Getting to the Point: Walking and feeling on the shorelines of Spurn

Toby Horkan, University of Hull

Introduction

My research is focused on a strange and captivating place called Spurn, a three-mile long coastal spit that sits at the southern tip of the Holderness Coast of East Yorkshire in England, a coast famous for being the fastest eroding in the whole of Europe, losing an average of 6 and a half feet per year. The spit juts out into the Humber Estuary, forming a physical and symbolic barrier between the river water and the ferocious North Sea, meaning Spurn is at the mercy of the elements from all sides. Because of this, many have said that "no two days at Spurn are ever the same", with an extensive history and continued present of flooding, eroding, and changing shape attesting to this. Spurn is also a designated National Nature Reserve and European Special Area of Conservation, because it is a significant stopping point for migrating birds, as well as being home to many rare coastal plant species. But there is also a varied human history, for example having been home to community of lifeboat rescuers and their families from the early 19th century to just last year.

Spurn is a complex and varied landscape, and yet is also quite remote and peripheral – though paradoxically, it attracts a considerable number of people who develop passionate, emotional, almost spiritual connections with the place. So, my research focuses on some of the stories, memories and emotions associated with Spurn, and the different ways in which people forge these connections with the landscape, the ways in which they come to know and care for the place. And arguably, walking is the most fundamental version of this – our different rhythms, our favourite places to walk, the encounters we have with humans and non-humans 'on the ground', the memories and interests we bring with us, the challenges we might face while walking – all contribute to the highly individual ways in which we experience landscapes.

Walking brings the body and the landscape together – as John Wylie describes, "in the midst of things, in the thick of earth and bodies, the self is pressed up against the landscape, at one and the same time part of it, emergent from it and distinct from it, like a blister on a toe." (2005, p.240) – the blister is a particularly compelling image. Furthermore, since a major storm surge destroyed the only road access onto Spurn in 2013, the spit has largely only been accessible on foot to most people. Therefore, a deeper understanding of how, where, when, with whom, and especially why people walk to and on Spurn is key to uncovering these ways of knowing the place, and the stories that surround it.

So, for this paper, I will first explore the idea of affect and emotion with relation to Spurn, and introduce the connection between 'walking and feeling' seen in my title. I will then look at two examples of writers who interlace their experiences of walking Spurn with their emotional responses and reflections – first, a narrative poem by Andrew Motion, and then a work of life-slash-nature writing by Katharine Norbury. My contention is that an understanding of the individual and emotional aspects of the practices that people undertake in places, with walking the most common form of these, could inform a more sensitive and plural form of landscape management as we head into an uncertain future.

Walking, affect and emotion

Interestingly, there are a number of authors who write quite specifically of walking at Spurn with the express purpose of working through their experiences of loss, uncertainty and sadness, often mixing their reactions to Spurn with the act of reflecting on their emotions. It is as if Spurn's strangeness, its liminality, melancholic atmosphere, and vulnerability in the face of an uncertain future mirrors these experiences of loss and uncertainty in our own lives, offers a place of solace and comfort, a space to walk and bring together, in the words of Rebecca Solnit, the body, mind and world (2001, p.5).

Key here is the idea that Spurn has the capacity to 'affect' us, referring to people's emotional responses to the place, as something that "triggers predominantly personal reactions" (Berberich et al. 2016, p.1). Sara Ahmed describes being affected by something as "evaluating that thing", explaining that "evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn towards things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us" (2010, p.31). In other words, in our acts of affecting and being affected by different elements in the landscape – turning a corner to see a beautiful sunset, the surprise of a cold wind on our face, the bodily effort of trudging along a loose shingle beach – we are continually shaping and reshaping our specific perceptions of a place, our own 'personal geographies'.

Christine Berberich and colleagues (2013, 2016) have developed the idea of an 'affective landscape' as a basis for exploring the more emotive, personal and haptic aspects of our encounters with landscapes, focusing on literary texts in particular. I also like this idea of a landscape filled with a range of actors that affect and are affected by one another is a useful frame for exploring how people move through the landscape, shaping their own perceptions and connections to a place. I will now move on to looking at the two writers I introduced earlier, hopefully showing the significance of the relationship between walking and emotion for these visitors to Spurn.

The effort of keeping going: Andrew Motion

Andrew Motion, the well-known poet and former poet laureate of the United Kingdom, has written multiple accounts of journeys that he took to Spurn in the 1970s when he was lecturing in my own department, the English department at the University of Hull. He has described how he is "still haunted by the trips" he made there, continually revisiting the place across his long career in a variety of literary forms. I want to focus on the first of these, a narrative poem simply entitled 'Spurn' written earlier in his career, which describes his walk to Spurn Point in more detail. In the poem, Motion decides to head out to Spurn from Hull because it's "a good place to be lonely" (1), advice he receives from none other than the poet Philip Larkin, then librarian at the university, who knows that Motion's "marriage was on the rocks" (2-3), an apt coastal metaphor for the difficulties he is facing in his personal life.

So, he drives from Hull to Spurn, travelling through a landscape that menacingly twists and turns around him as if it were alive, forcing him to acknowledge "his disappointment" at the "shape of not-being" in the car next to him (79-80). This is the mood in which he arrives at Spurn, and plucking up the courage to "finally" stop, he steps out the car and into a silence that "seethed round

[him] like boiling fat" (112), the loneliness described by Larkin taking on a sinister form. From here, he begins his journey on foot:

> "So I started walking, and half an hour later was still walking, / my head full of the effort of keeping going, everything else / part of that." (113-5)

This is an integral moment in the poem – first, from my own experience of walking on Spurn, I can attest to the feeling of going absolutely nowhere when walking on Spurn, with the distant lighthouse seemingly never getting any closer as you slog through sand and shingle. But we also have Motion directly making a connection between his body and his mind, "full of the effort of keeping going", referring both to his current walk but also his life circumstances more generally. It is as the physical walk down to Spurn Point comes to represent his wider experience of 'keeping going', marching on into an emotionally turbulent and uncertain future.

He feels closed in on both sides by the dune walls on the coast-side, and a "slack backwater of the Humber / coated with yellow scum" on the estuary-side – the landscape continues to affect his mood, and it changes the way he moves through it: "I put my head down and wouldn't look." (120). Nearing the Point, he starts to sense a change, and this reaches its head when he reaches Spurn Point, the very tip of the spit, and sits right at the edge, "half an eye on the water, half looking in" (169-70). Staring up-river, he imagines "the mud-banks and derelict staves, the groyne taking its green strides // into oblivion." (176-7), paralleling his own act of walking, physical and metaphorical, into an indeterminate, post-marriage world.

The poem closes with Motion's decision to turn around – but not back into shifting and unsettling landscape he traversed through to get here. Rather, he shuts his eyes, feels "the wind press its hand eagerly between [his] shoulder blades, / and began the journey back" (183-4) – the image suggests that his act of being in and moving through this place has aided him in stepping forward to face his future, like the groyne in the muddy river, into 'oblivion'.

Standing between shadow and sun: Katharine Norbury

The second text that I want to look at is a recent work of life and nature writing by Katharine Norbury, published in 2015. In this book, she describes different walking journeys taken to rivers across the United Kingdom, working from mouth to source and often alongside her young daughter. She is inspired by the books The Well at the End of the World and Highland River by Neil M. Gunn – in the former, the protagonist has reached "the end of his youth" (p.?) and his son was sadly stillborn, so he decides to walk through Scotland looking for the titular 'well at the end of the world'. Norbury sees herself in this character, as she is grieving from a recent miscarriage and too feels that her youth is fading, describing a "shared … sense that there was something beyond [her] grasp, something out of reach, and perhaps the idea of a secret well was as good a way of expressing it as any" (p.12).

Early in the book, Norbury travels to Spurn in the middle of the night, fulfilling a dream she has long had to walk to the lighthouse on the Point. Expecting the landscape to be empty and dark, for her and her alone, she is unsettled by how many houses in the villages leading up to Spurn have their lights on in the middle of the night, and the sky is much lighter than expected – she feels

exposed and vulnerable. The environment transforms into these fears – she imagines seeing in the marshy estuary a "bloated dog, pale limbs like chair legs pointing at a sightless sky. Or worse" (p.20), and turns away in fear. But, she walks on anyway – "the more space I put between myself and the wakeful inhabitants of the mainland, the better I felt." (p.21).

Walking on Spurn now becomes something liberating, rather than disquieting: "I liked being alone. I settled into my gait, happy that mine were the first footprints in sand as new in snow." (p.21). This chapter moves rapidly back and forth between these two representations – now in a better mood, the narrative weaves through Spurn's history of coastal defences as if mirroring Norbury's own child-like, excitable movement among the concrete and wooden remnants of sea walls and groynes. Describing the groynes as having "the gravitas of gods", or as comparable to "the skeleton of a Viking ship", Norbury is "delighted by the place, forgot about [her] fear, and was still running about between the forest of posts when the sun lifted out of the sea, orange into an indigo sky." (p.21).

Pausing, she feels the warmth of the sun on her face – the ground, meanwhile, becomes covered with spidery shadows that transform the landscape. Noticing her own shadow, "tall and spectre-thin", (p.22) she begins to cry:

> "My shadow! I stood between it an the sun, it flooded from my feet along the earth and, for a little while, I knew I was alive. This moment, these moments, of recognition, they come so rarely; without hindsight, without foresight. Time passing even as we enter it." (p.22)

This image embeds her body into the landscape: her shadow, emanating from her feet, her body's gateway into the ground, and in among the other shadows, alters the shape of the place; and she experiences a powerful realisation of her sense of self and her sense of being in the world. This, to me, is an excellent demonstration of the idea of Spurn as an affective landscape, engendered specifically by her act of walking through Spurn, by the sense of freedom and compression of time that it granted her.

So, she keeps on walking, "enchanted" by the "softness of the landscape", excitedly exploring a ruined cottage; tired from walking on the beach, her "feet sinking with every step", she steps off of the path and in among the low dunes, thrilled by her encounters with the plant species she sees there. This makes me think of Tim Edensor's work on the rhythms of walking – her ability to weave in and among the dunes, to explore and discover, allows her to notice and delight in the minutiae of the landscape, uncovering different layers of interest and wonder.

But, almost at the lighthouse, the mood shifts again: there is a man between her and her destination – she stops in her tracks and drops into the long grass, her ability to walk this place impeded again by her fear. The man is running at the sea and lobbing rocks in, running back and repeating the motion again and again – Norbury's fear overwhelms her, and she retreats to find a hidden place in the dunes, and falls asleep. But when she awakes, the man is still there, throwing the rocks, and she cannot bring herself to go past him to the lighthouse. So, her aim of walking to the lighthouse on Spurn Point, something she had wanted to do for a long time, is scuppered. She turns back, unable to look at the "murderous estuary" (p.25), and when she reaches the road, she begins to run back towards the mainland, away from the man, sticking to the path to remain visible as this is the safer choice – the total opposite of her animated meanderings through the dunes before.

She is in disbelief of the "literary irony" of not quite reaching the lighthouse, and expresses her irritation that "if I was a man, and I was ten years younger, I probably wouldn't care. I was irritated that my long blonde hair and slight frame rendered me vulnerable, unexpected." (p.26). The oscillating moods characterising her journey – an attempt to move on after the grief of her miscarriage – demonstrates the different experience that women and other minoritized groups can have when walking, the restrictions on what people can do because of perceived and real risks. Andrew Motion's fearfulness stems from his reluctance to face up to his personal issues – a young, straight, white man, he is free to walk on Spurn unquestioned, free to explore his interiorities, to walk with his "head down".

The mood changes again when she encounters and follows a massive hare into the grass, and she comments that "the riverbank, so recently a place of terror, seemed, under the warm sun, quite lovely" (p.27), so she ends up leaving Spurn with a more positive outlook. It is interesting then to see how Norbury's experience of Spurn, the routes she is able to take, the types and rhythms of her walking, are so impacted by her identity as a woman on her own in an isolated place – she is affected by the place in a myriad of ways, and there is much to learn from her representation of Spurn and her story of walking (almost) to the lighthouse.

Conclusions

I have demonstrated how we might use literary analysis, using the writings of two authors who visited Spurn, to unpack the relations between walking, emotion, and experience in this place. But what might we learn from these examples, as well as other written examples, and indeed from others, humans and non-humans, who aren't necessarily recording and publishing texts, about how people move through this place and the affective relations in which they are drawn into as they move? I think particularly of a research interview I conducted recently with a historian, Jan Crowther, who has written extensively on the history of Spurn and the south Holderness region, and who lived there for almost 2 decades. Calling her connection with Spurn "spiritual", she described how she and her husband would walk almost the exact same route onto Spurn almost every day, visiting their favourite parts of the peninsula and also checking the moth traps that her husband had set up. When he passed away, she continued to walk this same route, still checking his moth traps despite the fact that, she confesses, she never really "got" mothing, but that in doing this, she felt closer to him.

How might we uncover what attunements, interests, memories, prejudices, etc. that people bring with them that affect their perceptions and experiences of the place? What might understanding these teach us about the relationship between walking and the building of relationships with places? What could this teach us about the links between knowing and caring for places? This could be done using methods such as unstructured interviews, perhaps done on walks of the place, in community and group walks such as going on litter picks or fossil hunts, or by using creative methods such as walking diaries, photo-elicitation, and even reading and discussing texts about Spurn with different groups of people.

Spurn is such an interesting case study because there can be quite a lot of conflict around what its future should look like – it is so unpredictable and vulnerable, that, in the words of the same

historian, "it makes you care more". How might then a deeper understanding of people's intimate relationships, their encounters and connections, with Spurn, be implemented in managing this place for both humans and non-humans in the future? And indeed, what role might recording these experiences now, emphasising Spurn's place at the centre of a nexus of memorial and emotional relations, assume when the Spurn that exists today is no longer there?

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. 2010, 'Happy Objects', in M. Gregg & G.J. Seigworth (eds.) The Affect Theory Reader. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp.29-51.

Berberich, C., Campbell, N. & Hudson, R. 2013, 'Affective Landscapes: An Introduction', Cultural Politics 9(3).

Berberich, C., Campbell, N. & Hudson, R. 2016, 'Introduction: Affective Landscapes', in C. Berberich, N. Campbell & R. Hudson (eds.) Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and the Senses. London: Routledge: 1-17.

Edensor, T. 2010, 'Walking in rhythms: place, regulation, style and the flow of experience', Visual Studies 25(1): 69-79.

Norbury, K. 2015. The Fish Ladder. London: Bloomsbury.

Motion, A. [n.d.], 'Spurn'.

Solnit, R. 2014 [2001]. Wanderlust: A History of Walking. London: Granta Books.

Wylie, J. 2005, 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path', Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 30(2): 234-247.