

Rebecca Solnit: **Wanderlust** - A History of Walking

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This is an entertaining theoretical introduction to my BoW project of a long distance hike through Switzerland.

Rebecca Solnit, writer, historian and activist (<http://rebeccasolnit.net/biography/>) gives the reader an overview over the many facets of her topic, the philosophy and history, the literature, the cultural origins, down to the evolutionary side of walking upright, but also food for thought based on personal experience of hikes and pilgrimages and stories of hikers who took to the road for different motivations and reasons.

Political marches, pilgrimage, middle class leisure pursuit, romantic poets' journeys as well as the city flâneur, Buddhist walking meditator and walking artist are described and analysed to give a truly comprehensive picture of hiking, marching, wandering through the centuries in the western world.

Since I am reading this book as part of my preparation for the Trans Swiss Trail I am of course most interested to get some views on the issues that will concern long distance hiking and maybe find some reassurance and answers to questions that have come up when I think of the adventure ahead. And I am not disappointed.

In a chapter on the literature on walking we learn that, whereas in the 19th century the walking essay was predominant, the 20th century saw "lengthy tales of very long walks" (Solnit, p. 126) "There seem to be three motives for these long-distance trips: to comprehend a place's natural or social makeup, to comprehend oneself, and to set a record; and most are a combination of the three. An extremely long walk is often taken up as a sort of pilgrimage, a proof of some kind of faith or will, as well as a means of spiritual and practical discovery. If a path is like a story..... then a continuous walk must make a coherent story, and a very long walk makes a full-length book..... a walker does not skip over much, sees things close up, and makes herself vulnerable and accessible to local people and places." (Solnit, p. 128)

At the end of this chapter, after describing some of the most extreme and obsessive long distance walkers and the books they wrote about it, she concludes: "Walking is usually about something else - about the walker's character or encounters, about nature or about achievement, sometimes so much so it ceases to be about walking." (Solnit, p. 132)

The book suggests several answers to my question, why I want to do my hike, and one of the most poignant ones, from the chapter on pilgrimage, seems worth noting here: "There is a symbiosis between journey and arrival in Christian pilgrimage, as there is in mountaineering. To travel without arriving would be as incomplete as to arrive without having travelled. Too, we tend to imagine life as a journey, and going on an actual expedition takes hold of that image and makes it concrete, acts it out with the body and the imagination..... The walker toiling along a road toward some distant place is one of the most compelling and universal images of what it means to be human, depicting the individual as small and solitary in a large world, reliant on the strength of body and will." (Solnit, p. 50) And if possible even more succinctly, on the next page citing Nancy Frey's account of a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: "When pilgrims begin to walk several things usually begin to happen to their perceptions of the world which continue over the course of the journey: they develop a changing sense of time, a heightening of the senses, and a new awareness of their bodies and the landscape...." (Solnit, p. 51)

I am writing out all these lengthy quotes because, waiting in the wings, impatient to start my walk, I am wondering if this will be my experience - and how a visual realisation of the described mental states and sensitivities might be put into execution.

A whole chapter dealing with romantic forever walking poet Wordsworth's describes his adventures in crossing the Alps and makes me wonder if I shall meet him or traces of his

ramblings along the way. "Climbing a mountain has become a way to understand self, world, and art. It is no longer a sortie from but an act of culture." (Solnit, p. 113)

In the chapter "Walking After Midnight: Women, Sex and Public Space" towards the end of the book, Solnit talks about the dangers for women walking - be it in former times because of the idea that women out walking in public must be "street walkers" and of dubious morality, making the marches and demonstrations of suffragettes the more a revolutionary novelty, or to this day when unaccompanied as vulnerable prey to male aggression. The mentioning of photographer Ingrid Pollard shows that even without external "real" danger, women (in this case a woman of colour) may experience more fear and uncomfortable situations that result from imagined or subtly felt threats. "In Britain the photographer Ingrid Pollard made a series of wry portraits of herself in the Lake District, where she apparently went to try to feel like Wordsworth and felt nervous instead. But many white women too feel nervous in any isolated situation, and some have personal experience to draw upon." (Solnit, p.244)

Reading this I wonder what dodgy situations I shall encounter on my trail - so far I had been more aware of having to beware of slippery paths, wild bulls, mother cows and other unpleasant creatures like farmhouse dogs along the road....

Wanderlust is a fascinating, rich source of information and stories about walking through history. The style is light and charming, story-telling and informative chapters alternate and as a mental preparation for going on my trail, this book may be a most valuable source, even though the mentioning of photography and photographers are few and far between....

