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Walking as “Criticism on the Move” and a Protest Strategy in Contemporary French Travel Writing: The Case of Alexandre Poussin and Sylvain Tesson

Abstract

“*Ambulo ergo sum*. I walk, therefore I am,” journalist and travel writer Alexandre Poussin declares 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, “something between the classic traveller on the lookout for the wonders of the world, and the unattached and completely free nomad.” Walking and hiking certainly stand in the tradition of German Romantic vagrancy, but they are also part of an innovative movement. Indeed, in a society ruled by hyperindustrialization, walking becomes the conscious choice of deliberate slowness in reaction to the exorbitant speed offered by modern means of transportation. By reversing the numbing effects of time-space compression, it becomes an anachronistic and nonconformist activity, as well as a form of social transgression, since it allows a voluntary exile and rebellious withdrawal from civilization.

The slowing down of 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. For Poussin, slow travel is a powerful learning medium and a tool for understanding the world, since the travelers learn to accept their physical vulnerability and to place themselves in a position of fragility and availability in relation to the Other. As for 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. From his perspective, walking is a form of “criticism on the move,” a way to follow “the tracks of postmodern *coureurs de bois*” and to experience a return to nature, seen as a place of physical and inner regeneration.

While Poussin prefers to travel for humanitarian purposes, organizing pedestrian journeys that emulate a spiritual quest or a secular pilgrimage, slow travel gives Tesson the opportunity to reflect on the exploitation of natural resources, and on the uncertain future of humankind. *Éloge de l'énergie vagabonde* ('In praise of wandering energy') (2007) relates his trekking journey in the Ust-Yurt, an oil-producing region of Central Asia, the source of energy for industrialized societies. In an actively subversive gesture, he decides to follow this area's network of oil pipelines “by fair means, without any motorized propulsion” in order to complete the same journey as a drop of gasoline. Paradoxically, walking along these symbols of contemporary society's technocracy allows him to symbolically restore a lost balance and confirm the necessity for humans to reconnect to their intrinsic animal nature. By triggering the thought process, 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.

Keywords

travel writing, walking, literature and environment, Alexandre Poussin, Sylvain Tesson

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“J’ai toujours eu horreur de la marche” (13) ‘I’ve always hated walking.’¹ These are the opening lines of *La Marche dans le ciel* (‘Walking in the sky’), a travel diary co-written by Alexandre Poussin and Sylvain Tesson which describes their 1997 hiking trip across the Himalayas. This demoralizing comment made by Poussin does not bode well for someone who is about to cover on foot a distance of 5,000 km in six months, but there is no denying that walking can seem like a time-consuming and monotonous means of travel. Poussin continues: “Marcher, traîner sa carcasse, s’éreinter l’échine, se harasser les pieds, et cet inconfortable sentiment de perdre son temps” (13) ‘To walk, dragging myself along, wearing out my back, tiring out my feet, and that uncomfortable feeling of wasting my time.’ He concludes reluctantly: “Pas le choix! Apprendre à marcher. Apprendre à prendre le temps” (13) ‘We have no choice! Learn to walk. Learn to take the time.’ His travel companion Tesson shares the same disheartening feeling of wasting valuable time on a thankless activity: “avant de dormir, je jette un coup d’œil à la carte. Et constate que la journée si longue et épuisante correspond à un misérable centimètre” (53) ‘before going to bed, I glance at the map—and notice that this long and exhausting day is the equivalent of one pathetic centimeter.’

The first steps towards self-knowledge

However, by the time Poussin publishes his essay *Marche avant* (‘Walking forward’) a few years later, his tone has changed significantly: “*Ambulo ergo sum*. Je marche, donc je suis” (21) ‘I walk, therefore I am,’ he declares by way of introduction. He writes that his hiking journeys have proved to be a priceless instrument of initiation to other cultures and have transformed his perception of humanity. He continues (playing on the double meaning of the word “marcher”): “Comment marche le monde? J’essaie de trouver des réponses en marchant” (16) ‘How does the world work? I try to find answers by walking.’ Walking is regarded as a method of investigation, and plays therefore a central role in his travels: “La marche est ma façon d’appréhender le monde réel, de l’étudier” (16) ‘Walking is my way of grasping and studying the real world,’ since it guides the traveler’s journey by enabling various discoveries and encounters. The reason why walking encourages an awakening to the outside world, Poussin notes, is that

¹ This and all subsequent translations that follow quotations in the original French are my own.

it also reveals the walkers to themselves, and that everyone is equal before the self-discipline, austerity and introspection required by the democratic act of walking:

tous se retrouveront après quelques kilomètres, à pied d'égalité, face à eux-mêmes. C'est soi et rien d'autre que l'on trimbale quand on marche. On ne peut plus se cacher longtemps derrière ses problèmes, ses malheurs, ses faiblesses, ses préventions pour se cacher à soi-même. Car on emporte peu de choses quand on marche. Et on s'en déleste vite. (21)

everyone will find themselves after a few kilometers, on an equal footing, face to face with themselves. When you walk, it's yourself that you lug around with you, and nothing else. You cannot hide for long behind your problems, your misfortunes, your weaknesses, and whatever you may do to hide from yourself. Because when you walk, you take very little with you. And you get rid of it quickly.

Walking is perceived as an intimidating exercise that bolsters honesty and integrity because it presents a stripped-down and uncompromising image of the walker: "Marcher, c'est renoncer aux chimères, à la triche, au mensonge, c'est une *vulnérabilisation* volontaire, une mise à nu, un miroir implacable: le miroir de la connaissance de soi" (22) 'Walking means to give up one's illusions, to forego cheating, to lay aside falsehood; it's a deliberate *vulnerabilization*, a stripping down of oneself, an implacable mirror: the mirror of self-knowledge.' By compelling travelers to surrender the unnecessary and the frivolous and to drop one's pretenses, walking allows a radical transformation of the self. "La marche opère ce miracle, cette chirurgie plastique et psychique" (22) 'The act of walking brings about this miracle, this plastic and psychic surgery.' But more than merely a soul-searching tool, it is also a device used for building and training one's character. In *Petite philosophie du marcheur* ('The Little Philosophy of the Walker'), Christophe Lamoure maintains that walking is a hand-to-hand struggle against oneself, "une école de volonté et de liberté" (19) 'a school of willpower and freedom' that offers a challenge and an invitation to surpass and better oneself. "On ne marche pas contre un autre ou contre les autres, on marche contre soi. . . . Il s'agit de résister au découragement, à la fatigue, à la dureté qui affectent nécessairement le marcheur" (19) 'You do not walk against someone else or against the others; you walk against yourself. It's about resisting the discouragement, the fatigue and the pressure that inevitably affect the walker.' Poussin emphasizes his vision of pedestrian travel as a formative process when he writes in *Marche avant* that walking "recentre, elle aide à devenir. À faire le point" (22) 'refocuses, helps us become, and to take stock.' By encouraging

travelers to overcome their fatigue, shoulder their responsibilities and become self-reliant, walking provides time for self-awareness and introspection, and emerges as a form of self-agency, which prompts Poussin to reiterate his opening statement with a variation: “Je marche donc je deviens” (22) ‘I walk, therefore I become.’ The walker’s physical effort and moral endurance are the ingredients needed for a meaningful and productive walk, or what Poussin calls “la marche maïeutique, celle qui permet d’accoucher de soi” (25) ‘the maieutic walk, which helps give birth to oneself.’ Because ultimately, what matters is less the destination than the way it is attained, through this inner awakening. “Ce qui compte ce n’est pas le sommet, ce n’est pas la contemplation du paysage, c’est ce qu’il y a entre les deux. C’est le chemin et les efforts. Ce n’est pas le but mais le parcours” (23) ‘What is important is neither the summit nor the contemplation of the landscape: it’s what lies between the two—the path traveled and the efforts. It’s the journey, not the goal, that matters.’

Likewise, Poussin’s colleague Tesson has modified his opinion radically: in *Aphorismes sous la lune et autres pensées sauvages* (‘Aphorisms under the moon and other wild thoughts’), a collection of maxims inspired by his love of nature and animals, he notes that walking is much more than a means of reaching a destination; it is the destination itself. “Marcher sans but est un objectif” (91) ‘To walk aimlessly is an aim,’ he writes, since walking does not require a goal to be infused with purpose. It is clear that he no longer considers walking as a tedious, tiresome way of travel: on the contrary, “[m]archer, c’est faire un bout de chemin avec le temps” (122) ‘to walk is to spend a bit of time with time.’² In *Géographie de l’instant* (‘Mapping the moment’), Tesson stresses the importance of humans embracing their animal nature and standing on their own two feet: “Le voyageur est celui qui, un jour, a pris conscience devant une glace qu’il était un animal, qu’il avait des jambes et que ces jambes-là, l’évolution ne l’en avait point doté pour qu’il passât son existence entière le cul dans un fauteuil” (131) ‘The traveler is someone who one day stood before a mirror and realized that he was an animal, that he had legs, and that evolution hadn’t equipped him with those legs so that he could spend his entire life sitting on his rear end in an armchair.’ Walking is assuredly Tesson’s preferred travel mode, and he celebrates it in his *Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde* (‘Small treatise on the vastness of the world’), where he claims to be a twenty-first-century wanderer, “quelque chose entre le voyageur classique à l’affût des merveilles du monde et l’errant libre de toute entrave” (56) ‘something between the classic traveler on the lookout for the wonders of the world, and the unattached and completely free nomad.’ While discussing his hiking trip from Siberia to India, Tesson argues that walking made him feel like

² The author plays on the double meaning of the expression “faire un bout de chemin avec quelqu’un,” which can be “to walk part of the way with someone” or “to spend a bit of time with someone.”

he could “toucher à la liberté extrême, à l’essence du vagabondage romantique” (*Petit traité* 52) ‘reach the utmost freedom, the essence of Romantic vagrancy,’ embracing the Romantic wanderers’ intellectual legacy.

The deceleration of modern travel

Walking and hiking certainly stand in the tradition of German Romantic vagrancy, but they are also part of an innovative and nonconformist movement. Since the second half of the twentieth century, walking has become the conscious choice of deliberate slowness in reaction to the exorbitant speed offered by modern means of transportation. With the development of ever-faster travel modes enabling ever-shorter trips, there has been a growing trend to consider that any journey worthy of the name has to involve a denial of modernity, a rejection of the convenience and easiness made possible by technological advances. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was characterized by remarkable technological advances and momentous inventions, the breaking of speed records and the popularization of trains, trams and automobiles. By dramatically reducing journey times, fast travel made distances shrink, and the world map became increasingly small: it is a concept that David Harvey expresses in terms of “time-space compression” (260) or, according to Paul Virilio, “the deregulation of time and space” (*Speed and Politics* 154). “The immediacy of terrestrial transport, modifying the relation to space, annihilates the relation to lived time” (*Aesthetics* 108), and “the traveler, in peopling the modes of rapid transport, becomes a negator of terrestrial dimensions” (*Aesthetics* 102).

Therein lies the tragedy of the twentieth-century traveler: the planet has grown too narrow, the age of exploration and discovery is long gone, and in an era of instantaneous travel, distance has become irrelevant. The mythical elsewhere has been abolished by speed and has become an unreachable place. Moreover, modern travelers are confined in the safety of their own vehicles and are condemned to immobility, passivity, and disconnection. As poet and travel writer Alain Borer explains: “En métro, en voiture, sous la Manche ou au-dessus de l’Atlantique, nous voyageons immobiles. Et plus loin va l’astronaute, plus immobile il doit se tenir dans sa cabine” (36) ‘On the subway, in a car, under the Channel or over the Atlantic, we travel motionless. And the further astronauts go, the stiller they must sit in their cabin.’ Virilio makes the same observation by quoting Gaston Rageot: “train, car, jet, telephone, television... our whole life passes by in the prostheses of accelerated voyages, of which we are no longer even conscious” (*Aesthetics* 61).

Reverting to slowness allows the traveler to re-establish the reality of space-time in the landscape and resolve the disruptions caused by modernity; and walking, the most primitive and natural travel mode possible, has the capacity to

reverse the numbing effects of time-space compression. The superfast modes of transportation created a lethargic distance between the landscape and the passenger, a phenomenon Charles Forsdick calls “*esthétique de la séparation*” (“L’usage de la lenteur” 45) ‘the aesthetics of separation’ between the traveler and his travel since the machine becomes the extension or the prosthesis of a body that is no longer involved in the reality of its movement in space. In contrast, slow travel is an intensely physical experience that makes use of all the human sense organs: the traveler who takes their time—and the walker in particular—must face up to the physical realities of their journey. Le Breton notes that walking is “une expérience sensorielle totale ne négligeant aucun sens” (32) ‘a complete sensory experience that leaves no sense untouched,’ and Forsdick agrees that it is “une expérience sensorielle totale qui permet des voyages de plus en plus difficiles à accomplir” (“L’usage de la lenteur” 50) ‘a complete sensory experience that allows journeys that are increasingly difficult to complete,’ by forcing the walker to conquer space by the sweat of their brow, and to acknowledge their vulnerability before the elements of nature.

Walking becomes a favored way for modern travelers to reclaim their physical connection to the world, the natural environment and the ecosystem, in order to achieve, to use Lacarrière’s expression, a beneficial “repayement” (*Flâner en France* 11) ‘un-disorientation,’ or reintegration of the traveler into the landscape. Jacques Lanzmann writes that “[m]archer, c’est . . . se fondre dans la nature” (125) ‘to walk is to blend with nature,’ and Christian Verrier introduces the notion of eco-formative walking as a practice articulated around the five axes of space, time, the body, the environment, and an existential experience, in reaction to the “décorporéité” (156) ‘de-corporeality’ of modern life. In his essay *Marcher, une expérience de soi dans le monde* (‘Walking, an experience of the self in the world’), pedestrian travel is presented as a bio-cognitive process and a form of eco-formative training that generate “une co-émergence de soi et du monde à travers l’interaction complexe entre l’organisme et l’environnement” (9) ‘a co-emergence of the self and of the world through the complex interaction between the body and the environment.’

By restoring the bodily dimension of travel, walking can also mobilize the traveler’s physical powers and moral forces to eventually induce their symbolic self-effacement, as in Nicolas Bouvier’s travel narratives, where a central theme is the necessity to lighten one’s body and mind through the exhaustion and the hardships of travel. Walking and slow travel in general foster this phenomenon of erosion, filtration, and disappearance of the Self to make way for the Other. “La lenteur et l’espace agissent, ajustent et purgent comme une drogue à la fois émétique et hallucinatoire. Le bagage matériel et mental s’affine et s’amenuise et sans qu’on n’y soit pour rien. . . . Au terme du traitement, le voyageur a pratiquement disparu” (“Routes et déroutes: réflexions sur l’espace et l’écriture”

179) ‘Slowness and space have an adjusting and cleansing effect, like a drug that is both emetic and hallucinogenic. They slim down and reduce our material and mental baggage, without our having anything to do with it. At the end of the treatment, the traveler has practically disappeared.’ Further praising the virtues of slowness, Bouvier notes: “À ce rythme . . . la route vous tient une leçon cohérente, salubrement réductrice” (“Routes et déroutés: réflexions sur l’espace et l’écriture” 179) ‘At this pace, the road gives you a coherent lesson that is reductive in a wholesome way.’ This lesson in simplicity brought by slow travel prompted Bouvier to coin his memorable phrase “connaissance par la plante des pieds” (*Routes et déroutés* 55) ‘knowledge gained through the soles of the feet,’ an empirical lesson about the world and an almost mystical journey that affect him profoundly and permanently, and contribute to restore the balance between the physical and intellectual worlds: travel must therefore bring about a tangible transformation, otherwise it is likely to become trivial and insignificant. As he sums it up in *L’Usage du monde (The Way of the World)*, a seminal work about his voyage of self-discovery that is recognized today as a classic in travel literature: “After all, one travels in order for things to happen and change; otherwise you might as well stay at home” (135). This belief is echoed throughout his work: “If one does not accord the journey the right to destroy us a little bit, one might as well stay at home” (*Les Chemins du Halla-san* 68) (‘The Paths to Hallasan’).³

The reinvention of pedestrian travel

Because it is allowed to become once again an unpredictable and difficult endeavor, the travel experience regains its status as a unique, adventurous and personal activity. Forsdick, while discussing the way twentieth-century travelers negotiate their relationship with an endangered diversity, points out that the slow pace of walking is the best retaliation against the shrinkage of the traveler’s field of action (“L’usage de la lenteur” 45). As an anachronistic enterprise which reasserts the relevance of travel and gives it new meaning, walking is an *avant-garde* means of locomotion: it may seem slow and dull, but from the moment when it stems from a conscious choice, it becomes an anti-establishment statement that allows the traveler to go beyond what ordinary travel can offer.

The slowing down of travel in the twentieth century is not motivated by a nostalgia for the past; it is not a movement that is reactionary, but rather revolutionary, because travel writers do not walk out of necessity but of their own free will. Walkers of ancient times were restricted by the slow pace that was typical of their period and were therefore very different from the new walkers of

³ Although there is no English translation of Bouvier’s *Les Chemins du Halla-san*, this popular aphorism is being circulated online by Internet users.

the twentieth century. As Jean-Didier Urbain reminds us of the medieval pilgrim of times gone by, "[i]l ne *prend* pas son temps: bon gré, mal gré, il *a* du temps—celui que lui impose l'incontournable lenteur de la marche. Par la force des choses, le pèlerin du Moyen Âge, qui va *cum jambis*, est captif d'une perspective" (*L'Idiot* 121) 'he doesn't *take* his time: whether he wants it or not, he *has* the time—the time that is imposed on him by the inescapable slowness of walking. By necessity, the pilgrim of the Middle Ages who travels *cum jambis* [by Shanks's pony] is held captive by a certain perspective' that is affected by the unforeseen difficulties, risks and challenges of ancient travel. Urbain points out that some nostalgics mistakenly think of the medieval traveler as the forebear of the contemporary hiker, but nothing could be more inaccurate since ancient travelers did not *choose* their slow pace; they were *subjected* to it (133). By contrast, modern pedestrians appreciate walking for its difference, as it allows them to claim their membership in a non-conformist movement. For Antoine de Baecque, the practice of walking involves a conscious act of self-estrangement, which is made clear when he heads towards a network of traditional trails that lead to the summer pastures in the Alps but are now endangered by urban sprawl. At the exit of the city, being constantly overtaken by cars and trucks, he claims that walking amounts to "marquer sa solitude dans une région où plus personne ne marche" (*Ma transhumance* 47-8) 'marking one's solitude in an area where nobody walks anymore.' As Jacques Lacarrière makes clear, this is by no means a regressive phenomenon but instead a progressive one that looks to the future. "Marcher ainsi de nos jours—ce n'est pas revenir aux temps néolithiques, mais bien plutôt être prophète" (*Chemin faisant* 190) 'Nowadays, to walk for this reason does not mean going back to the Neolithic Era, but rather to be a prophet.'

Lacarrière, who walked 1,000 km across France in 1976, maintains that the only worthwhile travel is a "voyage au ralenti" 'slow travel' that consists in "visiter le plus lentement possible êtres et choses" ("Le bernard-l'hermite" 106) 'visiting people and things as slowly as possible.' He points out that in an urbanized and sedentary society, itinerant walkers are greeted everywhere with astonishment and suspicion, and are likely to be mistaken for drifters or lunatics. The unusual and seemingly unnecessary nature of their rambles gives them a marginalized status since they break down the boundaries and the routines of the civilized world. In that sense, walking encourages the transgression of social standards, and the inclination to view walking as a way of defying conventions and repairing the damage done by modernity has persisted into the twenty-first century. Jacques Réda published *Recommandations aux promeneurs* ('Recommendations to ramblers') in 1988, *Le Sens de la marche* ('The direction of walking') in 1990, and *Accidents de la circulation* ('Traffic accidents') in 2001. Bernard Ollivier, author of *Longue marche* ('A long walk'), traveled 12,000 km on foot along the Silk Road in 1999. In 2000, Yves Paccalet publishes

Le Bonheur en marchant ('Happiness through walking'), and the same year, David Le Breton writes in *Éloge de la marche* ('In praise of walking') that walking helps us rediscover forgotten sensations and frees us from the feeling of mass emergency that prevails in our society.

The slowing down of travel and a renewed enthusiasm for walking have paved the way for a reinvention of contemporary travel writing, with various outcomes. According to Tesson, "les temps du néo-nomadisme sont arrivés!" (*Petit traité* 14) 'the age of neo-nomadism has come!' He praises the merits of pedestrian travel achieved in the spirit of fair play (without the help of motorized propulsion), not for the love of unnecessary suffering, but because slowness reveals a hidden truth, "des choses cachées par la vitesse" (*Petit traité* 20) 'things that are concealed by speed.' The notion that resorting to motorized transport would taint and compromise the integrity of slow travel and discredit the entire endeavor is an accepted standard, even a convention among modern-day pedestrian travel writers, who tend to revel in their eccentricity and marginality. Poussin writes in *La Marche dans le ciel* that while walking towards Kashmir, he and Tesson pointedly refused local truck drivers' offer of a lift, making it clear they were not even slightly tempted by the prospect of a ride, as this would have taken away the meaning, and threatened the sacredness, of their undertaking: "notre espace transhimalayen est devenu sacré! Nous laissons passer ces profanateurs de l'espace-temps sans un regret. Nous savons que nous suiciderions le peu de sens que véhicule notre démarche. C'est peut-être con, mais c'est comme ça" (272) 'our trans-Himalayan space has become sacred! We let these desecrators of time-space pass us without a regret. We know that we would be killing off whatever meaning is being conveyed by our enterprise. It may be stupid, but that's the way it is.' Consequently, when they are apprehended in politically sensitive areas by border patrol officers and driven to the nearest police station on a road that they have not yet traveled, the experience is seen as an indignity and a humiliating setback, the negativity of which can only be purged by returning to the very spot of their arrest and covering the "missed" kilometers on foot.

Walking as a spiritual exercise, and a humanitarian pilgrimage

Some pedestrian travelers' propensity to convey a "sacred" importance to their field of action explicitly establishes an analogy with a religious journey, an expedition which offers the promise of spiritual regeneration. As Frédéric Gros points out, walking is more than a mere philosophical activity; it is a spiritual exercise ("La marche" 54), even when it is not associated with an actual pilgrimage. Because the physical and moral detachment brought by the speed, immediacy and virtual reality of modern society has alienated humans from real

life, what makes pedestrian travel all the more relevant today, he argues, is that walking makes us “ressentir la déconnexion comme une délivrance” (52) ‘experience disconnection as a liberation,’ or an almost metaphysical reawakening. Antoine de Baecque underlines the holistic potential of walking by describing it as “une forme de purification par l’effort, l’endurance, parfois la souffrance” (*Ma transhumance* 53-4) ‘a form of purification through exertion, forbearance, sometimes pain.’ He then uses a medieval religious analogy to emphasize its sacredness, comparing it to an “ordalie” (54) or trial by ordeal, where the accused was tested by the natural elements to reveal God’s judgment.

Strictly speaking, pilgrimages have been linked to pedestrian travel for centuries, and they have undergone, through their decline and revival, a transformation that is not entirely devoid of worldly considerations, such as a longing for a healthy unplugging exercise and a wholesome retreat from the world. In *Une histoire de la marche* (‘A History of Walking’), de Baecque notes that a renewed historical interest in holy places and sanctuaries in the 1950s provided a stimulus for a “re-pèlerinage moderne” (123) ‘modern re-pilgrimage’ that is often tainted with secular motives like a “*patrimonialisation*” and “*touristication*” (125) (a process of turning a locale into a heritage site as well as a tourist hotspot) of devotional itineraries (marketing strategies centered on the appreciation of cultural heritage and on making them accessible to the traveling masses). The increased popularity of pilgrimage routes in the twenty-first century, in particular that of Santiago de Compostela, must therefore be interpreted as a cultural, sociological and psychological phenomenon since this new impetus was built at the intersection of a spiritual revival, the revitalized trend of walking, and the rediscovery—or a reinvention—of old traditions. Referring to the widespread success of contemporary pilgrimage narratives, de Baecque identifies this newest development of pedestrian literature as resulting from a mix of piety, backpacking, and escape “hors de l’espace-temps du monde moderne” (129) ‘outside the time-space of the modern world.’⁴

Since their joint expedition in the Himalayas, Poussin and Tesson have gone their separate ways to pursue their individual interests. Interestingly enough, Poussin promotes a humanistic form of pilgrimage that seems to blur the lines between the sacred and the secular. His religious devotion is quite obvious in *Marche avant*, a collection of reflections and reminiscences where he chronicles

⁴ In the chapter “Pourquoi?” of *Immortelle randonnée: Compostelle malgré moi* (‘Immortal Walk: Compostela in Spite of Myself’), Jean-Christophe Rufin asks himself what prompted him to embark on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela (a sporting challenge, an invigorating experience, or an intellectual purge?) and wonders how to respond to those who ask him why he decided to go: was it a historical, mystical, ecumenical, or Freudian reason? Rufin eventually acknowledges that the necessity to walk was an evidence that imposed itself, with no need of justification.

with candid enthusiasm his major achievements as well as his family background, his formative years and the influences that shaped him as a globetrotter and an outdoorsman. This narrative provides an insight not only into Poussin's views on travel but also into his personal values and ethical standards. (His outlook on life and the world are in stark contrast to Tesson's avowed agnosticism, so it is no surprise, perhaps, that their intellectual collaboration should have dissolved over time.) Poussin's walking expeditions are often presented as an endeavor that emulates a spiritual quest. *Africa Trek: 14,000 Kilometers in the Footsteps of Mankind*, an account of his journey with his wife Sonia across the African continent, includes religious undertones, as their odyssey along the Great Rift Valley of East Africa, undertaken to symbolically retrace the passage of the First Man, conveniently leads them to Jerusalem and on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. At the halfway mark in their journey, after an arduous ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro that almost feels like a religious procession, they mentally send from the top of the mountain "un chapelet de pensées et de prières" (*Africa Trek I* 559) 'a rosary [string] of thoughts and prayers' towards the chain of solidarity formed by the numerous friends they made along the way. Once in Jerusalem, the Poussins make a point of honor to "fulfill [their] mission" (*Africa Trek II* 588) and deposit in the Holy City the prayers entrusted to them by their Christian and Muslim hosts. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,

Sonia and I sit down on the ground, our backs to a pillar, and begin reading our very long list of names, trying each time to remember the faces and stories of these men and women of Africa, to keep our promise, to sustain their memory, to entrust them to God. We go through these names as one says a rosary (589)

At the Dome of the Rock, the third holy place of Islam, they repeat the same ritual in a symbolic act of pilgrimage on behalf of their Muslim friends, in a universal celebration of faith and goodwill. "Pilgrimage here is an obligation that very few pious Muslims will be able to realize. We do it for them. Sitting against a pillar in the ambulatory, we recite, after our travelers' surate, the names of all our Muslim hosts" (589-90). The trek culminates on the Mount of the Beatitudes, where the couple recite the words of the Gospel while facing the Sea of Galilee toward the south, and toward Africa.

After what could be described as a three-year reconnaissance journey (as they only interrupt their progress to observe, listen and reflect), the Poussins have since been practicing walking for humanitarian purposes. They consider slow travel as a powerful learning medium and a tool for understanding the world since as frugal travelers they must learn to accept their physical vulnerability and to

place themselves in a position of availability and receptivity vis-à-vis the Other.⁵ Poussin’s belief in the interpersonal dimension of walking is best defined by Forsdick’s use of the term “pedestrianism” to refer to an ideology endorsed by travelers who believe in “the superiority of corporeal co-presence as a basis for dialogue” (*New Approaches* 187) and consider walking as the only genuine way to reach out to one’s neighbor. In Ollivier’s opinion as well, “le plus vieux mode de déplacement du monde est aussi celui qui permet le contact. Le seul, à vrai dire” (22) ‘the oldest travel mode in the world is also the one that enables contact. To tell the truth, it is the only one.’ For Lacarrière, it is precisely “ce pour quoi l’on part sur les routes: découvrir, rencontrer des inconnus qui, pour un soir, cessent de l’être” (*Chemin faisant* 263) ‘the reason why one hits the road: to discover, and to meet strangers who, for one evening, are strangers no more.’ Accordingly, Poussin’s thinking relies heavily on the figure of the free, pure and lightweight walker not burdened by material possessions or hampered by cultural bias and reaffirms his deep-seated conviction that the pedestrian traveler is not only bound to love his fellow humans but is also loved back by them: in fact, walking is presented as an altruistic project that builds closer ties between peoples and eventually “fabrique des philanthropes” (*Marche avant* 59) ‘produces philanthropists.’ Poussin, who considers the Other as an essential ingredient in pedestrian travel—“La marche a besoin des autres comme carburant” (60) ‘Walking needs to use others as a fuel’—describes in *Africa Trek* a difficult journey fraught with pitfalls, but also full of humbling experiences and inspiring anecdotes about the triumph of generosity and friendship. He attempts to develop postcolonial theories on pedestrian travel as a profoundly human exchange that is no longer perverted by the traveler’s arrogance and the abasement of the travelee: a “marche vers l’Autre” (72) ‘walk towards the Other,’ he argues, strips the Western visitor of his technological advantage and provides opportunities to meet the locals “at eye level,” letting them conduct the encounter on their own terms.

Between 2014 and 2018, the Poussins—with their two children in tow—traveled around Madagascar in a cart pulled by zebus to produce a documentary series and took the opportunity to raise awareness of non-profit organizations that work to improve the living conditions of the local population, appealing to the viewers’ generosity through crowdfunding platforms. On their blog, in a post titled “Madatrek se rend utile” (‘Madatrek makes itself useful’), Poussin writes that “nous n’avons pu rester les bras ballants face à tant de besoins” (Madatrek.com) ‘we couldn’t stand by helplessly in the face of so many needs.’

⁵ Although Sonia Poussin is named as co-author of *Africa Trek*, it is obvious that her name is included on the book’s cover by way of courtesy, to acknowledge her essential role as a loving, supportive partner and a loyal, dependable traveling companion. Her husband takes charge of the narrative voice as the more seasoned writer in the couple, as opposed to *La Marche dans le ciel*, where the Poussin-Tesson duo take turns telling their collaborative story.

Walking becomes the starting point for an initiative of discovery and humanitarian aid where the emphasis is given to solidarity and commitment on behalf of the disadvantaged. Similarly, the Poussins' partnership with a Christian travel agency is a confirmation of their philosophy of walking as a blend of a soul-searching pilgrimage/retreat and a socially concerned initiative that reaches out to one's neighbor. They regularly accompany groups of hikers for Ictus Voyages, a company specializing in pilgrimages and "cultural/spiritual walks." During such hiking trips, they facilitate daily group discussions around the theme "Ose ta vie" 'Dare to live your life' and guide the participants on a path of reflection, reinforcing their vision of walking as an eye-opening and formative process. In the same vein, Ollivier also views walking as an instrument of self-agency: he is the founder of Le Seuil, an association with a mission to rehabilitate youth at risk, and whose program challenges young people to walk 2,000 km for 110 days without access to a phone or the Internet, preferably in a foreign country where they do not speak the language. By encouraging them to overcome their fatigue, shoulder their responsibilities and become self-reliant, pedestrian travel provides time for self-awareness and introspection and emerges as a form of social therapy. The title of another book by Ollivier, *Marche et invente ta vie: 2000 km à pied pour tenter de se reconstruire* ('Walk and invent your life: 2,000 km on foot to try to get oneself back on track'), is self-explanatory. Gros concurs with this belief when he writes that "la marche amène aussi à se réinventer" ("La marche" 52) 'walking also leads to a reinvention of the self.'

Walking as an act of resistance and subversion

In contrast to Poussin who opens *Africa Trek II* with an epigraph by Teilhard de Chardin that reads: "Man? He is the axis and the arrow of the Universe," Tesson's approach stands out by its fierce anti-humanism: he rejects the traditionally humanistic dimension of travel literature, i.e., a vision focused on the writer's quest of self-discovery or the connection he builds with the Other. His attitude is partly to be understood in the light of Urbain's critique of the "tyrannie agoraphile" ("Les catanautes" 8) 'agoraphilic tyranny' of traditional travel literature that is still prevalent among contemporary travel writers. What is more, Tesson claims to dismantle the concept of anthropocentrism that places humans at the center of the universe, and emphatically asserts his difference from fellow travel writers: "Les voyageurs répugneront à avouer qu'ils cherchent à s'échapper. Ils préféreront dérouler de plus nobles motifs. Les uns affirmeront partir se frotter à l'altérité . . . épouser des causes, prêter main-forte aux démunis" ("Une école" 41) 'Travelers are loath to admit that they seek to escape. They would rather invoke nobler motives. Some will claim that they travel to experience Otherness . . . to embrace various causes, to assist those in need.'

Devoting a full chapter of *Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde* to his rejection of humanism, Tesson writes that his early travels had been motivated by his desire to meet people, experience other cultures, and quench his thirst for Otherness. “À ceux qui demandaient une raison à mes brusques départs, je décrivais l’humanisme—cet élan sentimental qui nous porte vers nos semblables—comme présidant à tout élan vagabond” (91) ‘To those who would ask the reason of my sudden departures, I would invoke humanism—that sentimental impulse which leads us to our fellow human beings—as the source of my wanderlust.’ He explains that although he had been taught that humans sit at the top of the food chain, he no longer believes in the myth of human superiority, and declares that he has removed Man from his pedestal (92). Tesson claims that since losing his faith in humanism, he has devoted his life to admiring the beauty of nature and animals rather than to glorifying other human beings. “Une fois que l’humanisme a perdu du terrain dans son âme, le vagabond ne se met plus en route sur les chemins du monde dans l’unique souci de rencontrer des hommes. Parfois même il lui arrive de les éviter ostensiblement” (97-98) ‘Once humanism has lost ground in his soul, the wanderer does no longer travel for the sole purpose of meeting other people. Sometimes, he even avoids them ostensibly.’ Tesson asserts his right to indulge in his solitude, a condition he believes to be more constructive than the pleasures of meeting other people (*Petit traité* 150). He writes further: “je voyage en *vagabond enchanté* pour le seul bénéfice de mon âme et la pure jouissance de mon corps. . . . Je suis capable de laisser l’Autre tranquille pendant des semaines si je me sens l’humeur solitaire” (*Éloge* 176-77) ‘I travel as an *enchanted wanderer* simply for the benefit of my soul and the sheer enjoyment of my body. I’m capable of leaving the Other alone for weeks if I’m in a solitary mood.’ Tesson seems to shy away from the traditional, canonical Western travel narratives, which were considered to be a faithful representation of Otherness; instead, he moves from what Siobhán Shilton describes as an “agoraphilic obsession” (46) to turn to a “contact zone” between the traveler and nature, signaling a decisive shift from an ethnological and sociocultural understanding of travel.

Tesson’s anti-humanistic stance is essentially driven by a sense of urgency in the face of an imminent ecological crisis and the belief that humans are the most harmful creatures on earth and nature’s greatest threat. In his narratives and essays, Tesson expresses his concerns about environmental degradation, the widespread disruption of ecosystems, and the irrevocable exhaustion of natural resources. His back-breaking treks and bucolic escapades into the wilderness inspire him to dissociate himself from an anthropocentric vision of the world and be more ecologically aware since walking constitutes an infraction of social norms, challenges the boundaries of socially accepted behavior, and allows a voluntary—if temporary—exile and rebellious withdrawal from civilization.

Tesson's ecological perspective is not a novelty: earlier reflections on solitary walking and the reverence of nature can be found in Gustave Roud's pastoral poems and idyllic portrayals of his native Haut-Jorat, where he projects the vision of an ideal harmony between humans and nature. He must, however, come to terms with the realization that the fragile beauty of this rural landscape is increasingly threatened and subject to a slow but steady degradation brought by modernity, which steeps his poetry in the nostalgic and melancholy perception of a lost paradise. Further back in time and also in Switzerland, Robert Walser, the enthusiastic wanderer and proponent of long, lonely and leisurely walks in rustic surroundings and urban settings, is part of the Romantic tradition of walking. In his musings on the condition of the observant walker, who without "walking and the contemplation of nature which is connected with it" (61) is utterly lost, he states that the walker must stroll while observing and studying every smallest living thing with the utmost attention and love, and efface himself in his contemplation, in a "devoted self-surrender and self-effacement among objects, and assiduous love for all phenomena" (62).⁶

For Tesson, walking is an ecologically conscious act of resistance against the excessive industrialization of society. It is "une forme de critique en mouvement, physique, incarnée" ("La marche" 11) 'a physical, embodied form of criticism on the move' that is closely associated with individual freedom and the experience of a return to the roots, against the state of alienation created by contemporary life. Throughout the centuries, de Baecque notes, walking has been "un mode de l'action politique" (*Une histoire* 15) 'a means of political action' through the nonconformist or eccentric figures of the vagrant, the wanderer and the transient, who resisted the established norms and boundaries of social behavior. Gros agrees that walking, because it draws on stoicism, determination and endurance, is the ultimate medium for political statements and civil disobedience, whether non-violent or more confrontational ("Marcher" 39-42). Indeed, while walking imparts a sense of physical vulnerability, the walker is also invested with a moral dignity, which makes marching and rallying the most fitting vehicles for expressing one's outrage and stating one's demands. Nonetheless, Tesson does not embrace this form of collective action as his walking is a solitary and personal protest—and for good reason: his position is strongly influenced by the writings of Ernst Jünger who develops the archetype of the "forest rebel" (*Waldgänger*), the sovereign individual who turns to nature in a spirit of resistance against the increasing mechanization of society and the tyranny of the Leviathan State. Inspired by a medieval Scandinavian tradition according to which the outcast would retreat into the woods (the *Waldgang*, or forest passage)

⁶ This observation echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, where the writer finds solace in the solitude and isolation of his country retreat, and develops a symbiotic relation with nature through walking, meditation, and plant collecting.

on the fringes of society, Jünger’s *Waldgänger* questions the legitimacy of the State and seeks refuge in an allegorical forest, a place of renewal that escapes destruction and ensures the preservation of the individual’s inner subjective freedom in the face of persecution by superior external powers that strive to intimidate, manipulate and exploit him. “The locus of freedom is to be found elsewhere than in mere opposition, also nowhere that any flight can lead to. We have called it the forest” (Jünger 32). In an attempt to give concrete form to the metaphorical passage through the forest, Tesson chooses to bivouac during his hiking trips, pitching his tent in the wilderness to indulge in the pleasure of pastoral nostalgia, or even in city centers, in a symbolic protest against rampant urbanization. He vows to follow “la piste des coureurs de bois postmodernes” (*Petit traité* 155) ‘the tracks of postmodern *coureurs de bois*’—a cultural nod to the woodsmen and trappers of the New World, but also a clear reference to, and an alternative French rendering of, the word *Waldgänger*. Walking and bivouacking contribute therefore towards finding a deeper and more primordial meaning of existence in a society ruled by hyperindustrialization, hyperconsumption and hyperconnection. “Quelle que soit la direction prise, marcher conduit à l’essentiel” (*Petit traité* 61) ‘Whatever the direction taken, walking leads to the heart of the matter,’ and to be a wanderer in the twenty-first century means to devote all of one’s energy to meet basic needs in a natural environment—such as searching for food, keeping warm, finding shelter for the night—in short, to distance oneself from a civilized lifestyle in order to negotiate one’s survival in the wild, and reconnect with the roots that bind humans to planet Earth. Because walking reconnects humans to their bodies and minds, and sharpens their awareness of the outside world, it constitutes a criticism of the mental disconnect created by the digital revolution. In a world governed by virtual communication, augmented reality and high-speed Internet, and where nothing can be done without resorting to a computer, Tesson seeks, through an eco-formative walk, a lost connection with the body and the natural world: without claiming to be a philosopher or a theorist, he writes that adventure is “le contre-poison” (“Une école” 42) ‘the antidote’ that helps him rise up against the excesses of technicism, and defy the control of predictability over his life.

Even so, Tesson claims he does not participate in any sort of active rebellion, and he insists that he is not trying to change the world, but simply to avoid it: “[le vagabond éternel] ne veut pas se battre, il s’échappe” (*Petit traité* 54) ‘[the eternal wanderer] does not seek to fight, he takes flight,’ he explains to justify his solo expeditions in remote areas across the world. His attitude is a combination of dejection, disengagement and escapism, a choice that may, as he

admits, be perceived as cowardice but which he fully embraces (*Oscillation* 15).⁷ In Bouvier's work, slow travel was an essential part of an exercise of disappearance that recommended a moral humility towards the Other, but the kind of disappearance promoted by Tesson is an escape strategy, a conscious act of withdrawal from humanity, and an expression of protest against modernity.

Slow travel in the lands of fast energy

In a time of increased awareness for the necessity to reassess the impact of humans on the environment, travel writing, with its main focus on the exploration and conceptualization of the natural world, is frequently used as a prime vehicle for an ecological discourse, be it ecocritical or ecopoetic. As a result, slow travel gives Tesson the opportunity to reflect on the exploitation of natural resources and on the uncertain future of humankind. *Éloge de l'énergie vagabonde* ('In praise of wandering energy') and *L'or noir des steppes: voyage aux sources de l'énergie* ('Black Gold from the steppes: travel to the sources of energy') relate his trekking journey in the Ust-Yurt, an oil-producing region of Central Asia, the source of energy for industrialized societies. In an anachronistic and actively subversive gesture, he decides to walk from the Aral Sea to the Mediterranean for four months to follow this area's network of oil pipelines, the bloodline of modern society. He walks (and occasionally cycles) along the pipelines "loyalement, sans propulsion motorisée" (*Éloge* 15) 'by fair means, without any motorized propulsion,' to complete the same journey as a drop of gasoline. Walking allows him to distance himself from modern society's unrestrained pursuit of wealth, comfort and leisure. Walking also helps the walker to initiate a reflection on the problem of today's excessive consumption of energy, and especially on the considerable supplies of raw energy that humans are born with but which they have forgotten how to make good use of. "Pétrole et force vitale procèdent du même principe: l'être humain possède un gisement de forces que des forages propices peuvent faire jaillir" (16) 'Both oil and vital strength proceed from the same principle: human beings hold a deposit of energy which an appropriate drilling process may cause to release.'

This "appropriate drilling process" is achieved by the act of putting one foot in front of the other, an occupation which awakens one's physical resources, fuels the body, and activates the engine of the mind to generate ideas. Tesson explains that in order to reflect on the matter of energy consumption in the twenty-first century, he had the choice between two options: either sit on a chair and lose himself in a motionless meditation, or

⁷ "Une lâcheté, l'escapisme? Peut-être, mais je m'en moque. Fuyons, puisque demain sera pire qu'aujourd'hui" (*Oscillation* 15) 'Is escapism an act of cowardice? Maybe, but I don't care. Let's run away since tomorrow will be worse than today.'

actionner les rouages de mon corps, battre le tapis des steppes, recourir à mes ressources physiques pour tailler la route à travers un univers de prédation des réserves naturelles et nourrir mes interrogations. J'ai parié que le mouvement est le derrick de la pensée. Les idées jailliront mieux sous les pas du vagabond. (*Éloge* 16-17)

activate my body's machinery, tread upon the steppe lands, use my physical resources to make my way through a world of predation of natural resources and fuel my investigation. I have wagered that motion is the derrick used to drill for ideas. Those ideas will flow better under the wanderer's footsteps.

Through Tesson's use of "métaphores pétrolières" (*L'or noir* 11) 'oil-producing metaphors,' walking is described as a powerful and productive trigger of the thinking process: it facilitates the intellectual journey as well as an inquiry about the environmental crisis, and it helps sustain the debate on the exploitation of nature and its implications for humankind. As an exercise that strengthens the connection between body and mind, it confirms Verrier's assertion that a truly constructive and dynamic thought process has to be involved in a constant dialogue with the traveler's body and the world, facilitating "l'audace d'une certaine pensée raisonnée, rationnelle, philosophique au sens large" (Verrier 164) 'the boldness of a certain reasoning, rational thought that is philosophical in a broad sense.' Tesson uses the act of giving birth as an image for the process of generating ideas and suggests that when people leave the safety of their vehicles and start removing "la ceinture ombilicale de leurs bagnoles-utérus" (*Éloge* 217) 'the umbilical belt of their uterus-cars,' they will realize that "des pensées insoupçonnées montent à la surface quand le corps est en marche" (217) 'unexpected thoughts rise to the surface when the body marches on.' Poussin concurs with Tesson when he reminds the reader in *La Marche dans le ciel* that the distances traveled on foot "accouchent d'idées" (346) 'give birth to ideas,' because "[l]a marche est une mise en questions. Chaque pas est un argument, le suivant un contre-argument" (346) 'walking is a questioning process. Each step is an argument; the next step is a counter-argument.'

The impetus for his expedition in the Ust-Yurt, Tesson reports, was the realization that he knew very little about this valuable liquid fuel that gave him the freedom of mobility, and which he so casually and mindlessly bought from filling stations. "Devant l'or noir, nous sommes ignorants, ingrats et blasés. Je suis parti aux sources de l'énergie pour me corriger" (*L'or noir* 13) 'When it comes to black gold, we are ignorant, ungrateful and blasé. I traveled to the sources of energy to mend my ways.' Walking from Kazakhstan to Turkey by way of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Tesson discovers a

highly sensitive, heavily guarded region that is crossed by a network of oil pipelines installed above ground, or below ground to prevent sabotage. The most important of these is the British Petroleum (BP) pipeline that stretches over 1,700 kilometers, runs at more than 2,500 meters above sea level, and crosses the Caucasus, the mountains of Anatolia, and more than a thousand rivers and streams. Tesson points out the ironic twist of fate, or the “malédiction des nappes” (*L’or noir* 26) ‘the curse of oil fields’ that has placed the world’s largest known hydrocarbon resources in some of the regions where they are the least needed, justifying the presence of this colossal infrastructure. Central Asia has thus become an object of fierce competition among major economic superpowers, as the Caspian Sea is now exploited by the Russians, the Americans, the Chinese, the former Soviet Republics, and no fewer than twelve oil companies vie for this region’s huge oil and gas resources. Tesson observes that this “Black Gold Rush” and the struggle for control of energy sources have created a new post-colonial cauldron of conflict that cannot and should not be ignored. “Qui a conscience, en pressant le robinet de la pompe à essence en Toscane ou dans le Dorset, des conditions d’acheminement du brut?” (*L’or noir* 89) ‘Who is aware, while squeezing the fuel pump handle in Tuscany or in Dorset, of the conditions in which crude oil is conveyed?’

There is a strong perception that for such an ecocritical investigation to be conducted properly, it must be supported by the nonconformism of pedestrian travel, which has the capacity to take the walker off the beaten track—physically and mentally. Tesson is indeed acutely aware of the trespassing nature of his walk: he documents several instances when he was bothered and harassed by security guards and police officers for intruding into a restricted area and taking pictures of the pipeline. In this remote and strangely parallel universe, his trek reveals the day-to-day realities of crude oil extraction, such as: the unfair distribution of oil wealth and the disastrous environmental damage caused by the industry; drilling machines incessantly pumping “le sang du monde” (*L’or noir* 58) ‘the blood of the world’ in a desolate and barren wasteland; pipeline laborers who make a living out of the exploitation of black gold, enduring grueling work shifts in stifling heat; impoverished farmers who presumably will never benefit from this windfall, and who tend to their fields while the underground steel pipe runs its course under their feet. His itinerary also takes him to the Aral Sea: once one of the largest inland seas in the world, it is now almost entirely drained of its water, most of which was diverted by Soviet irrigation projects. Today, drilling rigs used for gas extraction are installed on the dried-up bottom of the Aral, making it the perfect allegory of the relentless plundering of nature’s bounty by humans.

Having set out on this journey to educate himself, Tesson meditates on the future of a society that has established its prosperity and gambled its destiny on

the exclusive exploitation of a non-renewable natural resource. Noting the astonishing amounts of oil that are extracted every day to meet the global demand, he warns that humans’ predatory behavior and ravenous appetite for planet Earth’s resources will soon make it impossible to sustain humanity’s needs. “Il aura fallu six cents millions d’années à l’or noir pour se constituer, deux siècles aux sociétés pour le consommer” (*L’or noir* 59) ‘It took black gold six hundred million years to be formed; it will take our societies two centuries to consume it.’

Accordingly, *L’or noir des steppes* includes ominous and prophetic mentions of a “[v]ision prométhéenne” (83) ‘Promethean vision,’ the god “Moloch” (49) of capitalism whose fire needs to be kindled by endless sacrifices, an “apocalypse” (32), and finally a “[c]ompte à rebours” (142) ‘countdown’ that considers the possibility of a catastrophic energy crisis. Tesson’s eco-formative walk and his resulting eco-awareness lead him to ponder on the madness of frenzied consumerism, the energy of mimetic desire and rivalry, the concept of grey energy, the illusion of growth and sustainability, as well as the theory of degrowth. He discusses the possibility of living in harmony with our habitat and reflects on our responsibilities regarding the looming shortage of energy resources, asking whether we as humans are ready for the post-oil era that will inevitably reconnect us to our fundamental animal nature—compelling us to walk again.

At the conclusion of his trek, Tesson wonders if humanity will survive an ecological disaster and predicts that the post-oil revolution might send pedestrians back on the road, forcing them to act like proper bipeds and embrace their animality.

Le moteur à explosion réduit en éclats le rapport naturel que notre bipédie devrait nous faire entretenir avec le temps et l’espace. . . . Laisserons-nous le temps envahir à nouveau nos êtres? Rééquilibrerons-nous la course de nos vies en renouant avec la lenteur? Accepterons-nous d’user six heures d’efforts pour trente kilomètres? (*Éloge* 216-17)

As two-legged animals, we should be maintaining a natural connection to time and space. The combustion engine shatters that connection into pieces. Are we going to let time take possession again of our beings? Are we going to restore balance to our fast-paced lives by reconnecting with slow speed? Are we going to accept to put six hours of effort to travel thirty kilometers?

Paradoxically, walking along the symbols of contemporary society’s technocracy allows Tesson to restore a lost balance and understand the need for people to reclaim “la valeur électrisante du voyage, la vertu énergisante de la flânerie nomade” (*L’or noir* 148) ‘the electrifying value of travel, the energizing virtue of

nomadic wandering’ that activates the thought process and stimulates a reflection on the consequences of excessive consumption of energy, contributing to the debate on environmental issues. Walking as an act of escape, trespassing and protest, when combined with a sense of criticism and engagement, has the potential to open up new directions across established territorial and national boundaries and to encourage an exploration of topical concerns. It enables an ecological awareness of the planet that cannot be generated by a perspective anchored in a mechanized and yet sedentary society.

Walking against globalization: a human-scale experience of the world

Poussin pointedly differentiates himself from his former travel companion by stating that he is “l’inverse d’un néo-nomade romantique, d’un *wanderer*” (*Marche avant* 80) ‘the opposite of a Romantic neo-nomad, of a wanderer,’ and argues that his travels are not an act of escape (a thinly veiled reference to Tesson’s escapist escapades) but rather a quest for something deeper. However, despite their divergences, pedestrian travel writers’ views coincide when it comes to the contribution that walking can make to the debate on environmental issues. As a low-cost, no-frills and fairly rudimentary activity, walking is ideally the most environmentally-friendly mode of transportation. Poussin surmises for example that during their three-year trek across Africa, he and his wife were probably the Westerners with the smallest carbon footprint in the world: indeed, making no purchases, producing zero waste, consuming neither electricity nor gasoline, the serious walker, Poussin notes, cannot help becoming a “fieffé écologiste” (188) ‘bloody ecologist.’ On another level, he points out that walking has the capacity to reconnect the walker with the real world and to sharpen their awareness of the surrounding environment (197). Because walkers move on the ground, they are “en prise directe avec la réalité” (111) “in direct contact with reality,” in contrast with the overall, bird’s-eye view of the landscape made possible by air travel. James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, associates such a panoramic view of the world with state-controlled legibility and standardization of society, or “an aerial view resolved what might have seemed ground-level confusion into an apparently vaster order and symmetry” (58). Scott’s critique of an autocratic governmental planning can be applied to the context of modern travel and new challenges identified in a globalized world.

In an age that has moved from an aerial view of the world to a satellite’s perspective of the planet, leading to the apparent uniformization of ideas and cultures, the walker who travels at ground level is the most likely to understand humanity in its contradictions, entanglements and many ramifications, “comprendre la multiplicité des points de vue, la pluralité des préjugés, les pièges du destin et la complexité de l’homme” (*Marche avant* 61) ‘understand the

multiplicity of perspectives, the plurality of prejudices, the traps of destiny, and human complexity.’ As a result, walkers are able to “héberger plus d’une dialectique” (61) ‘accommodate more than one dialectic’ in their mind, and to readjust their perception of the world. Walking helps travelers confront their preconceived ideas with the facts of real life, construct a specific system of values, and generate a cluster of new ideas that can be structured into opinions: those opinions, Poussin explains, can be reshaped at any time, for “la marche a cette vertu de les déconcerter en permanence par de nouvelles expériences” (61) ‘walking has the virtue of unsettling them constantly through new experiences.’ Moreover, walking opposes a form of authenticity to the illusory connectivity of the twenty-first century: it dispels the sense of false immediacy generated by virtual reality and turns the walker into an investigator who addresses the root of issues like overpopulation, pandemics, deforestation, chronic poverty and social injustice: “Tout marcheur devient chercheur . . . même reporter” (114) ‘Every walker becomes a researcher . . . even a reporter.’ By way of example, Poussin laments the destruction of tropical forests worldwide so that European train stations, conference centers and concert halls may be covered with exotic wood: he adds that only the walker equipped with hands-on experience can fully appreciate the absurdity and inequality of commercial exchanges. “Il faut avoir traversé la jungle du Laos . . . pour haïr le tort que l’homme fait à la nature. Le marcheur ne comprend pas que ces bois exotiques puissent toujours être importés en Europe” (189) ‘You have to have crossed the jungle in Laos . . . to hate the harm that humans inflict to nature. The walker doesn’t understand how these exotic woods can always be imported to Europe.’ Because walking allows to assess the situation in the field, to absorb and assimilate things on a human scale, it helps expose the irrationalities of the globalized world and the abuses of the international trade system.

Similarly, in *Sur les chemins noirs*, a travelogue about his hiking trip on the back roads of France, Tesson observes and analyses the incongruities of global economy where the balance of supply and demand is severely distorted and even destroyed, deploring the abundance of wild fruits that grow in the countryside without anyone bothering to pick them since it is easier to buy Chinese bottled jams at the local grocery store. “Il y avait un rapport entre la prodigalité de ces buissons et la chute du baril de pétrole sous les trente dollars” (44) ‘There was a connection between the profusion of these bushes and the drop in oil prices to below thirty dollars a barrel.’ The act of walking assists in surveying first-hand the socioeconomic impacts and the environmental repercussions of global decisions on rural areas and by doing so encompasses the local and the global, the infinitesimally small and the infinitely great. In marked contrast to his earlier frustration with the “pathetic centimeter” on the map of the Himalayan range, Tesson displays in *Sur les chemins noirs* his new fascination with his Geological

Survey Map, set at the scale of 1:25,000. Describing it in several enthusiastic passages as “le laissez-passer de nos rêves” (33) ‘the pass to our dreams’ that “livrait des issues” (34) ‘revealed the way out,’ he rhapsodizes over the map’s endless potential to open up new perspectives.

After the Stone Age, Iron Age and Bronze Age, Tesson writes, the advent of the “âge du flux” (80) ‘Age of the Flow’ is exposing people and societies to perpetual contact, instant communication and unbridled circulation of goods, leading to increased competition, unrestrained output growth and overexploitation of natural resources. In this “Age of the Flow” ruled by fast means of transportation and communication, where humanity is carried away by the dizziness of speed and has lost all sense of proportion, Tesson’s “pathetic centimeter” contains its own logic and reveals a substantial truth: it is a metaphor for a human-scale exploration of the world that offers a criticism of the inconsistencies of modern society as a global system. Walking in the depths of the French countryside on long-forgotten ancient tracks and neglected rustic pathways, Tesson ponders on the local farmers’ living and working conditions while they deal with changes brought by the global agricultural economy. Originally and ideally, their environment is one that can be taken in at a glance and easily covered on foot, eating what is harvested in their range of action: they may not be interested in international issues or well-versed in the subtleties of foreign cultures, but they know why mushrooms grow at the foot of a particular tree stump. Tesson concludes that this kind of small-scale insight into the workings of a community or a plot of land is precisely the path leading to a genuine understanding of the world. “D’une connaissance parcellaire on accède à l’universel” (78) ‘From a fragmentary knowledge you reach the universal.’

At the end of his hiking journey which reinforced a microcosmic perspective of the universe anchored in a human dimension, Tesson contemplates the map of France that guided him and holds now the promise of new discoveries: “Désormais, s’ouvraient de nouveaux chemins . . . ceux que je devais inventer, hors du 25 000^e” (140) ‘From now on, new trails were opening up: the ones left for me to discover, beyond the scale of 1:25,000,’ outside the confines of conventional thought. He adds that one should always “répondre à l’invitation des cartes, croire à leur promesse” (141) ‘answer a map’s invitation, and believe in its promise,’ as it offers infinite possibilities for reading and interpreting the world from a local viewpoint. Through its ability to initiate a discussion on environmental matters and to “opposer une ‘théorie politique du bocage’ aux convulsions du monde” (136) ‘put forward a “political theory of the wooded countryside” against the spasms of the world,’ walking becomes therefore the catalyst of a new consciousness in motion.

Whether pedestrian travel writers are driven by misanthropy or philanthropy, whether they undertake a humanitarian journey or an ecological

inquiry, walking is seen as a transformative activity that reshapes the walkers’ relationship with themselves, with the others, or with the environment. One of Alexandre and Sonia Poussin’s pieces of advice for a life lived “full-time” is: “Marcher, marcher, marcher. La marche est . . . naturelle, non-violente, écolo, spirituelle, gratuite, thérapeutique, maïeutique, etc.” (Adrian) ‘Walk, walk, walk. Walking is natural, non-violent, environmentally friendly, spiritual, free of charge, therapeutic, maieutic, etc.’ The sheer physicality of pedestrian travel can be an antidote for the disconnect with the outside world, releasing the walker from a state of apathy. Advocates of slow travel maintain that walking, as a form of “criticism on the move,” is “un remède contre l’anxiété ou le mal de vivre” (Le Breton 165) ‘a cure for anxiety or melancholy,’ and ultimately stimulates a fruitful intellectual activity through a renewal of the body. As Tesson suggests, walking may have the capacity to provide healing benefits for modern society’s woes and miseries: “Les fièvres modernes, les angoisses intérieures, ne viendraient-elles pas de ce que nous ne prenons plus la peine de marcher une journée entière?” (*Éloge* 216) ‘Could it be possible that modern restlessness and inner anxieties are caused by the fact that we no longer go to the trouble of walking for a full day?’

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