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# Interpreting Contemporary Pilgrimage as Spiritual Journey or Aesthetic Tourism Along the Appalachian Trail

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Pilgrimage and tourism can be interpreted as overlapping travel experiences. Given all the changes mass transportation and communication technologies have brought, understanding the phenomenon of pilgrimage becomes fraught with ambiguity. Is pilgrimage better understood as a tourist excursion that affords instances of religious devotion? Pilgrimage routes and long distance scenic trails have their aesthetic appeal, which pilgrims and tourists enjoy. Is there a difference in the way these two groups walk these trails that become manifest through aesthetic experiences and encounters? Looking at long distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail as spiritual journey opens up a reinterpretation of both pilgrimage and tourism, disentangling them. In taking a phenomenological approach to describing and interpreting the two kinds of travel, they are shown to be dissimilar. The *liminal* journey of the pilgrim opens them to an encounter with both symbols and beings that is distinct from the scenic orientation of the tourist.

**Key Words:** pilgrimage, spiritual journey, aesthetic tourist, Appalachian trail

The early afternoon sun radiated increasing heat on this July day in the Spanish Meseta. I was drawing close to the end of a twenty-seven kilometer trek from Carrión de los Condes to Terradillos de los Templarios. Just 200 meters before the albergue a large group entered the path from the direction of the highway; minutes before they had exited a large tour bus and were now walking briskly toward the albergue. Each member of the group carried a small daypack. As I passed each person, greeting them with the customary 'buen camino,' I smelled soap and saw clean clothes. Nobody in the group had yet broken a sweat. I walked through the gate leading to the albergue, and the group hesitated for a minute before following me up the sidewalk. The hospitalera greeted me, we have been friends for many years, and invited me in. She then turned toward the group and explained that the albergue would be filled with those who had actually walked that day. They would have to find accommodations somewhere else.

This was the first time I had ever seen a group exiting a bus a few hundred meters away from an albergue and then attempting to find beds for the evening. It was 2015, and I had been taking students on the Camino, walking from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, since 2008. Students in these classes engage in ethnographic research, discovering the meaning of pilgrimage in general and what the journey to Santiago means to contemporary pilgrims more specifically. After encountering the tour-bus pilgrims, I made it part of our evening discussions to question this practice. Are

these tour-bus pilgrims really engaged in spiritual journey? These evening discussions are popular amongst the pilgrims with whom our classes have formed relations. Many of the pilgrims who are not my students also participate in our classes. I was surprised that some of our fellow travelers did not think tour-bus pilgrims were any different from those who walk. As the aphorism goes, 'it's my Camino,' meaning it can be accomplished in whatever manner the individual chooses.

I have also led classes in Israel, where pilgrims regularly bus from site to sacred site. It is true that the group sharing the bus and the experience in these various sites find fellowship and spiritual significance. The same can be said for Rome, another pilgrimage site where I have taken students. In both Israel and Rome, I found the atmosphere to be a combination of religious devotion and theme park tourism. On the other hand, in Jerusalem, walking along the Via Dolorosa, the pilgrim encounters both the Stations of the Cross and the vendors along the way, a combination of sacred and profane actions that somehow defy the mixed atmosphere of devotion and tourism. Actually, the walk in the street past the first eight stations seemed more religious in atmosphere than after entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where pilgrims and tourists jostle for a space to take selfies. Many villages, towns and cities along the Camino also have markets, streets filled with locals engaging in daily business, and in some cases tourists visiting architectural wonders. But walking through

these places does not seem to create the mixed atmosphere I found in both Israel and Rome. There is something important about sharing the difficulty of walking long distances that annuls the tourist in each of us and thrusts us into *liminality* even in the most profane place.

Primal pilgrimage stories describe travelers 'touring' but the pilgrims therein lack contemporary tourist characteristics. It would seem absurd to interpret the travels of Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or Jesus as prototypes of pleasure seeking and recreational oriented tourists. These proto pilgrims tour across land and sea questing after that which does not compare with those things sightseers seek. However, if we look to more recent history we do find pilgrim narratives from Christian Europe, India, Japan, and the Middle East that describe both religious devotion and recreation. In these accounts the distinction between pilgrim and tourist activities is variously ambiguous. In contemporary pilgrimage we find a less ambiguous overlap of sacred and profane actions. Buses transporting pilgrims from sacred site to sacred site in the biblical Holy Lands stop at touristic souvenir shops. Visitors to the Vatican also pay homage to Roman ruins and popular tourist destinations in Rome such as the Spanish Steps or the Trevi Fountain. Has pilgrimage been transformed in the contemporary period to a tourist excursion wherein travelers occasionally engage in religious devotions?

Those who flock to Israel or Rome for religious devotion are understood to be pilgrims. The same could be said about those who travel to Santiago via bus or even rental car. If pilgrimage is understood as a long journey to a sacred site for religious devotion, all of these tour-bus travelers with religious devotion are indeed pilgrims. Given the evolution of mass transportation and the technological advances in communication technologies, understanding the phenomenon of pilgrimage becomes fraught with ambiguity. Perhaps defining pilgrimage is the wrong approach to understanding it. What follows is a phenomenological exploration of the question, 'what is pilgrimage?' Rather than answering the question with a definition, drawing linguistic borders around a human practice that sometimes transcends conceptual boundaries, I will interpret long distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail using two hermeneutic lenses: spiritual journey and aesthetic tourism. Turning to the Appalachian Trail, rather than traditional pilgrimage paths, moves the exploration to an established journey through the American wilderness that is not associated

with any particular religion. Despite this apparent lack of religious connection, those who walk the more than two-thousand-mile trek have been compared to pilgrims as they open themselves to spiritual transformation and encounter one another, as well as opening themselves to extra-human constituents of the journey, in ways similar to more traditional pilgrims. An interpretation of this wilderness trail also serves to distance the interpreter from preconceived ideas of what does or does not pass for pilgrimage. In some instances, the journey along the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains reveals itself spiritually. On the other hand, the hiker is an aesthetic tourist. These alternate interpretations of the journey help answer the question, 'what is pilgrimage?'

### **The Appalachian Trail as both Spiritual Journey and Aesthetic Tourism**

In his essay, 'Walking,' Henry David Thoreau highlights a difference between pilgrims and other hikers whose journey might be understood as profane. He looks at the action of sauntering and brings up the background for this term noting that it comes from pilgrimage:

*They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean (1957:p.592-593).*

Thoreau depicts two kinds of people on tour, pretenders and pilgrims. The same might be said of long distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail (hereafter referenced as the AT). When the rigors of the difficult hike interrupt romantic preconceptions of a walking communion with nature, usually a week or two into the journey, some take to the paved road, skipping more rugged sections of the trail. These hikers have become such a fixture that there is a name for them. They are referred to as 'yellow blazers' because they hitchhike on the highway but continue walking easier sections of the trail. The AT rarely follows paved highways, and when it does it tracks the road only for brief distances because the particular route is unavoidable. 'Yellow blaze' references the yellow lines painted on paved highways. In contrast, the AT is blazed with white paint on trees and rocks. These 'yellow blazers,' Thoreau's pretenders, boast of their hiking mileage, reporting that they have endured the ordeal of the AT, traversed the route from Georgia to Maine and claim to have hiked the entire trail. Those who do stay on the white blazed trail, 'Saunterers,'

experience the entire AT as an unbroken pathway through the wilderness. These pilgrims become indifferent to braggadocious pretenders. Whether the hiker is a pretender or pilgrim is beyond the scope of this inquiry. The point here is that people who traverse the same pathway may have divergent motivations as well as spiritual encounters.

There are other saunterers who track long distances on the wilderness trail along the Appalachian Mountains, and whose motivation is not spiritual. The aesthetic tourist is neither one of Thoreau's pretenders nor pilgrim. Their primary motivation for hiking the rugged terrain and mountainous forests is better described as sightseeing. They walk the trail focusing on picturesque or sublime prospects and other experiences of landscape that manifest as contemporary ecotourism or scenic adventure. The landscape aesthetic tradition that came of age in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of which Thoreau serves as an iconic figure, sets the precedent for ecotourism and scenic adventure. European and American landscape painters ventured into the wilds of America's mountains and forests, brought sketches back to their studios, and produced art that valued such scenery. America's National Parks and scenic trails were established in the wake of this aesthetic tradition. The aesthetic tourist finds fulfillment in searching for and discovering picturesque or sublime prospects while hiking.

Rather than a pursuit of picturesque or sublime scenery, some approach the walking journey in ways that are better interpreted in light of pilgrim narratives, or accounts of sacred journey stretching from the present to the ancient world. These hikers' approach also resonates with the writings of mystics such as desert hermits and wandering monks. AT hikers and other long-distance wilderness hikers of this stripe engage in a walking symbolic journey like pilgrimage. Is this a revival of those short-lived perpetual pilgrims of Ireland? Will some of these sojourners become known as wilderness mystics? Their journey also brings with it an aesthetic aspect but involves a much wider array of experiences and encounters not limited to an orientation of landscape as scenic. I refer to them as aesthetic sojourners. Their sojourn manifests in two ways that are consistent with the aesthetic tourist. They do traverse the landscape as do tourists, and they temporarily discover beauty as it unfolds in the picturesque or the sublime. They differ from the aesthetic tourist as the journey transforms them from disinterested subjects experiencing the landscape as scenic beauty, toward orienting them to becoming

visitors in particular environmental emplacements. That is, they become guests who receive the hospitality of those constituents of the environmental milieu whose home they are passing through. Just as pilgrims throughout the ages have relied on hospitality in their journey to a sacred site, receiving grace from those who dwell along the pathway, these aesthetic sojourners do not stand aloof from the beauty of the trail, admiring it from an aesthetic distance.

In this way the aesthetic sojourner's encounters are consistent with pilgrims interacting with religious icons. Jean-Luc Marion uses Levinas' analysis of the face in understanding the phenomenality of the icon, 'the face as icon addressing a call envisages me' (2002:119). Encountering both the icon and the face involves a 'counter-intentionality that does not manifest itself in becoming visible but in addressing its look to me' (Marion 2002:79). The icon looks at me before I bring my eyes to its surface. Just as when my gaze rises to the eyes of my lover and I realize I am the intended one, I encounter the icon as the face who has already been looking at me. We are together in this journey. Each of the constituents of the wilderness milieu envisages me as I sojourn through their place of dwelling. Our mutual encounter, one with the other, involves this aesthetic dimension.

This aesthetic sojourn can also be understood as one involving a 'complex, intentional 'Body-Subject in-the-world''<sup>[1]</sup> encountering the intertwining of a range of 'Body-Subjects' (Lanigan 1975:131). As we envisage one another dialogue happens, and we find meaning in and through our relations. Rather than gazing out at the vast landscape, letting my eyes sweep over the scene, this aesthetic encounter is better understood through Merleau-Ponty's description of standing before a painting:

*I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it (Merleau-Ponty 1993:126).*

Like those who stand before a painting, aesthetic sojourners, contemporary wilderness mystics or desert hermits, begin to 'see according to, or with' their environmental emplacement and experience a transformation of perception. Merleau-Ponty points to this mutual envisagement and fellowship, those who

1. Richard L Lanigan's elaboration on Merleau-Ponty's 'Body-Subject' (1975: 131).



see and those who are seen, a dialogic reciprocity, the intertwining of body-subjects in their environmental emplacement; he writes, ‘Things have an internal equivalent in me’ (Merleau-Ponty 1993:126). Pilgrims understood as aesthetic sojourners traverse places of both natural and cultural beauty, communicating intersubjectively, being present ‘at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted,’ called ‘to the task of knowledge and action’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964a:25).

Considering these divergent but related approaches to passing temporarily through places of natural and cultural beauty, spiritual journey or aesthetic tourism, is it possible that the same trail manifests distinct meanings? Can a particular location within the wild along the Appalachian Trail communicate both an experience of sedimented, objectified beauty as well as a spiritual encounter? Can such an encounter move hikers and constituents of wilderness toward mutual meaning? Are aesthetic tourists and pilgrims as aesthetic sojourners who occupy the same space on a given day really sharing the same site? To explore these questions, it is helpful to examine how these types emerged in their historical context.

### Rise of Aesthetic Tourism

Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, wild lands were the focus of neither aesthetic nor utilitarian value. Europeans and their descendants in America shunned wild lands. They typically associated wilderness with terror and considered prospects involving the wild as dreadful. The forests surrounding Versailles were cut down and transformed into a large and ordered garden reflecting human rationality and display. Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1959) tracks the transformation of perceptions of mountains, paralleling those of wilderness. Elizabeth Manwaring (1925) studied the significance of the aesthetic of the picturesque that ‘helped transform the distaste for mountains as things uncouth into fearful joy at their precipices, crags, and hanging woods’ (p.4). Frederick Law Olmstead, however, saw value in wild scenery, modeling it and touting it as inspirational for the design of ‘The Ramble’ in New York City’s Central Park. ‘The Ramble,’ located in the center of the park, becomes the antithesis of the design found in the gardens of Versailles. Rather than a forest destroyed and replaced by a garden planted in the image of human rational ordering, in New York City a plot of industrial acreage was salvaged and formed with the model of an indigenous American forest in mind: ‘The Ramble’ is also known as the ‘American Garden.’

Olmstead’s culminating landscape design might be thought of as a type of American Versailles. George Vanderbilt retained him to create a vast pastoral garden in the mountains of North Carolina. Olmsted incorporated both formal, pastoral, and wild landscapes in his designs at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. The ‘approach road’ leading up to Vanderbilt’s ‘palace’ required the reclamation of worn out and over grazed farmlands. As was the case for ‘The Ramble’ in Central Park, the ‘approach road’ finds its landscape inspiration in wilderness scenes. Those who visit Biltmore enter the estate along a long winding road that immerses them in a forest. Driving up this approach leaves no hint that a large mansion immediately surrounded by formal gardens is just up this hill.

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1972) draws a distinction between landscape and what he labels ‘countryside.’ Countryside in his account has similarities to wilderness in that ‘Countryside is that which is beyond our habitation, whether that is a house, a garden, a park, or a hacienda’ (Ortega y Gasset 1972:141). The Roman *locus amoenus*, or pastoral landscape, as well as picturesque cultivated lands, are dissimilar to Ortega y Gasset’s countryside. He writes:

*To walk, then, through an orchard, sown field, or stubble field, through an olive grove laid out in diagonal rows or a methodically planned grove of pin oaks, is to follow man traveling within himself* (Ortega y Gasset 1972:140).

Traversing domestic landscapes such as the *locus amoenus*, cultivated fields, large gardens such as Versailles or other parks dominating the contemporary environment connect pilgrims and other hikers to the conceptual landscapes that humans have constructed for centuries. These landscapes provide aesthetically stimulating prospects but do not open pilgrims to encountering environmental complexities that transcend an anthropocentric ordering.

A sojourn through the wilderness becomes an occasion to engage in a phenomenological reduction while interacting with varied environments. Jean-Luc Marion has proposed a ‘fourth and last formulation of a possible first principle of phenomenology: ‘As much reduction, as much givenness’’ (2002b:17). The reduction is a distancing from in its bracketing of the natural attitude. That is, a distancing of the usual. One setting of this reduction as distance happens in the *liminal* space of pilgrimage. *Liminal* distance creates a gap so that the given both gives itself and is received.

Marion points to the creation of such a gap ‘between the (appearing, transcendent) thing and (immanent) lived experience (in which the thing would appear)’ (2002b:55). *Liminal* distance facilitates meaning making as it happens through dialogue that unfolds throughout a journey. Liminality breaks the natural attitude and opens the sojourner to an alternative attitude. In ‘flow’ this alternative attitude becomes a phenomenological reduction where the given gives itself to the consciousness of the sojourner in the ‘gap between the (appearing transcendent) thing and (immanent) lived experience’ (2002b:55). Merleau-Ponty (1956:60) characterizes phenomenological description as a turning from the conceptual way of humans in the natural attitude to the things themselves revealing themselves there beyond our projection: ‘To turn back to the things themselves is to return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks’. Pilgrims become walking phenomenologists venturing on pathways such as the AT and opening themselves to encounter, turning to the world of things prior to their conceptualization, opening themselves to a wilderness that precedes landscape.

Is the distinction between the aesthetic tourist and pilgrim one of a journey to experience a preconceived landscape versus an encounter in the countryside, a wilderness wherein the pilgrim opens up to that which is other than ‘of which knowledge speaks’? Many AT hikers, in distinction from aesthetic tourists who preceded them and who loathed wilderness as unbearably ugly, go into the countryside where they hope to find beauty. The unpalatable aesthetic that travelers of previous eras equated with wild scenery has been translated into the sublime. But might this interpretation of the wild as sublime be another conceptual strategy towards taming the wild? Are wilderness trekkers really domesticating the wild, establishing their dominance over raw and strange environments? Might these long-distance hikers also be understood as aesthetic tourists? Ortega y Gasset points to this reinterpretation of the countryside writing:

*For the tourist, the countryside, as landscape, is no less human than the others: it is a ‘painting’ and its existence depends on the lyric conditions that man wishes and is able to mobilize . . . Poets and painters are the ones who have formed it* (Ortega y Gasset 1972:140).

Landscape painters in the 16<sup>th</sup> century prefigured a reinterpretation of wild scenery as they focused on the countryside as a subject for their creations. The reinterpretation waxed and came to maturity two

centuries later as artists continued to paint scenes of the countryside, their new formed aesthetic tradition mediating conceived landscapes:

*Only by the beginning of the nineteenth century was there enough force behind the human impulse which leads man to convert a piece of ground into the ideality of a landscape* (Ortega y Gasset 1972: 141).

These conceived landscapes objectify and isolate scenery. One example of this action was the Claude Glass, an instrument carried by aesthetic tourists so that they could frame landscapes as they walked through the countryside. The device was inspired by the landscape paintings of Claude Lorraine and as the tourist gazed through the glass, the scene appeared as a facsimile of one of the master’s creations. So, the aesthetic practice of composing a painting, of isolating scenery, of projecting a conception upon the environmental prospect, served to create landscape. In the creation of landscape, the very thing itself is concealed behind the conception of artists and aesthetic tourists. Artists may desire to communicate a vision of the thing that moved them to paint, but their arrangement in pigment remains a composition.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists such as Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet took their canvases into the countryside, attempted to paint what was seen immediately rather than creating through the mediation of sketches and a studio. Still, viewers experience these works through the frame of a painting. Whether the landscape is conceived, viewed through painting, seen through a glass, or even through the lens of a camera, the thing itself remains under these sedimented attempts at communicating an encounter. Artists teach culture that wild places have aesthetic value. But, their communicated scenes train viewers to gaze through a frame, to participate in conceiving landscape rather than encountering wild things. Art becomes for the aesthetic tourist an experience of landscape, a view through a conceptual window separating the one seeing from the thing itself, distancing the tourist from the life world. As the aesthetic tourist gaze focuses on the beautiful, the picturesque, or the sublime, even when they are walking a wilderness trail, they remove themselves from a lived encounter with the constituents of the place where they walk, they become distanced by the orienting frame composing the scene, independent of it being an actual device or a conception. In this scenario landscape is experienced as an object of aesthetic value that mediates a subjective experience. Pilgrimage, on the other hand,

opens the sojourner to alterity, to the things themselves that transcend their conception. Pilgrims encounter the other and communicate intersubjectively. Both the pilgrim and the things themselves, the constituents of the environmental milieu, give themselves one to another in the phenomenological exchange.

### The Scenic and the Journey

The constituents of the AT, the pilgrim and vast array of humans and extra-humans along the way, give themselves one to another in a variety of ways. Walking in relation to both time and space, the duration and distance one walks along the wild and winding footpath, have a qualitative impact on perceptions. Much of the AT surrounds the hiker in thick growing vegetation forming what many call the 'green tunnel.' Scenic overlooks and other aesthetic wonders greet hikers as well, but they are few and typically far between. Those who engage in day and section hiking experience less of the 'green tunnel' and relatively more of the sought after aesthetic spectacles.

How is it that day or section hiking limit experiences of dense foliage whereas these kinds of environments abound throughout long distance hikes? Day and section hikers typically target places along the trail that offer scenic rewards and as a result walk shorter distances through dense vegetation in their pursuit of overlooks and other aesthetically desirable prospects. Day or section hikers are able to access these sites via closely situated trailhead car parks and thereby collapse the distance needed to walk while pursuing particular chosen destinations of beauty. This is not the case with long distance hikers who walk the trail all day and every day through a range of conditions such as fog, rain, blazing sun, sleet and snow. Their trek usually involves being on the trail for three or four seasons and can extend to nearly six months. Long treks immerse hikers in every kind of ecosystem and in all kinds of weather along the Appalachian Mountains that extends their hike in duration and distance. Those hiking north, for example, walk from Georgia to Maine. While day and section hikers experience more novelty on whatever section they target, long distance hikers become accustomed to flora, fauna, and other constituents along the way and so may come to interpret interactions as forms of hospitality.

Some places along the AT give long distance hikers rare encounters not possible for short term hikers targeting aesthetically pleasing prospects. These day and section hikers come to the trail focused primarily on the scenic. Though a long distance hiker's original

motivations may have been similar to an aesthetic tourist's, their orientation may shift to a hiking approach that is more than a visual aesthetic experience. Such long distance ramblers need to find goals that diverge from visual aesthetic highpoints. Though such prospects of scenic beauty give great rewards, the long distance hiker will have to continue the journey whether or not they experience such sights. Inclement weather often hinders scenic prospects. Such weather may last days. In mist, drenching rain, and snow sweeping panoramas vanish or are obscured. Both the Grayson Highlands and the Roan Highlands exemplify open fields, bald mountaintops, and rocky outcrops that give hikers picturesque and sublime views, but long distance hikers often miss these experiences, never seeing more than five feet down the trail because these places are often shrouded in clouds. A common aphorism used by long distance hikers captures this happening, 'no rain, no pain, no Maine.' If such aesthetic rewards do not provide the hiker's intended goals, their long journey will be abandoned and maybe several shorter treks, or an altered hike that reduces these challenging situations and enhances a more pleasurable aesthetic experience, will be sought.

An aesthetic tourist's goals often involve amassing experiences and memories. Aldo Leopold lists a number of potential tokens that memorialize experiences for aesthetic tourists, those he refers to as recreationists. Duck hunters bring home their kill, birders or botanical enthusiasts hunt their own 'prey' and return with some reward, nature-lover/writers capture 'bad verse on birchbark,' motorists collect visits to National Parks (Leopold 1949:167). These aesthetic tourists, recreationists, share something common with the hunter in hunting in that they bring home the kill through photographs, essays, or other tokens of memory and then display them as trophies. Leopold shows that there is little difference between the contemporary hunter displaying a mounted elk head on her wall and the 'nature-lover' exhibiting photographs on her wall: in each case they are 'symbols or tokens of achievement such as heads, hides, photographs, and specimens' (Leopold 1949: 168). Leopold continues in this vein:

*All these things rest upon the idea of trophy . . . The trophy, whether it be a bird's egg, a mess of trout, a basket of mushrooms, the photograph of a bear, the pressed specimen of a wild flower, or a note tucked into the cairn on a mountain peak, is a certificate. It attests that its owner has been somewhere and done something - that he has exercised skill,*



*persistence, or discrimination in the age-old feat of overcoming, outwitting, or reducing-to-possession (1949: 169).*

Leopold's comparison of seeming distinct activities shows them sharing a common aesthetic practice:

*The duck-hunter in his blind and the operatic singer on the stage, despite the disparity of their accouterments, are doing the same thing. Each is reviving, in play, a drama formerly inherent in daily life. Both are, in the last analysis, esthetic exercises (1949: 168).*

Pilgrimage and other types of spiritual journey also involve an aesthetic that could be referenced as aesthetic sojourning. However, not common with aesthetic tourism, pilgrims move through *liminal* space. *Liminality* reorients pilgrims to interpreting symbols and beings not as tokens for display, but as fellows on a similar journey. Rather than collectibles, trophies, or other items exhibited in an attempt to concretize one's experience, the constituents of the journey, the others whose being-in-the-world that transcends my own become manifest, draw me out of experience and into encounter. Concerning the distinction between experience and encounter, Martin Buber writes:

*Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is 'in them' and not between them and the world. The world does not participate in experience. It allows itself to be experienced, but it is not concerned, for it contributes nothing, and nothing happens to it (1970:56).*

Buber expands his description of encounter with three spheres of relation: 'life with nature,' 'life with men,' and 'life with spiritual beings' (1970:56-57). These relations, as Buber describes, open the pilgrim to encounter while on a *liminal* journey, a movement transcending the boundaries of familiarity where we project and construct, where we experience the constituents of our world as beings for use, what Buber would reference as the I-It pairing.

Buber's phenomenological description is particularly appropriate as it applies to a common encounter on the AT wherein the hiker relates to a tree. The person who experiences the tree as an object, the orientation of Buber's I-It pairing, 'can accept it as a picture,' 'feel it as movement,' 'assign it to a species,' 'overcome its uniqueness and form,' 'dissolve it into a number,' and in all of this 'the tree remains my object' (Buber 1970:58). But, the person who encounters the tree

intersubjectively, enters into relation with the whole:

*its form and mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars - all this in its entirety (1970:58).*

Distanced from the influences of the natural attitude, the everyday world left behind while on pilgrimage, removed from the lure of a marketplace reality wherein others are experienced as a means to an end, the *liminality* of the journey transforms relations, and in so doing the sojourner undergoes transformation.

Those whose primary orientation may have been aesthetic tourism and who discover a transformed way of relating to the other, human and extra human, through the *liminality* of a long distance hike find that their gaze, thoughts, and goals shift. Their perspective changes from an experience of centeredness, where they themselves are the center of orientation, to the possibility of multiple viewpoints. The long distance daily rhythm - rising early in the morning, eating, drawing water, breaking camp, walking through rough terrain, pausing for meals, finding more water, setting up camp, making dinner, and sleeping - becomes the whole of the hiker's being-in-the-world. If the hiker is to finish the entire journey, it necessitates completing between 18 and 24 miles each day. Some days are shorter, even resting for what is known as a 'zero day,' while other days are longer. Whatever the distance, each hiker feels the daily rhythm as a kind of choreography wherein everyone shares the dance. These distances translate into duration, a walk of more than 10 hours each day; 10 hours of rhythmic moving, one foot in front of the other, full attention focused on the pathway so as not to fall and incur an injury. This rhythmic walking facilitates 'flow,' a merging of action and awareness. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, 'one is very aware of one's actions, but not of the awareness itself' (Csikszentmihalyi 1975:45). Csikszentmihalyi's studies of flow show that it is associated with 'painful, risky, difficult activities that stretched the person's capacity and involved an element of novelty and discovery' (Csikszentmihalyi 1997:110). The difficulty of both physical and mental challenges that are particularly evident in long distance versus day and section hiking along the AT open hikers to flow.

In expanding on the connection between flow and the spirituality of long distance hiking, I previously wrote:

*In the experience of flow our preconceptions evaporate as our actions and awareness*



*become one and the constituents of our field of awareness interact in the walking* (Redick 2016: 42).

In flow, the hiker rarely thinks of collecting experiences or tokens as such thinking breaks the rhythm. Hikers cease relating to the wilderness constituents as potential souvenirs. Instead, pilgrims engage in dialogue with those constituents. This dialogue may take forms other than linguistic exchange. Communication may extend to the non-verbal through gesture, a form of expression. Merleau-Ponty notes that in 'pointing gestures' the body 'flows over into a world' (1964b:67). He continues,

*So much the more does the gesture of expression, which undertakes through expression to delineate what it intends' and that 'every use of the body is already primordial expression* (1964b: 67).

One example of such a dialogic, non-verbal communication happened in 2011 on the AT in New York. During the mid-morning while walking alone, I came upon a bear just four meters off of the trail. The bear was sitting, and we both saw each other at the same time. I did speak so as to announce my presence, just in case I mistook the bear having seen me. The bear watched me for about a minute then began to huff, exhaling air and blowing through its open jaws. The bear's jowls flapped and its head jutted forward, though it was still in the sitting position. I understood this as an expression indicating that I should leave. So, I announced my intention to leave and slowly walked away.

If *liminality* and daily rhythm fail to introduce a transformed perspective, aesthetic tourists may also find reorientation through increasing frustration that rises when their daily walk through miles and miles of dense forest fails to produce wondrous aesthetic rewards. The 'green tunnel' is notorious for being void of visually framed scenes of both middle and extended distance. One of the most iconic overlooks, McAfee Knob, does provide such an expansive prospect. But even on a clear day, the long-distance hiker has at best a brief visual aesthetic experience. If collecting such experiences were the pilgrim's goal, frustration might alienate their interaction with other places on the trail. Many do quit the long journey and instead choose day hiking or section hiking as better methods for experiencing the aesthetic wonders of the wilderness.

Such aesthetic frustration is still common amongst thru-hikers who proclaim their desire for more scenic

overlooks. They would rather there be fewer miles of the 'green tunnel.' This frustration is illustrated by a particular complaint wherein thru-hikers reference hiking up mountains with no view as PUDS - pointless ups and downs. There are countless steep, thickly wooded mountains all along the AT. On most of these climbs the trail leads to the top and immediately takes the hiker back down again having offered no scenic reward. Descriptions of the trail, such as labeling sections as PUDS, illustrate an interpretation of the wilderness way that objectifies scenery - an aesthetic orientation privileging the visual. Such hiker interpretations are rooted in landscape traditions that conceptualize beautiful scenery. Norman Wirzba (2015: 58) writes:

*When we desire our relationship to nature to be mediated by the expectation that only places deemed pretty or spectacular are worthy of our attention, then we do witness an idolatry that condemns much of the world to neglect or even disparagement. What we often fail to realize is that our worship of nature's beauty, especially our designations of certain kinds of landscapes or creatures as beautiful, is also fundamentally a reduction of the world to the expectations that we bring to it.*

This conceptual, scenic orientation separates aesthetic tourists from encountering the constituents within the ecological complex that form unique places along the AT. Rather than encountering a particular tree as it manifests itself in wholeness, for example, the tourist experiences particular trees as hindrances, obstacles, frames that accent prospects. The orientation of aesthetic tourists involves experiencing rather than encountering the constituents of the ecoplace, the immediate geographical area wherein the hiker walks, which is also encompassed by a larger ecoregion.<sup>[2]</sup>

When hikers walk with an orientation toward encounters within the ecoplaces that make up the entire Appalachian Trail, a dialogic relation happens; hikers who share more than scenery discover a deeper communion with each other, the constituents of ecoplaces, as well as with divinity. In all of this they discover hospitality. These relational encounters reveal the life-world to be invested with sacred meaning.

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2. Ecoregion is defined as *relatively large units of land containing a distinct assemblage of natural communities and species, with boundaries that approximate the original extent of natural communities prior to major land-use change* (Olson et al., 2001:933).

Pilgrimage, unlike a self-gratifying tourist journey, reveals relational tensions where encounters happen. In pilgrimage the *liminal* journey confronts those who would privilege mediated relations characterized by Buber as the I-It pairing. During the *liminal* journey *communitas* emerges rather than objectified relations. The visual scenery experienced as landscape is exposed as an objectified relation, conceived rather than given. *Communitas* rises in the play of unmediated and spontaneous bonds between persons. The natural attitude that rules in the everyday experience of the market place gives rise to hierarchical social status. During *liminality*, sacred journey brings forth *communitas*, which erases utilitarian social relations. When hikers objectify landscapes, they set themselves apart. In so doing they occupy a privileged vantage and cut themselves off from an encounter with the constituents of the ecoplace. As controlling agents, aesthetic tourists occupy the central point of perspectival orientation. Their goal is to seek an experience for the self and in so doing transform ecoplaces into landscapes. Pilgrims, on the other hand, are relationally focused, *communitas* rises spontaneously in the reciprocity of encounter.

Aestheticians of landscape conceptualized scenery in terms of the beautiful, picturesque, and sublime, thus reorienting our cultural understanding of wild landscapes, opening us to viewing wild scenery as conceived. José Ortega y Gasset points out that landscape is a construction. He shows us that countryside, or wilderness, transcends our cultural gaze, and that the conceived categories of the beautiful, picturesque, and sublime could be interpreted as another domesticating strategy. Aldo Leopold introduced ecology as the study of the interrelationships between diverse constituents of particular environments. In *Sand County Almanac* Leopold describes his encounter with a wolf, a happening in the American southwest. Leopold's encounter happens in relation to a particular ecoplace, on 'high rimrock . . . at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way' (Leopold 1949:129). The encounter revealed to him the interrelationships between the varied constituents, flora and fauna, of the ecoregion. Leopold's revelation happened in relation to both a concrete experience on that particular day and his imagined dialogue with a mountain. This spiritual elaboration of ecology is captured in a short essay titled 'Thinking Like a Mountain.' This spiritual awakening showed Leopold what would have otherwise been an invisible reality of ecological interrelationships. He and his companions shoot a wolf

and then approach her, watching as her life end, the 'fierce green fire dying in her eyes' (Leopold 1949:130). Many of the interrelationships between the constituents of the ecosystem come into view as he imagines this complex via the perspective of a mountain. An environmental abstraction concretizes in this particular place through the dying green fire of the expiring wolf. This particular environment is transformed into what I have labeled an ecoplace; the conceptualized landscape becomes concrete, this turbulent river, this rimrock, this wolf, these green eyes. The interrelationships of various environmental constituents manifest themselves, give themselves in a phenomenological exchange there on the slopes above the river. The account comes to us as a highly poetic intersubjective dialogue between Leopold and the constituents of this ecoplace. It is a spiritual vision rooted in the particular place showing the interrelationships between the constituents in their environmental milieu. Something like this happens in the *liminality* of Pilgrimage as it opens those on journey to spiritual and poetic encounters. Interpreting the AT as spiritual journey and approaching it phenomenologically reveals that there is more than one way to enter the wilderness. Two distinct ways of walking the path have been outlined. One approach manifests aesthetic experiences while the other opens the hiker to various encounters.

### Aesthetic Sojourning

Is it really possible to draw such a distinction between experience and encounter in relation to pilgrimage? Aesthetic experiences are a regular occurrence along the pilgrimage route, and the encounters that pilgrims have may also be profoundly aesthetic. Is it really possible for poetic and spiritual encounters to be meaningful void of aesthetic dimensions? In order to distinguish between tourist and sojourner while also recognizing a shared dimension requires an unfolding of alternative aesthetic distances. Landscape itself, as conceived by aestheticians, arises as a result of visual experiences, the objective scene being 'out there' and the subjective experience 'in here.' The conception reinforces distance and allows the aesthetic tourist to retain particular landscapes in the form of possessions, objects of aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic tourists 'collect' these objects as memories, photographs, or other tokens of the pilgrimage and upon returning home, display them. Aesthetic sojourners, in contrast, return from their journey in a different manner.

Their encounters involve them in a fully embodied walk, such as happens in flow, all their senses and imagination gather what is given in a kind of phenomenological exchange. Such an exchange facilitates phenomenological reduction and alters aesthetic distance. Jean-Luc Marion (2002), in describing givenness and the phenomenality of beauty, shows the way a painting presents itself. His description is applicable to the givenness of beauty as it appears to the sojourner. He writes that the painting is not given as a thing, something ready-to-hand, but that it opens me to its beauty:

*It is that I 'live' its meaning, namely its beautiful appearing, which has nothing thinglike to it, since it cannot be described as the property of a thing, demonstrated by reasons, or hardly even be said. What is essential - the beautiful appearing - remains unreal, an 'I know not what,' that I must seek, await, touch, but which is not comprehensible.* (2002a: 46)

The exchange contracts the sojourner's proximity to ecoplaces along the trail. The contraction also diminishes the subject / object orientation where objects appear 'out there' and produce experiences 'in here.' This contraction of aesthetic distance, coupled with phenomenological reduction, facilitates discovering meaning in other ways than objectifying. The reduction sets aside conceptions associated with scenery, with landscape and its construction. The pilgrim, in the 'I know not what,' finds herself pursuing meaning outside of preconceptions and instead dialoguing, participating with the constituents of the journey through hospitality and an aesthetic exchange. The pilgrim seeks, awaits, and touches. She collaborates with the constituents of the aesthetic field that is the array of beings she perceives through a fully embodied encounter. She leaves something of herself on the trail, and something of the trail remains with her. She is no longer the same person who embarked when the journey commenced and at the same time cannot reenter the life-world she left behind when she started her journey. She does not collect objects that add to her identity. If she does return with a gift from the trail, she and that gift are extensions of one another.

In relation to aesthetic encounters, as encounters they were neither scenic nor merely subjective, neither 'out there' nor 'in here.' The pilgrim, the beauty, and the constituents of each ecoplace along the way communicated in a kind of dance, a choreography rooted in a particular time and place. Her communion

transcended the merely visual scene and incorporated her whole body in the encounter. Her whole being as well as the wholeness of each of the other beings' being were given one to another as each situation unfolded, not distinctly but as the collaborative manifesting of their being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty (1995) writes of this kind of situation:

*It is not a surveying of the body and of the world by a consciousness, but rather is my body as interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body standing in front of the upright things, in a circuit with the world, an Einfühlung with the world, with the things, with animals, with other bodies . . .* (1995: 209).

Aesthetic tourists and long distance hikers / pilgrims do travel the same pathways, and sometimes alongside one another, but their way of walking diverges. Aesthetic tourists traverse landscapes while their practiced and conceptually oriented gaze frames scenery and facilitates an experience of landscape. Their conceptually trained gaze distances the tourist from the scenery, and orients an interpretation of the journey that comes forth primarily through the perception of the visual and objectified experience. Narratives related to such journeys cast the walker as the controlling agent, the perspectival center point through which the scenery comes to view from the hiker's visual vantage point. The long-distance hiker, or wilderness pilgrim, shares in hospitality with others, both other pilgrims and constituents of the milieu, who are all gathered together during the journey. Rather than objective distance, the long distance hiker / pilgrim practices intersubjective dialogue, communing with other hikers and the constituents. Distance does manifest itself in the *liminal* space. But this distance separates the wilderness ecoplace from the marketplace that the pilgrim exited at the opening of the journey. *Liminal* distance opens a space wherein the pilgrim reimagines herself as co-agent with others, both fellow pilgrims as well as others not journeying. Dialogue gives rise to meaning making as it unfolds throughout the journey. Tourists return to their place of origin upon the completion of their recreational journey and are enlivened with new vigor. They reinvest it into their life. Their experience is best understood as additive. Pilgrims also return after their journey and become collaborative authors of a renewed life. They discover a new approach to being-in-the-world. Their encounter has been transformative. This then is the ongoing manifestation of pilgrimage.



## Conclusion

Thoreau described two kinds of people walking to the Holy Land. He also writes that not all who enter the woods become spiritually present:

*Of course, it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the wood bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is - I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? (1957: 597-598)*

The hiker must shake off the village in order to collapse the distance between themselves and the woods. *Liminality* serves to collapse the distance and facilitates a walking that places the pilgrim in spiritual presence, which is shown in Thoreau's description to involve a fully embodied presence wherein the walker's attention coalesces in the emplacement.

Belden C. Lane proposes four axioms that facilitate an understanding of sacred place. He writes that these axioms are 'phenomenological categories, describing how places are perceived in the process of mythogenesis' (2001:19). His third axiom is consistent with Thoreau's idea that not everyone who is merely present in body is also fully present, 'sacred place can be tread upon without being entered' (2001:19). Pilgrimage involves a journey to a sacred place as well as an encounter with the sacred. Not everyone who journeys to a sacred place recognizes the encounter. Those who practice pilgrimage versus tourism, who engage in *liminal* journey, are the ones who best understand what is pilgrimage? The pilgrim and the tourist may arrive at the same albergue at the same time, but their bodies have been in divergent places revealing vastly different meanings of sacred journey.

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