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Walking in August: Wanderlust and the Writing Process

> A solitary walker is in the world, but apart from it, with the detachment of the traveler rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of a group. […] As a literary structure, the recounted walk encourages digression and association, in contrast to the stricter form of a discourse or the chronological progression of a biographical or historical narrative. . . . James Joyce and Virginia Woolf would, in trying to describe the workings of the mind, develop the style called stream of consciousness. In their novels *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the jumble of thoughts and recollections of their protagonists unfolds best during walks. This kind of unstructured, associative thinking is the kind most often connected to walking, and it suggests walking as not an analytical but an improvisational act.
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> -*Wanderlust: A History of Walking* by Rebecca Solnit (21)

William Faulkner had a complicated writing process; figuring out how he wrote his novels is almost as difficult as it is to read them. During his tenure as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia, Faulkner described his idiosyncratic approach to writing stories: beginning with no notes or structure, and preferably writing when he was "hot," Faulkner would hold an image in his mind and improvise on that image, "trying to say" what he could about the image or character in as many words as were appropriate to the story being told. Along with an openness to improvise and experiment, the catalyst for Faulkner's writing was the stream-of-consciousness literary technique created by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf; although he was not its inventor, his innovations with the technique—as seen in the novel *Light in August*—lend credence to the opinion that stream-of-consciousness was integral to Faulkner's development and style as a writer. Yet Faulkner clearly struggled with writing *Light in August* as his manuscripts show evidence of ongoing revision; shuffling pages through various points of the narrative and pasting cut-out pieces of manuscript onto other drafts are but a few immediate signs of careful and meticulous editing. But this is not to suggest that the novel is overwrought; the deliberate restructuring of the narrative was used to most effectively juxtapose the characters in the story (Gwynn 45). The novel fluctuates between the stories of Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, and Gail

Hightower, characters who all hold only tenuous relationships to one another. While the unifying characteristic of this novel is difficult to parse, how the characters are related raises a deeper question: why does Faulkner choose to begin *Light in August* with Lena Grove? The novel opens with Lena sitting and thinking of how she had been walking for nearly a month before the story even began: "Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking'" (1). Why does Faulkner choose to bookend the novel with the story of Lena Grove's walk to Jefferson and her eventual trip to Tennessee; and how does a *walk*, specifically, as a way to begin the narrative reflect Faulkner's writing process?

In a famous response to the question of how he wrote *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner proudly claims that the book began with "an image, a picture to me, a very moving one" of the character Caddy Compson climbing a tree and looking through a window; "it was, I thought, a short story, something that could be done in about two pages, a thousand words, I found out it couldn't" (Gwynn 31-32). One of the guests in attendance who had heard this response asked Faulkner the same question in a later session about *Light in August*, to which he responds, "No, that story began with Lena Grove . . . that was out of my admiration for women, for the courage and endurance of women. As I told that story I had to get more and more into it, but that was mainly the story of Lena Grove" (Gwynn 74). Perhaps what Faulkner meant by getting 'more and more into it' was that he had to allow a stream-of-consciousness approach to take hold and let the long, winding story of *Light in August* take its course in an unpredictable, improvisational way. To have the leading character begin the novel by walking is a direct manifestation of this train of thought, for walking, too, as Rebecca Solnit notes, is an "unstructured, associative, [and] improvisational act" (21). The value of walking as a means for personal growth is clearly shown

by Lena's own thoughts: "*although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before*" (1). Having moved beyond her immediate environment, Lena sits and thinks about her walk not only as a respite from her sojourn to Jefferson, but as an opportunity to process her experiences. Lena's affinities for walking began when she was a young girl: "She would not tell her father why she wanted to walk in [to town] instead of riding. He thought that it was because of the smooth streets, the sidewalks. But it was because she believed that the people who saw her and whom she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too" (1-2). Lena's desire to be seen as someone who belongs in the town directly conflicts with the mode of her arrival: "a solitary walker is in the world, but apart from it, with the detachment of the traveler rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of a group" (Solnit 21). But Lena's motivations for walking change as she gets older. No longer does she try to use walking as a means for fitting in; once she becomes pregnant and begins her pursuit for Lucas Burch, Lena uses walking as a way to stand out and signify herself as needless and independent.

The narrator's recollection of Lena's travel to Jefferson suggests that the time she has spent on her journey is something she still carries with her: "Behind her the four weeks, the evocation of *far*, is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices" (4). Time is granted a quasi-physical presence that follows Lena wherever she goes, but is itself amended each time she stops to gather her thoughts. It is only in retrospect that the route Lena travels becomes 'peaceful' and 'paved' rather than unfamiliar terrain, and venturing out farther than she has ever been before requires courage as well as faith. Faulkner enables the reader to visualize the effects that walking has had on Lena: "[the four weeks] backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and

undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons . . . like something moving forever and without progress across an urn" (5). As Lena's sojourn is portrayed in terms of its paradoxical mobility and stasis, Faulkner begins to implement revisions to the narrative's temporal sequence. Resuming the moment that began the novel, the narrator describes Lena's preternatural sense to know when the wagon will emerge: "She thinks of herself as already moving, riding again, thinking *then it will be as if I were riding for a half mile before I even got into the wagon, before the wagon even got to where I was waiting, and that when the wagon is empty of me again it will go on for a half mile with me still in it*" (6). The disjunction between cause and effect and the continuation of past events even after they have ended both reflect Faulkner's careful revisions to the text, as well as how the ability to stop moving and process her thoughts enables Lena to make sense of her own narrative. The retroactive adjustments to time also enables Lena to see images of her future appear in the present: "The wagon crests the final hill and they see smoke. . . . following his pointing whip, she sees two columns of smoke: the one the heavy density of burning coal above a tall stack, the other a tall yellow column standing apparently from among a clump of trees some distance beyond the town" (26). The signs of Byron Bunch at the planing mill and of Joe Brown at the Burden house signify Lena's possibilities of romantic partners, while also signifying Faulkner's carefully constructed temporal revisions of the direction of Lena's future.

Faulkner's focus on Lena's story begins to wane as he gets more and more into the novel; the narrative begins to focus on Joe Christmas, with whom Lena never interacts but who is closely affiliated with her beau Joe Brown, as well as the narrative of Gail Hightower and Byron Bunch, who are often seen telling and retelling Lena Grove's story. As exemplary of his writing

process, Faulkner explores the relationship between Byron and Hightower as they begin to tell and retell Lena's story. Byron is suspicious of Hightower possessing the same preternatural power that Lena holds to know aspects of his future: "He thinks *He knows that is not what I meant, too. He knows. He just said that. I know what he is thinking. I reckon I expected it*" (283). Byron's fear of others knowing his thoughts has to do with his prior experience with Lena; with the image of the two smoke stacks rising in the air and the ability to see her future in front of her, Byron is able to perceive that Lena can see through him, too: "'I never even had any need to keep it from her, to lie it smooth. It was like she knew beforehand what I would say, that I was going to lie to her. Like she had already thought of that herself, and that she already didn't believe it before I even said it, and that was all right, too" (285). Lena's ability to foresee the actions of others continues once Byron has her settled in Joe Christmas's cabin. When the deputy who is investigating the Burden house meets Lena, he informs the sheriff, "She is a stranger. A young woman. She told me all about it. She begun telling me almost before I got inside the cabin, like it was a speech. Like she had done got used to telling it, done got into the habit" (302). Lena's ability to perceive the thoughts and anticipate the actions of others comes to a head when the sheriff tricks Joe Brown into entering the cabin with Lena and their child. The narrator articulates Lena's cutting perception into the mind of Joe Brown: "She knew that in that sense he had not even seen the child. She could still see, feel, his mind darting and darting. *He is going to make out like he was not afraid* she thought. *He will have no more shame than to lie about being afraid, just as he had no more shame than to be afraid because he lied*" (407). After Joe Brown climbs out of the window of the cabin, Lena realizes her respite from wandering is over and that her experiences, while processed in her moments of repose, must resume: "'Now I got to get up again,' she said, aloud" (410).

In hindsight of all his revisions, Faulkner's own interpretation of Lena is that she is one of the few characters in the novel "who seemed to have had a very fine belief in life, in the basic possibility for happiness and goodness" (Gwynn 97). We hear the last of Lena Grove's story as the novel comes to a close, when she and Byron Bunch are picked up by a traveling, unnamed furniture salesman. The man shares what he believes is an amusing story with his wife: "he felt that he could make it interesting in the retelling [because] he and his wife are not old either" (468). The emphasis of youth suggests that the journey Lena and Byron are taking together is only in its beginning stages, and the retelling of her story by the furniture salesman provides an additional layer of narrative revisions to Lena's story. But the most revealing aspect of the direction of Lena's sojourn from Alabama to Mississippi is articulated by a preternatural ability of the salesman that he must have picked up from Lena: "Because do you know what I think? I think she was just travelling. I don't think she had any idea of finding whoever it was she was following. . . . I reckon this was the first time she had ever been further away from home than she could walk back before sundown in her life" (480). Lena's wanderlust rewards her in the end, even if she did not accomplish exactly what she had set out to achieve; this may be because she had no clear vision of her goal in mind, but only a vague image: "My, my. A body does get around" (480). Lena's journey from Alabama to Mississippi and now onward to Tennessee expresses her independence as much as it does her restlessness. Trusting herself with tranquil and unwavering faith as to her ability to find what she was looking for, or at the very least find something rewarding in the end, is comparable to Faulkner's own trust in his imagination, observation, and experience. By trusting himself as an artist to tap into his subconscious and allow thoughts that he had meditated on and mulled over to emerge to guide and tell this story,

Light in August is an excellent example of how walking and stream-of-consciousness are connected.

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