

Close Walking

Musings from Goat Mountain

Matthias Egeler
Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich

In this note, I want to propose that sometimes a rather pedestrian approach to storytelling can greatly help us to understand the context of and what is going on in folk narratives. For many such stories, a close reading of the text can be fruitfully supplemented with a corresponding 'close walking' of the locations where the plot of the narrative plays itself out, and this can help to ground our understanding of the stories in the everyday contexts of work and land use that were a given for the people who originally told the tale. I will develop this thought on an Icelandic example, but, especially judging from my experience with Irish literature, I think that it can be applied also in at least some other cultural contexts.

Imagine yourself sitting on the crest of a hill, or more accurately of a rocky bluff. This bluff juts out of a mountainside right above an Icelandic fjord. You are only at a height of about 130 meters above sea level, but your perch directly overlooks the coast, so wide views open up along the coastline as well as to the mountains on the far side of the fjord. These mountains are still speckled with snow, just as there are pockets of snow in the mountain landscape that stretches out behind your back. On one side, your bluff is bounded by near-vertical cliffs that drop towards the valley a hundred metres below you. There, the red-painted roofs of a cluster of farmhouses are nestled at the foot of the mountain. On the other side of your bluff, the trough of a small valley separates it from the mountains that form the upland plateau. This small valley – really little more than an elongated hollow – would make for a good hiding place: there is no view into it from the coast or the coastal road; one can only overlook it either from your bluff or from the even higher mountains beyond it. It is one of those places



View from Goat Mountain towards Heydalsá (Photo © M. Egeler, 2019).

that is so much in the shadow of its surroundings that patches of snow still hold out there; in it, it is windy and bone-chillingly cold. If you let your gaze follow the line of this valley towards the coast, you see a second farm, this one with its roofs painted a light sky-blue.

This view – overlooking the fjord, the two farms with the red and blue roofs, and the half-hidden little valley – is the view that you have from ‘Goat Mountain’ – Geitafell – on the south coast of Steingrímsfjörður in the Icelandic West-fjords. Goat Mountain forms a prominent outcrop of a rocky ridge that lies diagonally between the two farmsteads of Heydalsá (with the red roofs) and Smáhamrar (with the blue roofs). The reason I was there was a research project on landscape and storytelling. We know that Icelandic storytelling frequently engages in an intense play with place-names. Icelandic place-names often are objects of wordplay and reinterpreted to form the basis for developing new plot-lines (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991: esp. pp. xxx–xli; Egeler 2018a, 2018b, 2021). This made me wonder: does this storytelling not only play with the names of places, but also with their topography?

The stretch of coast between Heydalsá and Smáhamrar is, as so many places in Iceland are, a landscape of stories. One of these stories was written down in 1933 by Guðmundur Jónsson at Bakki in Tálknafjörður, to be published by Helgi Guðmundsson shortly afterwards (1933–1937: 147–149). It runs as follows (my transl.):

The Neighbours

Early in the eighteenth century, a man lived at Smáhamrar on Steingrímsfjörður, who was called Bárður; and another, Jón by name, at Heydalsá, which is the next farm further into the fjord from Smáhamrar. They both had knowledge of magic and played various tricks on each other. It was said that mostly Jón started it, but Bárður got his own back. Bárður had a riding horse, one of good quality, the best in that community. Jón at Heydalsá developed a great interest in the horse and often asked Bárður to sell it to him, but Bárður always says no. Once, as on other occasions, Jón asks Bárður for the horse, and Bárður then tells him without any reservation that it would be no use for him to continue with his pestering, because he would not sell the horse, neither to him nor to anybody else; he thought so much of it that he would not part from it. Jón gets angry about that and says in the same moment as he is going away: “It can happen that you will not get more out of it than if you had sold it to me.” Bárður does not reply anything to that.

Around the time when the lambs are separated from the ewes, the shepherd from Smáhamrar comes across Bárður’s riding horse, dead behind the so-called Goat Mountain (Geitafell), and that is on the ridge towards the farm at Heydalsá. The shepherd tells Bárður of his find. He lets little show at that, but immediately suspects that Jón would be responsible for the death of the horse. The shepherd asks Bárður whether he did not want to skin it. Bárður replied to this question only by saying that he strictly forbade both him and all others in his home from touching the horse.

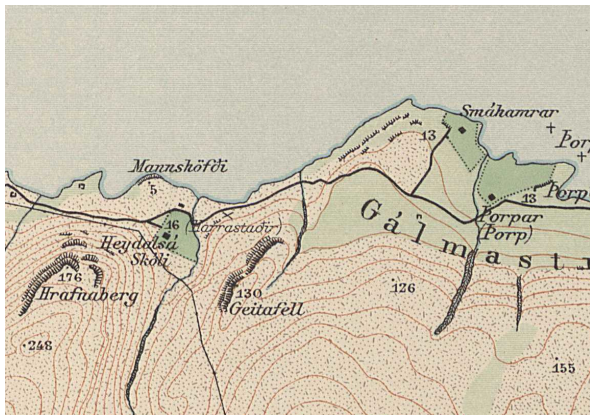
The following day, the news reached Smáhamrar that all ewes at Heydalsá were missing from the pens.

People searched for them day after day, and they were found nowhere. In the end, after a week has gone by, they are found behind the above-mentioned Goat Mountain, and they are busy gnawing the last scraps from the bones of Bárður’s riding horse. As it could easily be seen, the ewes had eaten its skin and pelt, and all that of it that teeth can grip, and they had now become spindly thin and were looking very bad, and they became also useless for all that was left of the summer. – People said that the neighbours never played any tricks on each other again.

In trying to get an angle on this story, the traditional close reading did not get me anywhere, at least not anywhere particularly interesting: it just seemed like a straightforward story told in straightforward language and with a straightforward moral message about good neighbourly coexistence. Even in the wider context of Icelandic literature, it does not particularly stand out, except maybe for its comparatively amiable ending. In a medieval Icelandic saga, the incident of the dead horse would have marked the beginning of a feud which would have left everybody dead, innocent bystanders included. Readers of *Egils saga* may remember how much bloodshed could come from a slightly rough ballgame, let alone genuine aggression. By comparison, the neighbours of “The Neighbours” are good neighbours indeed.

Some other hints about a possible approach to reading “The Neighbours” can be found in local writing. In 1985, Gísli Jónatansson discussed the story in the regional year-book *Strandapósturinn* (‘The Strandir Post’) in an account of abandoned farmsteads in the area (1985: 125). Gísli farmed at nearby Naustavík, a farmstead only a few hundred metres from Heydalsá that today is itself abandoned. He thus was a neighbour of “The Neighbours” and deeply familiar with the locality. In his article, a summary of the story is prompted by the ruins of a former seasonal mountain farm in the valley above Heydalsá and its name Bárðarsel (‘Bárður’s shieling’): this name could be taken to refer to the Bárður who has the last laugh in “The Neighbours”. Thus, since Gísli takes his cue for summarizing the story from a place-name, his text illustrates a point made by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson already in 1940: stories about place-names are told when the place-name is discussed or when the place to which it belongs is seen (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003 [1940]: 67). Contrary to an often-repeated stereotype, however, this does not mean that the reality of the place and its name is taken to be proof of the truth of the story. After summarizing the folktale, Gísli pointedly concludes (1985: 125): *Svona er nú þjóðsagan og trúir þeir sem vilja* (‘Thus now is the folktale, and believe it who will’). Reading Gísli’s summary, one is left with the distinct impression that stories are about places, not about truth, and believing a word of them is strictly optional.

Yet the spatial aspect implied by the association with a place-name is exactly where things get interesting. Gísli does not retell the story as a historical tradition but as part of the chain of associations evoked by a place, and this



Map 1: The story landscape of “The Neighbours” in the early twentieth century: Heydalsá, Smáhamrar, and Goat Mountain (Geitafell) on the fjord of Steingrímsfjörður in the Strandir district of Iceland. The sheep would have gnawed the horse carcass within a couple of dozen metres from where the elevation of Geitafell is marked (“130”). Geitafell may be the only point from which one can see both Heydalsá and Smáhamrar, as well as the hollow of the horse carcass. Section of *Generalstabens Topografiske Kort, sheet Tröllatunga – 33 Óspakseyri N.V.* (drawn 1912, published 1914), based on the digitized copy of the Icelandic National and University Library (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn), used with permission (Jökull Sævarsson, 03/05/2019).

geographically-focused approach to the story tallies with the geographical specificity of the story itself: the tale of “The Neighbours” exactly locates where its plot unfolds. In fact, the story contains more place-names than names of people. So, judging from both its own focus on places and from its local reception, the story of “The Neighbours” seems to have been viewed very much as a story about places.

This thought suggested to me the rather pedestrian method of going to these places and just see what happens: one could say, to supplement a close reading with a ‘close walking’. This is how we ended up on top of Goat Mountain. The coastal road that connects Heydalsá and Smáhamrar today follows virtually the same course as it did in the 1910s, when the Danish General Staff produced the first detailed maps of Iceland (Map 1). If one follows this road, and thus walks the connecting line between the two farms as it already was when the story was recorded in 1933, one learns exactly – nothing much. As the crow flies, Heydalsá and Smáhamrar are less than 3 km apart, but there are no interesting lines of sight, as the ridge of which Goat Mountain forms a part blocks the view between the farms. Given how common intervisibility between farms is in the open landscape of Iceland with its absence of higher vegetation, this is an unusual situation for neighbouring farms; but whether one can correlate the lack of a line of sight with the inability of the two neighbours to see eye to eye? I am hesitant to go that far.

Yet a properly ‘close’ walking of the story would have to cover not only the farms of the two cantankerous neighbours, but also the more outlying locations of the tale, and

this means: Goat Mountain. Even this location actually is not that far out of the way. Seen from Heydalsá, Goat Mountain is a bluff overlooking the farm, the valley of Heydalur, and the coast, and it does not require any particular effort to reach. Going there is not mountaineering, but indeed just a walk. Yet what one meets at the end of this walk, on top of Goat Mountain, is again Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. As mentioned above, already decades ago Einar observed about Icelandic place-lore that such “stories come to life when the place-names come under discussion or when one sees the places” (2003 [1940]: 67). At the top of Goat Mountain, the story of “The Neighbours” becomes very lively indeed. As one walks up to the top of the bluff, the ridge between Heydalsá and Smáhamrar stops being a visual obstruction but rather begins facilitating wide views in both directions: while from a point of view down at the coast the two farms are visually isolated from each other, up at Goat Mountain both of them can be seen at the same time. It may even be that Goat Mountain is the *only* place from which one has a view of both the red roofs of Heydalsá and the blue ones of Smáhamrar. So what better place to tell a story involving the two farms? And not only that, but from Goat Mountain one also has a view into the little valley where the carcass of the riding horse was found by the shepherd and devoured by the sheep. Goat Mountain combines all the places of the story into one single vista.

In a way which is almost untypical for an Icelandic story, no single place-name is coined in “The Neighbours”. In contrast to many other Icelandic tales, this is not a place-name story. But how all its places fall together into a single



360°-view from Goat Mountain: the hollow behind Goat Mountain, Heydalsá, the fjord of Steingrímsfjörður, Smáhamrar, and the hollow behind Goat Mountain again (Photo © M. Egeler, 2019).

landscape prospect if seen from Goat Mountain strongly suggests that it nevertheless is a place story in the strictest sense: a narrative that is inextricably bound up with a specific patch of ground and the lay of the land at that patch. Sitting on top of Goat Mountain and seeing, for the first (and only) time, all the places of the story together within one turn of the head, it is hard to avoid a feeling that this story is tailored specifically to Goat Mountain and its surroundings.

An obvious counter-argument would be that Goat Mountain is too out of the way to be a place from which people would look at stories. But then – is it? There are hey meadows directly at its foot, and, more importantly, even the story itself names the context in which this bluff would have been visited: after the riding horse has died in the hollow behind Goat Mountain, it is found by the shepherd of one of the farms, and after the ewes have gone missing, they are found there by the shepherds of the other farm. Goat Mountain may be named for goats rather than sheep, but the story itself depicts it as closely integrated into the workflow of sheep husbandry and a place where shepherds would go fairly regularly. It might also be worthwhile remembering that the story of “The Neighbours” is only partly about humans: on one level it treats the quarrel of the two neighbours, but on another it focuses entirely on the consequences of this quarrel for their livestock. It is a story about animal husbandry, and thus it seems to make eminent sense that it can be taken in at one glance at a place connected with this animal husbandry.

A ‘close walking’ of the story seems to allow us an unexpected glimpse of the *Sitz im Leben* of the tale as one that has its place in a landscape of livestock production, and in one of the specific places that are visited as part of the

workflow of this economy. It thus provides contextual information that was self-evident for the people about whose farms this story was told, but which has not entered the text. It also seems to suggest that the story was composed around a view from a specific place. Maybe this hints that this story was experienced when this specific place was visited, lending everyday chores the glamour of magic-realist fantasy. There are stories, it seems, for which a ‘close walking’ of their places is the way to go if one wants to gain a deeper understanding of what is going on in the narratives.

There is a huge literature on walking, with various different foci. There are the literary works, like Theodor Fontane’s *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (‘Walks through the March of Brandenburg’, 1862–1882), W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ringe des Saturn* (‘The Rings of Saturn’, 1995), or of course the poetry of William Wordsworth (cf. Gaillet-De Chezelles 2010). There is literary criticism that itself takes on a literary form, like Robert Macfarlane’s *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012). There is literary activism like Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001) that voices social criticism through the lens of the history and social frameworks of forms of walking. There are attempts to theorize literary texts about walking in such a way as to adapt their insights as critical terms for scholarly analysis, like John Wylie’s and Pippa Marland’s discussions of Tim Robinson’s idea of the “good step” (or the “adequate step”, as Robinson himself also calls it), i.e. a step that would be aware of all the connotations of the piece of land that it is covering (Wylie 2012; Marland 2015; Robinson 2008 [1985]: 19–20). Ecocritical discussions, furthermore, have addressed the relevance of walking for understanding, writing about, and directly grappling with environmental



Goat Mountain (background) and the farm of Heydalsá, which to this day is a working farm that breeds horses (Photo © M. Egeler, 2019).



Looking towards Smáhamrar from Goat Mountain (Photo © M. Egeler, 2019).

issues (Borthwick et al. 2020). From an anthropological perspective, Tim Ingold has emphasized the paradigmatic role of walking for central cultural practices like painting, reading, and writing, and the importance of paths for creating places (Spencer & Ingold 2020: 210–211; Ingold 2010; Ingold 1993: 167; cf. Moor 2016).

Looking from Goat Mountain at the story about “The Neighbours” suggests a way of relating walking and storytelling that is rather less ambitious, but that can nonetheless help to elucidate stories in unexpected ways. In a manner of speaking, a ‘close walking’ of a story really is nothing more than a ‘close reading’ with the help of one’s feet. While we rarely theorize what exactly we mean by ‘close reading’, Jonathan Culler has highlighted three central aspects. These core aspects of close reading include a slowing down of the reading praxis, reminiscent of the old adage that ‘philology is the art of reading slowly’; a close attention to detail; and an estrangement of the reading, a *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect that can give the text a different optic and thus can make aspects become visible which otherwise might easily have been missed (Culler 2010: 23–24). In a way, a ‘close walking’ is an enactment of the slowing down of the reading praxis by spending hours on walking a story that can be read in two minutes. This forces an attention to details in both the story and its setting that would otherwise have been missed, and in doing so creates an effect of alienation that may easily lead to a new reading of the story. In the case of “The Neighbours”, a ‘close walking’ of the story highlights

a point in space from which the whole story seems to hang together, which in turn tells us something about its *Sitz im Leben* – the social context in which the story was actualised – in animal husbandry. It shows that a story that at first seemed like a simple didactic tale about community life at the same time is also a story deeply rooted in working the land – including Goat Mountain – and rearing animals. Thus, it helps us to appreciate the close interlacing of storytelling and everyday work that is such a common aspect of folk storytelling, and to ground our reading of the tale in the everyday experience of the people who first told it.

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