

Reflecting on the pilgrim path: routes, landscapes and performing bodies

Richard Scriven

Department of Geography, University College Cork
r.scriven@umail.ucc.ie

Abstract

In this paper, I explore how walking along pilgrimage routes is an involved process in which the self and landscape emerge and entwine. Following phenomenological and non-representational engagements with landscape as a practiced and unfolding space, I reflect on my own experiences walking *Tóchar Phádraig*, Co. Mayo, as a participant in group pilgrimages. My movements, conversations and feelings along these paths shape my considerations of the practice as an act of becoming that draws together the physical movement, the embodied participants and the location, as well as emotions, intentions and beliefs. Drawing my observant-participation and audio-visual recordings, I present moments and encounters along these paths from which the pilgrims and landscapes emerge.

Keywords: landscape, embodiment, practice, ethnography, pilgrimage

1. Introduction

At times the path is a whisper of itself, a subtle indentation in open field. The group ahead has crafted an imprint of flow through the high grass. But, there is also the suggestion that there was and is an underlining trail, a groove of human feet worn into the substance of the ground. I walk a fresh version of an old path.



Fig 1. Pilgrims walking on *Tóchar Phádraig* towards Croagh Patrick in the background.

Pilgrimage and landscape have an inherent connection. As well as being a journey to a particular place – traditionally a sacred place associated with Divine or supernatural activities – pilgrimage is a journey *through* landscapes.

This paper is concerned with exploring aspects of the interrelationship between pilgrimage and landscape in the empirical circumstances of walking *Tóchar Phádraig*. By foregrounding the performative and embodied aspects, I intend to illustrate how the practice of pilgrimage weaves

together the landscape and self in an active process of becoming that is moulded by the mobilities, context and emergent social and religious-spiritual elements.

Tóchar Phádraig is a thirty-six kilometre cross-country path from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh Patrick in Mayo. It is a medieval pilgrimage way potentially based on a pre-Christian trail [1,2]. The current route is a revived form which, with the cooperation of landowners, has been established by Ballintubber Abbey (now a Catholic parish).

The paper opens by locating its place within recent discussion of landscape, with particular attention to sacred landscapes and pilgrimage. Following a brief outline of my employment of an observant-participation methodology, I articulate how the act of walking forges connections between the participants and the environment, continually creating the pilgrim (body) and landscape. The next section, considers the layered nature of the pilgrimage with beliefs, traditions and affective encounters reverberating through the enacted experiences of the *tóchar*. I gather together the key strands of my discussion in the concluding remarks, while speculating on paths that await walking.

2. Animating Landscape

Conceptions of landscape within cultural geography have tended to move away from the emphasis on landscape as setting and concentrations on the optical / representational, towards engagements with landscape as practice and process [3]. It is an active engagement during which the embodied-self experiences the

environment, and it is these corporeal experiences and perceptions which should be taken as the basis for spatial understanding (Wylie 2011)

In phenomenological terms, landscapes is a form of 'being in the world' involving the enlacing of self and surroundings, rather than self-contained individual confronting a discrete world; by experiencing and living in the landscape it 'becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it' (Ingold 2000: 191). The unfolding nature of these landscapes has found particular purchase within nonrepresentational approaches' emphasis on the 'practical and processural fluidity of things' and the 'production of meaning in action' (Cresswell 2012, p.2).

In considerations of the sacred and the spatial, it is increasingly appreciated that 'place is sacralized' and de-sacralization (Kong 2001: 213) with 'the sanctity of space is corporeally enacted and physically sensed as sacred' (Holloway 2003: 1965). In the practising of sacred landscapes there is 'performative presencing of the spiritual or 'the possibility of otherworldly dispositions' (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009: 696).

Pilgrimage as a physical and spiritual / emotional journey involves pilgrims travelling to special places and performing their beliefs. Landscapes are a significant factor in these journeys as it is through the embodied, material and sensory interactions with the surrounding environment that pilgrims can have spiritual or personally meaningful experiences (Slavin 2003; Maddrell 2011). Drawing on these conversations of landscape, I propose to empirically and analytically walk along and into the *tóchar* pilgrimage through considerations of how pilgrim and landscape 'coconstitutively come into being' (Maddrell and della Dora 2013: 1115).

3 Methodology

Principally, this paper is based on an 'observant-participation' which has been deployed in several recent studies of pilgrimage as a means of acknowledging the researcher's active presence while also harnessing the corporeal, affective and lived insight provided (Dubisch 2004; Foley 2011; Maddrell 2013; Maddrell and della Dora 2013). Through a suite of ethnographic methods and reflexivity, this approach can simultaneously take in the social and cultural environment and attend to experiences, emotions and embodiments of the journey (Ellis 1999).

I present synthesised accounts of walking the *tóchar* based on several pilgrimages, facilitated monthly during the summer by Ballintubber Abbey and local volunteers. The day commences with a logistical and spiritual introduction, during the walk there are numerous stops where support cars meet us, there is a mass on the decorated rock at Boheh, and a return bus collects us from Croagh Patrick. The pilgrimage group consists of

a random collection of people who mostly are unknown to each other.

4. Walking the Path

The path's tones change as surfaces, contours and performance encounter each other in walking the trail. Light lines stretch across undulating fields giving way to doughy causeways which in turn transform into boggies bordered by heathers and brambles. Each aspect involving distinct tactile, affective and corporeal interplays of motion, strain and resistance, which are felt in my movements and the pace of others.



Fig 2. The group walks through a boggy area, the narrow causeway evident in the line of pilgrims.

In attuning to landscape as practiced, the significance of interactions with the surrounding environment takes on renewed significance, as I feel and consider the elements of this process at work. The terrain acts on me, the pilgrim; it is experienced in movements as ease, effort, rhythm and pause. My encounters with the landscape happen simultaneously externally and internally, interweaving in the process (Lund 2012). There is a bounce to the open field, while the boggy patches impress frictions as the damp ground grips footwear, and the tarmac evens the pace.

These elements are both corporeally registered in my experiences and observed in the movements and behaviour of others. A spreading of the group and the free flow of conversation is manifest on the smooth sections, while the more challenging places seem to encourage clustering and concentration. I am confronted with something that is beyond correlations, it is processural and emanate. There is a continuously occurring series of encounters which actively feedback defining the entities involved.

Landscape, then, as Rose and Wylie (2006, p.479) describe 'names the creative tensions of selves and worlds'. It is these unfolding encounters and it is in these that the environment and walker are constantly entwining shaping each other (Lund 2012). This process is lived and perceived on the pilgrim path as the place and participants act on and with each other, crafting the interactions alongside self and landscape.

This process foregrounds the role of the performance in the present, but it is also the means by which pilgrimage occurs. The performance is a means of bringing pilgrims into the 'present moment – to be present to the world as well as oneself' (Slavin 2003, p. 11). The potential to achieve this mindfulness in the purposeful and embodied interactions with place is a central aspect of pilgrimage. The pace slowing the pilgrim down both physically and mentally, removing them from the quotidian and opening up space to take in the surrounding environment enabling meditation on more profound topics. On these paths, there are moments and encounters that facilitate an 'inner dialogue, whether understood to be with oneself or with the Divine' (Maddrell 2013, p. 70).

The rhythms and oscillations of the path enmesh me in my journey of observant-participation. The circumstances of the walk, the nature and meanings of the path and the presence of other pilgrims, coalesce and shape my experiences. I am brought into the present, the research concerns ebbing and flowing as I immersed in the proceedings; conversations, surfaces, cadences and encounters producing affective awareness of a 'more-than-walking' character to events (Maddrell 2013, p.75). I (re)trace the path as I go; the path, landscape and performers melding and dispersing along the way.

4. Threads of Pilgrimage

The path is punctuated by simple signpost at junctions, with an outline of Croagh Patrick pointing one way and a cross inside an enclosed arch pointing the other (Fig. 3). Each on a subtle reminder of purpose: marking progress, giving direction and underling the meanings.



Fig 3. One of the sign post marking the route, with a small information display.

As you 'walk the Tôchar'...you will be going not only on a spiritual pilgrimage, but on a cultural and historical journey down through the ages also. And both experiences, if fully entered into, should bring about that change of heart and insight of mind which is essential to a pilgrim's progress. (Fahey 1989, p.v).

Fr Frank Fahey, a steward of the *tôchar* being crucial in its (re)establishment, points out the numerous layers involved in any pilgrimage. Although it is a fine walk through a variety of rural settings, there are additional significances with religious /spiritual and cultural aspects lurking, lingering and permeating the trail.

In walking the *tôchar*, a term used in Irish to denote a trackway [2], we tangibly pursue an entwining of past and present, lore and reality, spirit and material. The off-road route has the feel of the past to it, in some way we are participating in a greater tradition. In passing sites associated with the evangelising mission of St Patrick and the monastic foundations of medieval Christian Ireland, there is a sense of authenticity and affinity that emanates from the purposeful act of walk along the ancient trail.

There is also a spirituality to the slowed pace and engagement with the natural environment, which I have referred to the in the previous section. This aspect is built upon through the emergent fellowship of the group, as the shared purpose and removal from the rest of the world, which reinforces the 'more-than-walking' character. While reflections of nature are associated with the spiritual in general, there are affective resonances on the *tôchar*, indications of immanences at the edge of awareness.

These different threads of meaning all shape and inform the interactions of landscape and participants, as this process of coming into being draws 'variably on embodied, material and discursive domains' [3 (p.6)]. My visual and material encounters with the landscape are moulded by the pilgrimage. The entwining of self and landscape is in the pilgrimage as pilgrim and sacred landscape.

A sense of this is touched on by Robert Stoddard (1987) who intentionally uses the term path to distinguish a pilgrimage trail from other routes. The path is followed because of the inherent qualities it poses. While Croagh Patrick is the destination, the journey is of significance in and of itself. I walk a pilgrim path which is remade by the activity of myself and other pilgrims. The path, the landscape and ourselves being enmeshed in this process called pilgrimage.

5. Conclusion

Tôchar Phádraig is an empirically rich context for exploring human-landscape relations in terms of the embodied, practice and felt aspects of pilgrimage. Drawing on my own experiences, this paper has considered the rhythms, character and 'more-than' walking elements of pilgrimage by emphasising the concept of the practiced landscape. In attending to the performative and unfolding nature of walking this pilgrim path, a processural understanding, which appreciates the different threads involved and how they interact, is forged, both in the field and on the page.

The dynamics of pilgrimage and spiritual landscapes more generally have been the topic of recent discussions both in geography and related disciplines in the social sciences; however, there are provocations and conversations that are awaiting theoretical and empirical developments. The pilgrim paths of Ireland and beyond are ideal grounds for some of these contributions. As increasing numbers of people take to these ways, going on their own pilgrimages, perhaps some researchers may join them and tell their stories.

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