PILGRIMAGE VARIATIONS: HEMINGWAY’S SACRED LANDSCAPES

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I want to make the small pilgrimage to see you... I prayed for you sincerely and straight in Chartres, Burgos, Segovia and two minor places. ... Sorry not to have made the home office of Santiago de Compostella /sic/... Hemingway to Bernard Berenson (8/11/53, 2/2/54), Selected Letters

Pilgrimage, the notion and motion of spiritualized travel, is at the center of Hemingway’s religious vision and his work from his earliest stories to the final, unfinished and posthumously published novels and memoirs. Pilgrimage variations in his work range from individualized quests to places that are sacralized by the achieved journey, to traditional pilgrimages long held sacred by centuries of pilgrims. Most notable in the latter category of pilgrimage is Hemingway’s longstanding devotion to the specifically Catholic Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela.

Although my primary concerns here are not biographical, it may be useful, as prelude, to outline Hemingway’s personal religious profile. Indeed given the vast countervailing weight of the pervasive popular culture Myth of Papa Hemingway as well as most Hemingway biographies, which lead readers to notions such as Hemingway-the-Nihilist, Hemingway-the-Non-believer, Hemingway-the-amoral Existentialist, etc. ad infinitum, it is essential to clarify the biographical facts: 1) Hemingway was baptized, confirmed and raised in the Congregational Church. As a boy, as a teenager, he sang in the church choir, he spoke at youth fellowship meetings. His adult conversion to Roman Catholicism must be understood.

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against the background of his boyhood experience of mainstream social-gospel Protestantism. 2) Beginning with his wounding and near-death experience on an Italian battlefield in 1918, and continuing with increasing intensity through the early and mid-1920s, Hemingway’s personal religious pilgrimage takes him through a rejection of Puritanism, and far beyond the social-gospel brand of Protestantism, into an ever-deepening discovery of Catholicism. This personal faith-journey is manifest, in his life and his work, by profound engagement with the aesthetic and historical and spiritual sensibility centered in ritual and ceremony (e.g., most obviously, as in the world of *Tono*, or the bullfight; and, less obviously, in the vision of life-as-pilgrimage). Hemingway’s rootedness in the sacramental sense of experience, in the incarnational paradigms of Catholic Christianity, grows ever deeper. Before his twenty-eighth birthday (in 1927), he has accepted the tradition, the authority, and the discipline of Rome and formalized his conversion. Far from being a “nominal” or “bogus” Catholic as some biographers would have it, Hemingway is a devout practicing Catholic for much of his life. He believed that “the only way he could run his life decently was to accept the discipline of the Church,” and he could not imagine taking any other religion seriously (Baker, *Life Story* 333). I have documented these biographical matters in considerable detail elsewhere, and students of Hemingway’s *life* are urged to consult the complete printed record (see e.g. Stoneback “Nominal Country”).

What matters for students of Hemingway’s *writing*, and what matters most for me, is that his fiction from *The Sun Also Rises* (and arguably even before, from the earliest short stories) through *Men Without Women*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Winner Take Nothing*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Across the River and into the Trees*, *The Old Man and the Sea* and on through all the posthumously published work to *True at First Light* is rooted in his religious sensibility, and the work is most deeply accessible through an understanding of his Catholic vision. Prose, Hemingway famously said, is architecture, not interior decoration. The spirituality, or if the reader prefers, the faith, the religion, the Catholicism of Hemingway’s prose is architecture not mere interior decoration. And the foundational mode of that architecture is pilgrimage.

The ever-recurring center of Hemingway’s work, then, is the notion of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, in its many avatars, serves his fiction as deep structure, as externalized mysticism, as road map to the sacred landscapes of his fiction, as cartography of both the individualized and elusive *Deus Loci*, as well as the communal and binding historicity of actual landscapes.
rendered numinous by the millennial motions of millions of pilgrims who have traveled that way before.

The word—pilgrimage—has been subject to so much loose and leveling usage in popular culture that we must clarify at the outset how the term will be deployed here. (For example, I happened to overhear quite accidentally, while preparing this essay, two minor celebrities chattering on some television talk show about their seasonal “pilgrimages” to buy clothes at certain boutiques. This leveled eviscerated usage will not be in play here; if every movement is construed as pilgrimage, if every landscape—including a shopping mall—is considered sacred, the very possibility of authentic pilgrimage is rendered impossible.) Dictionary hierarchies of definition point to three categories of pilgrimage: 1) the journey of religious devotees to a specific shrine or numinous place, e.g., the Pilgrimage to Rome, or to Santiago de Compostela; 2) the more generalized notion of personal quest for some end individually construed as exalted, as morally or spiritually significant, e.g. the veteran’s pilgrimage to a war memorial, or the desert aficionado’s journey to Death Valley; 3) the trivialized notion of pilgrimage as any journey of any traveler for any reason. As indicated above, this latter false or attenuated sense of pilgrimage is here rejected. The first sense, the specific communal religious pilgrimage, and to some extent the second sense, the generalized notion of the individual quest, both involve to varying degrees the deeply felt necessity to seek out the numinous place (the spiritually elevated location), to travel through (or to) a paysage moralisé or symbolic landscape and approach the Deus Loet, or Spirit of Place, in the deliberate composed mood of expiation, or vow-fulfillment, seeking renewal or redemption.

To be sure, within the sacred space of authentic pilgrimages, there may be found both true pilgrims and false pilgrims. T. S. Eliot provides a useful touchstone for distinguishing the two types in his Four Quartets where he addresses the true pilgrim who must “put off / Sense and notion. You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid” (Eliot 139). Thus, when Hemingway as devout Catholic makes the Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela, he cannot be a mere curious tourist, nor even the well-informed traveler and writer intent on carrying “report” or verifying anything—he is there “to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.” The same holds for Jake Barnes, Hemingway’s narrator in The Sun Also Rises; e.g., when Jake prays in the Cathedral of Pamplona (a major way-station on the great Pilgrimage Road of Santiago) he knows where he is and why he is there—“to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.” And when he tells us
he's "a rotten Catholic" but it is a "grand religion" he confirms his
authentic pilgrim-identity (Sun Also Rises 97). He may be accompanied by
false pilgrims, friends and acquaintances who are in Pamplona only for the
carnivalesque aspects of fiesta and pilgrimage, or worse, mere tourists
curious about the local color of the bullfights. But Jake lives the true
pilgrim's code, dwells in the sacred landscape, and quests renewal and
redemption.

The Sun Also Rises, far from being the chronicle of an aimless "lost
generation" that it is often taken for, is Hemingway's first great meditation
on the theme of pilgrimage. Rather than rehash the details and arguments
of my numerous essays on this matter, published over the last three
decades, it must suffice here to recapitulate briefly the essential informa-
tion: 1) from 1925 (the time of Hemingway's composition of The Sun Also
Rises) and throughout his career, the Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela
remains a benchmark in Hemingway's life, a touchstone in his writing; 2)
the deep structure of The Sun Also Rises is determined by this pilgrimage;
and Jake Barnes, who designs the scrupulously precise movement of the
novel on the Road of Santiago—from Paris to Bayonne to Roncevaux to
Pamplona—is the conscious authentic pilgrim. Moreover, Jake (and
Hemingway) know the moral and spiritual anguish and joy of the true
pilgrim, the specifically Catholic pilgrim on the exact and exacting pil-
grimage route, and they are very much in touch with the history, the ritual,
the moral and aesthetic and salvific legacy of the great medieval—and
modern—Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela.

II

This seems to be getting very solemn for the hour which
is 0930 but then I have heard Mass at that hour in Santiago
de Compostella /sic/...I stayed there three summers trying to
learn when I was working on my education.

Hemingway to Bernard Berenson (10/24/55), Selected Letters

Hemingway's Compostelan pilgrimage variations reverberate through-
out his works; and twenty-six years after The Sun Also Rises, in the last major
fiction published during his lifetime, The Old Man and the Sea, the sacred
landscape—or seascape—of pilgrimage is once again a major motif. For
many years I have routinely remarked in passing, in hundreds of lectures
and addresses dealing with the subject of Hemingway and Pilgrimage,
that an important key to The Old Man and the Sea is provided if we
understand that the novella’s protagonist, Santiago, represents the culmination of Hemingway’s lifelong preoccupation with the Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela. And I once wrote, in an essay published nearly two decades ago, that although Jake Barnes is clearly a Compostelan Pilgrim, he does not complete the pilgrimage, whereas Hemingway’s Santiago does complete the pilgrimage “in a figurative or incarnational sense” (“From the rue Saint-Jacques” 5). My concern here is to clarify and expand these passing remarks.

In 1954 Hemingway wrote to Father Robert Brown: “You know about Santiago and you know the name is no accident” (Hemingway-Father Brown Correspondence: University of Texas Hemingway Collection). This was at the beginning of an important correspondence (unpublished) of several years’ duration, which had been initiated by Brown’s general inquiries regarding Hemingway’s Catholicism and specific questions about The Old Man and the Sea. Let us consider here that one telling sentence; Hemingway writes you know, i.e., you, Father Brown, a priest with a sense of history and a knowledge of pilgrimage, you know even if all my other readers do not know about Santiago-Saint James-Saint Jacques and the Pilgrimage of Compostela; and, you know—even if other readers are blind to the fact—that it is “no accident,” that I have named my old Cuban fisherman after Saint James, and more particularly, after the avatars of Saint James associated with Compostela. So Father Brown knew about Santiago, and Hemingway knew, and as informed readers aware of the depth of Hemingway’s writerly iceberg, we must know.

There are, of course, biblical resonances that link Hemingway’s old fisherman, Santiago, to James the fisherman and the calling of St. James to apostleship. These biblical resonances may be passed over here for they are not, strictly speaking, the matter of Santiago with which Hemingway is most deeply concerned; his matrix of signification is primarily generated by St. James of Compostela, by matter, that is to say, which is extra-biblical, which is specifically Catholic and medieval, the stuff of pilgrimage legend, lore, and tradition.

Tradition holds that after St. James-Santiago was beheaded in Jerusalem, thus becoming the first martyred apostle, his body was transported by arduous sea voyage in a small open boat to the northwestern coast of Spain, near the site of what would become the city and shrine of Santiago de Compostela. By the twelfth century, Santiago had achieved his full complex identity, through the two principal configurations: 1) the Pilgrim Saint for all of Europe and 2) Santiago Matamoros (or “moor-slayer”), champion of the Spanish armics in the reconquest of Spain for
Christendom. In his manifestation as Santiago Matamoros, one of the “Seven Champions of Christendom,” he appears rather directly in The Old Man and the Sea as, in Hemingway’s words, “Santiago El Campeón.” For a long time after his epic struggle with and final conquest of the “negro from Cienfuegos,” everyone calls him “The Champion” (Old Man 69-70). And yet, for the most part, Hemingway de-emphasizes Santiago Matamoros in order to emphasize the avatar of Santiago who is the opposite of the knightly warrior-champion, who evokes the feeling and vision, the humility and gentleness, the poverty and resolution and endurance of St. James the Pilgrim.

Consider Hemingway’s repeated references to the stars, how the old man on the first night at sea knows his location and direction “from watching the stars,” how he repeatedly checks his course by looking “at the stars” (47). On the second night at sea, he watches the “first stars” appear and he knows that “soon they would all be out and he would have all his distant friends.” He knows he must kill the great fish but he is glad, he says aloud, “we do not have to try to kill the stars.” He assures himself that he is “clear enough” in the head: “I am as clear as the stars that are my brothers” (74-77). These and other references to the stars function as a primary allusion to Santiago de Compostela, which has manifold associations with the stars. The popular derivation of Compostela is from campus stellae, the “field of the star,” and the pilgrimage road to Compostela was known as the via lactea, the Milky Way which pointed pilgrims the way to the shrine of St. James.

In Hemingway’s terms, then, Santiago the pilgrim-fisherman knows where he is and who he is (“brother” of the stars) because of the field of the star, the Compostela, or campus stellae. But Hemingway also knows, as all students of Compostela know, that the more likely derivation of Compostela is from the Latin compostum, suggesting not only the “little graveyard” of St. James, but death and the grave in general, and—perhaps for Hemingway’s ear—the compost heap of dying, dead, and decaying matter which is the always-imminent destination of all nature, great fish and humble fisherman alike. The true pilgrim knows this well, and that is why the pilgrimage is made.

The great strangeness that is at the heart of The Old Man and the Sea is anchored in a profoundly intensified consciousness of participation in the mysteries of nature; and the quintessential mystery of nature, I would add, has to do with the triumph of the human spirit. Hemingway and Santiago said it better: “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (103). Above all others, pilgrims know this truth of the spirit, pilgrims who suffer and
endure much in their lonely journey through and struggle with nature, pilgrims who participate profoundly in nature’s mysteries, pilgrims who seek expiation and redemption, pilgrims who chant the litany of brotherhood, who practice humility and charity and compassion even as they fight off the sharks on their long journey through the sacred seascape toward the field of the star and the compost heap of all things living and dying. This great strangeness of the “strange old man” (a phrase used by Hemingway to characterize both Santiago and himself) and his journey is finally only approachable as mystery, through the discipline of mysticism, that mysticism which is a form of internalized pilgrimage, as pilgrimage is externalized mysticism.

Since there is not sufficient space here to consider all of the allusions, resonances, and patterns in Hemingway’s skillful narrative deployment of the Pilgrim-Saint of Compostela, we must settle for a few more key details. Readers will recall that Hemingway’s Santiago promises “to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre” if he catches the great fish (65). (The Christological associations of the great fish are obvious, and need not be belabored here.) We note that just as Nuestra Señora del Pilar, the Virgin patroness of Spain, is associated with Santiago de Compostela, so is the Virgin of Cobre, Cuba’s Virgin patroness, associated first with the sacred place of Santiago de Cuba where she was enshrined in the Cathedral of Santiago, and second with Hemingway’s Santiago who has made the interior pilgrimage to the Virgin of Charity and promises the physical pilgrimage. The most intricate aspect of Hemingway’s overall narrative strategy is that at the same time that he constructs a pattern of allusions to the universal matter of the Pilgrimage to Santiago, and to the local Cuban matter of Pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre, he presents the transcription of Santiago’s actual pilgrimage at sea.

This pilgrimage motif was rounded off and underlined, extratextually, when Hemingway gave his Nobel Prize Medal to the shrine of the Virgin of Cobre. At a fiesta in his honor in Hemingway’s hometown in Cuba, with 400 villagers present including 45 fishermen, Hemingway presented his medal, symbol of his life’s work, his long personal and creative pilgrimage, to the major pilgrimage site of Cuba. Or to be more precise, Hemingway gave his medal not to the Cuban state, not to the Cuban people (as is often said in Cuba), not to any museum, but to the Virgin: “Quiero dar esta medalla,” he said, “a Nuestra Señora la Virgen de Cobre.” In that speech to his neighbors and fisherman-friends, more revealing than his formal Nobel Prize Address, Hemingway bore witness to his long pilgrimage, his
engagement with Santiago de Compostela that began decades before in *The Sun Also Rises.*

*The Old Man and the Sea*, then, is a complex study of pilgrimage, not only in the way that it connects with the history and legend of a particular saint, but in its deconstruction (for want of a better word) of Santiago de Compostela, not for purposes of debunking or dismissal, but in order to reconstruct a version of the original, historical saint—anchored in time, immersed in nature, rooted in the bright particularity and dailiness of lived saintliness. That is to say, the old fisherman Santiago is Hemingway's version of St. James the Fisherman grown old not as an Apostle, but as a fisherman-pilgrim; and he is Hemingway's version of Santiago de Compostela, stripped of legend and lore, presented in his fundamental human identity as pilgrim. With his reconfiguration of Santiago's namesake and pilgrim-brother, Santiago de Compostela, Hemingway reconstructs the paradigm of pilgrimage, relocates the “field of the star” to the Caribbean, and creates in the Gulf Stream off Cuba one of the most compelling sacred landscapes in world literature.

III

dépaysement. . .change of scene, disorientation.
*Larousse Dictionnaire*

*The Old Man and the Sea*, while it was the last fiction published in Hemingway's lifetime that dealt with pilgrimage and sacred landscape, is not the final pilgrimage variation in the Hemingway canon. Posthumously published works such as *The Garden of Eden* and *True at First Light* remain centrally concerned with pilgrimage, the hermeneutics of mobility, and sacred landscape. *The Garden of Eden*, for example, involves another specifically Catholic and traditional pilgrimage: the ancient and venerable Provençal and pan-European “Gypsy Pilgrimage” of the Holy Marys of the Sea, with its annual celebrations and processions in les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France, on the Camargue coast of Provence. It was this pilgrimage that the Catholic newlyweds Ernest and Pauline Hemingway participated in during their honeymoon in 1927. It was this pilgrimage, with its links to the Pilgrimage of Santiago, that would figure importantly in Hemingway’s ambitious but unfinished *The Garden of Eden*. The pilgrimage motif is clearly present in the manuscript, if less so in the unfortunate much-edited posthumously published version (Stoneback, “Hemingway and the Camargue” *passim*). And *True at First Light*, Hemingway's most
recently published (1999) unfinished work, is essentially the story of his African Pilgrimage, which will be considered in some detail below. Another, unfinished and posthumously published work that may be considered a pilgrimage variation is the long “short story,” or more precisely, the unfinished novel “The Last Good Country.” This work is the narrative of Nick Adams’s flight into the wilderness of northern Michigan, after he commits a violation of the hunting laws and believes he must go on the run from the game wardens who are after him. As a tale of flight, an escape story, it may seem to fall under a questionable rubric of pilgrimage-under-duress, until we remember that the medieval sentence for some crimes was indeed a required pilgrimage. Moreover, even if it is a pilgrimage that is set in motion by the fear of pursuit, the real focus is on the individualized quest to a place that is sacralized by the journey, the difficult travel through and to a symbolic landscape. The adolescent Nick is accompanied in this quest for the sacred landscape at the heart of the wilderness by his little sister. They must fight their way through the “long bad slashings,” nearly impenetrable thickets of downed timber, must traverse a “real swamp,” a “bad swamp,” to get to “the secret place beyond all this slashing” (CSSEH 515). When they reach the “virgin timber,” Nick tells his little sister: “This is the way forests were in the olden days. This is about the last good country there is left. Nobody gets in here ever.” She replies: “I love the olden days. But I wouldn’t want it all this solemn” (516).

The solemnity of the virgin forest makes them both “feel very strange.” As is usual in Hemingway’s fiction, the inscription of the great strangeness at the “secret” heart of nature (“the last good country” where almost “nobody gets . . . ever”) leads directly into the spiritualization of the landscape, and the specifically religious aspects of the journey. Nick is not “afraid” in this secret place but, as he reiterates: “I always feel strange. Like the way I ought to feel in church.” His sister agrees: “this kind of woods makes me feel awfully religious.” Then, there in the Michigan wilderness, they have this remarkable exchange:

“That’s why they build cathedrals to be like this.”
“You’ve never seen a cathedral, have you?”
“No. But I’ve read about them and I can imagine them. This is the best one we have around here.”
“Do you think we can go to Europe some time and see cathedrals?”
“Sure we will. But first I have to get out of this trouble and learn how to make some money” (517).
Thus, in the midst of their individualized quest of the “secret place” in the woods where they will be safe from the game wardens of northern Michigan, they entertain a traditional religious pilgrimage to the cathedrals of Europe. While the story remains unfinished and inconclusive regarding the escape-journey, there is sufficient evidence that the deep structure of this Edenic pilgrimage variation has more to do with patterns of innocence-fall-banishment-redemption than with mere flight. Hemingway writes that Mr. John, one of the key characters in the community from which Nick has fled, “liked Nick Adams because he said he had original sin. Nick did not understand this but he was proud.” And Mr. John tells Nick that “one of the best things there is” is to have things to repent: “You’re going to have things to repent, boy” (523). “The Last Good Country” is fundamentally a pilgrimage of penance and expiation to the “cathedral” of the deep secret forest. We cannot know how Hemingway would have completed this unfinished story, but we can discern the patterns. We can see how Nick, the experienced pilgrim, instructs his younger sister in the mysteries of the secret woods, in fishing and hunting and drinking from sacred springs, and how, after a difficult journey, these two young brother-sister pilgrims are redeemed by pristine spiritual love in the virgin woods, far from the law of the game wardens.

This unfinished pilgrimage variation from late in Hemingway’s career, “The Last Good Country,” connects in a very direct fashion with his earliest pilgrimage tale, the journey into the deep, secret, and redemptive Michigan northwoods in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Dating from the early 1920s, Hemingway’s first masterpiece is sometimes read as one of the “greatest fishing stories,” but it is much more than that; indeed it should not be construed even as a story since it is, strictly speaking, the concluding chapter of the Nick Adams Bildungsroman, In Our Time. As “Big Two-Hearted River” begins, we find Nick Adams, a wounded war veteran, returning to the Michigan northwoods where he fished in his pre-war youth. At first the entire country seems like a wasteland; the town of Seney is burned to the ground; the foundation stones of the buildings are “chipped and split by the fire”; nothing else is left of the town—“even the surface had been burned off the ground” (CSSEH 163). Nick’s pilgrimage from the wasteland of war-torn Europe seems to have brought him to another wasteland. But the river is there, and it is full of trout. And that is why Nick has come to the Two-Hearted River. As he does with many of his pilgrimage narratives, Hemingway centers this one simultaneously on the fishing (or hunting) quest and the search for peace, for inner spiritual harmony and serenity.
Nick’s heart tightens and he feels “all the old feeling” as he watches the trout move in the river (164). Then he sets off hiking through the countryside beyond the burned-out town; at first the country is all “burned over and changed”—even the grasshoppers have “turned black from living in the burned-over land.” But Nick keeps hiking, “sweating in the sun,” knowing the country “could not all be burned” (164-65). Finally he gets beyond the fire line, into the good country, the ankle-high sweet ferns, the island of tall pines and the meadow by the river where he will make his camp. Very carefully, he prepares his campsite, pitches his tent. Every action is charged with precision, as he makes order out of chaos. He crawls into his tent, thinking:

Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. (CSSEH 167)

This passage might well serve as the Pilgrim’s Credo, the essence of the individualized quest with no traditional pilgrimage associations—there are no shrines in these Michigan woods except the one the pilgrim constructs. The pilgrim-protagonist makes a difficult journey through the wasteland, arrives at a numinous place, made numinous in part by his creative discipline and order-making activities. The landscape is sacralized by the pilgrim’s ordering of it, the home he makes “in the good place.” This is not to say that “Big Two-Hearted River” is allusion-free; certainly the deep structure of the tale echoes T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, with Nick Adams playing the role of the Fisher King, questing redemption in the “good place” beyond the ruined Wasteland. Nick’s fishing activities throughout the rest of the narrative, like those of Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea, resonate with Christological associations.

Such pilgrimage variations abound in Hemingway’s work from his early fiction to his last works. Indeed a year-long course of study could be built around the pilgrimage variations in Hemingway’s work that we often miss, because we approach the narratives with a circumscribed predisposition—e.g., A Farewell to Arms, a novel almost always viewed exclusively through the lens of “love and war.” Yet this is a novel suffused with pilgrimage designs, difficult journeys through hard country, the flight from the Italian army, the flight to Switzerland from Stresa; all of these actions are conditioned by a pilgrimage paradigm. Moreover, Frederic Henry is imaged as a Fisher King figure in the Stresa fishing scenes, just before the midnight
flight to Switzerland. That flight is both escape and pilgrimage, made in the name of love, renewal, and redemption from the wasteland of war. Then there is the Abruzzi motif in *A Farewell to Arms*, which may be seen as an instance of the road not taken, the pilgrimage that should have been made. The Abruzzi is not a traditional Catholic Pilgrimage site, but it acquires that significance in Hemingway’s text: the high clean place of honor and dignity and good manners, where, as the Priest tells Frederic Henry, “it is understood that a man may love God. It is not a dirty joke” (*Farewell* 71). The Abruzzi functions as the symbolic matrix of the novel, Hemingway’s anagogical place-referent, the emblem of his sacral geography and the desired journey to the numinous place in flight from a desacralized world.

Then there are the so-called “hunting stories” in the Hemingway oeuvre that, like the fishing stories, are almost always designed as quest and pilgrimage narratives. Consider “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” where the protagonist has undertaken a pilgrimage-safari to Africa with the hope that he can find personal and creative renewal and redemption there, with the hope “that in some way he could work the fat off his soul” (CSSEH 44). What he finds on this African pilgrimage is redemption and death and the flight of his soul to Kilimanjaro (which, as Hemingway reminds us, means the “House of God”)—”as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun. And then he knew that there was where he was going” (56).

Africa, and the sacred landscape around Kilimanjaro, are once again at the center of Hemingway’s last major pilgrimage narrative—*True at First Light*. Yet another unfinished and posthumously published work (1999), it provides all the evidence necessary to declare that pilgrimage remains Hemingway’s most enduring theme. Ostensibly a hunting tale, it is more importantly a straightforward pilgrimage narrative that subsumes all of the pilgrimage variations found throughout Hemingway’s work, incorporating elements of the traditional pilgrimage and the individualized quest in a new and quite specifically religious synthesis.

*True at First Light* is a fictionalized memoir of Hemingway’s 1953 African safari. It is also a pilgrimage variation that stresses, more than Hemingway’s other pilgrimage narratives, the desire to become a part of the place to which the pilgrimage is made. It is rooted, as most pilgrimage narratives are, in a sense of dépaysement, in the desire for a “change of scene” and the simultaneous “disorientation” that accompanies the change, the motion of the pilgrim. If the pilgrimage is to be judged efficacious, the “disorientation” leads through catharsis to a profound reorientation that leaves the
pilgrim feeling a part of the place to which the pilgrimage has been made, feeling authentic connection with, rootedness in, the sacred landscape. Most discussions of *True at First Light* stress the primary theme of the “Africanization” of Hemingway, who is, in *propria persona*, the narrator and major actor. At the beginning, Hemingway states his love for Africa, and then he narrows the range of that love to a specific part of Africa, Kenya, and then to the particular tribal part of Kenya that he loves—ultimately the sacred country in the shadow of Kilimanjaro (or the “House of God”), which is the goal of his pilgrimage. He is there not as a tourist, not as just another rich and fashionable hunter and maker of safaris, but “to learn and to know about everything” (*True* 73) and to do this not to serve some anthropo-missionary goal but in order to become increasingly a part of local tribal life. He stresses an intense localism of identity throughout. The primary mode of identity in this Hemingway work, as in most, is tribal and local, the pilgrim outsider become insider. Nearly every chapter has some indication of Hemingway’s identification with, then his participation in, and finally his membership in the Kamba tribe.

Near the end of the book his wife Mary says that she wants “to go and really see something of Africa. You don’t have any ambition. You’d just as soon stay in one place.” To which Ernest replies: “Have you ever been in a better place?” And again, more firmly: “I’d rather live in a place and have an actual part in the life of it than just see new strange things” (301-02). Of course, contrary to the popular view and the usual biocritical view, this was always the fundamental Hemingway mode of being: in France, or Spain, or Cuba, or Africa. He is never a tourist, always a pilgrim in the process of being localized, a purposeful traveler longing to be a member of a select community, or *creating* a new tribe or community rooted in the best traditions of the best places. It is a version of pilgrimage in which the pilgrim who goes to Rome or Santiago, stays in Rome or Santiago, or longs to stay forever.

At the very heart of Hemingway’s African pilgrimage is the question of religion. Religious motifs and images are so pervasive that they can only be sketched here. When I talked to Hemingway’s son Patrick as he was editing the book (omitting a great deal of the manuscript), he stressed one thing: “It’s full of talk about the Baby Jesus and all this stuff foreshadowing the coming of Christmas, but Christmas never comes.” When I received my pre-publication copy, the first thing I did after reading it through was to begin a count of the key passages and allusions dealing with religion; I stopped counting after marking 85 such passages. Likewise, with the references to the marijuana-effect Christmas Tree that Mary quests so
assiduously for, I stopped counting after 35 references. And there are many references to the “Birthday of the Baby Jesus” and other formulations, some serious, some hilarious, involving the words “Baby Jesus”—e.g., when they go to dig up the magic Christmas Tree, Hemingway says they are “working for the Forestry Department of Our Lord, the Baby Jesus” (296). Also I noted immediately the dozens of citations of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro. When portions of this manuscript were first published, decades ago, in Sports Illustrated, it was presented as a hunting narrative; but the editor noted that religion was important, and though often used for humorous purposes, religion was not a laughing matter for Hemingway. Not enough time has passed since this published version of True At First Light came into print four years ago for there to be any established critical contextualizations, but the majority of Hemingway students and scholars tend to adopt a dismissive stance toward the book’s religious concerns, viewing the matter as comic relief. But religion is never comic relief for Hemingway. Pilgrims don’t make pilgrimages just for laughs.

It seems a safe bet that there are already dissertations and books in progress dealing with Hemingway’s “New Religion” in True at First Light. It seems an equally safe bet that many such studies will view the “new religion” as Hemingway’s Pagan Pilgrimage, his rejection of Christianity, or his farewell to Catholicism (and thus miss the point of Hemingway’s Catholicism yet once more). Others will be sophisticated enough, it is to be hoped, to recognize that Hemingway’s lifelong preoccupation with pilgrimage led him to a vision of Catholicism in relation to his African tribal religion that is subsumptive; that beneath all the comic play with religion, there is a syncretic religious thesis at work, a syncretistic drive to reconcile, to localize and thus truly universalize his fundamental Catholic beliefs. Under the rubric of syncretism True at First Light might seem to some students of Church history to be an adumbration of post-Vatican Two trends, and Hemingway might be seen as a kind of forerunner, a prophet of ecumenical inclusiveness and new modalities of worship. Here, for example, is Papa describing what Mary calls “Papa’s religion”: “We retain the best of various other sects and tribal laws and customs. But we weld them into a whole that all can believe” (79). At times, it sounds like Papa’s Postmodern Pilgrimage for Everyman. All on one page “Papa’s religion” is described as a “new religion,” as a “frightfully old religion,” as a religion that Papa makes “more complicated every day,” as a “revealed” religion rooted in Papa’s “early visions” (79). Whatever is serious, whatever is joking, one theme remains constant: the world-pilgrim’s syncretistic drive to reconcile the local and the universal.
There is much more in the religious design—throw in Gitchy Manitou, the great Spirit, the Happy Hunting Grounds, add sacred trees and mountains and African religious ceremonies, animistic, Hindu, and Muslim references, meditations on the soul, pilgrimage allusions involving Rome, Mecca, and Santiago de Compostela, and you have some notion of how rich the mix is. The reader who has not studied the omitted portions of the manuscript should tread cautiously before drawing conclusions about this seriocomic melange, and should remember also that Hemingway is always serious about religion and pilgrimage, which is precisely why he jokes about it. Never preachy, *True at First Light* rides on the syntax of spirituality, moves in religious rhythms that alternate between mystical meditation and epiphanic moments, and the self-deprecatory mockery of Papa, the pilgrim-leader of the “new religion.”

One striking example may be seen in the sequence of movements that begins with the death of Mary’s lion, the object of her achieved quest. First, there is ceremonial drinking; then Hemingway writes: “I drank and then lay down by the lion and begged his pardon for us having killed him and while I lay beside him I felt for the wounds. I drew a fish in front of him with my forefinger in the dirt” (169). This Ichthus-ceremony (calling to mind the countless Christological associations of Hemingway’s fishing pilgrimages) then flows directly into a meditation on the dark night of the soul and leads eventually to a quasi-Eucharistic meal: “it was wonderful to be eating the lion and have him in such close and final company and tasting so good” (200). These incarnational moments of epiphanic communion with and in and through the body and blood of the lion are followed almost immediately by a sequence of self-mockery and mocking of religious clichés. Papa, paraphrasing the eighteenth-century Protestant hymn-writer Isaac Watts, tells his friend G. C. (which stands for Gin Crazed): “Satan will find work for idle hands to do.” He asks—in inflated preacherly mode—if G. C. “will carry these principles into Life.” Drinking a ceremonial beer (and beer drinking functions throughout the work as a ritual act of communion), G. C. says, “Drink your beer, Billy Graham” (203-04). If we read Hemingway accurately and well, such joking does not undercut but underlines the seriousness of religious matters. Beyond all irony, Hemingway’s work is about carrying principles into action, and he is a kind of pilgrim-evangelist always inculcating ethical and moral and spiritual codes of conduct and communion.

Readers of *True at First Light* should be reluctant to make sweeping judgments regarding Hemingway and pilgrimage, Hemingway and religion, based on this published version, which might seem to suggest, for
example, that Hemingway’s African Pilgrimage had led him to go truly native, to become an actual pagan worshiper of the Mountain-God Kilimanjaro. Before reaching such a conclusion, consider carefully such omitted manuscript passages as this one: “We all worshiped the mountain with our borrowed and insecure religion but she belonged to another people and we loved her but we knew that we were strangers and we looked at her as a boundary and a delight and a source of coolness and something to be enjoyed and loved. But she was another people’s God” (Hemingway Collection: JFK Library). The true pilgrim, that is to say, salutes all sacred landscapes, but holds fast to his own God. It may also be useful to remember that while Hemingway was writing his African pilgrimage variations, he was still praying at the Cathedrals of San Marco and Chartres and Burgos and Segovia, and still remaking segments of his old beloved Catholic Pilgrimages of Santiago de Compostela and les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a road-weary pilgrim in a café in the pilgrimage town of les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where I was living, after having made the pilgrimage several times, after having been chosen through some providential intervention to be the first American in history to carry the Saints into the sea at the pilgrimage. Thus, in that place, pilgrimage is always very much on my mind. The pilgrim, who was also a poet and a professor, was on his way back from Santiago de Compostela. “If the true pilgrim is always the quintessential anti-tourist, how would you define the pilgrim’s hermeneutics of mobility?” I asked him. (He was, after all, a French poet and professor so it seemed safe to use the word hermeneutics after sundown.) “First,” he said, “dépaysement, a hunger for change, of place and self. Then, a new Composition of Place rooted in cathartic vision—and, with luck, visions—of sacred landscape. Landscapes where you leave part of yourself, your remorse, where change, expiatory transformation, sweeps away the old self. Sacred landscapes that live within you forever.” “That sounds a lot like Hemingway,” I said, “like the pilgrimages he created in his work.” “Oh,” he said, “was Hemingway a pilgrim?” “Yes,” I said, “and you are walking in his footsteps, abiding in his sacred landscapes.”
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