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New Pilgrim Stories
Narratives, Identities, Authenticity

Suzanne van der Beek

1 Introduction

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has a long and complicated history dating back to the ninth century. It might therefore not be surprising that the image of the pilgrim on the Camino is rather traditional. However, rather than aiming to personify a medieval stereotype, modern pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago adopt a mixed profile, which is based partly on traditional ideas of pilgrimage and partly on new ideas that are shaped by contemporary voices. These pilgrims are not particularly religious, they use modern communication networks to inform themselves about the journey, they use social media to negotiate and communicate the meaning of their individual pilgrim identity, they use the pilgrimage to reflect critically on the globalized and digitalized society in which they find themselves. In this dissertation I explore new pilgrim stories and analyze how they shape new contemporary pilgrim identities within a polyphonic environment. The research question that carries this research is: How do contemporary Dutch pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago use different narratives, both on- and offline, to shape their identity?

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the traditional narrative that has dominated the interpretation of the Camino for centuries has a limited influence on the ways in which contemporary pilgrims perceive and appropriate the profile of the pilgrim. Therefore, I analyze the new voices that create the meaning of the Camino today. To unpack this idea, I have divided this research into three steps. First, I look at the most prominent narratives that shape the Camino story. Then, I explore how these narratives influence the ways in which pilgrims create their own identities on the Camino. Lastly, I will dive into the concept of authenticity. This was not a concept that I had originally intended to include in this dissertation, but it soon became clear to me that it plays a significant role in the dynamic that I set out to understand.

2 Narratives

In this chapter I propose to explore pilgrim narratives. More in particular, I analyze the dialogical nature of these narratives and the way these narratives travel within the storytelling community around the Camino de Santiago. Pilgrim narratives tend to be composited stories, combinations of stories taken from personal experiences, heard from other pilgrims, and read in popular publications. These

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different stories are shared, incorporated in existing narratives, and passed on by new voices. This results in a set of many-voiced narratives that easily travels within the pilgrim community. Some of the elements of these stories are more tied up to their creator than others, and therefore travel less freely than others do. In order to understand this dynamic, I look at the relationships between the storytellers and their narratives. This results in a typology of pilgrim narratives that is exactly based on these relationships: the anonymous, the institutional, and the personal pilgrim narrative.

Even though all pilgrim narratives relate to the experiences and backgrounds of pilgrims and the Camino, the three types of narratives tend to focus on different aspects of that world. Anonymous narratives mostly relate historical or legendary stories. They often tell of larger than life events or accomplishments on the Camino, and can be said to reflect the values celebrated by pilgrims on the Camino today, such as hospitality, trust, endurance, community. These stories are not protected by the presence of an authoritative creator, and therefore travel freely within the pilgrim community. They are spread through informal popular media like guidebooks, leaflets, and via conversations between pilgrims. Because of their many retellings, their actual content can vary quite a bit.

The stories I call institutional narratives come in different forms and shapes, depending on the creators' public personae. Often, they are accounts of the pilgrim experiences of professional writers or artists, but can also be fictional/ized stories that reflect the maker's interpretation of the Camino. For example, Emilio Estevez's movie *The Way* echoes the American's point of view, by presenting the Camino as a quaint, European ritual. By stressing the exoticism of rural Spain and the unfamiliar historicity of the route the movie presents the Camino as a place where pilgrims can come into contact with their true selves. Hape Kerkeling's novel *Ich bin dann mal weg*, on the other hand, is the story of a man who sets out to understand himself and his relation to both others and God. As such, this narrative is more concerned with questions of identity, both private and public, both mundane and spiritual. A TV series like Wilfred Kemp's *Op weg naar Santiago* does not relate to just one personal story, but rather attempts to show the multitude of different reasons people are drawn to the Camino.

When it comes to personal narratives, there is a tendency to create very intuitive narratives. Pilgrims on the Camino do not take the time to carefully write and rewrite their blogs or Facebook posts, but rather tell their stories with an immediacy that fits the online platforms that they use. Through platforms like blogs, Facebook groups, and Instagram accounts, pilgrims narrate their experiences and reflections almost immediately after they have taken place. Following these narratives can give the reader a good sense of what the pilgrim is actually experiencing on the road to Santiago. There is, however, a difference in the ways pilgrims use these different online media. For example, whereas blogs are more suited to first-person narratives or monologues, Facebook groups are essentially dialogical in character and much better suited for conversations. Again, Instagram invites visual stories with only small textual indicators, and is ideal to position oneself in the surroundings of the Camino.

These different types of narratives do not stay in their neat categories, they rather travel and are combined with other stories to create yet new narratives. Personal narratives end up in institutional narratives, anonymous narratives are combined with personal ones, institutional narratives integrate anonymous narratives in their stories, etc. People who have never even have set foot on the geographical Camino de Santiago can even make use of these stories to create their own virtual journey to Santiago de Compostela. And so the dialogical character of Camino narratives makes for a dynamic and ever-changing set of stories that are shaped and reshaped by different types of pilgrims on and off the Camino.

3   Identities

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which narratives can shape pilgrim identities. In the past, personal pilgrim identities have often been understood as if there existed fixed categories of types of pilgrims, and every individual was a manifestation of one of these types. Whether based on religious background, motivation, experience, or the direction of one's journey, individual pilgrims are routinely judged on one aspect of their experience that will thereafter decide 'what type of traveler/pilgrim' they are. I have found that pilgrims do not necessarily identify with one specific aspect of their journey, but enjoy negotiating their identity through a number of different themes and motifs – ranging from the choice of route and transportation, to personal frustrations in a specific part of life, from the personal motivation to start the journey, to the earliest memories of one's family life.

What is more, these themes and motifs are different in various stages of becoming a pilgrim. During this process, pilgrims use narratives to navigate the different possibilities the Camino offers them to shape themselves. Starting at a stage of initial interest, narratives inspire someone to engage personally with the journey. In this stage, different narrative elements can draw someone into the Camino narrative. Whether it is the promise that the Camino will change your life, the attraction of a period away from daily chores, or the idea you could challenge yourself by accomplishing something that seems out of your reach. Afterwards, the initiated takes part in a phase of preparation, in which narratives inspire the choice for a particular route or mode of transportation, but also what values they will want to celebrate on the Camino: a sober pilgrim who sleeps in simple *albergues* or a pilgrim who wants to be well-rested when they leave their comfortable hotel after a good breakfast?

Once arrived on the Camino, the pilgrim will be able to judge how accurate their narrative guides have been. Are their experiences similar or not at all? The resulting emotions are manifold and are the basis for their initial engagement with the new environment, until they are comfortable enough in their new position to form a more autonomous view of their journey. However, the conversation with other pilgrims will continue to be a part of the way in which people understand themselves as pilgrims – and of the way in which they communicate these reflections through their own writings. Individual

stories are always colored by the voices of other storytellers on the Camino, even if they reflect on very intimate parts of one's personal life.

This dynamic fits in a context of a world that is increasingly shaped by processes of globalization and digitalization. Individual pilgrim identities are continuously informed by other voices. However pilgrims might value distance from daily life, a pilgrimage is not a solitary project. Pilgrims are shaped by stories from and about other pilgrims through an exchange with other pilgrims – who come from all over the world – and their stories that are increasingly shared on online platforms. I have showed some of the effects of this digitalization of personal writing by discussing some of the more prominent characteristics of pilgrim identity work: liminality and *communitas*, a relation to the sacred, and the notion of movement. All of these take on a different shape due to the nature of online writing on the Camino.

4   Authenticity

The topic of authenticity is not one that I initially set out to analyze in this research. I have always thought the notion was a rather essentialist one that had little to do with the ways in which people actually understand themselves today. However, during my years of engagement with the pilgrim community, it has become clear to me that it is a topic that cannot be ignored when talking about pilgrim identities. It is constantly present in conversations and reflections on the Camino, and plays a large role in the ways in which people identify as pilgrims. It is connected to both the personal and the social negotiations taking place in the construction of a pilgrim identity and weighs in discussions on all kinds of themes. Some of these play out on the level of the pilgrim community. Decisions made about travel distance, mode of transportation, official documentation, and sleeping arrangements can signal to others in what way you are an authentic pilgrim. For there is not *one way* to be an authentic pilgrim, you might be authentic in your religious intentions but less so in your accommodation choices. The balancing of these choices, having enough of certain qualities to still be considered authentic while not overdoing the act, influences how you are acknowledged by others on the Camino as an authentic pilgrim. Instead of aiming for a standardized profile, contemporary pilgrims create personalized versions that combine the character of the individual pilgrim ('Every pilgrim creates their own Camino!') with core values of the pilgrimage (perseverance, slowing down, spirituality, adventure, religious and historical awareness). This process of negotiation is both a personal and a social affair, in which pilgrims discuss their decisions and reflect on each other´s choices.

However, authenticity also relates to a larger social scale, going beyond the direct pilgrim circle. I argue that pilgrims also use this concept to enable themselves to externalize those aspects of their identity that they find undesirable, by branding them as part of a corrupting society and therefore as un-authentic. In this process of externalization they adopt a different external context, that of the Camino, and in constructing this context as fundamentally pure and open, they are able to find within

this authentic world a more suitable, a more desirable identity as pilgrim. So pilgrims find themselves in a paradoxical relationship to society: they are fundamentally dependent upon exterior circumstances to become aligned with what they often understand as their personal, interior reality. By reversing some of the experiences that most prominently signal the truly authentic Camino, we find a number of criticisms to contemporary society: our obsession with the new and constantly changing, an a-historic worldview, a disconnect with nature and our bodies, our fixed social routines based on social prejudices, a lack of meaning, and the sense that we are ultimately alone in this world. Pilgrims contest this society by explicitly celebrating the opposite values: historical awareness, a human pace, a reliance on nature and physical abilities, open and hospitable relations with other pilgrims, meaning that is found in every part of the journey, and a belief that something bigger is looking out over our well-being. In these ways authenticity guides the pilgrim in their journey to find their identity.

5   Conclusion

In the last and concluding chapter of this dissertation I present my findings in relation to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin – a scholar whose work has inspired large parts of this project and whose ideas have run throughout this dissertation, whether implicit or explicit, while I attempted to analyze these new pilgrim identities: identities that are created and shared through pilgrim narratives and questioned by the idea of pilgrim authenticity. The relation between the contemporary pilgrim and pilgrim identity work is not dissimilar to the relationship Bakhtin describes between the speaker and the language they use:

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.[*]

A pilgrim coming to the Camino can appropriate an identity that is tied up to the profile of the pilgrim. This identity is at first a borrowed identity, something created by others, contaminated by other people's meaning and significance. But in the process of becoming a pilgrim, the new pilgrim adopts this profile and shapes and molds it until it resonates with their own personal background and individual outlook. This personalized identity is a mixture of personal desire, practical necessities, cultural interest, spiritual needs, and societal critique. Pilgrims do not necessarily feel the need to 'resolve' their stories. They are typically not bothered by contradictive voices and paradoxical reflections. This unresolvedness is in fact a staple of pilgrim identities. It is based on an unresolved conflict between the personal and the community, between the desire for silence and the desire for conversation, meeting

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[*]   Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 294.

others and meeting yourself, between a reverence for nature and admiration for culture; between standing still and to keep on moving, between historical awareness and an embeddedness in the current social climate, between a non-religious spirituality and the fascination for the Catholic dimensions of the journey. And all these are elements that pilgrims can use for critical reflection, both on each other and on society as a whole – even though the concept of criticizing other pilgrims is in itself again in contradiction to the open and welcoming character of the pilgrimage.

And so we come full circle, back to the notion of contradictions that make up pilgrim identities. Contradictory identities that do not seem to be bothered by their contradictory nature. And so I might more aptly use the term paradoxical than contradictory, and conclude that these contemporary pilgrim identities I have been studying are in its very essence paradoxical. This is an aspect of an identity type that we as academics tend to smooth out, as if they are imperfections that need to be fixed, but for pilgrims they seem to lie at the very core of their experience. And if they can accept these paradoxes, embrace them even, then why can't we? I propose to embrace these pilgrim paradoxes too, to take them seriously and to make them the basis for our further research.