art of happenstance.

Slow travel thus happens for the purpose of resistance, social and political responsibility, as an act of trespassing, and accompanied by mindfulness and the benefits of self-therapy, eco-awareness, kindness to flora and fauna. In their range the essays assembled in this volume attempt to address many of these functions and aspects.

In the first of the ensuing essays **Jon Hughes** examines the representation of leisure cycling in recent and contemporary German novels. Focusing on Uwe Timm's *Der Mann auf dem Hochrad* [The Man on the Penny Farthing] (1984), Lea Streisand's *Im Sommer wieder Fahrrad* [By Bike again next Summer] (2016) and Joachim Zelter's *Im Feld*. *Roman einer Obsession* [In the Field. A Novel of an Obsession] (2018) he reads these texts alongside a range of recent conceptual responses to the increased popularity of cycling both in Germany and internationally. Hughes explores the ways in which the texts both utilize and criticize an idealistic association between cycling and (the desire for) happiness. One of his arguments is that a hybrid literary genre, combining popular history, practical guides and memoir, has begun to articulate a distinct philosophy of cycling in which value is placed on authenticity, experience and above all happiness.

His article analyses the ways the chosen texts use the motif of cycling not only to explore transient but intense forms of happiness, but also to problematize them. Hughes highlights Timm's representation of a cycling pioneer as a focus for the competing imperatives of modernity (the desire for leisure versus the drive for speed). His reading of Streisand's text is then informed by reflection on forms of 'slow' experience, and argues that it presents cycling as a meaningful end in itself. 'Slowness' here becomes less a reference to measurable speed than a way of accounting for the joyful experience of autonomous, self-propelled movement.

Hughes claims that both Timm's and Streisand's texts suggest a productive point of comparison with the pedestrian flâneur, Baudelaire's 'gentleman' stroller, but which has more recently been explored (for example by Lauren Elkin) in terms of feminine experience in the modern city. The history of cycling, Hughes suggests, also parallels shifting conceptions of gender, and cycle sport remains strongly associated with the performance of competitive masculinity, as Zelter's text makes clear. Zelter's unusual novel, which narrates the experience of a single group ride on a single day, seeks both to convey the experience of cycling as rhythm and 'flow' and also to offer a

critique of the disruptive effects of competitiveness and group psychology. Hughes demonstrates how these novels about cycling provide compelling accounts of 'obsession.'

Barbara Siller's essay then explores expressive modalities of walking and cycling in Paolo Rumiz's *A piedi* [On Foot] (2012) and *Tre uomini in bicicletta* [Three Men on a Bicycle] (2002) by drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept of values and to demonstrate how the texts of this author from Trieste engage with social and political responsibilities. Siller argues that while these books can be superficially read as walking guides, the author's insistence on slow travel also offers us deeper benefits such as therapy, self-introspection but also resistance to our industrial frenzy.

In the act of walking, Rebecca Solnit has argued, "the body and the mind can work together" and "[e]ach walk moves through space like a thread through fabric, sewing it together into a continuous experience" (2002, xv). It is precisely this texture of body and mind experience which runs through Rumiz' books. Siller closely reads Rumiz's engagement with slow travel as a reflection of Michel de Certeau's theory of walking rhetorics with their three inherent values of *aletheia*, *episteme* and *deontos*, of disclosure, understanding and duty. In combination, she argues, these three aspects result in the creation of a specific genre characterized by its connectivity to the reader community and its social and political engagement.

This essay is then followed by **Christina Gerhardt**'s article on oceanic travel. Gerhardt points out that the shift to slow travel takes place in tandem with considerations related to time in the environmental humanities. She suggests that this shift includes notions of deep time moving backwards with consideration for the geologic span of fossil fuel production or moving forwards with consideration for the Anthropocene as an epoch that one day will have left its traces in the geologic record. These temporal shifts, Gerhardt points out, have been recorded in scholarship by Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour, by Anna Tsing and Kathryn Yusoff. Going back to previous modes of travel, such as walking or sailing in order to ensure a future, is currently being engaged by everyone from ambling environmentalists to scientists and technologists. In Germany and Sweden, for example, scientists are working to develop large cargo sailing ships. These ships of the future harken back to the past of ocean voyaging. Gerhardt argues that they dovetail with contemporary literary reflections on ocean voyaging and slow travel such as Judith Schalansky's *Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Never Set Foot On and Never Will* (2009). In an expansive essay that highlights various forms of slow travel, their cultural and literary reflections, and relationship with the environmental and migration crisis Gerhardt weaves together an analysis of Schalansky's atlas with environmental humanities discourses on deep time in order to put forward a model of ocean voyaging as an alternative form of slow travel. Finally, she demonstrates the links between slow travel, the migrant crisis and slow violence in a brief analysis of Jenny Erpenbeck's 2015 novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* [Go, Went, Gone]. She concludes that although slow travel offers an

opportunity to address the current climate crisis, to read it solely in these terms would foreclose a reading of slow travel motivated by other factors, such as the migration of those fleeing wars and climate change induced migrations. While the development of forms of travel that reduce CO2 emissions, such as wind-powered ocean voyaging, are clearly beneficial to avert climate change, the very term "slow travel" should, in her view, from its very inception be mindful of inclusion and exclusion. Among the questions she seeks to answer but also highlight for future scholarship are: Who does slow travel include or exclude? Who designs slow travel and for whom is it designed?

Ben Pestell then demonstrates the links between contemporary writing on nature, especially literary walks, and myth. He argues that this modern mythification is by definition a political gesture. For in his view, shared history, social spaces, and unmediated communication are all erased by instruments of capital – from the skyscrapers of high finance, the 'Olympicopolis' of East London, the privatization of public space to the recuperation of language by mass media and marketing. The literary, he argues, becomes a branch of magic, allowing history and place to become re-sacralized by the collapse of linear time into mythic time. Pestell suggests that in the dizzying proliferation of literary walks in recent years, the intersections between walking, myth, and other signifiers of the magical, sacred, or transcendental can be confusing. His article seeks to advance an understanding of the mythic as encountered in literary walks through a close reading of a text which ostensibly resists both categories of "myth" and "psychogeography": Esther Kinsky's *Am Fluß* [River] (2014). Pestell concludes that as a text that reaches in manifold directions – the discursive thoughts of a walker, taking in migration, borderlands, marginal communities, post-war experience, home, and the limits of the fantastic in urban space – this novel is ideal in reflecting a dialogue about the function of myth in literary walks.

Finally, **Halia Koo** analyses walking as a protest strategy in contemporary French travel writing. "Ambulo ergo sum. I walk, therefore I am," journalist and travel writer Alexandre Poussin once declared by way of introduction to his essay *Marche avant* [Walking forward] (2011). Likewise, his colleague Sylvain Tesson, with whom he has covered 5,000 km on foot across the Himalayas, writes in *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde* [Small treatise on the vastness of the world] (2005) that he is a twenty-first-century wanderer and nomad. Koo argues that while walking and hiking stand in the tradition of German Romantic vagrancy, in a society ruled by hyper-industrialization, walking becomes the conscious choice of deliberate slowness in reaction to the exorbitant speed offered by modern means of transportation.

She suggests that slowing down travel, already begun in the second half of the twentieth century, and a renewed enthusiasm for walking have paved the way for a reinvention of the contemporary travel narrative, with various outcomes. As for Sylvain Tesson, while he claims to embrace the Romantic wanderers' intellectual legacy, his grueling treks and bucolic escapades into the wilderness help him dissociate himself from an anthropocentric vision of the

world and be more ecologically aware, in an act of resistance against the excessive industrialization of society. To Tesson walking is a form of criticism on the move, a way to experience a return to nature, seen as a place of physical and inner regeneration.

According to Koo, slow travel and writing about this experience give Sylvain Tesson the opportunity to reflect on the exploitation of natural resources, and on the uncertain future of humankind. She discusses his *Éloge de l'énergie vagabonde* [In praise of wandering energy] (2007), the narrative of his trek in the Ust-Yurt, an oil-producing region of Central Asia. In an actively subversive gesture, Tesson decides to follow this area's network of oil pipelines without any motorized propulsion in order to complete the same journey as a drop of gasoline. Koo argues that, paradoxically, walking along these symbols of contemporary society's technocracy allows Tesson to symbolically restore a lost balance and confirm the necessity for humans to reconnect to their intrinsic animal nature. By triggering his thought process, she argues, walking ultimately stimulates a philosophical reflection on the consequences of excessive consumption of energy, contributes to the questioning of environmental issues, and encourages debate on the exploitation of nature and its implications for humankind.

The essays assembled in this volume are limited to contemporary European writers, and we have tried to go well beyond walking in literature by including scholarship on cycling and – following Greta Thunberg's example – oceanic travel in literary texts. Slow travel with animals will need more attention in future scholarship as it gets short shrift here. With their focus on slow travel, however, these articles are products of a time before the virus. Since their production humanity has progressed to a new era that may very well produce a new genre of travel writing – on the kind of travel that renounces entirely with physical movement beyond the confines of one's domestic environment. From slow travel to no travel – at best perhaps a form of travel that goes inward rather than outward, thus also offering a remedy to what Blaise Pascal famously invoked in his statement that "all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

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