

The Camino de Santiago as a Contemporary Source of Empowerment in Literature and Experiential Testimony

ALAN G. HARTMAN*

Each year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walk the Camino de Santiago to arrive to Santiago de Compostela, the regional capital of Galicia and home to the historic shrine of the apostle St. James the Greater. Often referred to as “the Camino”, the pilgrim’s Way of Saint James consists of many routes that stretch from Northern and Central Europe as well as throughout the Iberian Peninsula.¹ Only in Santiago de Compostela do all of these trails converge.² Just as the Camino is comprised of a plurality of routes so too are the reasons for which pilgrims embark on the pilgrimage. Such wayfaring unites contemporary pilgrims with all others who have journeyed these same routes since the Middle Ages. Since renewed popular interest in the pilgrimage began in the early 1990s, the Camino is often characterized in literature and media by the communal fraternity and personal renewal and growth felt by those who

* Mercy University, New York, USA.
E-mail: ahartman@mercy.edu.

- 1 While the Camino de Santiago is in fact a complex web of numerous pilgrimage routes that traverse Europe and lead to Santiago de Compostela, the most commonly travelled pilgrim routes are those on the Iberian Peninsula, especially the Camino Aragonés, Camino del Norte, Camino Frances, Camino Portugués, Camino Primitivo, and Vía de la Plata.
- 2 The Camino Aragonés, Camino del Norte, Camino Primitivo, and Vía de la Plata all join the Camino Francés in different junctions before Santiago de Compostela.

journey along the way. Contemporary pilgrims often report that their pilgrimage along the Camino was an apogee life event for them due to the strong sense of fellowship, accomplishment, and transformation experienced. In this paper I will explore how wayfaring along the Camino de Santiago has been a source of empowerment for religious medieval pilgrims and secular contemporary pilgrims alike and remains so for those who undertake the pilgrimage today.

Peter Stanford writes that “[a]ll faiths embrace, to varying degrees, the concept of pilgrimage” (Stanford 2021, 8) and that pilgrimage routes “are regarded as thin places, set apart from the world [...] because of their connection to another, higher dimension” (*Ibidem*, 8). Such “thin”, or liminal, spaces attract pilgrims regardless of their reason for peregrinating. Regarding the myriad of motives that inspire pilgrims to journey towards Santiago since the route’s inception, the historian and translator William Meczer writes:

The Road to Compostela is nothing but a metaphor. By the mid-eleventh century western Europe, including eastern and northern Spain, was crisscrossed by a complex network of roads, partly ancient Roman pavements, partly high-medieval itineraries that served, among many other purposes, to facilitate the pilgrimage to the Galician shrine. At the same time, with the increasing focus of interest on Santiago in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, a number of specifically Jacobean roads came into being, most of them dirt surfaces, with their own appropriate infra-structure of hospices, bridges, chapels, and reliquary churches. (Meczer 1993, 23-24)

The varied beginning of the pilgrimage to Santiago in fact reflects the abundance of interests held by pilgrims, royalty, and clerics who historically traversed or promoted the Camino. In his research, Meczer writes that Gallic interests in promoting the pilgrimage routes to Santiago arguably stemmed from French royal and noble families, notably those from Burgundy, Champagne, and Aquitaine, that intermarried with northern Spanish, especially Aragonese, royalty and nobility.³ The Aragonese especially encouraged these marriages to gain French military support in their battle against the Moors. French powers in turn saw this as an opportunity to benefit economically and culturally

3 William Meczer’s (1993) work *The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela* is the first English translation of “Book Five” of the twelfth century *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, also known as the *Codex Calixtinus*. The introduction that he writes for this translation is a masterful synthesis of research done on the history of the Camino de Santiago.

from other Europeans wayfaring through their territory and northern Iberian leaders were also seeking to repopulate newly reconquered territory from the Islamic invaders. Welcoming an influx of Catholic pilgrims and their resources was one way to do this, especially considering many pilgrims never returned home for reasons of health or opportunity.⁴

Just as the different pilgrimage routes to Santiago are varied in character, topography, and location throughout medieval Europe so too were the experiences of pilgrims who traveled those routes.⁵ The pilgrimage routes in northern Spain especially differed from those elsewhere in western Europe and reflected the liminality of the northern Iberian Peninsula due to its sparse population, harsh terrain, and relative lawlessness. The largest northern Iberian pilgrimage route became known as the “Camino Francés”, or “French Way” because it served as a continuation of pilgrimage routes from France.⁶ After reaching the Galician shrine, many of these same pilgrims walked to the Atlantic coast, a three-day journey from Santiago de Compostela.⁷ Their post-Santiago destinations included the Marian shrine in Muxia and the non-religious destination of Finisterra.⁸ The location of Santiago, Muxia, and Finisterra at the westernmost reaches of continental Europe and the perhaps terrifying further unknown emphasizes the liminal space that the shrine to Santiago de Compostela occupied in the medieval Christian imagination.

Santiago de Compostela’s liminality can even be found in the figure of Santiago, or Saint James the Greater. The saint was an apostle who is believed

4 “[t]wo closely integrated socio-economic ingredients resulting from the bonanza of the *Reconquista*: [...] the pilgrimage route, or better routes, as a mainly transversal axis of stability within the newly conquered territories; and on the other, the foreign, mainly French, *Landsmannschaften* that settled in particular quarters of towns and villages, not without enjoying considerable economic advantages offered to them quite liberally by the Hispanic administration” (Melczer 1993, 17).

5 In the second chapter of her 2002 text, Diana Webb explores the diversity of motives for medieval pilgrims.

6 All of the major pilgrimage routes from France, which were the Via Turonense, Via Lemovicense, Via Podense, and Via Tolosana, coalesced at Puente La Reina in Navarra and all of the pilgrims walking these routes then continued walking towards Galicia along the same way.

7 This 60 kilometer pilgrimage route known as the Camino de Finisterre is the only Camino that does not end in Santiago de Compostela.

8 “Finisterra” comes from the Latin “finish terrae”, which means the “End of the Earth”. This location was so named because it was believed to be the literal end of the earth in the Middle Ages due to its westernmost location on Cape Finisterra, which is one of continental Europe’s westernmost points.

to have been the first evangelizer of the Iberian Peninsula before he returned to Judea, where he was beheaded because of his continued evangelical endeavors there. The apostle's body is said to have returned to northwestern Spain and the presumed tomb was found "under a field of stars," or "*campus stellae*" in Latin, in the late eighth century. The timing of the discovery of Santiago's tomb is significant because the grave was found at the beginning of the Moorish conquest of the Iberian Peninsula⁹. This invasion was an existential threat to Christendom because Christian Europe was in danger of becoming conquered and settled by Muslim powers, as happened in significant parts of the south-eastern Balkan Mountains and southern Italian peninsula in addition to the Iberian Peninsula. Galicia's geographic extremity and isolation rendered the area a metaliminal space because of its physical and metaphorical location between competing western civilizations, violently clashing religions, and geographic marginality. Its sense of liminality was further enriched by its presence beneath the Milky Way, or *Via Lactea*, which is part of an extraterrestrial infinitude manifested by a visible trail of stars that crosses Northern Spain. The presence of the Milky Way above the tomb of Saint James is what led to the title "Saint James of Compostela", or "Saint James of the Field of Stars".¹⁰ Even the emperor Charlemagne had a famous dream in which he saw "a starry way in the sky and is told to follow it in order to get to the saint's tomb" (Melczer 1993, 20). Through merit, history, medieval political and economic interests, and the presence of corporal remains of an apostle, this shrine quickly became the third holiest site in Christendom. It was preceded in importance only by Jerusalem and Rome. Spaniards fighting Moors during the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula eventually gave yet another title to Saint James the Greater, which was "Santiago el Matamoros", or "St. James the Moor Slayer".

9 On this William Melczer writes "(t)he rediscovery of the long-forgotten tomb towards the end of the eight century occurred, tellingly enough, at a time when the Christian political fortunes in the land were at their lowest ebb; it occurred at a time when the living presence of a religious-national figure of apostolic grandeur, who would be capable of rallying around himself the Christian forces at bay, was a dire need. The presence of Saint James – Sanctus Iacobus, that is to say, Santiago – no matter to what extent mythical and legendary, fulfilled, indeed, such a historic necessity" (Melczer 1993, 15).

10 Noting the plurality of possible etymological derivations of "Compostela", including a "field of stars" or *campus stellae*, William Melczer writes that in addition to the field of stars "there are other alternatives for the etymology of the toponym: from *composita*, well-dressed ground; or from the syncopated form of *compositum*, derived from *componere* in its meaning of 'to bury'" (Melczer 1993, 21).

Consequently, Christians quickly began to see Santiago as the patron of the Spanish people as we see first in the VIII century hymn “O dei verbum patris”, attributed to the Cantabrian Beatus of Liébana. In this hymn Santiago is called “potius Ispania”, or the conqueror of Spain, and given a full strophe of praise. There, among others, Santiago is called the “caput refulgens aureum Ispanie”, or “The glitteringly golden head of Spain”, and “tutorque nobis et patronus vernulus”, or our “protector and patron helper” (Melczer 1993, 12). Surely a Christian continent weary of Islamic invasion and a region eager to attract Christian pilgrims and settlers created the perfect setting for attracting pious Medieval pilgrims and promising adventure and transformation to those who embarked on the pious adventure.

As the shrine of Santiago de Compostela grew in importance so too did other shrines across Europe, especially Marian shrines such as those found in Vézeley, Le-Puy-en-Velay, Roncesvalles, and Villasilrga. These Marian shrines became incorporated into the Camino de Santiago and likely grew in fame because of the many pilgrims who visited the shrines. Such shrines remain important stops along the Camino de Santiago today. The medieval importance of many of these Marian shrines is also found in their repeated depiction in King Alfonso X's thirteenth century compilation of Marian canticles known as the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. Unlike Santiago de Compostela, however, the religious importance of these medieval Marian shrines is often unknown to contemporary Camino pilgrims. Newer Marian shrines like Lourdes and Fatima have similarly been incorporated into the Camino as have been non-Marian Catholic shrines and pilgrimage destinations since the Middle Ages. This shows the ongoing malleability and functionality of the Camino, which changes together with the needs and desires of its pilgrims.

The presence of many religious shrines along the Camino makes the pilgrimage a meta-pilgrimage in which wayfarers encounter a multitude of places of religious importance on their way to Santiago de Compostela. The Camino may even be understood as a complex of pilgrimage routes that serves each town through which it passes because its path always incorporates the main church of each city, town, or village along the way as well as any major religious sites in the locale. Béttharam, France serves as an example of this. Not only does the Camino guide pilgrims past Béttharam's miraculous statue of Saint Rocco but the monastery, which was established to care for pilgrims in the sixteenth century, stands adjacent to the statue. Today the monastery remains an *auberge*, or hostel for pilgrims, and the site became a Marian shrine due to miraculous events attributed to the Virgin Mary beginning in the seventeenth

century. Leaving Béttharam, the way passes by each of the historic and monumental stations of the cross as it guides pilgrims away from the French town and atop a mountain on which rests the final two stations of the *via crucis*. This profusion of holy sites along the Camino de Santiago heightens the religious and spiritual experience of pilgrims and the route consequently becomes a composite of many religious journeys and experiences.

In *The Art of Pilgrimage*, Phil Cousineau affirms the universal need for man to peregrine and writes that “in each of us dwells a pilgrim. It is the part of us that longs to have direct contact with the sacred” (Cousineau 2012, 92). While Cousineau does not define what he deems “sacred”, it can be understood to be something that connects one with something greater than himself in an entirely or partly mystical way. The sacred, therefore, may be seen as something that connects mortal man with a common being or essence shared by all. Robert L. Moore notes that

[p]ropane space differs from sacred space in that it has no fixed point or center from which to gain orientation. Profane space has no *axis mundi*, no cosmic tree or pillar leading to the heavens. This is the experience of modernity: people unable to locate a center, profane space allows no direct contact with the power that enables renewal and regeneration to occur. (Havlick 2001, 23)

A pilgrimage may therefore be recognized as a journey that enables one to connect with a sacred space in a tangible way and breaks the dizzying modern malaise that may stem from a lack of contact with the sacred, which hinders personal “renewal and regeneration”. Reconnecting with the sacred, therefore, empowers one to participate in the secular world more fully and with a greater sense of life’s hallowedness. Regarding the mystical element of pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner, the “founders of pilgrim studies” (Ross 2011, XXXIV), write in their seminal work first published in 1978 *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* that “[f]or the majority, pilgrimage was the great liminal experience of the religious life. If mysticism is an interior pilgrimage, pilgrimage is exteriorized mysticism” (Turner & Turner 2011, 7).

Partly quoting Turner & Turner’s landmark work, James M. Jurovich and Wilbert M. Gesler build on this when writing that pilgrimages are important because

[l]eaving their home places, pilgrims are detached from familiar surroundings and social relationships; they pass through a period of liminality, neither here

nor there; and then they establish new bonds of communion with the divine and with their fellows at the pilgrimage site (Turner and Turner 1978). Pilgrims often overcome hazards and deprivations to reach a place where they believe their sins will be forgiven, their illnesses cured, and their misfortunes allayed. (Jurkovich & Wilbert 1997, 450)

Such hopefulness allows pilgrims to meaningfully confront challenges encountered along the way. In the Catholic imagination, the pilgrim's wayfaring is a metaphor for man's journey in life. Just as contemporary pilgrims voyage towards Santiago de Compostela, their physical journey may be understood as an allegory for one's life journey towards God as their destination upon death. On this Cousineau writes "the way of the pilgrim is twofold, exterior and interior, the simultaneous movement of the feet and the soul through time as well as space" (Cousineau 2012, 94). Similarly, the difficult physical journey of the pilgrimage allows travelers to experience elements of Christ's *Via Crucis*, which is seen as the greatest Christian example of pilgrimage.¹¹

Lengthy journeys act as a catalyst for allowing travelers to perceive and experience a transformation within themselves and the world around them due to the new environments, cultures, and people encountered along the way. Catholic religious sister and spiritual author Joyce Rupp writes that "[e]very significant journey changes us in some way. We are hardly ever aware of this while we are in the midst of it. We may have hints of these changes, but it is only later, in looking back, that we grasp in amazement at what was being formed and shaped in our lives" (Rupp 2005, 22). Similarly, when writing about "long distance rambling", or long-distance hiking, Kip Redick notes that "[t]he trail takes us beyond the quotidian world of a marketplace reality and becomes a sacred text wherein a proposed world is both presented and inhabited" (Redick 2016, 45). Redick goes on to state that "[t]he practice of long distance walking in remote places distances the pilgrim from his or her everyday world and opens them to new possibilities, to scripting their own life-story into a potential narrative arc" (*Ibidem*, 42). The Camino, therefore, entices the wayfarer to journey into a deeply inter-layered zone of multiple meanings and liminalities, which is perhaps that which most strongly calls contemporary pilgrims to the Camino. This multifold nature of the Camino is especially found

11 Félix Duque and Nicholas Walker allude to this allegory in their article "Via Stellarum – Via Crucis, a Philosophical Approach to the 'Camino de Santiago'" (Duque & Walker 2013).

in the blending of Catholic and secular historical sites with excellent facilities for dining, relaxation, and repose while living in community with others. This confluence of religiosity, historicity, beauty, and community renders a pilgrimage along the Camino “a journey filled with spiritual connectedness and communal resonance” (Rupp 2005, 26).

Today’s pilgrims, however, are not only seeking religious experiences or traversing the pilgrimage routes as a manifestation of religious piety. The transformation in motives for pilgrims has changed so greatly that a term associated with religious faith is not found among Peter Stanford’s “four essential Es of a new generation of pilgrims — Exercise, Exploration, Environment and Escape” (Stanford 2011, 10). Stanford even goes on to state that after interviewing many people who work in the pilgrimage hospitality industry that “tourism is the new religion, and pilgrimage just a new name for tourism. For pilgrimage read adventure holiday, and for pilgrim read hiker” (*Ibidem*, 11). As such, Stanford and others argue that contemporary pilgrimage may be understood as a form of contemporary tourism. This is not to say that religious piety and devotion are entirely absent from contemporary pilgrimages but instead that non-religious pilgrims heavily outnumber those that are religious. Recognizing the plurality of mostly secular motives that attract pilgrims to the Camino, Rupp writes in her 2005 work *Walk in a Relaxed Manner, Life Lessons from the Camino* that “[t]o be a pilgrim is to be willing to live with the mystery of what will happen both interiorly and exteriorly as one walks day after day after day towards the destination of the sacred site” (Rupp 2005, 40).

The uptick in secular reasons for hiking the Camino was affirmed in the findings of a 2014 study of approximately 470 pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago in which researchers discovered that “pilgrims tend to identify themselves more with spirituality than religiosity” (Oviedo, de Courcie and Farias 2014, 436). This study shows that the growth in popularity of the Camino does not suggest a “religious revival” (*Ibidem*, 437) but rather an overwhelming presence of pilgrims on the Camino seeking “spiritual growth” or “search(ing) for adventure” (*Ibidem*, 437). This mix of secular “spirituality” and Catholic religiosity on the Camino also emphasizes the Camino’s liminality because secular contemporary pilgrims regularly encounter approximately millennium-old manifestations of Catholicism during the entirety of the pilgrimage. In this way “[t]he Camino provides a context in which both types coexist: one integrated into a religious universe of symbols, and the second constructing her own universe of meaning and references, not immediately connected with a predetermined framework” (*Ibidem*, 440-441).

In this way the Camino is steadily transforming into an experience of cultural tourism as much as a destination for pilgrimage. In the text *Cultural Tourism*, Hilary du Cross and Bob McKercher (2015, 3) note that Cultural Tourism has become a “mainstream, mass product” that “between 35 and 80 percent of all tourists are cultural tourists”. Understanding tourists as “non-local residents travelling primarily for fun, recreation, escape or to spend time with family and friends” (*Ibidem*, 8), the “fun”, “recreation”, and “escape” descriptors appropriately fit many contemporary “pilgrims” on the Camino well today. Elizabeth Becker (2016, 7) notes that tourism is increasingly including religious experiences and writes that the “tourism industry has expanded its scope to embrace everything one can do on a trip, beginning with religious pilgrimages which is the oldest reason for traveling”. Mixing the historic religious roots of the Camino with the motives of contemporary pilgrim wayfarers is consistent with the multifaceted nature of tourism itself. On this Charles L. Goeldner and J.R. Brent Ritchie write that the “list of potential travel motivations is a long one and includes a range of needs from excitement and arousal to self-development and personal growth” (Goldner & Ritchie 2012, 203). In this way, the change in pilgrim motivations along the Camino reflects wider changes within the tourism industry itself. Furthermore, Walter Jamieson defines cultural heritage tourism as “travel concerned with experiencing the visual and performing arts, heritage, buildings, areas, landscapes, and special lifestyles, values, traditions, and events” (Jamieson 1998, 65) and writes that cultural heritage tourism “has become a major force in the tourism industry” (*Ibidem*, 65). The Camino is comprised of each of the elements listed by Jamieson and therefore can be described as a form of Cultural Tourism just as appropriately as it can be seen as a form of adventure, exercise, inspirational, or religious tourism.

The Camino is also growing as a destination for gastronomic and social reasons. This is evidenced in the recent publication of cookbooks for recipes of food and meals found along the Camino as well as the ongoing proliferation of digital forums, internet portals, webpages, books, podcasts, and Facebook groups about “pilgrim stories” in which past and present pilgrims connect and share stories about their experiences.¹² Meeting new people, enduring shared

12 Notable examples of the recent increase in gastronomic interest in the Camino de Santiago include the 2016 cookbook *Tastes of the Camino, 30 Authentic Recipes Along the French Way* by Yosmar Monique Martínez and the 2021 text *Cuisine on the Camino de Santiago: Traditional Spanish Cuisine and Delicious Recipes from Spain* by Genia Drago. There are too many Facebook groups and other web portals to list that show the increasing interest in discussing all aspects of the Camino. The Camino de Santiago

difficulties while traversing the pilgrimage route, and socializing with fellow pilgrims over common meals, libations, and communal sleeping accommodations have become iconic features of the Camino today. Leaving behind comfort and welcoming rugged adventure through communal living, physical challenge, and hopeful endeavoring allow contemporary pilgrims to become vulnerable to and connect with others in a way rarely found elsewhere. Louise Frey notes the importance of the refuges, or pilgrim hostels, in enhancing the communal experience on the Camino. Frey writes “[i]ndividual space is not often designed into the refuge space” (Frey 1998, 94) because of their “communal bathroom” (*Ibidem*, 94) and “common room for writing, resting, eating, or conversations” (*Ibidem*, 94). Likely because of this communal experience “[t]he pilgrims’ refuges play a fundamental role in adding to the human dimension and the creation of *communitas*, in which intense personal relationships are formed and enjoyed” (*Ibidem*, 94). Russ Eanes similarly affirms the importance of pilgrim fellowship in the writer’s memoir about his journey on the Camino. Eanes emphatically writes that “THE BEST EXPERIENCES (sic) on the Camino aren’t orchestrated. They are the unexpected encounters with friends in cafés, the sandwiches, cookies and apples shared at a picnic bench, the cups of coffee discerned on sleepy mornings, the stranger with an amazing story to tell” (Eanes 2019, 145). Such nostalgic references to moments of conviviality are ubiquitous in Camino literature today and frequently regarded as one of the most rewarding parts of the pilgrimage.

Recognizing the transformative effect of the journey, Rupp states that although “[i]nitially, we thought getting to Santiago was the purpose of our walk. We soon discovered it was in making our way to the cathedral that we were to receive spiritual empowerment and renewed enthusiasm” (Rupp 2005, 27). The Camino’s formative and communal aspects are also clearly depicted in Emilio Estevez’s 2010 film “The Way”, which was re-released in 2023. In a May 11, 2023, interview with Raymond Arroyo broadcasted on the American Catholic television station EWTN,¹³ Estevez states that the movie is as a homage to the 1939 film by Victor Fleming, *The Wizard of Oz*, wherein each of the

Forum found at Caminodesantiago.me, however, is perhaps the most historic and important digital forum and web portal. This forum is operated by Ivar Revke, a former Norwegian pilgrim who moved to Santiago de Compostela in 2004 and also hosts many videos on YouTube about the Camino de Santiago and Santiago de Compostela that serve as important resources for contemporary pilgrims.

13 This EWTN interview can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGW-p5ASlR-M>.

pilgrims in the 2010 film represents a character and motive of those traveling along the Yellow Brick Road in Fleming's historic film.¹⁴ Ultimately, Estevez' movie *The Way* shows how socialization with other pilgrims on the Camino together with the physical challenge of the route allow the protagonist an avenue for healing from trauma and heartache related to the loss of his son as well as for each of the main characters to attain what they are seeking in their quests.¹⁵ Other recent documentaries that explore the myriad of motives that propel today's pilgrims to traverse the Camino de Santiago are the 2017 film *Looking for Infinity: El Camino* by Aaron C. Leaman as well as the 2020 documentary *Pilgrims* by the Brazilian journalism graduate student and aspiring film producer Alexander Amaral. Despite the numerous motivations for walking the Camino de Santiago declared by pilgrims interviewed in the above documentaries, a commonality appears to be the quest for adventure and self-improvement by completing the pilgrimage.

Social phenomena relating to the Camino are also examined in an ongoing study by the PILNAR project and database. PILNAR is an acronym for "PILgrim NARratives" (Van der Beek, Post & Kemps-Snijders 2017, 372) and the project seeks to collect the narratives of Dutch pilgrims along the Camino to better understand their motives for wayfaring as well as how their experiences changed their identities and understanding of self and the world they inhabit. Indeed, the ongoing interest in these and other pilgrim narratives reflects the transformative effect that the Camino appears to have on those that walk it.

Throughout contemporary pilgrim narratives and Camino depictions in books and media, the physical movement of pilgrimage propels an inward experience of growth and change, which evidently has cleansing, healing, and renewing power. On this Frey writes:

[t]he journey of the Camino can reveal wounds — loss, failure, fear, shame, addiction — left festering from daily life. Experiences along the way often act as the

14 Beginning in minute 17:15 during the ETWN interview, Estevez states that the protagonist, Tom, represents Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the death of Tom's son represents the tornado in its chaos and destruction in *The Wizard of Oz*, the box of cremated remains represents Toto in the *Wizard of Oz* because the box keeps getting away from Tom just as Toto kept running away from Dorothy, Sara represents the Tin Man in the *Wizard of Oz* in her brokenness, Jack represents the Scarecrow in the *Wizard of Oz* in his search for a brain, and the "Dutchman" represents the Cowardly Lion in the *Wizard of Oz* in his search for bravery.

15 See the motives for each personage in note 50.

catalyst that allows them to be exposed. It has been, and appears to continue to be, a road for hopes and miracles of fulfillment of a different order. Some pilgrims, acknowledging this themselves, refer to the Camino as *la ruta de la terapia*, the therapy route. (Frey 1998, 45)

Frey's account is especially meaningful because it shows that such experiences were had by pilgrims along the Camino even at the very beginning of renewed contemporary interest in the Camino in the 1990s, before the pilgrimage route became commonly depicted in popular literature and media. Frey's narrative detailing such experiences was published in her 1998 work titled *Pilgrim Stories, on and off the Road to Santiago*.¹⁶

The twentieth century mystic and Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes that "[i]n the traditions of all the great religions, pilgrimage takes the faithful back to the source and center of the religion itself, the place of theophany, of cleansing, renewal, and salvation" (Merton 1961, 91). Thus, in today's chaotic world, pilgrims often undertake the Camino de Santiago hoping to experience as much of an inner renewal as exterior undertaking. Merton also writes that

the geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both. History would show the fatality and doom that would attend on the external pilgrimage with no interior spiritual integration, a divisive and disintegrated wandering, without understanding and without the fulfillment of any humble inner question. (Merton 1961, 92)

Thus Merton, a globally famous mid-twentieth century author, poet, monk, and mystic, also understood the importance of pilgrimage for interior growth. The Trappist monk even died while on pilgrimage in Thailand in 1968 after a lengthy tour of the western United States and Asia, which included several meetings with the Dalai Lama.¹⁷ In his diary during this trip Merton affirms the renewing power of pilgrimage when he writes "I have needed the experience

16 It is important to note that this text is valuable because it was published at the beginning of renewed interest in the Camino de Santiago. When the book was published in 1998 30,000 pilgrims hiked the Camino, a record for its time but a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of yearly pilgrims to come.

17 Thomas Merton met with the Dalai Lama three times in November 1968 and died in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968. The two notebooks that Merton kept as

of this journey. Much as the hermitage has meant, I have been needing to get away from Gethsemani, and it was long overdue" (Merton 1977, 104).¹⁸

The increased interest in the Camino de Santiago in recent history parallels the growth of the technological age we inhabit and becomes a retreat away from the tech-rich world. According to the Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, or The Pilgrim Office, in Santiago de Compostela, the Jacobean jubilee year of 1982 was the first time that over 1,000 pilgrims hiked enough of the Camino de Santiago to receive a "Compostela", or certificate stating that the wayfarer completed at least 100km of the Camino de Santiago.¹⁹ The number of pilgrims remained below 10,000 annually until 1993, the next Jacobean year, when almost 100,000 pilgrims arrived in Santiago. Subsequent Jacobean years show the continued exponential growth in popularity of the Camino: over 179,891 pilgrims in 2006 and 272,417 pilgrims in 2013. The non-Jacobean year of 2017 was the first year to witness over 300,000 pilgrims annually, and this progressive increase showed no sign of decreasing before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Such enormous growth in only thirty years shows how the Camino has become one of northern Spain's most important cultural, social, touristic, and economic phenomena. The Camino's cultural richness and affordability encourage travelers of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds to undertake the pilgrimage. The radical commercial transformation of the city of Santiago de Compostela as a direct result of the Camino has also been criticized, especially as pilgrims tend to "act like tourists" economically and experientially upon arrival.²⁰ Several Santiago de Compostela based researchers recently wrote that "it is difficult to distinguish between serious pilgrims and tourist-pilgrims" (Fernández, González and Lopez 2016, 283). They state that this is because "several religious sites have been converted into attractions, as is the case of (the historic center of) Santiago de Compostela" (*Ibidem*, 283) in which "highly ritualistic tourism practices predominate [...], meaning that very

diaries during this time were compiled and first published in 1973 as *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.

- 18 The Abbey of Gethsemani was founded in 1848 and is the name of the Trappist monastery in which Merton resided 1947-1968. The American monastery is located in Trappist, Kentucky and is the oldest still operating monastery in the United States.
- 19 These statistics are all found here: <https://www.editorialbuencamino.com/estadistica-peregrinos-del-camino-de-santiago/>.
- 20 On this Fernández, González, and Lopez note that "a tourist can be just as interested as a pilgrim in visiting a church, and this is because religious tourism is regarded as a subgroup of cultural tourism" (Fernández, González and Lopez 2016, 284).

limited use is made of the city” (Fernández, González and Lopez 2016, 285).²¹ Also growing is the number of pilgrims who traverse one of the Camino’s pilgrimage routes, often the Camino Francés, who later return to walk another or more of the pilgrim ways. Such pilgrims are increasingly writing books about their many Camino experiences such as the 2019 Portuguese text *Os nove Caminhos de Santiago de Compostela* by Carlos Figueiral Azevedo, in which the writer describes and reflects on his nine different Camino experiences along nine distinct Camino de Santiago pilgrimage routes. The relative young age of many pilgrims together with the affordability of the Camino and sustained growth in travel globally suggest that this trend will continue once current pandemic related concerns abate.²²

“The space of pilgrimage extends with no regard for national boundaries, and in a number of cases it becomes a space for exchange between cultures and religions” (*Ibidem* 2016, 283), as is the case with the Camino de Santiago. Perhaps more importantly, the Camino appears to be the ultimate locus for personal empowerment and transformation, as is evidenced by the narratives of pilgrims who have hiked the Camino as well as those who study them. As such, while no longer explicitly religious in nature, the Camino fuses culture, history, religion, spirituality, tourism, and contemporary man’s desire for community and social connection with others to create a highly meaningful and impactful journey. This continues to shape the regions, cities, towns, and villages through which the Camino passes as well as notably change those that undertake the pilgrimage. The Camino’s meta-liminality therefore serves as a touchstone with the sacred that leads to inner growth and empowers pilgrims to examine their lives and the world they inhabit. The sense of renewal and rebirth that wayfarers report experiencing as a result of having traversed the pilgrimage route is overwhelmingly evident in contemporary Camino literature and media. Ongoing desire by many for such transformational empowerment is also the reason that growing numbers of people from all over the world still seek to experience the pilgrimage for themselves and will likely continue to do so well into the future.

21 The city of Santiago de Compostela received the UNESCO World Heritage designation in 1985, and The Camino de Santiago received the same designation in 1993. Both are consequently conducive to large-scale tourism.

22 In a 2014 survey of 470 pilgrims while on the Camino de Santiago, the average age was found to be 32.2 (Oviedo, de Courcier and Farias 2014, 436).

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