The Unexpected Real: Negotiating Fantasy and Reality on the Road to Santiago[1]

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Introduction

As modern phenomena, pilgrimages present unique entry points to the study of expressions of meaning and identity. The pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela, a Catholic shrine in north-western Spain, have seen the passing of millions of pilgrims over the last thousand years. Throughout the twentieth century the routes, particularly the Camino Francés in northern Spain, have seen a revival of interest. Accurate statistics have only been kept since 1987, when 2,905 people completed the pilgrimage, yet in 2007 some 114,026 people completed it (up 14,000 from 2006).[2] Part of the reason for this increase is undoubtedly the profusion of literature on the pilgrimage in popular culture, mostly in the form of travel books. Of pilgrims recently interviewed while making the pilgrimage, two titles stood out – Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* and MacLaine's *The Camino* – not only for being far more widely read than others and being seen as inspiration to do the journey, but as an unreal depiction of life on the route itself. This is often a cause for a brief sense of disappointment that, as we shall see, emerges from the fact that many pilgrims embark upon the Camino in order to have precisely the types of experiences read about.

Images of deep psychological exploration, mystical encounter, and even simple beautiful countryside depicted in the books often sit in stark contrast with the daily pilgrimage process and its host of challenges. Some also find the character not mentioned in the books – themselves – is likewise a cause of disenchantment. The first few days of the Camino are often filled with complaints, sarcastic jibes, and questions of 'whether all this is really worth it?' However, the vast majority of pilgrims choose to continue, some even

[1] This paper is informed by research conducted as part of a doctoral candidature at the Department of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney. Much of the content appeared in the author's doctoral thesis, submitted in August 2009.

[2] Pilgrims Office of Santiago de Compostela, 'Distribution of Pilgrims: Pilgrims Classification 2006-2007', http://www.archicompostela.org/Peregrinos/Estadisticas/ESTADIST2005INGLÉS.htm, accessed 25/12/09.

reporting the types of deeply significant experiences they had hoped for to begin with. This paper examines the point at which pilgrims on the roads to Santiago de Compostela overcome their sense of disappointment with the journey as a key to understanding how the Camino functions as a modern secular pilgrimage. Examining how pilgrims' expectations based on the writings of a few authors are negotiated sheds light on the social processes at play along the Camino de Santiago that encourage pilgrims to keep walking. By using established process-oriented models of pilgrimage it can be seen that the journey to Santiago de Compostela operates to frustrate Campbell's consumer cycle, and encourages the types of meaning attachments we understand as pilgrimage-like.

Modern Pilgrimage

In order to frame the following argument, a brief discussion placing pilgrimage as a meaningful journey, rather than a journey to the sacred, is required. Academic treatments of pilgrimage initially tended to focus on what Coleman and Eade called place-centred understandings of sacred travel.[3] Pilgrimage sites were understood as spatially liminal locations separated from the normal world by virtue of their sacrality. This approach was exemplified by studies such as Nolan and Nolan's examination of Christian pilgrimage shrines in Europe, which understands pilgrimage through the destination shrine(s).[4] The object of the journey was the entry into what Turner called the "centre out there"[5] – a sacred space only accessible through travel. As a result, many studies of pilgrimage have sought to locate them in the dialectic of sacred and profane aspects of tradition. Pilgrimage was thus viewed as a journey towards the sacred. However, such theories play down the experiential aspects of pilgrimage, in particular the physical or metaphorical journey itself, and often miss the liminoid process, elsewhere discussed by Turner, in which pilgrims move away from the normal and the everyday, only to subsequently return.[6]

Nancy Frey's argument that the Camino operates in diverse personalised ways for pilgrims serves as the starting point for this essay. Frey's argument centres on the notion of the pilgrimage as a context for personal story-telling

[3] Simon Coleman and John Eade, 'Introduction', in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, eds Simon Coleman and John Eade (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.
[4] Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan, *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
[5] Victor Turner, 'The Centre Out There: Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions*, vol.12, no. 3 (1973), pp. 191-230.
[6] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

that functions in a confessional or psycho-therapeutic mode.[7] While lacking a solid methodological framework, it is her emphasis on story that serves as the inspirational departure point for the present argument. The analysis of the pilgrimage to Santiago for this paper is informed by three foundational ideas. Firstly, Coleman and Eade noted that pilgrimage entails movement that is not only physical but metaphorical. An "ethnographic snapshot", as they put it, that purports to completeness must account for the movement of pilgrims not only in space but in state.[8] Pilgrimage may well entail transitions from profane to sacred space, but it also involves a ritual transformation of the pilgrim, again calling to mind movement. Secondly, pilgrimages are, as Eade and Sallnow argued, contested in the sense that they are open to interpretation.[9] The sacred dimension of pilgrimage may take on many different forms, even in the one location, and may be the focus of numerous, sometimes conflicting interpretations simultaneously. Thus a less rigidly deterministic paradigm required to understand pilgrimage sees mapping the triad of pilgrimage participants – 'place', 'social space', and 'self' – to be the most effective method.

Third is the notion that pilgrimage is a travel practice imbued with meaning and purpose and that it works either towards or within a goal or ideal. Pilgrimage is not a monolithic undertaking. It involves the participation of many different personalities, often with quite different understandings of the purpose of the journey. Recently scholars have argued that pilgrimage can also be understood in terms of how the travel process is comprehended and experienced. These treatments see pilgrimage as journeys "redolent with meaning", as Digance put it,[10] and look to what the pilgrim intends to achieve as the decisive point. Useful here is Morinis's definition that pilgrimages are journeys "undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal".[11] This might include journeys to religious shrines as much as it might encompass a visit to a favourite football team's

[7] Nancy Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[8] Coleman and Eade, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.
[9] John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, 'Introduction', in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, eds John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 9.
[10] Justine Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journeys Redolent with Meaning', in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, eds Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 46.
[11] Alan Morinis, 'Introduction', in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis, (Westport CT and London: Greenwood Press,1992), p. 4.

home ground or the site of a culturally significant battlefield.[12] Thus for the purposes of this article pilgrimage is defined as journeys identified as personally meaningful that move towards a goal or idealised state of being or place. With this framework we can turn to the encounter of ideal-oriented pilgrims on the roads to Santiago with the disappointing real.

Written Accounts of the Camino

Victor Turner noted that pilgrimage was especially suited to modern systems of mass media and communication.[13] It is thus unsurprising that we find a relatively easily accessible pilgrimage such as the Camino de Santiago as the subject of numerous published accounts. Fieldwork was undertaken along the *Via Podiensis* and *Camino Francés* from September to November 2007. Responses were gained from twenty-six pilgrims on issues such as their motivations for doing the pilgrimage, their religious beliefs, how they viewed their home life, and what sort of information they had gathered about the journey beforehand, using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. In the course of the interviews two books stood out for being far more widely read than other 'Camino accounts', Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* and Shirley MacLaine's *The Camino* (among German pilgrims a book by comedian Hape Kerkeling *Ich Bin Dann Mal Weg* had been quite widely read, also). While there are hundreds of books available in numerous languages, none feature as universally as these two, although some guide books, most notably John Brierly's *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago*, that include 'Mystical Path' information for each section, were also popular. Of particular interest was the role the books by Coelho and MacLaine had played in inspiring people to do the pilgrimage.

Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* was the most widely read book about the Camino by pilgrims with 51% of respondents indicating they had read it, and 25% indicating it had been a key influence in their decision to make the pilgrimage. It describes in first person the author's journey along the Camino in search of purpose and meaning in life. It is a supposedly autobiographical account that functions as an allegory for the quest for simplicity and truth in life. The story follows the main character (supposedly Coelho) on his quest to find a sword taken from him ceremonially before setting out. As the reader follows Coelho we find there are secret passwords uttered to gain 'extra help',

[12] See for example Jordi Xifra, 'Soccer, Civil Religion, and Public Relations: Devotional-Promotional Communication and Barcelona Football Club', *Public Relations Review*, vol. 34 (2008), pp. 192-198, and Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[13] Turner, 'The Centre Out There', p. 225.

more secret passwords for various instances, and some shifty gypsies along the path. By page twenty-three a meeting with the Devil occurs, who, of course, happens to be a gypsy. Sometimes what Coelho writes about is so fantastical and so strange (as if these things weren't strange enough) that it is hard to take seriously, including an incident involving speaking in tongues to a dog who understands what is being said. Throughout the book there are visualisation meditations for readers to practice, and constant references to the author's 'messenger'; a character that reminds one of Frank the rabbit in the film *Donnie Darko*.[14] As for other pilgrims, it isn't until page 227 (of 265) that another one is even mentioned.

It is certainly a book about transformation, and the Camino is the setting for this. Coelho's website describes *The Pilgrimage* as "his experiences during the pilgrimage and his discovery that the extra-ordinary occurs in the lives of ordinary people".[15] But there can be no doubt it was intended to be 'interactive'. It includes numerous 'exercises' for the reader to practice, many of which involve meditative visualisation techniques, and it certainly seems quite deliberately written to inspire. It is, in essence, a story about learning to love life, the universe, and everything. It tells readers to go out and think about what is important to them, and to teach themselves to focus on those things in their lives. Like many of the popular Camino books, *The Pilgrimage* contains little Christianity. Rather, the author uses a 'mashup' of deistic *bonhomie* and loose New Age ideas (such as the spiritual energy of mature trees), wrapped together by a plot that focuses on the central character's inner journey. There is not much description of the route itself, nor of other pilgrims. This is intriguing, as if it is the case that this book has inspired so many people to walk the Camino, it has done so on an almost exclusively spiritual or transformational level. People will have been inspired by Coelho's inner journey that occurs in the context of an almost unspoken outer one.

Shirley MacLaine's book is similarly fantastical. *The Camino* was also a popular conversation point among pilgrims, although while many had heard of it and its content only a few had read it (12% of respondents indicated they had actually read it). Despite this, the amount of media attention that MacLaine's journey and subsequent book publication garnered undoubtedly resulted in many more people being aware it exists at all.[16] We can also surmise that her media tours about the book and her journey will also have contributed to

[14] Richard Kelly, *Donnie Darko* (Newmarket Films, 2001).
[15] Paulo Coelho, 'Biography', *Paulo Coelho Official Site*, at www.paulocoelho.com.br/engl/bio.shtml. Accessed 25/12/09.
[16] MacLaine was interviewed by such notables as CNN's Larry King and CBS's Mike Wallace (for *60 Minutes*).

people's desire to make the pilgrimage. MacLaine paints an even more mystical picture than Coelho, though she grounds it in some of the everyday reality of life on the Camino. In her book the reader is taken on a spiritual journey back thousands of years, through past lives to the very origins of the universe itself. For MacLaine the physical journey was a metaphor for the journey of the soul, and along the way she has visions and revelations, sees the meaning of the cosmos, Atlantis, the origins of humanity, gender, sexuality, and love. MacLaine's website notes that:

> For Shirley, the Camino was both an intense spiritual and physical challenge. A woman in her sixth decade completing such a gruelling trip on foot in thirty days at twenty miles per day was nothing short of remarkable. But even more astounding was the route she took spiritually: back thousands of years, through past lives to the very origin of the universe.[17]

Examples of Pilgrim Disappointment and Desires

Pilgrims arrive at the Camino with sets of ideas about what the experience may be like drawn from numerous sources. These may range from vague expectations of self-exploration to fully-fledged mystical encounters with a host of characters along the way. While many online forums exist in which future and past pilgrims can share information in a community format, most pilgrims interviewed had, surprisingly, never heard of such sites. Instead, the bulk of pilgrim knowledge about the Camino at the point of departure had been gleaned from books such as *The Pilgrimage* and *The Camino*, along with a few basic guidebooks. Filled with images of mystical revelation and spiritual progression, the reality of the first days on the road – all blisters, sore joints, and weariness – causes a sense of disappointment in many. KF, 21 from Mexico, indicated she was a fan of Coelho's *The Pilgrimage*, so it felt right for her to walk.[18] When asked why she wanted to walk the Camino, she responded, "I don't know what I'm looking for. Maybe I'm looking for me". However, she found the time lonely and admitted to clinging to those few pilgrims she encountered during the day. She was also disturbed by how physically difficult the journey was and how exhausted it left her. Likewise, HL, 34, from the USA, had read MacLaine's book and felt immediately compelled; "I wanted

[17] Shirley MacLaine, 'Books by Shirley: The Camino – Introduction', *Shirley MacLaine.com*, at http://www.shirleymaclaine.com/shirley/books-camino-intro.php. Accessed 25/12/09.

[18] Where appropriate, informants are referred to by their nominated initials, age, and country. All interviews and questionnaire responses were gathered while on the Camino de Santiago between Le Puy en Velay, France, and Santiago de Compostela, Spain, between 11/09/2007 and 22/11/2007.

that. That experience". However, her pilgrimage quickly turned into a cacophony of blisters, aching joints, and wolf-whistles from passing lorry drivers. She found herself shouting to the sky begging for a pain-free period with which to finally ask the big questions she had set out to ask.

But we should not assume that the two authors utterly play down the physical reality of the journey. Both, in fact, emphasise the painful aspects in particular. However, things are not quite as they are painted, and for readers the mundane reality can be a jarring disappointment. The sometimes staggeringly beautiful country often gives way to ugly urban developments, while daily life on the Camino turns out to be simple and repetitive. Apart from walking (typically around twenty-five kilometres per day) pilgrims spend the rest of their time eating, washing, caring for their feet, and sleeping. But also, far from being filled with mystical visions, secret passwords, and encounters with the Devil, the days on the route to Santiago are painful, slow, and sometimes miserable. Ironically, many pilgrims complain about the crowds of walkers who now journey to Santiago every year; also something neglected by Coelho and MacLaine, though not by most other authors. One Italian pilgrim even bemoaned the ease with which the journey could be made; he wanted to be forced to befriend local characters (just like Coelho had) in order to find a bed for the night rather than relying on the well coordinated system of *refugios*.

Blogs kept by pilgrims as they walk also document the grating reality that seems out of keeping with the spiritually oriented and natural world surround Camino they had read about. As one American pilgrim put it:

> We ended up in a goddamn industrial zone... Dust. Rocks. Beating sun. Dodging dump trucks every two minutes, either lumbering up behind us or looming before us. Sporadic yellow arrows were maddening, as they would disappear when we needed them to be there, and the book was no help, and all we had were a few random points and hollers from the dump truck drivers. I am floored and incensed that the Camino takes us through there... it's not safe and I felt the whole time like we were trespassing in a place where we'd end up with a free ride to the local police station...or government detention… and the whole thing had me feeling like Mulder and Scully sniffing along the borders of Area 51...with dump trucks.[19]

An Australian pilgrim was also perplexed by the difference:

> It was curious alright. Fitness hardly the thing. The average age must have been sixty plus, overweight a prerequisite. It certainly wasn't a classic hike. And any stroll in the Himalayas or the Andes, maybe a

[19] 'Christine', 'Agés to Burgos', *This Pilgrim's Progress…*, at http://merlintoes.blogspot.com/2008/07/ags-to-burgos.html. Accessed 25/12/09.

> dip in the Ganges, was going to leave the mysticism of the Camino way back in the distance, as far as I could tell.[20]

Pain, although mentioned in both books, is also found to be much harsher and consuming in reality. Knees suffer under the weight of a pack and the many kilometres, and the blisters people often develop are nearly crippling. Dealing with the visceral reality of the body takes some getting used to and at first seems to take up almost all of pilgrims' free time. Thoughts of poetic musings on life, mystical experiences with dark strangers, and speaking in tongues to dogs get tossed with the day's soggy blister pads, and the cobbled streets of the small villages through which the Camino passes echo with sarcastic jibes about certain authors' fanciful imaginations.

The Roots of Pilgrim/Traveller Disappointment

A part of understanding travel, in this case pilgrimage, is appreciating the influence travel books have in informing the decisions of travellers. It is at best a hybrid category that typically straddles genres and disciplines; picturesque, philosophical, political, ecological, spiritual; many paradigms of explication of the journey may be made. Paul Fussell even described the genre as "mediation between fact and fiction".[21] Joan-Pau Rubiés describes it as a 'genre of genres', since a variety of literary kinds may have travel as the essential ingredient of their production.[22] The popularity of travel books flows from the genre's ability to function simultaneously as information, excitement, and an exploration of identity. Arguably, the most successful travel books are those that have identified with the largest base of readers, generating the largest sales. Travel literature is worthy of study precisely because it crosses so many boundaries and especially because it seems to work as a tool to expose cultural preconceptions.[23] Rubiés argued that the traveller in literature can transcend the limits of an identity to defend it, reject it, or redefine it with a new, deeper understanding.[24] Such understanding has fuelled a persistent debate on the educational value of travel. The types of wisdom accessible to the traveller

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[20] 'timaxelsen', 'From Astorga to Santiago', *..drifting, rambling..: travel impressions, articles, stories, narratives, novels*, at http://timaxelsen.wordpress.com/2008/07/08/from-astorga-to-santiago/ Accessed 25/12/09.

[21] Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 203.

[22] Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Travel Writing as a Genre: Facts, Fictions and the Invention of a Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe', *Journeys*, vol. 1 (2000), p. 6.

[23] Kristi Siegel, 'Introduction: Travel Writing and Travel Theory', in *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, ed. Kristi Siegel (New York: Lang, 2002), p. 8.

[24] Rubiés, 'Travel Writing as a Genre', p. 9.

may be portrayed as either harmonious and integrated, or in opposition to prevalent world-views. Social attitudes to travel have tended to be ambivalent. Travel can educate and broaden the mind, and provide knowledge of distant places. Yet these can be dangerous acquisitions, and often travellers return changed people (if they return at all).[25]

Duncan and Gregory note that the closing years of the twentieth century saw a "double explosion of interest in travel writing".[26] Firstly, the genre had become (again) a best seller. The re-imagining of the world through rich and personal description, echoing to a certain extent the great travel accounts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had again found popular audience. Secondly, an academic interest had developed concerning the sociology of tourism and travel writing therein. Travel writing became part of the 'Euro-American' project of modernity in three key ways. Firstly, travel writing meshed itself with secularisation. While they do not demonstrate how this took place, they note that "sacralised frames of reference yielded to a much more complex taxonomy of cultural difference and natural history".[27] Thirdly, travel itself moved beyond commercial, political, and spiritual utility. The 'pleasurable instruction' of the Grand Tour gradually morphed into the more widely digestible 'pleasure' by the eighteenth century. Importantly the practices and performances of these new 'pleasure' tourists were, in diverse ways, scripted by travel writers and guidebooks.[28] Fourthly, travel became accessible to elements of society other than aristocrats and traders.[29] Initially it remained the domain of the bourgeois. Yet tourism, in its present commercial form, emerged out of the conjunction of industrialisation and Romanticism, and brought with it the seemingly contradictory ambitions of these two movements.

As these changes occurred travel writing began to be one of the most popular literary genres. Very quickly, it seems, authors learned to write, and audiences learned to read, the world.[30] Fussell noted the particular ability of the

[25] Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 2.
[26] James S. Duncan and Derek Gregory, 'Introduction', in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, eds James S. Duncan and Derek Gregory (New York,: Routledge, 1999), p. 1.
[27] Duncan and Gregory, 'Introduction', p. 5.
[28] Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 125.
[29] Duncan and Gregory, 'Introduction', pp. 5-6.
[30] William Sherman, 'Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 20.

British to see anomalies and create whole travel books about them.[31] In fact, it is in anomaly (to the author and their audience) that the travel book finds its voice. In this sense, travel writing can be seen as a form of translation in that it is 'transportation to another place'. In attempting to bring 'the other' into the reading room of the reader, the author must translate place, culture, smell, feel; all while retaining within their own language-game enough of the others' language-game to transmit a sense of otherness. Yet some things are lost in translation. As such, the act of translation also entails some addition to compensate for what has not come through.[32]

It is travel writing's ability to open up the opportunity for considered self-reflection that is most important to the present study. Whether as exciting story, vicarious escape, or as learned other, the travel book can act as a personal and cultural mirror allowing the reader a period of rumination on their lives and their place in the wider world. For future tourists it maps out ontic aspects of the journey. In this sense, the travel book is acting as an ontological guide of what to expect when *being* a traveller. As such, travel writing also functions to express cultural identity and practice, for it informs the reader of 'the done things'. It is thus also 'democratic' and has a recalcitrant character that, in part, comes from the fact that anybody can 'give it a go'.[33] The ontic musings, identity crises, and pseudo-ethnography that travel writings display are characteristic of the genre's ability to function in a number of ways. At one level it acts as a barometer of travel trends and fashions. At another, it reflects the writer's home society's outward looking view of the world, complete with 'colonial' or 'imperial' mind-sets, 'othering' text, and prejudices, not to mention the apparently contradictory wonder and delight in difference, novelty, and natural beauty. However, more significantly, in travel writing there seems to be a reflection of the role or function of travel itself. Travel writing, in that it looks for wonder, excitement, enlightenment, and distinction 'outside' one's own physical and social context, reflects some of the motivating or driving forces behind travel itself. Field data indicates that travel books contribute in large part to the decisions of readers to go travelling, or in this case walk 800 kilometres across northern Spain. Above all, travel writing promotes and maintains the notion that travel is an individual project of discovery and/or transformation of deep personal significance.

[31] Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*, p. 170.
[32] Duncan and Gregory, 'Introduction', pp. 3-5.
[33] Steven H. Clark, 'Introduction', in *Travel Writing & Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steven H. Clark (London: Zed Books, 1999), pp 1-4.

Negotiating the Written and the Real Camino

Walking through the industrial outskirts of a city like Burgos proves a shock for many pilgrims. The symbols of pilgrims' normal lives are everywhere along the route – cars, commuters, highways, office blocks, all of which they must walk right next to – not to mention the often trying interactions with other pilgrims. Notions of *communitas* aside, common in the bars and restaurants of northern Spain are the sounds of pilgrim's complaints about their fellows' night noises, smells, and daily habits. One aspect driving such disappointment is that the act of making the pilgrimage, which for pilgrims is about moving from the mundane to the meaningful, spiritual, and mystical, seems to have been frustrated. Symbolically speaking, Coelho and MacLaine construct the pilgrimage as a journey rich with deeply meaningful realisations and mystical spirituality, resulting in a movement towards self-realisation and self-transformation. Methodologically this fits with the assertions of Geertz that ritual transforms the experience of the everyday,[34] and of course with Turner's association of ritual with pilgrimage, specifically its liminal time-space removed from the mundane or profane everyday world.[35] The genre of travel writing itself is partly responsible for this disjuncture. In the first days of one's journey, with feet aflame with blisters, industrial landscapes to left and right, and a cohort of farting, snoring, and generally annoying pilgrims to walk with, the 'destination' of resolved emotions and renewed commitments can seem a far-fetched fantasy. So there is a disappointment with the experienced reality that is not driven by the books' fantasy, but references it. It is a case of 'that happened to them, and I want that to happen to me'. A suite of images of potential realities is created in the mind of the traveller.

Pop philosopher Alain de Botton, in *The Art of Travel*, speaks of the notion that reality is always experienced as differing from our expectations. After months of anticipation, reading the accounts of authors such as Coelho and MacLaine, and imagining a resulting transformation or experience, there will inevitably be difference in what is actually experienced. However, it is the point of difference that de Botton is concerned with. In particular he considers the source of the traveller's disappointment to be their failure to account for the long-winded "woolliness of the present" in the glossy brochure in their mind. In particular, he argues, disappointed travellers' greatest errors are to bring themselves on holiday. [36] In the accounts of authors, readers are exposed to brief moments of intense interest; a concentrated soup of activity, vision,

[34] See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 142-169.
[35] See Turner, *The Ritual Process, passim.*
[36] Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 12-13.

realisation, and spiritual progress while making their pilgrimages. However, in a single sentence about the journey from one village to another the book omits the stones that made the road treacherous for one's ankles, the flies that pestered one's nostrils throughout the afternoon, and incessant chatter of the nameless pilgrim one decided to wave to and who is now impossible to get rid of. But more than that, the sentence did not contain 'me'. The reader may imagine themselves there, they may even play out scenarios in their head, but the fundamental difference in the experienced reality lies in the fact that when we venture out on a journey like the Camino, we take the entirety of our lives with us. This is inevitably disappointing, as typically our own lives were the very things we wanted a holiday from.

One Dutch woman wanted to make the pilgrimage to have some time for herself, time to think. However, she kept finding all she thought about were the contents of her daily life. This was exacerbated when her sister joined her for a section. What she liked about the pilgrimage was walking alone. For her, being joined by her sister almost proved disastrous to their relationship. Her sister wanted to talk, "and brought all the Netherlands with her, all the news, and I felt I couldn't bear the whole Netherlands upon me. So I had to walk alone, meeting for meals and evenings only". PO, 41, from Austria, was similarly disturbed by her everyday self that seemed to have come along uninvited. She spoke of loving walking as it made her happy and allowed her "to be with me, and my mind". She found herself wanting to walk fast, just like at home, but the desire for speed and control was one aspect of her self she did not want to bring to the Camino. She noted that the first five days of her walk were difficult, and she kept on losing things (water bottles), forcing her to go back and look for them. On her sixth day she lost her way, and realised that with that she had lost her 'home self'. The lack of direction was something she specifically set out to explore; "You can't lose things by intention… Anything that is without intention interest[ed] me".

Upon arrival at the Camino the pilgrim faces for the first time the reality of the journey. This comprehension of reality encompasses the complete pilgrimage experience; what was referred to earlier as the triad of pilgrimage participants – place, social space, and self. The travel writer cannot possibly depict the lived reality of the travel destination. This possibly goes without saying; however the failure of the written word to convey accurately the complete sense of the real is highlighted by the character of the self. When pilgrims arrive they bring the whole of their selves with them, often in spite of any attempts to 'vacate'. This backstory leads eventually to the pilgrim taking their first steps on the Camino, and is also part of the reality presented them upon arrival. It is, for many, deeply confronting. As Frey discovered, and the

present research confirmed, the majority of pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago arrive with specific personal problems or questions they desire to resolve while on the Camino.[37] The face of this project, often something put off or neglected at home, makes for daunting contemplation.

Disappointment with the journey or the destination is not an uncommon theme in literature on travel and sacred space. Eliade spoke about the "dialectic of sacred space";[38] that one, at the same time, wants to both arrive and keep striving for it. Similarly, Nancy Frey, writing specifically about the Camino, also noted pilgrims' ambivalence towards reaching the goal of Santiago.[39] This process of disappointment with the destination, or with the initial experience, mirrors that of the consumer cycle described by sociologist Colin Campbell. Western modes of consumption involve "imaginative pleasure-seeking". That is, that the novel is favoured over the familiar, that the pleasure comes from the experience of desiring to acquire the new thing, and that the ultimate result of acquisition is disillusionment and the subsequent attachment of desire to a new object and hence the re-acquisition of a sense of pleasure.[40] If tourism, and really pilgrimage is a form of tourism or leisured travel, is a commodity and is to be considered a leisure activity, it is logical to assume that the same cycle of disillusionment Campbell asserts will be at play, especially as it harmonises here with Eliade's 'dialectic of sacred space'. In the disappointment of pilgrims on the Camino we can see this cycle at play.

Consumption is increasingly understood as leisure, and thus leisure is increasingly becoming commodified. Paraphrasing Max Weber, Sassatelli notes that, "consumer society is a type of society in which 'the satisfaction of daily needs' is realised 'through the capitalist mode'". Not only does it entail the satisfaction of daily needs, but also the sense of *being* a consumer, and conceiving of transactions as acts of consumption.[41] Campbell also noted that the turning of educated, middle-class youth toward religious paradigms that embraced the exotic, the mysterious, or the magical was indicative of a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with both rationality and puritan sensibilities.[42] This process emerges out of the legacy of Romanticism, a particular manifestation of which are the patterns of modern consumption, and concludes

[37] See Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, *passim*.
[38] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), p. 382.
[39] Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, pp. 150-151.
[40] Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (York: Alcuin Publishers, 2005 [1987]), pp. 89-90.
[41] Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007), p. 2.
[42] Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*, p. 3.

that "the individual consumer is… permanently exposed to the experience of wanting".[43] This ceaseless desire generates a sense of a disappointing real, and desire and dream are understood as perfected possibilities. Fantasy becomes more real than the real, as it were. If Campbell's consumer theory is indeed correct, one cannot help but wonder whether all that is left at the door out of the spiritual supermarket is credit card debt and a sense of spiritual dissatisfaction.

Negotiating with Disappointment

Despite these three sources of disappointment for pilgrims on the Camino 'disappointing' is not a word used often to describe the experience. Indeed, if pilgrims acted upon their dissatisfaction with the initial hardships and adjustment to the practice of walking the Camino, few would finish. This is overwhelmingly not the case. For example, among those interviewed for the present study no pilgrims were observed 'quitting' the pilgrimage.[44] Pilgrims interviewed towards the end of their journey described the experience as having been "surprised at the way it makes me so, so happy", or that it was "amazing", "life changing", and that it "taught me a lot of things", or they "learned a lot about me". This is true even of those who had earlier expressed such disappointment at the shape of the early journey. Thus at some point the journey becomes one of importance, and in many cases of significant meaning to the pilgrim. The fantastic visions of Coelho and MacLaine give way to an experienced reality that is understood as worthwhile and meaningful in four main ways; community, achievement, introspection, and freedom from consumer culture.

Firstly, while on the Camino, often within the space of days, pilgrims tend to form loose cohorts and develop a sense of what Turner called spontaneous *communitas*. This is generated when everyday structure is broken down or dissolved and social bonds formed with others in the liminal-experience cohort replace.[45] This results in "full unmediated communication, even communion between definite and determinate identities".[46] Such groups form strong bonds based on communal feelings of togetherness and mutual purpose arising out of the common experience and tend to transcend separating factors normal in the everyday world while commonalities are moved to the

[43] Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*, p. 95.
[44] However, in France, particularly, many pilgrims conduct the walk in sections, walking for two to three weeks at a time as paid leave from employment permits.
[45] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 128.
[46] Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 250.

forefront. The social world on the Camino is small, very intimate, and governed only by the 'code of the road' – keep going![47] The social norms that are created in this transient society demand the pilgrim keep walking, no matter how disappointing, boring, pointless, or painful the journey may seem. Once begun, the social ideals of the community demand that the journey be finished. This extends to those who walk only small sections at a time. The idea that one would walk a few hundred kilometres of the track without the intention to eventually make it to the end is considered anathema; touristic. The Camino is the whole of the path from wherever the pilgrim begins, and the only legitimate end-point is Santiago itself (or Finisterre after passing through Santiago).

This means pilgrims must keep walking day by day. Only the excuse of debilitating sickness or injury are accepted as reasons to rest, and only major injury or illness could serve as a reasonable justification for quitting the journey before the end. Even the infrastructure surrounding the pilgrimage is geared towards getting pilgrims out the door and walking each morning (well before most of the local Spanish population has arisen). As a result, despite sometimes deep dissatisfaction, even anger, at the initial Camino experience, the majority of pilgrims keep walking. This results in the second source of meaning in the Camino experience as pilgrims begin to develop a feeling of achieving something extraordinary. Keeping going naturally means people will walk a long way. This results in a sense of physical achievement, often begun to be felt quite quickly. It only takes a few days before pilgrims begin to realise what a remarkable achievement their progress is in comparison to their normal everyday lives. Sedentary living makes the few kilometres trudged in first days seem epic, and by the end of the first week, after covering some 150km or so, results in the development of a sense of pride in the achievement.

This pride in physical achievement, a lifetime first for many, begins to build in pilgrims a surety in the value of the pilgrimage and its potential for the very types of experiences they desired upon first setting out. Even though big blisters on one's heels tend to distract from the transcendent aspect of pilgrimage, overcoming or continuing through the pain provides a great sense of physical mastery and acceptance. Although seemingly contradictory, pilgrims often reported gaining an acceptance of their bodies while on the

[47] Turner spoke of three types of *communitas*; spontaneous, existential, and ideological. Though beyond the scope of this paper, in this case spontaneous *communitas* is the most useful in describing the Camino pilgrim social world, even though both existential and ideological do also come into play. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 169, for his description of the three types. See Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, *passim*, for a detailed discussion of Camino sociality.

Camino that is accompanied by the feeling of mastering its psychological hold over them. However, the pain experienced throughout the day and the boredom of walking through miles of industrial estates or even more miles of featureless, flat landscape leaves the walker with little to look at but the self. This proves, as discussed earlier, a difficult task, with some so alarmed by the picture confronting them – which they freely admit is themselves – they either skip the more featureless regions, opting for more visually distracting areas.[48] For others though, the task is to embark upon the project of self-examination or re-creation, or face going '*un poco loco*'.

Thirdly, the meditative quality of walking lends itself towards the introspection many pilgrims desire. The hypnotic somatic rhythm of the walk for six to eight hours a day, every day, for around thirty days, eventually helps to work with pilgrims' hopes for time to concentrate on themselves. With time the body becomes fit and used to the walking and the pain, and pilgrims report being able to operate on a form of 'auto-pilot', allowing the mind to wander, concentrate, or quieten. It is here that the final negotiation of the expected ideal of the walk and the experienced reality finally fuse, and pilgrims rework the stories of Coelho and MacLaine from being seen as extreme fantasy, to seeing them, possibly as the authors intended, as metaphors of an exploration of the self. One Swiss pilgrim put the process this way; "We wash our heads and our hearts with our feet", intimating that the process of walking the Camino was one through which psychological hurt could be healed. Other pilgrims around the table at the time heartily agreed with this assertion.

Indeed, Sean Slavin suggests that the somatic dimension of the Camino is its *raison d'etre* as a contemporary phenomenon.[49] With its sheer length of physical commitment, the Camino, now stripped of its Christian theological meaning for most pilgrims, operates as a meditative practice into which any meaning system may be inserted. Indeed, insofar as pilgrimage in general is understood to be about what is discovered or encountered, we can view the meditative aspect of walking through the little villages of fields of northern Spain as the locus of identity for the Camino de Santiago. Slavin noted that, "The point of walking is to bring oneself back to the present moment – to be present to the world as well as oneself. If thoughts are fixed on the future then

[48] Although not encountered personally, two pilgrims within the cohort the author was walking with were reported to have done this. One caught a bus in order to avoid having to walk through the infamously barren *meseta* region, the other caught a taxi around the city of León so as to avoid 'the boredom of its suburbs' (as related by another pilgrim in mobile phone contact with him).

[49] Sean Slavin, 'Walking as a Spiritual Practice: The Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela', *Body & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2003), pp. 1-18.

why not take a bus directly to Santiago? Why be on the 'way' at all?"[50] The focus on the moment ultimately brings about a focus on the self. This was expressed by MT, 26, from Australia, who said, "you don't have to think too much about, you know, 'what am I doing today, where am I going to go?' There's no options. Nothing's complicated, it's just, 'yeah I'm just going to walk today and that's it!' And eat and sleep!" What she got out of this experience was:

> lack of worry. Not thinking about things too much. I don't know it's just, I don't know, clear? Sometimes a lot of life I'm like all worried and stressed and stuff, so like it's, I find it quite relaxing I guess to just walk. I mean it's beautiful. When you're doing days on days of walking, I don't know, it clears your head.

MT raises two critical points here. The first is that the physical practice of walking is psychologically simple: "you don't have to think too much". It implies an opposite of 'everyday' experience, which we can assume to be very busy and involving 'thinking about a lot'. The second is that the length of time is important: "days on days of walking… clears your head". Time is an often overlooked aspect of the function of the Camino as a transformative and deeply meaningful experience for pilgrims. The importance of large blocks of time for personal projects tends to be downplayed in the modern Western world. Time is better spent with family, or spending the money one earns in the local shopping centre. Indeed, time is money. The idea of taking thirty days to walk to a town one could fly to is thus quite out of the ordinary. This dedication of time allows for a depth of experience rarely encountered in everyday life. Pilgrims are not only allowed but encouraged to think deeply and discuss with their new cohort stranger-friends the very core issues of their lives for up to a month or more.

Accounts from pilgrims as to why they set out on such a journey at all indicate that most were looking for 'time alone', 'time to think', or simply 'time away'. Using the notion of liminal space-time these pilgrimages operate very much on a 'time-to-one's-self' paradigm, inferring that they see their time at home as the opposite – 'not time to one's self'. While it is commonly said on the routes that 'everyone has their own Camino', for many this is forced upon them by the intense physicality of the walking itself, or by the mundane and sometimes off-putting humanity of it (the rudeness, snoring, and so on). Still more miss the great revelations or deep poetry experienced by authors such as Coelho and MacLaine entirely. But for most, negotiating the realities of the pilgrimage with the ideals carried into it involves turning from 'time for one's self' to 'time within one's self'. The journey becomes inwardly focussed, and

[50] Slavin, 'Walking as a Spiritual Practice', p. 11.

the emotional journey paramount. Each person may well have their own reasons for making the pilgrimage, but on the road itself each person must find their own satisfaction with it from within.

According to Campbell's consumer cycle hypothesis, however, pilgrims should abandon the pilgrimage experience and look elsewhere for the satisfaction of their desire for transformational experience. To be sure, pilgrims approach the journey knowing that it will be physically hard and possibly emotionally challenging. This is the critical point in understanding the modern pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela; it is a phenomenon that sits outside the normal paradigms of consumer experience, so much a part of Western culture from which the majority of pilgrims emerge. MT spoke of her joy in not having any choice, a fundamental marker of consumerism – "I'm just going to walk today and that's it! And eat and sleep!" With this lack of choice came a lack of worry, a relationship consciously realised by many towards the end of their journey. The previous weeks of simple, needs-based living is articulated as awakening pilgrims to the possibilities of life less governed by consumer cultures. The pilgrim life experienced along the Camino is one of simplicity. Eating, walking, and sleeping are the central concerns. This marks a fundamental difference for most pilgrims, used to living lives firmly embedded in consumer culture. The lack of desire for 'stuff' that is felt, and the satisfaction of instrumental needs yields a sense of personal autonomy. Many pilgrims even talk about taking this new found sense of release from consumer culture home with them, hoping to lives filled more with meaning than things.

Roberta Sassatelli suggests that in 'traditional' societies the "fundamental cultural dichotomy on which social order rested was that of sacred/profane rather than production/consumption".[51] In continuing walking through their sense of disappointment and frustrated consumer desire, pilgrims very briefly switch dichotomies; while on the road they begin to profess that social order and cultural understanding is unhealthy when posited on that of production and consumption. Applying Campbell's 'cycle' may seem problematic; it is the frustration of the cycle that forms such a strong reaction and phenomenological separation from everyday ways of being. In facing the process of the Camino, feeling obligated by Camino culture and the cohort's social norms to complete it, the cycle of consumerism is broken. What is experienced is, if we are to believe Campbell that this cycle is all-pervasive, a new form of being in which the cycle of consumerism was broken not by circumstance (e.g. lack of money) but by choice through physical achievement. In other words it places the body as the locus of agency for personal autonomy and identity. It is therefore useful to think of the modern Camino as a ritual

[51] Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, p. 4.

rebellion against consumerism, even though as an economic and social practice it clearly participates within broader consumer culture (including the purchase of travel books, walking boots, and the very notion of leisured vacation time in which it may take place). What is important is that many pilgrims understand themselves to be rejecting consumerist lifestyles, even if only temporarily, while on the Camino. It thus seems that the opposite of consumerism is perceived as commitment to a course of events, reduced choice, and a playing down of the image as a key locator of identity.

As a result, after some weeks on the road a sense of achievement and physical purity is felt by walkers, and reports of the types of experiences they had read about begin to emerge. Disappointment is erased by the sense of having lived a deep experience and a feeling that certain behavioural structures have been broken, in particular the cycle of consumerism. The inward turning forced by the Camino also precipitates the breakthrough of the consumer cycle. It forces satisfaction with the journey to be constructed from what is actually experienced rather that relying on advertised markers of enjoyment. These, by nature tend to be outside the self, whereas the experience of the Camino is intrinsically inside the self. This tells us that consumer life is perceived as quick, snappy, and made 'on the fly'. Along with this goes a sense of only skimming the surface, thus it is no surprise that the Camino experience also embodies another consumer opposite, depth. With time comes a depth of experience that is perceived not to be a part of everyday working lives. The Camino, as a generally month-long practice for those interviewed, offers a depth of experience and immersion that the perceived opposite of fast-paced consumerism does not. It is also different from a month spent backpacking 'seeing the sights' and partying, which are perceived in contrast as consumptive and hedonistic by pilgrims.

Conclusion

The fantastic writings of Paulo Coelho and Shirley MacLaine are popular books among future pilgrims to the Camino de Santiago, especially as motivators. However, their portrayal of the experiential aspects of the pilgrimage is far from accurate. This leads some pilgrims to initially experience a sense of disappointment with the lived pilgrimage. Further, aspects of their normal life, some of which they may want to change, are suddenly cast into sharp relief when pilgrims arrive at the Camino. It is a space socially removed from their everyday in which the only familiar markers are themselves. Thus those aspects of self they dislike or seek to change are made all the more apparent. Nonetheless pilgrims continue on with their pilgrimages, and the project of the Camino, for many, becomes the addressing of these

issues. Further, the social realm of the Camino is governed by ideals of perseverance and completion. The process of walking is articulated as one of somatic simplicity – one foot in front of the other – and to terminate the pilgrimage for reasons other than injury or lack of time besmirches the walker. Even cutting the journey short for time reasons is seen as less than ideal. Once on the path, the social norms of the combined pilgrimage community demand the pilgrim continue walking. Thus the vast majority of pilgrims continue through any sense of disappointment and any feelings of wanting to give up.

Modern pilgrimage includes journeys "undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal".[52] They are understood as contested spaces, open to individual interpretation that involve both a metaphorical or emotional journey in addition to the physical one, and being understood as rich in meaning for the pilgrim. When pilgrims depart on a Camino journey everyday selves are left behind. While on the Camino they move through a social state that encourages self-alteration by means of reflection, introspection, and meditation, not to mention physical labour. The process by which pilgrims negotiate the disappointing real with the written fantasy of travel books also casts light on the reasons why the Camino continues to be a space and process understood to be transformational. The physicality of the Camino not only stands in stark contrast to the normal daily lives of most pilgrims, but also forms the ground for days spent in introspection. Similarly, over the twenty to thirty days spent walking, the importance of time removed from the everyday to engage in personal reflection and introspection is highlighted, and lends weight to the arguments of authors who claimed the pilgrimage was indeed about self-realisation. Above all, the process by which pilgrims move past their initial disappointment, worries, and pains on the Camino display the ways it functions as meaningful. By rebelling against consumer culture it allows for the possibility of self exploration, and provides a sense of physical achievement that is extraordinary to largely sedentary people.

In addition, the initial sense of disappointment is in part generated by a consumerist expectation that the 'product' will be as described, thus by continuing with the Camino through the sense of disappointment pilgrims are breaking out of the cycle. The simple walking life in which the only demands are food, shelter, and sometimes company encourages pilgrims to question their more 'cargo-complex' lives at home. For many this leads to a sense of the possibility of simplicity in life, and a desire to be less governed by consumer desires. This is unexpected for the most part, and leads to a sense of freedom from and control over consumer culture. It is also understood as an

[52] Morinis, 'Introduction', p. 4.

achievement and brings with it a feeling described as more peaceful than the endlessly repeated cycle of desire-disappointment. When people choose to stick with the pilgrimage to Santiago we know right away that they want it to be meaningful. Most of the other institutions to which humans attach significant meaning are things committed to – careers, relationships, hobbies and pastimes, religions, social groups – thus meaning and significance is attached to commitment and perseverance.

Further, contemporary Western spirituality seeks self-transformation and individuals engaged in such processes will continue to construct the self with reference to the sacred.[53] Thus, as much as the presence, or lack thereof, of the body of St James is of no interest or use to most pilgrims, so to are the accounts of writers like Coelho and MacLaine. In the end they become providers of context or background; mythological contributors whose utterances are to be taken with a grain of salt, but who nonetheless are important insofar as they contribute to keeping the myth alive. The temporary rejection of consumer culture, the demanding physical nature of the walk, and the relative immersion in the natural world all contribute to its 'sacred' status as a journey "redolent with meaning".[54] The extent to which the pilgrimage becomes deeply personal results, in most cases, in it being seen as a journey separate from most other types of holiday or vacation. Most pilgrims set out on the Camino because they want a journey rich in personal exploration and meaning. Through the social, somatic, and personally explorative processes of the Camino they become pilgrims; however, it is important to remain cognisant that most pilgrims do not use the term 'sacred' to describe their own journeys. This in turn contributes to the ongoing re-establishment process of the Camino as a modern pilgrimage, though now in a very secular way.

What is found on the Camino is that the secular practice identifies real-life events from which sacred elements are identified. The contemporary revival of the Camino de Santiago has its foundations in its secularisation. In particular, it is the way the contemporary pilgrimage to Santiago involves "a complex of mobility practices that are based on the free interpretation of cultural, religious or spiritual meanings" that have been accumulated by the pilgrimage throughout its history.[55] Pilgrims bring with them their own sets of spiritual frameworks, and, in particular, notions of self around which the

[53] See David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 72-95

[54] See Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage'.

[55] Nieves Herrero, 'Reaching "Land's End": New Social Practices in the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela', *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2008), p. 133.

practice and the phenomenon of the Camino is fitted. The contemporary practice of the Camino thus involves the reinterpretation and secular occupation of the tradition's practices and symbols. It maintains the ritual structure and performative elements of the traditional Catholic practice while incorporating aspects synonymous with meaning in a secular society, such as the natural world, heritage, mind/body connection, and the practice of walking. Whether intentionally spiritual or not, the physical and social praxis of walking results in most pilgrims taking part in a spiritual exercise in the form of the examination of the self. Often this results in change, sometimes great, in the subsequent lives of the pilgrims. What we see happening in this particular context is the working of the negotiation of fantasy and reality, which, by necessity, becomes a mode of self-empowerment and self-investigation.