Fictioning a Pilgrimage (or Fieldwork on the Fiction of the Self)

by Simon O'Sullivan

What is the difference between a real pilgrimage and a fictional one?[1] A real pilgrimage involves a journey across space and, as such, through time. It involves travelling to a special site and/or travelling with a special purpose, one that is often concerned with self-understanding or self-transformation.[2] A fictional pilgrimage does not involve an actual journey as such but an invented one, albeit the purpose might be similar. In fact, things are already a little more complicated: a fictional pilgrimage might involve a fictional account of a real pilgrimage or even—why not?—a real account of a fictional one. With the former, we are gesturing towards a subgenre of autofiction insofar as there is a real pilgrimage—or a real pilgrim anyway (autofiction names a genre of writing that brings the author 'as character' in)—but the journey has been fictionalised somehow.[3] Or, at least, the narrative is not concerned with straightforward reportage (or, perhaps better, is not concerned with producing a straightforward 'reality effect' in the reader).[4] With the latter—a real account of a fictional pilgrimage—the whole question of what a pilgrimage actually consists of opens up. Does it need to involve movement in space, for example? Or could it involve something apparently more static—the 'stationary voyage' as it were? Certainly, these other kinds of 'unreal' travel can be involved in self-knowledge and self-transformation (or an alternative 'production of subjectivity' to use Felix Guattari's phrase).[5] This kind of pilgrimage—if it can be called as such—encompasses various mystical and especially

psychedelic journeys. There is a whole literature—and different kinds of writing—on this idea of 'the trip'.[6] But might such a definition also simply include fiction as itself a kind of pilgrimage? Writing as a real account—an account that is written down, there on the page—of a fictional journey. And all of this with some special purpose that concerns the self?

The most interesting cases here are those examples of writing that cross (and perhaps confuse) these various genres and registers. For example, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters* (1963), which involves a real pilgrimage, at least of sorts, insofar as both writers go off to search for a very particular technology: ayahuasca (which, for both, promises a kind of self-transformation or, as Burroughs' remarks, the finding of something that might be able to 'change fact').[7] And then there is the drug-induced journey itself—and the subsequent encounter with the 'Great Being' (for Ginsberg), and so forth. The book is a record of these two different kinds of journey (which are themselves doubled: Ginsburg repeats Burroughs pilgrimage a few years after). But then this is also a fictional pilgrimage—as it's written in the book at any rate—insofar as the letters and other reports are not strictly reportage (if some of it is not made up, certainly the dates and sequencing don't quite fit the reality of what happened).[8] Or, as David Burrows and I have put it elsewhere, the facts have been fictioned (which seems entirely appropriate given the subject matter—in fact, might we even say, it means the

account is more 'real' on one level?).[9] And then, crucially, there is also the business of the 'cut-up' method—a further technology—examples of which are in the book (alongside instructions for the method) and which Burroughs suggests (to Ginsburg) continues the work of the drug and, as such, explicitly involves further space-time travel. Here experimental fiction—or, really, what Burroughs' understood as a time-travelling device—constitutes a further and stranger kind of journey in a more 'formal' sense (and, crucially, one in which the reader becomes involved).

Another example of writing the moves between these different forms and registers is Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980).[10] On the one hand, it's a novel, a work of fiction that involves, in part, a made-up pilgrimage across a post-apocalyptic landscape to a very particular site: 'Cambry' (or Canterbury). It's written in the first person—from the main character Riddley's perspective—so there is a sense, when reading it, that we are on the journey with Riddley, or at any rate are looking out of their eyes (I'll return to this below). And yet, reading Hoban's 'Afterword' to his novel (included in the relatively recent 'expanded edition' of the book), it becomes apparent that the novel emerged from a real trip to Canterbury and Hoban seeing the stained-glass window of *The Legend of St Eustace* in the cathedral there (it was upon seeing this narrative landscape in that window that the whole set-up of *Riddley Walker* occurred to him all at once).[11] Might we make a claim then—a little wild perhaps—that Hoban's novel

is a fictioned account of his own pilgrimage? In fact, Hoban's own biography (again, as laid out in the 'Afterword' to *Riddley Walker*) suggests he travelled in a campervan around Kent whilst writing the book, so perhaps the idea that *Riddley Walker* is a fictioned account of a real journey does not seem quite so far-fetched.[12] This raises complex questions about which of these details are part of the fiction of *Riddley Walker* (or perhaps, better, the 'extended fiction' around the novel) and which are not. What is more context, or more supplementary, to use a Derridean conceit. Put bluntly, where does life end and the fiction begin?

As the readers of the novel will know, the geography of *Riddley Walker* is also, to a certain extent anyway, real. The places and journeys in the book are all based on particular areas of Kent, albeit in the future and after some kind of nuclear catastrophe. All of this is made apparent—again, to some extent at least—in the map that comes at the beginning of *Riddley Walker* and which is based on the actual area in question, albeit with names changed and a drastically altered terrain (and we might also remark here that these different registers, maps, drawings, and so on are all part of a kind of 'fictioning effect'—even perhaps a form of *fictioned fieldwork*—which we also see in *The Yage Letters* with Ginsberg's drawings).[13] The novel, we might say, contains aspects of our 'reality' alongside the fiction of Riddley. Indeed, it is this imbrication of the two that makes it such a compelling—and complex—work.

As I mentioned above, *Riddley Walker* is written from Riddley's perspective—it's a kind of diary and, in the main part, an account of his journey across this barren landscape. And then there is also Riddley's very particular language—perhaps the most remarkable thing about the book—a kind of future-orientated made-up middle English which only goes to accentuate the experience the reader has of both encountering a very different being, but also of becoming Riddley, at least in some senses.[14] In reading the idiosyncratic language, one somehow inhabits the fiction (and thus the perspective) of Riddley more closely and completely (certainly one has to more or less read the book aloud). Again, we look out at the world from his eyes (and, in a way, Riddley himself reflects on all this at times within the book).[15] To return to the idea of self-knowledge here, it certainly seems the case—paradoxical though it sounds—that seeing from another's perspective gives us a kind of insight into 'who' we are. Or, we might say, taking on another fiction helps us see more clearly the fiction we 'are'. I'll return again to this odd—but further compelling—aspect of *Riddley Walker* below.

As well as the question of moving across space, there is also the question of the different times that are mixed up in *Riddley Walker's* landscape (and language). The book concerns a future that is also a throwback to the past, for example, in the excavation of older machinery by the various communities that, in fact, is far more advanced than the tools being used for the various digs. And it is the fiction—the particular

Fig. 43

set-up of the novel—that allows an accessing of these other times. It's this, especially, that means the novel resonates with *The Yage Letters* (again, both books seem to be about time travel or, at least, the layering—and co-presence—of different times). We might briefly remark here on that other more literary tradition of walking and pilgrimage that can be found—in its contemporary instantiation—in writers like W. G. Sebald and Iain Sinclair, and then also with the film-essays (or 'docu-fictions') of artist/writers like Patrick Keiller, Justin Barton and Mark Fisher, Victoria Halford and Steve Beard and so forth. Burrows and I have written about this—the film-essay as a kind of fictioning of the landscape—at more length elsewhere, so I won't repeat things here (although I will return to one work of docu-fiction briefly below) except to remark that the layering of different times in these works also operates through another kind of set-up, a particular and complex interplay of image and sound.[16] And, certainly, in the work of all the artists and writers I have just mentioned, it is walking—or pilgrimage (broadly conceived)—that allows these different times and temporalities to foreground themselves.

There is also the 'tradition' of following in the footsteps of previous pilgrims. Treating their accounts as offering a historical context of sorts or even, perhaps, taking such an account with one as a guide. An interesting contemporary example of the former here is Halford and Beard's docu-fiction *Voodoo Science Park* that uses an 'estate poem' written by Thomas Hobbes

as a structuring narrative for its own script. A further compelling aspect of Halford and Beard's project is that their script—alongside various research and fieldwork notes (and images)—is then also published as an accompanying book.[17] The fictioning of the landscape is, we might say, extended across different platforms and media. An interesting example of the latter—the taking of a book (a different fiction, for example) on a journey and using it as a kind of guide—is Robert Smithson taking Brian Aldiss' science fiction novel *Earthworks* (as well as a newspaper and a map) on his pilgrimage—and fieldwork for his own non-sites—upstate to Passaic.[18] Here these other 'texts' operate as a kind of optic through which Smithson fictions the 'ruins in reverse' of that industrial landscape. Or, to return to *Riddley Walker*, there are also those readers (or fans really) who make a real journey to the 'real' places in the novel (see also the examples of Riddley's map that one can see on the web that has been 'reconstructed' or superimposed with actual maps of Kent). At stake here, once again, is the idea of a kind of extended fiction—or scene—around *Riddley Walker*. Once again, the border between fiction and reality becomes blurred—or, at least, is made porous.

But, in fact, it seems to me that all this can be pushed a little further. Is there really such a hard and fast distinction between reality and fiction in the first place? Or is it the case that all these various traverses and crossings that we encounter in various cultural forms and productions are showing up something important

and, as it were, levelling? Certainly, Burroughs, for example, understood reality as a script (or series of them) that could be cut into and edited somehow. It was this that meant the cut-up was a time-travelling *and* magical technology.

And then there is the question of *who* the pilgrim is anyway? I have gestured towards this with my remarks about Hoban's biography, but it's even more the case with Burroughs, who occasionally wrote himself into his books (and whose life operated as 'research' for them). More pertinent though is the idea that 'Hoban' or 'Burroughs' are themselves just fictions. This is the case insofar as they are simply names on the covers of their books. Names that perform a very particular 'author function' to use Michel Foucault's term.[19] But they are also fictions in the same way that any name is a fiction. Or, indeed, going a little deeper in, not just any name but any idea of a self. Following the philosopher and cognitive scientist Thomas Metzinger here, we might understand ourselves as always already on a particular fictioned journey. We are not outside these various fictions in this sense but travelling in and through our own fiction or what Metzinger calls our own 'ego tunnel'.[20] In fact, for Metzinger, we are always already a fiction (a self) that is inhabiting a fiction (the world produced for and by that self). There is much more to say here about Metzinger's thesis and especially how this fiction of the self is determinant of all of our experiences and not something we can just shrug off (it operates on a number of different levels and registers). That said—and for our purposes

here—Metzinger does point to various experiences where this fiction is dislodged somehow, or can be seen for what it is (to a certain extent anyway), perhaps most intriguingly in the section of his book on 'Lucid Dreaming'.[21]

Here, we get some more traction on the idea I gestured to above, namely that fictioning a pilgrimage gives us some kind of insight into our own self. If we are already on a particular journey, inhabiting a specific fiction, then inventing a further one, nesting it within this one perhaps works to show up the edges of the fiction that we are already in. Metzinger is especially compelling on this point. Towards the end of the section on lucid dreaming mentioned above, he writes about what he calls 'trans-tunnel communication', as when in a scientific set-up (or 'sleep lab'), a veteran lucid dreamer is able to communicate—from within the dream as it were—via certain eye movements (agreed on before sleep) picked up by polygraphic analysis.[22] It is not so much that one can access an outside to one's own tunnel (or step outside the fiction as it were), but by turning in the other direction—in this case towards a further fiction (the dream) within a fiction (waking life)—and then also exploring the possibility of communication between—something is demonstrated, recursively as it were, about our own fiction or ego tunnel (simply that it is a fiction).

Following Metzinger, then, an interesting case might be to represent a pilgrimage whilst on one. Or, more generally, simply to narrate it—to write it down—possibly with maps, drawings or whatever else. This is

then to produce a pilgrimage from within a pilgrimage. It would be to double the always already representational logic at work. To use representation, paradoxically, to arrive at a deeper understanding about fiction and reality. And then this effect is increased when the reportage itself—the account of the pilgrimage—also involves fiction. It seems to me that *Riddley Walker* and *The Yage Letters* both follow this logic (and thus achieve this odd doubling effect in the reader), but with *Riddley Walker* this is extended in an interesting way insofar as that book involves a sequence or nesting of these fictions (that parallels the experiments with layering time). Simply put, there are multiple fictions within fictions in that novel. To pick out perhaps the most interesting example, there is the Eusa show, a strange prophetic Punch and Judy set-up (which is also, in fact, itself a travelling show). The Eusa show is a fiction within Riddley's world, which is itself a fiction invented by Hoban—written as a novel—which is then within 'our' world. But there is also something odd about the way in which the Eusa show seems to deliver—or channels—messages from outside the immediate fiction of 'Inland' (Riddley's world). The puppet show has a strange divinatory function in this sense. An example, perhaps, of 'trans-tunnel communication'? At any rate, writing (or 'nesting') a fiction within a fiction can produce a kind of shift in which the outer fiction (our 'reality') is seen *as* a fiction.

There is also the question here of intention and perhaps even of other deeper

assignments at work. If the self is a fiction, then what is behind that fiction? This is not so much to instate a more secret self behind any particular fiction—there is not necessarily an ur-author, as it were, writing the scripts (no puppet master pulling the strings)—but it is to understand that intention does not end at our idea of the (conscious) self. There are things at work—not least a vast bodily intelligence—beneath the fictions we inhabit (again, this is to follow Metzinger's neuroscientific thesis). Or, to put this another way, we are not always aware of what we are doing or why we are doing it. Might it also be that we can *make* other fictions—perhaps, for example, more collective ones—that will show us another way of existing in the world? Or, another example, might we turn away from some of the gendered fictions that had been assigned to us at birth?[23]

In fact, is our idea of the self perhaps part of the problem in what can feel like these end times? There is not the space to explore this fully here, but it is the case that a particular notion of the self—as a cohesive, centred, self-possessed subject—also involves a whole set of values and assumptions that are also invariably exclusions. The writings of Denise Ferreira da Silva are instructive on this point, especially the deep philosophical work she has done in excavating this white Western subject and then also in gesturing towards other possible modes of being and value systems (constellated around 'Blackness').[24] We might also note the importance of turning to other neurodivergent

accounts—and experiences—of being in the world which, as well as showing us further and diverse modes of existence also show up the edges and exclusions of our dominant fictions.

This disruption of a dominant fiction (of the self) might also relate to some of the more ecological concerns of this anthology. On the one hand, it might, for example, open the way for other fictions of other-selves (or even, perhaps, 'non-selves') away from those premised on extraction and human centrism (with all the attendant investments in certain knowledge systems). On the other, it might point simply to the idea of the self (or the subject) as a particular kind of ecological system, one that is itself positioned—or nested—within a wider ecology. With the first of these at stake is the exploration of other kinds of epistemologies that will also imply different kinds of relationships with the landscape—with animals, plants, and the other non-human entities we live with (as explored, for example, in Donna Haraway's recent writings).[25] With the latter—the idea of an expanded ecology of the self—the writings of Felix Guattari might be turned to insofar as they attend specifically to these different levels and registers of ecology.[26]

Finally, to give all this a slightly different slant, might we also say this kind of practice—of fictioning a pilgrimage—is also a performance? The performance of a fiction that then reveals the fiction we already are? This idea of performance—some kind of effort or work, actively taking on a different

perspective somehow—is important. The kind of self-knowledge that has been at stake in this essay—the seeing of the self as a fiction—does not arise from inert reflect (that is always caught within the fiction) but needs to be performed somehow.[27] The fiction needs to be written as it were, characters (or avatars) invented, landscapes figured out (so a kind of fieldwork albeit more experimental and concerned as much with the subject as any object). There is a kind of analytic—or therapeutic—project and practice here: to both grasp (and care for) the landscape of the self as it is (with all its various investments and values), but then also to write other possible landscapes.

Pilgrimage would then be a kind of technology in this sense—one that involves a particular relationship to site (or a landscape that is both internal and external)—but also one that dislodges our pre-existing sense of self in some manner (certainly pilgrimage involves 'leaving home'). And then, to repeat some of the above, writing about pilgrimage would be a kind of doubling or nesting of these performance fictions. Might this be the same with reading? Certainly, as I have attempted to argue, this seems to be the case with reading a fictional work like *Riddley Walker*. But what about other kinds of writing? Is it the case, for example, that reading my words written here—following the brief and more theoretical journey I have laid out—something about your own fiction of the self is revealed? Is your reading of this essay—if you have got this far—part of your own fieldwork? Or,

put differently, does it raise the question as to whether there is a deeper assignment at work? You cannot answer that last question, of course (one cannot step on one's own shadow as it were), but perhaps by reading my perspective on fictioning a pilgrimage something about your own journey will be foregrounded, and with that new pilgrimages—and perhaps other landscapes too?—will begin to suggest themselves.

Image

Fig. 43 Map from Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, 1980 © The Trustees of the Russell Hoban Trust, published by Penguin Modern Classics, used by permission of David Higham Associates.

Endnotes

1. Before we get started on our way, a word about the intention behind what follows (at least, as far as I am conscious of it). The original idea was to go on an actual pilgrimage and then write about that. Here the guiding principle was of pilgrimage as a kind of (material) fieldwork. On the one hand, Covid-19 prevented such a plan, but, more generally, it became apparent to me—in the planning stages as it were—that it was more the idea of pilgrimage as a kind of 'stationary voyage' that was important and, even more so, how certain kinds of fictioned accounts of pilgrimage produced a kind of feedback effect on my sense of self. Hopefully, this will become clearer as things progress.

2. Gilbert Simondon understood pilgrimage as being about going to certain 'privileged points'—special sites in the landscape—where there is a kind of residual magic (a pre-technical and pre-religious mode of being) or, at least, a point of exchange between human and cosmos (see Gilbert Simondon, 'On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects' (extract), trans. N. Mellamphy, D. Mellamphy and N. B. Mellamphy, *Deleuze Studies*, 5.3, 2011 (1958): 407–24). For a discussion of Simondon's take on magic (in relation to landscape) see David Burrows and my book *Fictioning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), the section on 'The Magical Mode of Existence' in the chapter 'Residual Culture and the Magical Mode of Existence', 87-94. Simondon also suggests that with vacations we have a residue of this desire for something different, special, out of the ordinary (Simondon, 414). Something, we might say, that allows for a shift in perspective.

3. There are various contemporary art practices—and examples of 'artistic research' more generally—concerned with these kinds of 'fictioned' pilgrimages. For an account of some of these, see Fictioning, especially the section on 'The (New) Pilgrims' in the chapter 'Future-Past-Presents: Neomedieval Mappae Mundi', 113-118.

4. See Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3–10.

5. For some earlier (and more tentative) thoughts about the relationship of pilgrimage to the production of subjectivity (namely mine), see my article, written with my friend Ola Stahl, 'Contours and Case Studies for a Dissenting Subjectivity (or, How to Live Creatively in a Fearful World)' (Angelaki, 11.1, 2006: 147-56) which has a section that concerns a pilgrimage I made with another friend, Vali Hutchinson (Samudradaka) to Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty and Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels. That writing is concerned with the journey that we made but also with the way in which the two monuments themselves operate as space-time travel devices.

6. For an account of some of these, see *Fictioning*, the chapter 'Overcoming the Fiction of the Self', 49-62.

7. William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963). David Burrows and I have written about *The Yage Letters* in a little more length in *Fictioning*. See the section on 'Yage and the Cut-up' in the chapter 'Overcoming the Fiction of the Self', 50-3.

8. As Oliver Harris makes clear in his 'Editor's Introduction' to the Redux edition of *The Yage Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006), ix-xlix.

9. Burrows and O'Sullivan, 51.

10. Russell Hoban, Riddley Walker (London: Bloomsbury, 1980). Again, Burrows and I have written about Riddley Walker at more length in *Fictioning*. See the section on 'Riddley Walker' in the chapter 'Residual Culture and the Magical Mode of Existence', 94-8. What follows re-visits that material—and introduces a couple of diagrams that did not make it

into that book—but also attempts to develop it somewhat (especially around the idea of fiction's relation to 'revealing' the fiction of the self).

11. Here's the relevant quote from the 'Afterword':

> As I stood before the picture there came to me the idea of a desolate England thousands of years after the destruction of civilisation in a nuclear war; people would be living at an Iron Age level of technology and such government as there was would make its policies known through itinerant puppeteers. I know it sounds strange but that's how it was. ('Afterword', Riddley Walker, 224)

12. There are also the reports of Hoban discussing the—somewhat torturous—progress of his novel with his psychotherapist suggesting a tightly enmeshed landscape of life and fiction (see Nicholas Roe, 'Secrets of the Yellow Pages', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2002).

13. For a compelling account of the role of these kinds of drawings in relation to fiction and fieldwork, see Michael Taussig's *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

14. Dostoyevsky is alleged to have remarked that there are only two plots in and for the novel: you go on a journey and a stranger arrives in town. We might reflect that both of these are the same but from different perspectives. The perspective of a stranger who goes someplace else (such as on a pilgrimage), and then the perspective of us looking on at this stranger who has arrived. With a novel like Riddley Walker, there is a kind of doubling of perspectives also. Indeed, we go on the journey—with Riddley, as Riddley. But in its oddness, in its use of language—in the way we encounter this peculiar character—it is very much the case that a stranger has arrived in town. And it is this—the strangeness or alienating effect—that also helps produce the recursive self-knowledge about our own strangeness. Burrows and I develop this idea of a kind of doubling of perspective—or of a 'perspective on perspective'—in our essay on 'Science Fiction Devices' which looks at Hoban's novel, amongst some others, as containing a particular kind of perspectival (and, in this case, metafictional) device.

15. In a strange and apparently metafictional section towards the beginning of the novel, Lorna—Riddley's partner—remarks: '… theres something in us it dont have no name…Its some kynd of thing it aint us yet its in us. Its looking out thru our eye hoals.' Riddley Walker, 6). It's this conversation that sets Riddey off on his account, or, as he says at the end of Chapter 1: 'Thats why I finely come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idear of us myt be. Thinking on that thing whats in us lorn and loan and oansome' (Riddley Walker, 7).

16. See *Fictioning*, the section on 'Docu-fictions and Theory-Fictions' in the chapter 'Fictioning the Landscape', 134-40.

17. Victoria Halford and Steve Beard, *Voodoo Science Park* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).

18. For a longer discussion of Smithson's pilgrimage upstate, see Fictioning, the section on 'Ruins in Reverse' in the chapter 'Fictioning the Landscape', p. 130-33.

19. See Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books), 101-20.

20. Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

21. Metzinger, 139-48.

22. Metzinger, 144.

23. See the thesis 'against nature' set out in Laboria Cubonik's 'Xenofeminist Manifesto' (2015), http://www.laboriacuboniks.net Accessed 20 July 2021).

24. See, as indicative, Ferreira da Silva, Denise (2017), '1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞:

On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value', e-flux, 79: n.p.

25. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016)

26. See, for example, Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. I. Pinder and P. Sutton (London: Athlone, 1989).

27. And this kind of performance—that produces a certain type of knowledge—will not necessarily fit with more typical accounts of research. Indeed, because it involves subjective experience (or, at least, the bringing of this first-person perspective into relation with a third-person perspective), it might well be treated with suspicion or not accepted as valid research at all. It is perhaps this that makes it a form of artistic or practice research.