

---

## REBECCA SOLNIT

IT IS NOT surprising that Rebecca Solnit, an author with far-ranging interests, would be the one to write *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000). Unaffiliated with any university or other institution, Solnit has pursued her interests without regard to disciplinary, temporal, or geographical boundaries. In the words of one *Columbia Journalism Review* assessment, “irrepressible curiosity has led her to investigate and reflect on a diverse range of subjects: landscapes both rural and urban, politics, the environment, indigenous people, technology, gender, art, and photography. Each of the labels that have been used to describe her—historian, journalist, cultural theorist, critic, activist—bumps up against the others.”

Prior to *Wanderlust*, Solnit wrote two books of art criticism, and another about her ancestral homeland called *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland* (1997). The same year that she published *Wanderlust*, Solnit published *Hollow City* (2000), a book about the changing cultural landscape of her hometown, San Francisco. She later turned her attention to nineteenth-century photography and the evolution of motion-capture media technology in the award-winning *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (2003), which she followed up in 2004 with *Hope in the Dark*, a celebration of political protest. Solnit’s wandering intellect returned to its fascination with the pathways and byways that we take in life with *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005).

“The Solitary Stroller and the City,” a chapter from Solnit’s history of walking, explores the many elements of human experience and the many sides of human character that emerge in the course of a stroll on the city streets. “The word *street*,” Solnit points out, “has a rough, dirty magic to it. It conjures up images of transgressions and encounters that could only take place on public paths.” For Solnit, streets are more than just the space left over between buildings: they constitute a vital public space that has, throughout history, served intermittently as the staging ground for revolutionary movements and the field

---

Solnit, Rebecca. “The Solitary Stroller and the City,” *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2001. 171–195.

Quotations come from “Room to Roam,” a Q&A conducted by Peter Terzian for the July/August 2007 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, <[http://www.cjr.org/q\\_and\\_a/room\\_to\\_roam.php](http://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/room_to_roam.php)>, and from *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (U of CA Press, 2007).

for flirting young people. Though it offers its share of dangers and unsavory possibility, Solnit champions urban walking as a cultural activity of great import both in the past and in the present, when “consumption and production” are the organizing values of our cities.

“The straight line of conventional narrative,” Solnit writes in the introduction to *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (2007), her most recent book, “is too often an elevated freeway permitting no unplanned encounters or necessary detours. It is not how our thoughts travel, nor does it allow us to map the whole world rather than one streamlined trajectory across it.” By resisting the straight lines of such narratives, Solnit’s prose mirrors the content of her books. Her cultural history of walking is just one of several demonstrations of what a mind can discover when set to wander.



## The Solitary Stroller and the City

I lived in rural New Mexico long enough that when I came back home to San Francisco, I saw it for the first time as a stranger might. The exuberance of spring was urban for me that year, and I finally understood all those country songs about the lure of the bright lights of town. I walked everywhere in the balmy days and nights of May, amazed at how many possibilities could be crammed within the radius of those walks and thrilled by the idea I could just wander out the front door to find them. Every building, every storefront, seemed to open onto a different world, compressing all the variety of human life into a jumble of possibilities made all the richer by the conjunctions. Just as a bookshelf can jam together Japanese poetry, Mexican history, and Russian novels, so the buildings of my city contained Zen centers, Pentecostal churches, tattoo parlors, produce stores, burrito places, movie palaces, dim sum shops. Even the most ordinary things struck me with wonder, and the people on the street offered a thousand glimpses of lives like and utterly unlike mine.

Cities have always offered anonymity, variety, and conjunction, qualities best basked in by walking: one does not have to go into the bakery or the fortuneteller’s, only to know that one might. A city always contains more than any inhabitant can know, and a great city always makes the unknown and the possible spurs to the imagination. San Francisco has long been called the most European of American cities, a comment more often made

than explained. What I think its speakers mean is that San Francisco, in its scale and its street life, keeps alive the idea of a city as a place of unmediated encounters, while most American cities are becoming more and more like enlarged suburbs, scrupulously controlled and segregated, designed for the noninteractions of motorists shuttling between private places rather than the interactions of pedestrians in public ones. San Francisco has water on three sides and a ridge on the fourth to keep it from sprawling, and several neighborhoods of lively streets. Truly urban density, beautiful buildings, views of the bay and the ocean from the crests of its hills, cafés and bars everywhere, suggest different priorities for space and time than in most American cities, as does the (gentrification-threatened) tradition of artists, poets, and social and political radicals making lives about other things than getting and spending.

My first Saturday back, I sauntered over to nearby Golden Gate Park, which lacks the splendor of a wilderness but has given me many compensatory pleasures: musicians practicing in the reverberant pedestrian underpasses, old Chinese women doing martial arts in formation, strolling Russian émigrés murmuring to each other in the velvet slurp of their mother tongue, dog walkers being yanked into the primeval world of canine joys, and access by foot to the shores of the Pacific. That morning, at the park's bandshell, the local radio variety show had joined forces with the "Water-shed Poetry Festival," and I watched for a while. Former poet laureate of the United States Robert Hass was coaching children to read their poetry into the microphone onstage, and some poets I knew were standing in the wings. I went up to say hello to them, and they showed me their brand-new wedding rings and introduced me to more poets, and then I ran into the great California historian Malcolm Margolin, who told me stories that made me laugh. This was the daytime marvel of cities for me: coincidences, the mingling of many kinds of people, poetry given away to strangers under the open sky.

Margolin's publishing house, Heydey Press, was displaying its wares along with those of some other small presses and literary projects, and he handed me a book off his table titled *920 O'Farrell Street*. A memoir by Harriet Lane Levy, it recounted her own marvelous experiences growing up in San Francisco in the 1870s and 1880s. In her day, walking the streets of the city was as organized an entertainment as a modern excursion to the movies. "On Saturday night," she wrote, "the city joined in the promenade on Market Street, the broad thoroughfare that begins at the waterfront and cuts its straight path of miles to Twin Peaks. The sidewalks were wide and the crowd walking toward the bay met the crowd walking toward the ocean. The outpouring of the population was spontaneous as if in response to an urge for instant celebration. Every quarter of the city discharged its residents into the broad procession. Ladies and gentlemen of imposing social repute; their German and Irish servant girls, arms held fast in the arms of their

sweethearts; French, Spaniards, gaunt, hard-working Portuguese; Mexicans, the Indian showing in reddened skin and high cheekbone—everybody, anybody, left home and shop, hotel, restaurant, and beer garden to empty into Market Street in a river of color. Sailors of every nation deserted their ships at the water front and, hurrying up Market Street in groups, joined the vibrating mass excited by the lights and stir and the gaiety of the throng. 'This is San Francisco,' their faces said. It was carnival; no confetti, but the air a criss-cross of a thousand messages; no masks, but eyes frankly charged with challenge. Down Market from Powell to Kearny, three long blocks, up Kearny to Bush, three short ones, then back again, over and over for hours, until a glance of curiosity deepened to one of interest; interest expanded into a smile, and a smile into anything. Father and I went downtown every Saturday night. We walked through avenues of light in a world hardly solid. Something was happening everywhere, every minute, something to be happy about. . . . We walked and walked and still something kept happening afresh."<sup>1</sup> Market Street, which was once a great promenade, is still the city's central traffic artery, but decades of tearing it up and redeveloping it have deprived it of its social glory. Jack Kerouac managed to have two visions on it late in the 1940s or early in the 1950s, and he would probably embrace its freeway-shadowed midtown population of panhandlers and people running sidewalk sales out of shopping carts.<sup>2</sup> Levy's downtown stretch is now trod by office workers and shoppers and by tourists swarming around the Powell Street cable car turnaround; more than a mile farther uptown, Market Street finally bursts into vigorous pedestrian life again for a few blocks before it crosses Castro Street and begins its steep ascent of Twin Peaks.

The history of both urban and rural walking is a history of freedom and of the definition of pleasure. But rural walking has found a moral imperative in the love of nature that has allowed it to defend and open up the countryside. Urban walking has always been a shadier business, easily turning into soliciting, cruising, promenading, shopping, rioting, protesting, skulking, loitering, and other activities that, however enjoyable, hardly have the high moral tone of nature appreciation. Thus no similar defense has been mounted for the preservation of urban space, save by a few civil libertarians and urban theorists (who seldom note that public space is used and inhabited largely by walking it). Yet urban walking seems in many ways more like primordial hunting and gathering than walking in the country. For most of us the country or the wilderness is a place we walk through and look at, but seldom make things in or take things from (remember the famous Sierra Club dictum, "Take only photographs, leave only footprints"). In the city, the biological spectrum has been nearly reduced to the human and a few scavenger species, but the range of activities remains wide. Just as a gatherer may pause to note a tree whose acorns will be bountiful in six months or inspect a potential supply of basket canes, so an urban walker may note a

grocery open late or a place to get shoes resoled, or detour by the post office. Too, the average rural walker looks at the general—the view, the beauty—and the landscape moves by as a gently modulated continuity: a crest long in view is reached, a forest thins out to become a meadow. The urbanite is on the lookout for particulars, for opportunities, individuals, and supplies, and the changes are abrupt. Of course the city resembles primordial life more than the country in a less charming way too; while nonhuman predators have been radically reduced in North America and eliminated in Europe, the possibility of human predators keeps city dwellers in a state of heightened alertness, at least in some times and places.

Those first months at home were so enchanting that I kept a walking journal and later that glorious summer wrote, “I suddenly realized I’d spent seven hours at the desk without a real interruption and was getting nervous and hunchbacked, walked to the Clay Theater on upper Fillmore via a passage on Broderick I’d never seen before—handsome squat old Victorians near the housing projects—and was pleased as ever when the familiar yielded up the unknown. The film was *When the Cat’s Away*, about a solitary young Parisienne forced to meet her Place de Bastille neighbors when her cat vanishes, full of uneventful events and people with seesaw strides and rooftops and mumbling slang, and when it got out I was exhilarated and the night was dark with a pearly mist of fog on it. I walked back fast, first along California, past a couple—her unexceptional, him in a well-tailored brown suit with the knock knees of someone who’d spent time in leg braces—and ignored the bus, and did the same on Divisadero with that bus. Slowed down at an antique store window to look at a big creamy vase with blue Chinese sages painted on it, then a few doors down saw a balding Chinese man holding a toddler boy up to the glass of a store, where a woman on the inside was playing with him through the glass. To their confusion, I beamed. There’s a way the artificial lights and natural darkness of nightwalks turn the day’s continuum into a theater of tableaux, vignettes, set pieces, and there’s always the unsettling pleasure of your shadow growing and shrinking as you move from streetlight to streetlight. Dodging a car as a traffic light changed, I broke into a canter and it felt so good I loped along a few more blocks without getting winded, though I got warm.

“All along Divisadero keeping an eye on the other people and on the open venues—liquor stores and smoke shops—and then turned up my own street. At a cross street a young black guy in a watch cap and dark clothes was running downhill at me at a great clip, and I looked around to suss up my options just in case—I mean if Queen Victoria was moving toward you that fast you’d take note. He saw my hesitation and assured me in the sweetest young man’s voice, ‘I’m not after you, I’m just *late*’ and dashed past me, so I said, ‘Good luck’ and then, when he was into the street and I had time to collect my thoughts, ‘Sorry to look suspicious, but you were kind of speedy.’ He laughed, and then I did, and in a minute I recalled all the other

encounters I'd had around the 'hood lately that might have had the earmarks of trouble but unfolded as pure civility and was pleased that I'd been prepared without being alarmed. At that moment, I looked up and saw in a top-floor window the same poster of Man Ray's *A l'heure de l'observatoire*—his painting of the sunset sky with the long red lips floating across it—that I'd seen in another window somewhere else in town a night or two before. This poster was bigger, and this night was more exuberant; seeing *A l'heure* twice seemed magic. Home in about twenty minutes at most."

Streets are the space left over between buildings. A house alone is an island surrounded by a sea of open space, and the villages that preceded cities were no more than archipelagos in that same sea. But as more and more buildings arose, they became a continent, the remaining open space no longer like the sea but like rivers, canals, and streams running between the land masses. People no longer moved anyhow in the open sea of rural space but traveled up and down the streets, and just as narrowing a waterway increases flow and speed, so turning open space into the spillways of streets directs and intensifies the flood of walkers. In great cities, spaces as well as places are designed and built: walking, witnessing, being in public, are as much part of the design and purpose as is being inside to eat, sleep, make shoes or love or music. The word *citizen* has to do with cities, and the ideal city is organized around citizenship—around participation in public life.

Most American cities and towns, however, are organized around consumption and production, as were the dire industrial cities of England, and public space is merely the void between workplaces, shops, and dwellings. Walking is only the beginning of citizenship, but through it the citizen knows his or her city and fellow citizens and truly inhabits the city rather than a small privatized part thereof. Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one's life, the personal microcosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around. In her celebrated *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes how a popular, well-used street is kept safe from crime merely by the many people going by.<sup>3</sup> Walking maintains the publicness and viability of public space. "What distinguishes the city," writes Franco Moretti, "is that its spatial structure (basically its concentration) is functional to the intensification of mobility: spatial mobility, naturally enough, but mainly social mobility."<sup>4</sup>

The very word *street* has a rough, dirty magic to it, summoning up the low, the common, the erotic, the dangerous, the revolutionary. A man of the streets is only a populist, but a woman of the streets is, like a streetwalker, a seller of her sexuality. Street kids are urchins, beggars, and runaways, and the new term *street person* describes those who have no other home. *Street-smart* means someone wise in the ways of the city and well able to survive in it, while "to the streets" is the classic cry of urban revolution, for the streets are where people become the public and where their power resides. *The street*

means life in the heady currents of the urban river in which everyone and everything can mingle. It is exactly this social mobility, this lack of compartments and distinctions, that gives the street its danger and its magic, the danger and magic of water in which everything runs together.

In feudal Europe only city dwellers were free of the hierarchical bonds that structured the rest of society—in England, for example, a serf could become free by living for a year and a day in a free town. The quality of freedom within cities then was limited, however, for their streets were usually dirty, dangerous, and dark. Cities often imposed a curfew and closed their gates at sunset. Only in the Renaissance did the cities of Europe begin to improve their paving, their sanitation, and their safety. In eighteenth-century London and Paris, going out anywhere at night was as dangerous as the worst slums are supposed to be nowadays, and if you wanted to see where you were going, you hired a torchbearer (and the young London torch carriers—link boys, they were called—often doubled as procurers). Even in daylight, carriages terrorized pedestrians. Before the eighteenth century, few seem to have walked these streets for pleasure, and only in the nineteenth century did places as clean, safe, and illuminated as modern cities begin to emerge. All the furniture and codes that give modern streets their orderliness—raised sidewalks, streetlights, street names, building numbers, drains, traffic rules, and traffic signals—are relatively recent innovations.

Idyllic spaces had been created for the urban rich—tree-lined promenades, semipublic gardens and parks. But these places that preceded the public park were anti-streets, segregated by class and disconnected from everyday life (unlike the pedestrian *corsos* and paseos of the plazas and squares of Mediterranean and Latin countries and Levy's Market Street promenade—or London's anomalous Hyde Park, which accommodated both carriage promenades for the rich and open-air oratory for the radical). Though politics, flirtations, and commerce might be conducted in them, they were little more than outdoor salons and ballrooms.<sup>5</sup> And from the mile-long Cours de la Reine built in Paris in 1616 to Mexico City's Alameda to New York's Central Park built during the 1850s, such places tended to attract people whose desire to display their wealth was better served by promenading in carriages than walking. On the Cours de la Reine, the carriages would gather so thickly a traffic jam would result, which may be why in 1700 a fashion for getting out and dancing by torchlight on the central round developed.

Though Central Park was shaped by more-or-less democratic impulses, English landscape garden aesthetics, and the example of Liverpool's public park, poor New Yorkers often paid to go to private parks akin to Vauxhall Gardens instead, where they might drink beer, dance the polka, or otherwise engage in plebeian versions of pleasure. Even those who wished only to have an uplifting stroll, as the park's codesigner Frederick Law Olmsted had intended them to, found obstacles. Central Park became a great promenade

for the rich, and once again carriages segregated the society. In their history of the park and its city, Ray Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar write, "Earlier in the [nineteenth] century the late afternoon, early evening, and Sunday promenades of affluent New Yorkers had evolved into parades of high fashion; the wide thoroughfares of Broadway, the Battery, and Fifth Avenue had become a public setting in which to see and be seen. By midcentury, however, the fashionable Broadway and Battery promenades had declined as 'respectable' citizens lost control over these public spaces. . . . Both men and women wanted grander public space for a new form of public promenading—by carriage. In the mid-nineteenth century, carriage ownership was becoming a defining feature of urban upper-class status." The rich went to Central Park, and a populist journalist said, "I hear that pedestrians have acquired a bad habit of being accidentally run over in that neighborhood."<sup>6</sup>

Just as poorer people continued to promenade in New York's Battery, so their Parisian counterparts strolled along the peripheries of the city, often under avenues of trees planted to shade just such excursions. After the Revolution, Paris's Tuileries could be entered by anyone the guards deemed properly dressed. Private pleasure gardens modeled after London's famous Vauxhall Gardens, including Ranelagh and Cremorne Gardens in London itself; Vienna's Augarten; New York's Elysian Fields, Castle Gardens, and Harlem Gardens; and Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens (sole survivor of them all) sorted out people by the simpler criterion of ability to pay. Elsewhere in these cities, markets, fairs, and processions brought festivity to the sites of everyday life, and the stroll was not so segregated. To me, the magic of the street is the mingling of the errand and the epiphany, and no such gardens seem to have flourished in Italy, perhaps because they were unneeded.

Italian cities have long been held up as ideals, not least by New Yorkers and Londoners enthralled by the ways their architecture gives beauty and meaning to everyday acts. Since at least the seventeenth century, foreigners have been moving there to bask in the light and the life. Bernard Rudofsky, nominally a New Yorker, spent a good deal of time in Italy and sang its praises in his 1969 *Streets for People: A Primer for Americans*. For those who consider New York the exemplary American pedestrian city, Rudofsky's conviction that it is abysmal is startling. His book uses primarily Italian examples to demonstrate the ways plazas and streets can function to tie a city together socially and architecturally. "It simply never occurs to us to make streets into oases rather than deserts," he says at the beginning. "In countries where their function has not yet deteriorated into highways and parking lots, a number of arrangements make streets fit for humans. . . . The most refined street coverings, a tangible expression of civic solidarity—or, should one say, of philanthropy, are arcades. Apart from lending unity to the streetscape, they often take the place of the ancient forums."<sup>7</sup> Descendants of the Greek stoa and *peripatos*, arcaded streets blur the boundaries between inside and out and pay architectural tribute to the pedestrian life that takes



place beneath them. Rudofsky singles out Bologna's famous *portici*, a four-mile-long covered walkway running from the central square to the countryside; Milan's Galleria, less strictly commercial in its functions than the upscale shopping malls modeled and named after it; the winding streets of Perugia; the car-free streets of Siena; and Brisinghella's second-story public arcades. He writes with passionate enthusiasm about the Italian predinner stroll—the *passaggiata*—for which many towns close down their main streets to wheeled traffic, contrasting it with the American cocktail hour. For Italians, he says, the street is the pivotal social space, for meeting, debating, courting, buying, and selling.

The New York dance critic Edwin Denby wrote, about the same time as Rudofsky, of his own appreciation of Italian walkers. "In ancient Italian towns the narrow main street at dusk becomes a kind of theatre. The community strolls affably and looks itself over. The girls and the young men, from fifteen to twenty-two, display their charm to one another with a lively sociability. The more grace they show the better the community likes them. In Florence or in Naples, in the ancient city slums the young people are virtuoso performers, and they do a bit of promenading any time they are not busy." Of young Romans, he wrote, "Their stroll is as responsive as if it were a physical conversation." Elsewhere, he instructs dance students to watch the walk of various types: "Americans occupy a much larger space than their actual bodies do. This annoys many Europeans; it annoys their instinct of modesty. But it has a beauty of its own, that a few of them appreciate. . . . For myself I think the walk of New Yorkers is amazingly beautiful, so large and clear."<sup>8</sup> In Italy walking in the city is a universal cultural activity rather than the subject of individual forays and accounts. From Dante pacing out his exile in Verona and Ravenna to Primo Levi walking home from Auschwitz, Italy has not lacked great walkers—but urban walking itself seems to be more part of a universal culture than the focus of particular experience (save that by foreigners, copiously recorded, and the cinematic strolls of such characters as the streetwalker in Federico Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* and the protagonists in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thief* and in many of Michelangelo Antonioni's films). However, the cities that are neither so accommodating as Naples nor so forbidding as Los Angeles—London, New York—have produced their own fugitive culture of walking. In London, from the eighteenth century on, the great accounts of walking have to do not with the cheerful and open display of ordinary life and desires but with nocturnal scenes, crimes, sufferings, outcasts, and the darker side of the imagination, and it is this tradition that New York assumes.

In 1711 the essayist Joseph Addison wrote, "When I am in a serious Humour, I very often walk by my self in Westminster Abbey; where the Gloominess of the Place, and the Use to which it is applied . . . are apt to fill the Mind with a kind of Melancholy, or rather Thoughtfulness, that is not

disagreeable."<sup>9</sup> At the time he wrote, walking the city streets was perilous as John Gay pointed out in his 1716 poem *Trivia, or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London*. Travel through the city was as dangerous as cross-country travel: the streets were full of sewage and garbage, many of the trades were filthy, the air was already bad, cheap gin had ravaged the city's poor the way crack did American inner cities in the 1980s, and an underclass of criminals and desperate souls thronged the streets. Carriages jostled and mangled pedestrians without fear of reprisal, beggars solicited passersby, and street sellers called out their wares. The accounts of the time are full of the fears of the wealthy to go out at all and of young women lured or forced into sexual labor: prostitutes were everywhere. This is why Gay focuses on urban walking as an *art*—an art of protecting oneself from splashes, assaults and indignities:

Though you through cleaner allies wind by day,  
To shun the hurries of the publick way,  
Yet ne'er to those dark paths by night retire;  
Mind only safety, and condemn the mire.<sup>10</sup>

Like Dr. Johnson's 1738 poem "London," Gay's *Trivia* uses a classical mode to mock the present. Divided into three books—the first on the implement and techniques of walking the streets, the second on walking by day, the third on walking by night—the poem makes it clear that the minutiae of everyday life can only be observed scornfully. The high-flown style cannot but contrast abrasively with such small subjects, with something of the same mockery he brought to his *Beggars' Opera*. Gay tries—

Here I remark each walker's diff'rent face,  
And in their look their various bus'ness trace.<sup>11</sup>

—but he ends by despising everyone, assuming he can read their tawdry lives in their faces. At the end of Gay's century Wordsworth "goes forward with the crowd," seeing a mystery in the face of each stranger;<sup>12</sup> while William Blake wanders "each charter'd street/And mark in every face meet/Marks of weakness, marks of woe:"—the cry of a chimney sweep, the curse of a young harlot.<sup>13</sup> Earlier eighteenth-century literary language was not supple enough or personal enough to connect the life of the imagination to that of the street. Johnson had been one of those desperate London walkers in his early years there—in the late 1730s, when he and his friend, the poet and rogue Richard Savage, were too poor to pay for lodgings, they used to walk the streets and squares all night talking insurrection and glory—but he didn't write about it.<sup>14</sup> Boswell did in his *Life of Johnson*, but for Boswell, the darkness of night and anonymity of the streets were a less reflective opportunity, as his London diary records: "I should have been at Lady Northumberland's rout tonight, but my barber fell sick [meaning his hair was not

properly powdered]; so I sallied to the streets, and just at the bottom of our own, I picked up a fresh, agreeable young girl called Alice Gibbs. We went down a lane to a snug place. . . ."<sup>15</sup> Of Alice Gibbs's impression of the streets and the night, we have no record.

That few women other than prostitutes were free to wander the streets and that wandering the street was often enough to cause a woman to be considered a prostitute are matters troubling enough to be taken up elsewhere. Here I merely want to comment on their presence in the street and in the night, habitats in which they more than almost any other kind of walker became natives. Until the twentieth century women seldom walked the city for their own pleasure, and prostitutes have left us almost no records of their experience. The eighteenth century was immodest enough to have a few famous novels about prostitutes, but Fanny Hill's courtesan life was all indoors, Moll Flanders's was entirely practical, and both of them were creations of male authors whose work was at least partly speculative. Then as now, however, a complex culture of working the streets must have existed, each city mapped according to safety and the economics of male desire. There have been many attempts to confine such activity; Byzantine-era Constantinople had its "street of harlots," Tokyo from the seventeenth to the twentieth century had a gated pleasure district, nineteenth-century San Francisco had its notorious Barbary Coast, and many turn-of-the-century American cities had red-light districts, the most famous of which was New Orleans's Storyville, where jazz is reputed to have been born. But prostitution wandered outside these bounds, and the population of such women was enormous: 50,000 in 1793, when London had a total population of one million, estimated one expert.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century they were to be found in the most fashionable parts of London too: social reformer Henry Mayhew's report refers to "the circulating harlotry of the Haymarket and Regent Street," as well as to the women working in the city's parks and promenades.<sup>17</sup>

Twenty-odd years ago a researcher on prostitution reported, "Prostitution streetscapes are composed of *strolls*, loosely defined areas where the women solicit. . . . On the stroll the prostitute moves around to entice or enjoin customers, reduce boredom, keep warm and reduce visibility [to the police]. Part of most streetscapes resemble common greens, areas to which all have unimpeded access. Here women assemble in groups of two to four, laughing, talking and joking among themselves. . . . Working the same stroll infuses much needed predictability into an illegal, sometimes dangerous environment."<sup>18</sup> And Dolores French, an advocate for prostitutes' rights, worked the streets herself and reports that her fellow streetwalkers "think that women who work in whorehouses have too many restrictions and rules" while the street "welcomed everyone democratically. . . . They felt they were like cowboys out on the range, or spies on a dangerous mission. They bragged about how free they were. . . . They had no one to answer to

ut themselves."<sup>19</sup> The same refrains—freedom, democracy, danger—come p in this as in the other ways of occupying the streets.

In the eighteenth-century city, a new image of what it means to be human ad arisen, an image of one possessed of the freedom and isolation of the traveler, and travelers, however wide or narrow their scope, became emblematic figures. Richard Savage proposed this early with a 1729 poem called *The Wanderer*, and the aptly named George Walker inaugurated the new century with his novel *The Vagabond*, followed in 1814 by Fanny Burney's *Vanderer*. Wordsworth had his *Excursion* (whose first two sections were titled "The Wanderer" and "The Solitary"); Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* was condemned like the Wandering Jew to roam; and the Wandering Jew himself was a popular subject for Romantics in Britain and on the continent.

The literary historian Raymond Williams remarks, "Perception of the new qualities of the modern city had been associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets."<sup>20</sup> He cites Blake and Wordsworth as founders of this tradition, but it was De Quincey who wrote of it most eloquently. In the beginning of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey tells of how at the age of seventeen he had run away from a dull school and his unsympathetic guardians and landed in London. There he was afraid to contact the few people he knew and unable to seek work without connections. So for sixteen weeks in the summer and fall of 1802 he starved, having found no other support in London but a home in an all-but-abandoned mansion whose other resident was a forlorn female child. He fell into a spectral existence shared with a few other children, and he wandered the streets restlessly. Streets were already a place for those who had no place, a site to measure sorrow and loneliness in the length of walks. "Being myself at that time, of necessity, a peripatetic, or walker of the streets, I naturally fell in more frequently with those female peripatetics who are technically called street-walkers. Many of these women had occasionally taken my part against watchmen who wished to drive me off the steps of houses where I was sitting." He was befriended by one, a girl named Ann—"timid and dejected to a degree which showed how deeply sorrow had taken hold of her young heart"—who was younger than he and who had turned to the streets after being cheated of a minor inheritance. Once when they were "pacing slowly along Oxford Street, and after a day when I had felt unusually ill and faint, I requested her to turn off with me into Soho Square," and he fainted. She spent what little she had on hot spiced wine to revive him. That he was never able to find her again after his fortune changed was, he declares, one of the great tragedies of his life. For De Quincey, his sojourn in London was one of the most deeply felt passages in his long life, though it had no sequel: the rest of his book is given over to its putative subject, the effects of opium, and the rest of his life to rural places.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Dickens was different, in that he chose such urban walking and his writing explored it thoroughly over the years. He is the great poet of

London life, and some of his novels seem as much dramas of place as of people. Think of *Our Mutual Friend*, where the great euphemistic piles of dust, the dim taxidermy and skeleton shop, the expensively icy interiors of the wealthy, are portraits of those associated with them. People and places become one another—a character may only be identified as an atmosphere or a principle, a place may take on a full-fledged personality. “And this kind of realism can only be gained by walking dreamily in a place; it cannot be gained by walking observantly,” wrote one of his best interpreters, C. K. Chesterton. He attributed Dickens’s acute sense of place to the well-known episode in his boyhood when his father was locked up in a debtor’s prison and Dickens himself was put to work in a blacking factory and lodged in a nearby roominghouse, a desolate child abandoned to the city and its strangers. “Few of us understand the street,” Chesterton writes. “Even when we step into it, we step into it doubtfully, as into a house or room of strangers. Few of us see through the shining riddle of the street, the strange folk that belong to the street only—the street-walker or the street arab, the nomads who, generation after generation have kept their ancient secrets in the full blaze of the sun. Of the street at night many of us know less. The street at night is a great house locked up. But Dickens had, if ever man had, the key of the street. . . . He could open the inmost door of his house—the door that leads onto the secret passage which is lined with houses and roofed with stars.” Dickens is among the first to indicate all the other things urban walking can be: his novels are full of detectives and police inspectors, of criminals who stalk, lovers who seek and damned souls who flee. The city becomes a tangle through which all the characters wander in a colossal game of hide and seek, and only a vast city could allow his intricate plots so full of crossed paths and overlapping lives. But when he wrote about his own experiences of London, it was often an abandoned city.<sup>22</sup>

“If I couldn’t walk fast and far, I should explode and perish,” he once told a friend, and he walked so fast and far that few ever managed to accompany him. He was a solitary walker, and his walks served innumerable purposes.<sup>23</sup> “I am both a town traveller and a country traveller, and am always on the road,” he introduces himself in his essay collection *The Uncommercial Traveller*. “Figuratively speaking, I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers, and have rather a large connection in the fancy goods way. Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent-garden, London.” This metaphysical version of the commercial traveler is an inadequate description of his role, and he tried on many others.<sup>24</sup> He was an athlete: “So much of my travelling is done on foot, that if I cherished better propensities, I should probably be found registered in sporting newspapers under some such title as the Elastic Novice, challenging all eleven stone mankind to competition in walking. My last special feat was turning out of bed at two, after a hard day, pedestrian and otherwise, and walking thirty miles into the country to breakfast. The road was so lonely in

the night that I fell asleep to the monotonous sound of my own feet, doing their regular four miles an hour." And a few essays later, he was a tramp, or a tramp's son: "My walking is of two kinds: one straight on end to a definite goal at a round pace; one, objectless, loitering, and purely vagabond. In the latter state, no gypsy on earth is a greater vagabond than myself; it is so natural to me, and strong with me, that I think I must be the descendant, at no great distance, of some irreclaimable tramp."<sup>25</sup> And he was a cop on the beat, too ethereal to arrest anyone but in his mind: "It is one of my fancies, that even my idlest walk must always have its appointed destination. . . . On such an occasion, it is my habit to regard my walks as my beat, and myself as a higher sort of police-constable doing duty on the same."<sup>26</sup>

And yet despite all these utilitarian occupations and the throngs who populate his books, his own London was often a deserted city, and his walking in it a melancholy pleasure. In an essay on visiting abandoned cemeteries, he wrote, "Whenever I think I deserve particularly well of myself, and have earned the right to enjoy a little treat, I stroll from Covent-garden into the City of London, after business-hours there, on a Saturday, or—better yet—on a Sunday, and roam about its deserted nooks and corners."<sup>27</sup> But the most memorable of them all is "Night Walks," the essay that begins, "Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep, referable to a distressing impression, caused me to walk about the streets all night, for a series of several nights." He described these walks from midnight till dawn as curative of his distress, and during them "I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness"—or what is now called homelessness. The city was no longer as dangerous as it had been in Gay's and Johnson's time, but it was lonelier. Eighteenth-century London was crowded, lively, full of predators, spectacles, and badinage between strangers. By the time Dickens was writing about houselessness in 1860, London was many times as large, but the mob so feared in the eighteenth century had in the nineteenth been largely domesticated as the crowd, a quiet, drab mass going about its private business in public: "Walking the streets under the pattering rain, Houselessness would walk and walk and walk, seeing nothing but the interminable tangle of streets, save at a corner, here and there, two policemen in conversation, or the sergeant or inspector looking after his men. Now and then in the night—but rarely—Houselessness would become aware of a furtive head peering out of a doorway a few yards before him, and, coming up with the head, would find a man standing bolt upright to keep within the doorway's shadow, and evidently intent upon no particular service to society. . . . The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river." And yet he relishes the lonely nocturnal streets, as he does the graveyards and "shy neighborhoods" and what he quixotically called "Arcadian London"—London out of season, when society had gone en masse to the country, leaving the city in sepulchral peace.<sup>28</sup>

There is a subtle state most dedicated urban walkers know, a sort of basking in solitude—a dark solitude punctuated with encounters as the night sky is punctuated with stars. In the country one's solitude is geographical—one is altogether outside society, so solitude has a sensible geographical explanation, and then there is a kind of communion with the nonhuman. In the city, one is alone because the world is made up of strangers, and to be a stranger surrounded by strangers, to walk along silently bearing one's secrets and imagining those of the people one passes, is among the starkest of luxuries. This uncharted identity with its illimitable possibilities is one of the distinctive qualities of urban living, a liberatory state for those who come to emancipate themselves from family and community expectation, to experiment with subculture and identity. It is an observer's state, cool, withdrawn, with senses sharpened, a good state for anybody who needs to reflect or create. In small doses melancholy, alienation, and introspection are among life's most refined pleasures.

Not long ago I heard the singer and poet Patti Smith answer a radio interviewer's question about what she did to prepare for her performances onstage with "I would roam the streets for a few hours."<sup>29</sup> With that brief comment she summoned up her own outlaw romanticism and the way such walking might toughen and sharpen the sensibility, wrap one in an isolation out of which might come songs fierce enough, words sharp enough, to break that musing silence. Probably her roaming the streets didn't work so well in a lot of American cities, where the hotel was moated by a parking lot surrounded by six-lane roads without sidewalks, but she spoke as a New Yorker. Speaking as a Londoner, Virginia Woolf described anonymity as a fine and desirable thing, in her 1930 essay "Street Haunting." Daughter of the great alpinist Leslie Stephen, she had once declared to a friend, "How could I think mountains and climbing romantic? Wasn't I brought up with alpenstocks in my nursery, and a raised map of the Alps, showing every peak my father had climbed? Of course, London and the marshes are the places I like best."<sup>30</sup> London had more than doubled in size since Dickens's night walks, and the streets had changed again to become a refuge. Woolf wrote of the confining oppression of one's own identity, of the way the objects in one's home "enforce the memories of our own experience." And so she set out to buy a pencil in a city where safety and propriety were no longer considerations for a no-longer-young woman on a winter evening, and in recounting—or inventing—her journey, wrote one of the great essays on urban walking.<sup>31</sup>

"As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six," she wrote, "we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's room." Of the people she observes she says, "Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give one the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly

for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer." In this anonymous state, "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted for themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter! It is at once revealed and obscured."<sup>32</sup> She walked down the same Oxford Street De Quincey and Ann had, now lined with windows full of luxuries with which she furnished an imaginary house and life and then banished both to return to her walk. The language of introspection that Wordsworth helped develop and De Quincey and Dickens refined was her language, and the smallest incidents—birds rustling in the shrubbery, a dwarf woman trying on shoes—let her imagination roam farther than her feet, into digressions from which she reluctantly returns to the actualities of her excursion. Walking the streets had come into its own, and the solitude and introspection that had been harrowing for her predecessors was a joy for her. That it was a joy because her identity had become a burden makes it modern.

Like London, New York has seldom prompted unalloyed praise. It is too big, too harsh. As one who knows only smaller cities intimately, I continually underestimate its expanse and wear myself out on distances, just as I do by car in Los Angeles. But I admire Manhattan: the synchronized beehive dance of Grand Central Station, the fast pace people set on the long grids of streets, the jay-walkers, the slower strollers in the squares, the dark-skinned nannies pushing pallid babies before them through the gracious paths of Central Park. Wandering without a clear purpose or sense of direction, I have often disrupted the fast flow of passersby intent on some clear errand or commute, as though I were a butterfly strayed into the beehive, a snag in the stream. Two-thirds of all journeys around downtown and midtown Manhattan are still made on foot, and New York, like London, remains a city of people walking for practical purposes, pouring up and down subway stairs, across intersections—but musers and the nocturnal strollers move to a different tempo.<sup>33</sup> Cities make walking into true travel: danger, exile, discovery, transformation, wrap all around one's home and come right up to the doorstep.

The Italophile Rudofsky uses London to scorn New York: "On the whole North America's Anglo-Saxomania has had a withering effect on its formative years. Surely, the English are not a desirable model for an urban society. No other nation developed such a fierce devotion to country life as they did. And with good reason; their cities have been traditionally among Europe's least wholesome. Englishmen may be intensely loyal to their towns, but the street—the very gauge of urbanity—does not figure large in their affections."<sup>34</sup> New York's streets do figure large in the work of some of its writers. "Paris, c'est une blonde," goes the French song, and Parisian poets have often made their city a woman. New York, with its gridded layout, its dark



buildings and looming skyscrapers, its famous toughness, is a masculine city, and if cities are muses, it is no wonder this one's praises have been sung best by its gay poets—Walt Whitman, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, and the prose-poet David Wojnarowicz (though everyone from Edith Wharton to Patti Smith has paid homage to this city and its streets).

In Whitman's poems, though he often speaks of himself as happy in the arms of a lover, the passages in which he appears as a solitary walking the streets in quest of that lover—a precursor of the gay cruiser—ring more true. In "Recorders Ages Hence," the immodest Whitman states for the record that he was one "Who often walk'd lonesome walks thinking of his dear friends, his lovers."<sup>35</sup> A few poems later in the final version of *Leaves of Grass*, he begins another poem with the oratorical address "City of orgies, walks and joys." After listing all the possible criteria for a city's illustriousness—houses, ships, parades—he chooses "not these, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love": the walks rather than the orgies, the promises rather than the delivery, are the joys.<sup>36</sup> Whitman was a great maker of inventories and lists to describe variety and quantity and one of the first to love the crowd. It promised new liaisons; it expressed his democratic ideals and oceanic enthusiasms. A few poems past "City of Orgies" comes "To a Stranger": "Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon you. . . ."<sup>37</sup> For Whitman the momentary glimpse and the intimacy of love were complementary, as were his own emphatic ego and the anonymous mass of crowds. Thus he sang the praises of the swelling metropolis of Manhattan and the new possibilities of urban scale.

Whitman died in 1892, just as everyone else was beginning to celebrate the city. For the first half of the new century, the city seemed emblematic—the capital of the twentieth century, as Paris had been of the nineteenth century. Destiny and hope were urban for both radicals and plutocrats in those days, and New York with its luxury steamers docking and immigrants pouring off Ellis Island, with its skyscrapers even Georgia O'Keeffe couldn't resist painting during her time as a New Yorker, was the definitive modern city. In the 1920s a magazine was devoted to it, the *New Yorker*, whose Talk of the Town section compiled minor street incidents made incandescent by its writers in the tradition of eighteenth-century London's *Spectator* and *Rambler* essays, and it had jazz and the Harlem Renaissance uptown and radical Bohemia down in the Village (and in Central Park was the Ramble, an area so well known for gay cruising it was nicknamed "the fruited plain").<sup>38</sup> Before World War II, Berenice Abbott roamed New York's streets photographing buildings, and after it, Helen Levitt photographed children playing in the streets while Weegee photographed the underworld of fresh corpses on sidewalks and prostitutes in paddy wagons. One imagines them wandering purposefully like hunter-gatherers with the camera a sort of basket laden with the day's spectacles, the photographers leaving us not their

walks, as poets do, but the fruits of those walks. Whitman, however, had no successor until after the war, when Allen Ginsberg stepped into his shoes, or at least his loose long lines of celebratory ranting.

Ginsberg is sometimes claimed as a San Franciscan, and he found his poetic voice during his time there and in Berkeley in the 1950s, but he is a New York poet, and the cities of his poems are big, harsh cities. He and his peers were passionate urbanists at a time when the white middle class was abandoning city life for the suburbs (and though many of the so-called Beats gathered in San Francisco, most wrote poetry about things more personal or more general than the streets they thronged, or used the city as a gateway to Asia and the western landscape). He did write about suburbs, notably in his "Supermarket in California," in which he summoned up a supermarket where the abundance of produce and shopping families makes wry comedy of the dead gay poets—Whitman and Federico García Lorca (a New Yorker from 1929 to 1930)—cruising the aisles. But otherwise his early poems burst with snow, tenements, and the Brooklyn Bridge. Ginsberg walked considerably in San Francisco and in New York, but in his poems walking is always turning into something else, since the sidewalk is always turning into a bed or a Buddhist paradise or some other apparition. The best minds of his generation were "dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix," but they immediately commenced to see angels staggering on tenement roofs, eat fire, hallucinate Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy, and so on, even if they did afterward stumble to unemployment offices and walk "all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open. . . ."39

For the Beats, motion or travel was enormously important, but its exact nature was not (save for Snyder, the true peripatetic of the bunch). They caught the tail end of the 1930s romance of freighthoppers, hobos, and railroad yards, they led the way to the new car culture in which restlessness was assuaged by hundreds of miles at 70 m.p.h. rather than dozens at 3 or 4 on foot, and they blended such physical travel with chemically induced ramblings of the imagination and a whole new kind of rampaging language. San Francisco and New York seem pedestrian anchors on either side of the long rope of the open road they traveled. In the same mode, one can see the shift in country ballads: sometime in the 1950s disappointed lovers stopped walking away or catching the midnight train and began driving, and by the 1970s the apotheosis of eighteen-wheeler songs had arrived. Had he lived that long, Kerouac would've loved them. Only in the first section of *Kaddish*, when Ginsberg gives over singing of his generation and his pals to mourn his mother, do the act and the place remain particular. The streets are repositories of history, walking a way to read that history. "Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village,"40 it opens, and as he walks Seventh Avenue he thinks of Naomi Ginsberg in the Lower East Side, "where you walked 50 years ago, little girl—from Russia / . . . then struggling in the crowds of Orchard Street

toward what? /—toward Newark—” in an antiphony of her city and his, joined in later sections by their shared experiences during his childhood.<sup>41</sup>

Handsome as a marble statue, Frank O’Hara was as unlike Ginsberg as a gay poet born the same year could be, and he wrote about far more delicate diurnal adventures. Ginsberg’s poetry was oratorical—jeremiads and hymns to be shouted from the rooftops; O’Hara’s poetry is as casual as conversation and sequenced by strolls in the street (among his book titles are *Lunch Poems*—not about eating but about lunchtime excursions from his job at the Museum of Modern Art—*Second Avenue*, and the essay collection *Standing Still and Walking in New York*). While Ginsberg tended to speak to America, O’Hara’s remarks often addressed a “you” who seemed to be an absent lover in a silent soliloquy or a companion on a stroll. The painter Larry Rivers recalls, “It was the most extraordinary thing, a simple walk” with O’Hara, and O’Hara wrote a poem titled “Walking with Larry Rivers.”<sup>42</sup> Walking seems to have been a major part of his daily repertoire, as well as a kind of syntax organizing thought, emotion, and encounter, and the city was the only conceivable site for his tender, street-smart, and sometimes campy voice celebrating the incidental and the inconsequential. In the prose-poem “Meditations in an Emergency” he affirmed, “I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life. It is more important to affirm the least sincere; the clouds get enough attention as it is. . . .”<sup>43</sup> The poem “Walking to Work” ends

I’m becoming  
the street.  
  
Who are you in love with?  
me?  
Straight against the light I cross.<sup>44</sup>

Yet another walking poem begins:

I’m getting tired of not wearing underwear  
And then again I like it  
strolling along  
feeling the wind blow softly on my genitals<sup>45</sup>

and goes on to speculate on “who dropped that empty carton / of cracker jacks,” before turning to the clouds, the bus, his destination, the “you” to whom he speaks, Central Park. The texture is that of everyday life and of a connoisseur’s eye settling on small things, small epiphanies, but the same kind of inventory that studs Whitman’s and Ginsberg’s poems recurs in O’Hara’s. Cities are forever spawning lists.

David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* reads like a summary of all the urban experience that came before him. Like De Quincey he was a runaway, but like De Quincey’s friend Ann he supported

himself as a child prostitute, and like Dickens and Ginsberg he brought an incandescent, hallucinatory clarity to the moods and scenes of his city. Most who took up the Beat subject of the urban underworld of the erotic, the intoxicated, and the illegal took it up in William Burroughs's amoral vein, more interested in its coolness than its consequences or its politics, but Wojnarowicz raged at the system that created such suffering, that created his suffering as a runaway child, a gay man, a person with AIDS (of which he died in 1991). He writes in a collage of memories, encounters, dreams, fantasies, and outbursts studded with startling metaphors and painful images, and in his writings walking appears like a refrain, a beat: he always returns to the image of himself walking alone down a New York street or a corridor. "Some nights we'd walk seven or eight hundred blocks, practically the whole island of Manhattan," he wrote of his hustling years, for walking remained the recourse for those with nowhere to sleep, as it had been for Johnson and Savage.<sup>46</sup>

Wojnarowicz's 1980s New York had come full circle to resemble Gay's early eighteenth-century London. It had the scourges of AIDS, of the vast new population of homeless people, and of the drug-damaged staggering around like something out of William Hogarth's Gin Lane, and it was notoriously violent, so that the well-to-do feared its streets as they once had London's. Wojnarowicz writes of seeing "long legs and spiky boots and elegant high heels and three prostitutes suddenly surround a business man from the Waldorf and they're saying: 'Come on honey' and rubbing his dick . . . and his wallet appears behind his back in the hands of one of them and they all drop away as he continues to giggle" and we're back to Moll Flanders stripping a passed-out trick of his silver gloves, snuffbox, and even his periwig. He writes of the years when he was suffering from malnutrition and exposure, living on the streets until he was eighteen, "I had almost died three times at the hands of people I'd sold my body to in those days and after coming off the street. . . . I could barely speak when in the company of other people. . . . That weight of image and sensation wouldn't come out until I picked up a pencil and started putting it down on paper." "Coming off the street": the phrase describes all streets as one street and that street as a whole world, with its own citizenry, laws, language. "The street" is a world where people in flight from the traumas that happen inside houses become natives of the outside.

One of the book's sections, "Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration," is as tidy a chronicle of the uses of walking for a queer man of the streets in 1980s urban America as *Pride and Prejudice* is of the uses of walking for a country lady almost two centuries before. "I'm walking through these hallways where the windows break apart a slow dying sky and a quiet wind follows the heels of the kid as he suddenly steps through a door frame ten rooms down," it opens. He follows the kid into the room, which resembles the long wharves and warehouses he used to cruise, sucks him off, and a

few sections later his walking becomes mourning for his friend, the photographer Peter Hujar, dead of AIDS. "I walked for hours through the streets after he died, through the gathering darkness and traffic, down into the dying section of town where bodies litter the curbsides and dogs tear apart the stinking garbage by the doorways. There was a green swell to the clouds above the buildings. . . . I turned and left, walking back into the gray haze of traffic and exhaust, past a skinny prostitute doing the junkie walk bent over at the waist with knuckles dragging the sidewalk." He meets a friend—"man on second avenue at 2:00 am"—who tells him about a third man being jumped on West Street by a carload of kids from Jersey and brutally beaten for being gay. And then comes his refrain, "I walk this hallway twenty-seven times and all I can see are the cool white walls. A hand rubbing slowly across a face, but my hands are empty. Walking back and forth from room to room trailing bluish shadows I feel weak. . . ." His city is not hell but limbo, the place in which restless souls swirl forever, and only passion, friendship, and visionary capacity redeem it for him.

I began walking my own city's streets as a teenager and walked them so long that both they and I changed, the desperate pacing of adolescence when the present seemed an eternal ordeal giving way to the musing walks and innumerable errands of someone no longer wound up so tight, so isolated, so poor, and my walks have now often become reviews of my own and the city's history together. Vacant lots become new buildings, old geezer bars are taken over by young hipsters, the Castro's discos become vitamin stores, whole streets and neighborhoods change their complexion. Even my own neighborhood has changed so much it sometimes seems as though I have moved two or three times from the raucous corner I started out on just before I turned twenty. The urban walkers I have surveyed suggest a kind of scale of walking, and on it, I have moved from near the Ginsberg-Wojnarowicz end of the spectrum to that of a low-rent Virginia Woolf.

Two days before the end of the year, I went to one of the local liquor stores for milk early one Sunday morning. Around the corner a guy was sitting in a doorway drinking and singing falsetto, with that knack some local drunks have for sounding like fallen angels. The word *Aloooooone* trilled out of nowhere, echoing beautifully in the stairwell. On my way back I saw him weaving so intently down the street he didn't notice me pass a few feet away. Merely walking seemed to take all the singer's concentration, as though he were forcing himself through an atmosphere that had become thick around him. When I started watering the tree in front of my building, he was still winding around the corner. The old lady who always wears a dress and always speaks so politely in word-salad non sequiturs was walking in the other direction. I said hello to her as she passed me, but she didn't notice me any more than he did. All of a sudden, when she had reached the same point on her side of the street that he had on his, she broke into a sort

of soft-shoe shuffle that carried on until she turned out of sight down the facing corner. The two of them seemed to be listening to some inaudible music that carried them along and made them joyous as well as haunted.

Later on the churchgoers would appear. When I first moved here, there were no cafés, and all the churchgoers walked—on Sunday mornings the streets were busy and sociable with black women in resplendent hats, walking in all directions to their churches, not with the dogged steps of pilgrims but with the festive stride of celebrants. That was long ago; gentrification has dispersed the Baptist congregations to other neighborhoods, from which many now drive to church. Young African-American men still saunter by, their legs nonchalant while their arms and shoulders jump around as though staking a bodily territory, but most of the churchgoers have been replaced on the sidewalks these weekend mornings by joggers and dog walkers pumping towards that great secular temple of the middle class, the garden as represented by Golden Gate Park, while the hung-over drift towards the cafés. But this early the street belonged to us three walkers, or to the two of them, for they made me feel like a ghost drifting through their private lives out in public on that cold, sunny Sunday morning, in the communal solitude of urban walkers. ■

#### NOTES

Philip Lopate's essay "The Pen on Foot: The Literature of Walking Around," *Parnassus*, vol. 18, no. 2 and 19, no 1, 1993, pointed me to Edwin Denby's writings and to specific poems of Walt Whitman's.

1. "On Saturday night . . .": Harriet Lane Levy, *920 O'Farrell Street* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1997), 185–86.
2. Kerouac managed to have two visions on [Market Street]: see *Atlantic Monthly*, reprinting a May 1961 letter, November 1998, 68: "It [*On the Road*] was really a story about two Catholic buddies in search of God. And we found him. I found him in the sky, in Market Street San Francisco (those 2 visions)."
3. how a popular, well-used street is kept safe: Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), throughout the chapter "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety."
4. "What distinguishes the city": Moretti, quoted in Peter Jukes, *A Shout in the Street: An Excursion into the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 184.
5. little more than outdoor salons and ballrooms: *Cities and People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 166–68, 237–38.
6. "Earlier in the [nineteenth] century," "I hear that pedestrians": Ray Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1992), 27, 223.
7. "It simply never occurs to us": Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People: A Primer for Americans* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982), epigraph quoting his own *Architecture without Architects*.
8. "In ancient Italian towns the narrow main street": Edwin Denby, *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets*, introduction by Frank O'Hara (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), 183.

9. "When I am in a serious Humour": Addison in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, Vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1907), 96, from *Spectator*, no. 26 (March 30, 1711).
10. "Though you through cleaner allies": John Gay, "Trivia, or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London," book 3, line 126, in *The Abbey Classics: Poems by John Gay* (London: Chapman and Dodd, n.d.), 88.
11. "Here I remark": *Ibid.*, II. 275–82, 78.
12. "goes forward with the crowd": Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 286.
13. "each charter'd street": The famous opening of William Blake's "London," in *William Blake*, ed. J. Bronowski (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1958), 52.
14. one of those desperate London walkers: See Richard Holmes, *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 44, quoting Sir John Hawkins in the chapter on these walks: "Johnson has told me, that whole nights have been spent by him and Savage in conversations of this kind, not under the hospitable roof of a tavern, where warmth might have invigorated their spirits, and wine dispelled their care; but in a perambulation round the squares of Westminster, St. James's in particular, when all the money they could both raise was less than sufficient to purchase for them the shelter and sordid comforts of a night cellar."
15. "I should have been": James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: Signet, 1956), 235.
16. 50,000 [prostitutes in London] in 1793: Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 4 (1861–62; reprint, New York: Dover Books, 1968), 211, citing Mr. Colquhoun, a police magistrate, and his "tedious investigations."
17. "the circulating harlotry of the Haymarket and Regent Street": *Ibid.*, 213. On 217, "They [the streetwalkers] are to be seen between three and five o'clock in the Burlington Arcade, which is a well known resort of cyprians of the better sort. They are well acquainted with its Paphian intricacies, and will, if their signals are responded to, glide into a friendly bonnet shop, the stairs of which leading to the coenacula or upper chambers are not innocent of their well formed 'bien chaussee' feet. The park is also, as we have said, a favorite promenade, where assignations may be made or acquaintances formed."
18. "Prostitution streetscapes are composed of strolls": Richard Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1981), 175–76.
19. "think that women who work in whorehouses": Dolores French with Linda Lee, *Working: My Life as a Prostitute* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988), 43.
20. "Perception of the new qualities of the modern city": Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 233.
21. "Being myself at that time, of necessity, a peripatetic" and following: De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), 42–43.
22. "And this kind of realism," "Few of us understand the street": C. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens, a Critical Study* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1906), 47, 44.
23. "If I couldn't walk fast and far": Dickens to John Forster, cited in Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 288.
24. "I am both a town traveller": Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces Etc.* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1.
25. "So much of my travelling is done on foot," "My walking is of two kinds": Dickens, "Shy Neighborhoods," *ibid.*, 94, 95.
26. "It is one of my fancies": Dickens, "On an Amateur Beat," *ibid.*, 345.

27. "Whenever I think I deserve particularly well of myself": Dickens, "The City of the Absent," *ibid.*, 233.
28. "Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep": Dickens, "Night Walks," *ibid.*, 127.
29. "I would roam the streets": Patti Smith, when asked what she did to prepare to go on-stage, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, Oct. 3, 1997.
30. "How could I think mountains and climbing romantic?": *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, *A Change of Perspective*, ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: Hogarth Press, 1975–80), letter to V. Sackville-West, Aug. 19, 1924, 126.
31. "enforce the memories of our own experience": Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 23.
32. "As we step out of the house," "the shell-like covering": *Ibid.*, 23–24.
33. Two-thirds of all journeys . . . still made on foot: Tony Hiss, editorial, *New York Times*, January 30, 1998.
34. "On the whole North America's Anglo-Saxomania has had a withering effect": Rudofsky, *Streets for People*, 19.
35. "Who often walk'd lonesome walks": Walt Whitman, "Recorders Ages Hence," *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 99.
36. "City of orgies, walks and joys": *Ibid.*, 102.
37. "Passing stranger!": *Ibid.*, 103.
38. "the fruited plain": Ken Gonzales-Day, "The Fruited Plain: A History of Queer Space," *Art Issues*, September/October 1997, 17.
39. "dragging themselves through the negro streets," "shoes full of blood": Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," in *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 182, 186.
40. "Strange now to think of you, gone": Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958–1960* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961), 7.
41. "where you walked 50 years ago": *Ibid.*, 8.
42. "It was the most extraordinary thing": Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 217.
43. "I can't even enjoy a blade of grass": Frank O'Hara, "Meditations in an Emergency," in *The Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 87.
44. "I'm becoming": O'Hara, "Walking to Work," *ibid.*, 57.
45. "I'm getting tired of not wearing": O'Hara, "E. (Missive and Walk) I. #53," *ibid.*, 194.
46. "Some nights we'd walk seven or eight hundred blocks": David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 5; "long legs and spiky boots," 182; "I had almost died three times," 228; "I'm walking through these hallways," 64; "I walked for hours," 67; "man on second avenue," 70; "I walk this hallway twenty-seven times," 79.

▣ QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE READING ▣

1. "The Solitary Stroller and the City" comes from a book entitled *Wanderlust*. On first reading, the goal of Solnit's itinerary is likely to appear to be unclear: she pauses over details; she moves from section to section



without obvious transitions; she catalogs authors, friends, and locations that can't all be familiar to her readers. As you reread the piece, number the five sections that Solnit creates through the use of white space and summarize the work she does in each section. Does an order emerge? What is Solnit's organizational strategy? Where is she trying to take her reader?

2. Solnit contrasts urban and rural walking, walks in European cities and walks in American cities, walks taken 200 years ago and walks taken today, walks taken by men and walks taken by women. Are separate mindsets associated with each kind of walking? Catalog the places where you walk: has Solnit left anything out of her study that you feel is important?
3. Solnit's essay concludes with a vignette about a Sunday morning walk, one that illustrates "the communal solitude of urban walkers." Is this "communal solitude" something that is learned or is it natural to city dwellers? Is it available to urban drivers? Does Solnit offer this vision to her readers in hopes of fostering this state of mind or is she more concerned with describing something that is endangered?

☞ QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ☞

1. Following Solnit's example, describe one of your walks through an urban landscape. Does your description serve to illustrate her assertion that "urban walking seems in many ways more like primordial hunting and gathering than walking in the country"? Does following Solnit's example bring to light anything about your way of moving through the world that would otherwise go unnoticed? Are you led to the same conclusions? Does this way of writing carry within it the same thesis for all writers?
2. Solnit finds something liberating in the mental state that urban walking produces—"cool, withdrawn, with senses sharpened, a good state for anybody who needs to reflect or create." Can you identify passages in "The Solitary Stroller and the City" that are the result of Solnit's achieving this state of mind? Why does walking generate this state, but not other forms of travel? Is this a personal experience, or is it a biological condition? How does one distinguish this state of mind from indifference? Discuss the relationship between physical movement, state of mind, and social engagement.

☞ QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READINGS ☞

1. In "The Ecology of Magic," David Abram describes how his travels made him "a student of subtle differences." Solnit is also concerned with the relationship between travel and states of mind. It is no surprise that the

person traveling through rural Bali both sees and thinks about different things than the person traveling through New York City, San Francisco, and London. If we push this observation to the furthest extreme, though, we might be driven to conclude that thought, location, and movement are fundamentally intertwined, so that the person traveling in Bali can think in ways not available to the urban stroller and vice versa. Drawing on Abram and Solnit, discuss the degrees to which thought, location, and movement are connected.

2. In "The Power of Context," Malcolm Gladwell argues that the rundown condition of New York City in 1984 played a significant role in leading Bernhard Goetz to shoot four young men on the subway. Does this argument extend, contradict, or reinforce Solnit's observations about the effects of urban walking? Can Gladwell's argument be used to explain Solnit's experience? If context is so powerful, can any experience be said to be personal?