

THE WAY OF ST. JAMES: RENEWING INSIGHTS

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Faith and Narrative: The Secularization of the Way of St. James through Literature

The Way of Saint James is inextricably bound up with the tales recounted by those who have travelled along it. From the oral testimonies of the pilgrims who returned renewed and strengthened in their faith, to written accounts that combine the travel journal with the adventure novel, it is not difficult to image how these narratives could have a considerable impact on the minds of future pilgrims. That is why it should not surprise us that the Way of Saint James has become, from different perspectives, linked to literature: "Among the most significant consequences pertaining to the return from the pilgrimage, we should take into account the birth of a rich, extensive body of travel and pilgrimage literature that stretches around the major European nations" (CAUCCI VON SAUCKEN, 1993:111). From the first half of the twelfth century to the beginning of the seventeenth, Book V of the *Codex Calixtinus*, the earliest of the Compostelan 'pilgrim's guides', exercised the greatest and most singular influence. However, as far back as the fourteenth century, a large body of European literature linked to the pilgrimage began to appear. A particularly notable example is: "*Die Walfart und Strass zu San Jacob*, written by the Servite monk Hermann König von Vach, whose four editions, published between 1495 and 1521, demonstrate the popularity that the pilgrimage to Santiago still enjoyed in the German world, despite being by now on the threshold of the Reformation" (CAUCCI VON SAUCKEN, 1993:112). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continuing even up to 1790, many pilgrims' guides were written in French. The French language also made a significant contribution to the literature linked to the Way in the field of song: "the many bookish expressions of pilgrim songs conserved are basically from the French-speaking area and, to lesser extent, the Flemish" (VILLANUEVA, 1993:157). There also exists an abundance of works in Italian that, from the late-six-

teenth century, helped to increase interest in the Way through such quality literary productions as the two travel diaries *Viaggio in Ponente* (1681) by Domenico Laffi and *Viaggio da Napoli a San Giacomo di Galizia* by Nicola Albani (1745), works that contribute to an understanding of the workings of the pilgrim's mind and his or her aspirations (BIELLA, 2003:50). In all these works we find a blend of elements that we could describe as "worldly" along with a more fundamental content of a religious nature. The background is always supernatural, although when the adventures and feelings experienced are described with realism, the human and natural elements always come to the fore to one extent or another. To quote Caucci von Saucken once more:

all this literature constitutes an exceptional source enabling us to gain close-up knowledge of the pilgrim mentality, as in it we find reflected his or her motivations, aspirations, worries, crises and weaknesses, and the joy of having reached such a distant place. (CAUCCI VON SAUCKEN, 1993:112)

In recent decades, however, we witness a paradoxical phenomenon. More and more literary works are appearing that take the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela as the backdrop, both in fictional literature and in travel diaries, yet the predominant perspective in this production oscillates between insubstantial spiritualism and more or less cynical anti-clerical scepticism.

Contemporary esoteric literature based on the Way inevitably finds its point of reference in the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, who published *The Pilgrimage*, based on his experience of travelling the Way, in 1987. The international popularity of his later novels, such as *The Alchemist*, then, make Coelho an ineluctable point of reference with regard to all esoteric literature related to the Way. Moreover, Coelho has been a powerful agent in popularising the Way in America, especially Brazil, exercising an influence that should not be underestimated¹:

¹ "The Way has another meaning and a plurality of messages that go beyond the limitations of the traditions of the Order of Santiago in today's world. Perhaps for this reason and due to the Brazilian people's intense spiritual (more than religious) feeling, they discovered the Way of Saint James in the nineteen-eighties, to such an extent that in the following decade it became a cult journey for them. Leaving aside better informed Brazilians, the main reason for this boom in interest in the Way in the South American country has a name: the writer Paulo Coelho. In 1986, still unknown, and driven by the need for a change in his life and for a spiritual quest, he walked the French Way of Saint James from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the south of France. The result of that experience, one that really did change his life, according to Coelho, was the book *The Pilgrimage (Diary of a Mage)*, which became an instant bestseller following its publication in 1987. In Brazil, the book generated a legion of unconditional followers driven by the urgent need to travel the Way. Such was its effect that the boom in pilgrims was not limited to those with sufficient means to travel to Europe; others also made enormous sacrifices in order to make their dream come true. When the book was translated into other languages,

Per la profondità delle sue descrizioni e per la sua nota abilità ad esprimere concetti e sensazioni apparentemente indefinibili, Coelho è ritenuto essere la causa inconsapevole di un fenomeno molto recente: siamo agli inizi degli anni Novanta quando migliaia di persone, soprattutto latinoamericane, si lanciano entusiaste a compiere il pellegrinaggio, inaugurando una nuova tendenza che supera la tradizione di considerare il Camino de Santiago una peculiarità europea, per ovvie ragioni di vicinanza e storia. (BIELLA, 2003:52)

In Spain, in 1998, the author Juan García Atienza, a specialist in Hispanic esotericism, published *Leyendas del camino de Santiago. La ruta jacobea a través de sus ritos, mitos y leyendas* [Legends of the Way to Santiago. The Way of Saint James Through its Rites, Myths and Legends], in which he compiles around one hundred legends, grouped according to the different stages in the history of the Way. For his part, in 1999, the author and journalist Sánchez Dragó published *Historia mágica del camino de Santiago* [Magical History of the Way of Saint James], mixing historical information and mythological beings. In the world of children's literature, moreover, we include in this article a study of *Peregrinatio*, published by the Spanish writer Matilde Asensi in 2004, a work that exemplifies, within the framework of the genre, the same post-modern approach.

Due to its international media impact, a book by the celebrated American actress Shirley MacLaine played a decisive role in the popularity of this whole body of esoteric literature. The well-known film star walked the Way of Saint James in the summer of 1994 and in 2000 published *The Camino. A Journey of the Spirit*. This was a blend of personal experience, products of the imagination (brought very much to the fore), fiction, and vague spiritual ideas.²

moreover, it continued to attract more and more followers. Coelho has mentioned that, when he dies, he would like his ashes to be scattered at O Cebrerio in Galicia, a mythical site on the French Way" (RODRÍGUEZ, M. F. voz *America*, in Various authors, *Xacopedia*. Ediciones Bolanda. Ebook of the *Gran Enciclopedia del Camino de Santiago*).

² "Looking down at the landscape below, I imagined that I could see Charlemagne and his armies, the Moors and their conflicts, the individual stories of our lives and events. I was the Moorish lassie, dark hair flying in the wind as I rode my horse and sputtering obscenities in a cold stream after having been baptized. And over all of it hovered John the Scot, the cleric-teacher, somehow still narrating in my head: 'Remember who you are and what you have been' (...) Yes, I had walked towards those unknown worlds, looking for who I was and who I had been then (...) I thought about our known world today (...) We didn't seem to understand our fundamental soul connection to the Great God-Goddess Spirit, the first word, the origin of ALL." (MACLAINE, 2000: 277). It seems pretty clear that, if she had not been a film star, she would not have caused much impact with this book. However, there is no doubting the work's influence in spreading knowledge of the Way in the US, as it led many of MacLaine's compatriots, including other celebrities, to under the journey along the Way of Saint James. Cf. RODRÍGUEZ, M. F. loc.cit.

1. Recovering the historic value of pilgrims' journals

Beyond this line of insubstantial spiritualism, in recent decades we have also witnessed a flourishing of travel journals linked to The Way. In this field, the most original and innovative work in its genre was *Prier pour nous à Compostelle*, published in 1978 by the French journalists Pierre Barret and Jean-Noël Gurgand after they had made the pilgrimage from Vézelay. Most of the book consists of a popular scientific summary of the history of the Way. The originality in their journal lies in its constant use of direct citations from a few accounts personally written by pilgrims, thereby forming a highly original sort of "history of medieval and modern Europe". Chronologically, the dozen or so ancient accounts used range from the inevitable twelfth-century *Liber Sancti Jacobi* to Jean Bonnecaze in 1748. The final section contains a more personal story, entitled 'Un tombeau en Espagne', describing the authors' impressions from their fifty-day pilgrimage from Vézelay to Santiago. Due to the success of *Prier pour nous à Compostelle* in France, the book was translated in the 1980s into Spanish and Galician, as well as into other languages, such as German and Dutch. In it, Barret and Gurgand turn pilgrims' anecdotes into a chance to enable readers, and themselves, to discover the circumstances experienced by those that preceded them along that same Way over the centuries. In this manner, going from the accidental to the essential, they succeed in painting a credible image of the person and motivations of the pilgrim in ancient times:

Histoires de chapeaux, de chaussures, de saignements de nez: la chronique du chemin, c'est la face cachée de l'aventure, la part vulgaire et douloureuse de l'épopée. Cela tient sans doute à la nature de l'entreprise. L'ambition du pèlerin est transcendente, mais sa méthode est la plus prosaïque qui soit: mettre un pied devant l'autre et recommencer. Livré au hasard des horizons inconnus où le temps finit par s'abolir, chahuté par la nature, menacé par tous les prédateurs, aussi désarmé qu'un hanneton sur une pierre lisse, notre arpenteur d'éternité trace son chemin à force d'infimes progrès. C'est en cela qu'il dépasse ce qui lui arrive. (BARRET-GURGAND, 1978: 110)

In their journal of the pilgrimage, they return once more to the subject of the inevitably religious motivations of the pilgrims of ancient days, mixed with other types of motivations that are easier for the post-modern, secular twentieth-century observer to understand. For these pilgrims were also motivated by curiosity, the desire to see the world, encouragements that existed alongside other, more transcendent reasons for making the journey. Moreover, it is logical to believe that those pilgrims who, on their return, translated their experiences and memories into written

form would have been those most deeply interested in the stories, legends, personal testimonies, rumours and so on that were shared by travellers during their evening respites before taking to the road once more the next day:

Il n'y a pas si longtemps, la représentation qu'on avait du monde se formait aux vieilles. Là, dans les légendes et les récits de voyage, ceux qui savaient transmettaient ce qu'ils avaient eux-mêmes entendu ou observé. Un pèlerinage à Santiago, traversant tant de régions, est une occasion privilégiée de confronter des images et des réalités. La curiosité d'avant les média est avide, abrupte, critique, volontiers méprisante pour ce qui est différent, accueillante aux ragots et aux médisances... (BARRET-GURGAND, 1978: 199-200)

However, Barret and Gurgand are fully aware, as they make clear, of the great difference between those pilgrims and us. This is not only a difference in the material aspects of the journey, but also, and above all, a crucial difference between the religious and secular worldviews:

En somme, la foi est ce qui nous manque le plus pour nous retrouver en pèlerins. Eux vivaient sur le chemin une grande aventure, entretenue par des prières et des chants de route qui donnaient du coeur aux jambes et maintenaient le contact avec l'au-delà, ponctuée de miracles, de reliques, de légendes. Ils suivaient l'étoile. (BARRET-GURGAND, 1978: 290)

The authors find their most convincing evidence that the ancient pilgrims' motivation was supernatural in the extreme insecurity of the Way, the extreme uncertainty regarding the likelihood of emerging safe and sound from the experience:

...chaque étape les rapprochait du pardon et du salut. Les risques de la route, de plus, exaltaient leur espérance. Les faux passeurs, les faux guides, les vrais bandits et les vrais loups, le froid, le mal pouvaient toujours interrompre le voyage. Combien d'entre eux ont dû connaître (...) les nuits atroces de la peur. Et combien, tout simplement, sont morts sur leur plus longue route (...) Nous, nous savons toujours où nous en sommes à un kilomètre près; nous pourrions, s'il le fallait, regagner Paris en moins de vingt-quatre heures; nous n'avons à craindre ni les passeurs ni les loups. (BARRET-GURGAND, 1978: 290-291)

In ancient times, it was only with their gaze set on something more precious than life itself that pilgrims could travel the Way. That is why, in their travel diary, Barret and Gurgand describe their thoughts, doubts and conclusions regarding their own reasons for becoming twentieth-century pilgrims. They even discuss their feelings when, on several occasions, they consider deliberately omitting the entry into Santiago. Nonetheless, in the end they complete the pilgrimage in a mixture of

joy and sadness. On the one hand, they arrive with conviction of having understood the pilgrims of the past better. On the other, they have the feeling that they had not been able to see themselves as pilgrims exactly, since they proved themselves unable to adopt a vision free from the secularism that has taken root in modern men and women: «Il est inquiétant d'avoir perdu le sens du salut quand on a gardé celui du péché» (BARRET-GURGAND, 1978: 302).

2. The interpretation of the Way of Saint James as a key to understanding Spain

In the nineteen-eighties, the Dutch Hispanic scholar Cees Nootboom made notes on his car journeys around Spain before writing the book *De omweg naar Santiago*, published in 1992. Based on these notes, he reconstructs a kind of history of Spain from a deeply anti-religious standpoint. Santiago de Compostela and the Way become an excuse to describe a selection of places, monuments, festivities and customs, a meditation on the Spanish people from Cádiz to Girona. Indeed, it is only at the end of the book that the significance of the title becomes clear, when the author mentions driving past Santiago de Compostela without stopping time and again, as if boasting of his rejection of Hispanic orthodoxy:

...a *tour* being synonymous with a detour in my experience, the eternal, self-concocted labyrinth of the traveller who cannot resist the temptation of side roads and country lanes, of a branch road off a main road, of the sign pointing to a village with a name you have never heard before, of the silhouette of a castle in the distance with only a track leading to it... (NOOTBOOM, 1997: 309).

In Nootboom's view, all that needs to be said about the Way of Saint James can be summarised in a few comments of a cultural and economic nature.³ There is no place for mystery. The Way is nothing more than a social, political and religious

³“The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is one of the arias of madness of European opera, a gigantic migratory flow, a movement of millions of extras, an unceasing stream of scallop-bearing pilgrims from all the corners of Christendom, who found shelter and sustenance at Mont Saint-Michel, Tours, Vézelay, Le Puy and Arles on their way to the Pyrenees and beyond, until they reached the *camino* to Santiago. What that massive adventure signified in terms of religious zeal, political, social, economic and artistic influence is almost impossible to imagine. For centuries a whole army was permanently on the move across Europe, where the foot was the unit of measurement. Everyone who joined, whether voluntarily or as imposed penitence, abandoned hearth and home to the vagaries of circumstance, the dream of every romantic soul, not in those uncertain times, but in later ones. Thus the pilgrimage became a myth in its own right, and as the links between northwestern Spain and the

phenomenon, though one with enormous historic importance and significance – this he does not deny.⁴ Like Barret and Gurgand, Nootboom stresses the religious and social elements that surrounded the ancient pilgrims, but at no point seems to become interested in the real, personal experience. He examines everything with the cold gaze of the erudite scholar who, from his ivory tower, permits himself the luxury of enjoying the contemplation of a field of corn or a capital. At the end of the book, the Dutch author does attempt to take the step towards a personal experience: “And suddenly it gets to you, you want to be rid of your car, you want to walk, you’ve been doing everything wrong, you are no match for the others, the true pilgrims, those who have made the entire journey on foot, the only ones who really know what it’s like” (Nootboom, 1997: 330). But the gap is too wide, the difference too big. On Monte de Gozo, the Hill of Joy, he imitates the gaze of the true pilgrim: “I stand and look, but the eyes that see are not mine, they belong to the others, to those of the past. (...) They were different people, with the same brains thinking different thoughts” (Nootboom, 1997: 333).

3. The pilgrimage in a sceptical, anticlerical key

Shortly after the publication of Nootboom’s book we find the same reluctance to enter Santiago de Compostela in a Spanish author and journalist, Gregorio Morán. In the summer of 1993, Morán walked the route from Roncesvalles to León in the company of the illustrator Antonio Meseguer. In León, they decided to give up and go straight to Finisterre, passing Santiago by without entering the city. However, like Nootboom, they finally visited Santiago on their way back from Finisterre. Their experiences on this three-week walk finally became the book *Nunca llegaré*

European north continued to strengthen, the desire for reunification with the Arab-occupied parts of Spain deepened.” (Nootboom, 1997: 200-201)

⁴ “To understand the essence of the pilgrimage to Santiago it is necessary to separate medieval man from the comfortable romantic image we have formed of him (if we have one at all). He was a truly different human being, with different preoccupations. His society was spiritual unity; the importance that he attached to the relics of the saints and martyrs is beyond modern comprehension. Seeking out and venerating those sacred reliquaries, devout Christians tramped from country to country, from shrine to shrine, an inspired multitude of prayerful, lifelong travellers. In the petty jargon of our present century, we call such things ‘social, political or religious phenomena’. *Political* because this movement drew non-Islamic Spain closer to Christian Europe in a prelude to that other development which consolidated European Christendom, the Crusades; *social* because of the international contact and what the pilgrims brought with them and in their wake, in the spheres of trade as well as art; *religious* because for those who joined the movement the importance of spirituality surpassed that of material existence.” (Nootboom, 1997: 50-51)

a Santiago. From the start of this volume, Morán makes the absence of any kind of personal religious motivation quite clear. For this Spanish writer, starting out on the road to Santiago is merely a way of trying a different, stimulating experience, one that will enable him to create new memories. He openly declares himself an atheist, and the book is liberally sprinkled with sarcasm and mockery of all things religious. In each chapter, Morán recounts his experiences over the course of a day along the Way. In doing so, he emphasises two aspects, basically. These are, firstly, the physical inconveniences entailed in making the pilgrimage and, secondly, the attitude of the people he meets along the Way. In his description of the physical inconveniences, Morán alternates complaints about aches and pains, tiredness, cold and so on with the delights caused by certain lunches and dinners. This he does to such an extent as to turn food and drink, and smoking, into a mental refuge, to the point of reinterpreting the entire Way of Saint James in a purely gastronomic and cultural key. As for the people whose attitudes the journalist describes in his book, these include, in particular, those of his travelling companion and other pilgrims with whom they share parts of the Way. Morán also takes the chance to complain about the lack of hospitality displayed by landlords at hostels along the way, the rudeness of some staff at this or that accommodation and the alleged hypocrisy of certain priests.⁵ However, his main lament concerns the fact that he is denied certain foodstuffs due to the fact that he and his companion are treated as pilgrims and, therefore, penitents and, as such, not permitted certain gastronomic delights.⁶

Gregorio Morán is a potent example of the postmodern pilgrim. His apparent inconsistency in walking the Way of Saint James whilst lacking religious motivation of any kind is nothing more than a practical demonstration of the postmodern impossibility of achieving anything like an authentic lifestyle. It is precisely the issue of authenticity that dogs all the journalist's thoughts as he travels the Way: "Thought about this Way of Saint James and even the very act of walking revolves

⁵ "We enter the Bishop's Palace in Pamplona very tired, and the fact that the two priests and a woman employee all express their admiration for our decision to travel the Way of Saint James does not console us at all. I even have to swallow my anger when one of the priests waxes nostalgic about our freedom to do so. He is not free, he says, due to the commitments that tie him to his bureaucratic labour. I regret not telling him what I thought, and perhaps I did the right thing. He would have understood nothing and would have been shocked if anyone told him he was fooling himself, or was a cynic, or both" (MORÁN, 1996: 45)

⁶ "...I note for the first time that we are treated as penitents; people, rich or poor, but to whom one must speak distantly or disdainfully, because they are not in a situation of normality. Anomalous people that must be given treatment exempt from human respect; praise their will, but fear their intentions. In religious words: deep sinners who must be kept in their place. And to think that here, near the cathedral, there was once a famous kitchen for pilgrims, typical of the Navarre people" (MORÁN, 1996: 45)

around authenticity. We generally start from the idea that we live in an artificial world. From childhood to retirement, human beings seek –or claim to seek– the authentic. However, this authenticity is seen to be impossible, unattainable. Nonetheless, the writer continues to eagerly seek just that. Hence his passion to “search for situations, journeys and meals with pretensions of authenticity”, even though this quest is nothing more than “a nostalgia or melancholia, a trace of anxiety before a world that does not satisfy” (MORÁN, 1996: 184). The pilgrim’s hope of finding *authenticity* in some aspect of the Way of Saint James is illusory: “Nowadays, the Way of Saint James is as authentic as a summer in San Sebastián or a walk along the coast of Brittany” (MORÁN, 1996: 187).

The fusion of this nihilistic posture and the supremacy of food and drink reaches a paroxysm in Morán’s overriding interest in consuming products made from pork, such as chorizo:

Along the walk, skirting around churches that remind us of the final goal of the pilgrim, there is a red thread loaded with connotations that may be another permanent link with the past. The humble chorizo. Did they eat chorizos in the Middle Ages? Apparently they did. As long as the pig existed as an animal from which nothing is wasted, it is no surprise that this red thread, made from paprika, blood, meat, should run along the Way towards the legendary Moor-slayer, bone-breaker of the servants of Allah, firm in their disdain for the absolute impurity represented by swine, animals detested by Mohammed (...) Chorizo acts as a second Credential for the Way of Saint James. (MORÁN, 1996: 186)

All this explains Morán’s absolute contempt for those who attempt to continue to make the pilgrimage to Santiago today in the spirit of pilgrims from the past. Just like Barret and Gurgand, and like Nooteboom, too, Morán is fully aware of the fact that the ancient pilgrims possessed an individual and collective worldview that is completely unattainable, practically incomprehensible to us, and in any case absolutely impossible to share:

Artificial is the route taken by the Way –which has little to do with that of bygone days– artificial are the hostels and refuges, the people and, above all, the goals of the walkers themselves. The alleged continuing existence of medieval spirituality –what does that have to do with anything? Suffice to say that the credulity of so many gentlemen from the past, and vagabonds and poor people and cripples, was linked to the spiritual period in which it was their lot to live. They didn’t even think about it. They believed with absolute faith. Santiago de Compostela was the place of the Apostle’s tomb. Yet anyone who believes, today, that under that basilica in Santiago de Compostela lie the mortal remains of Saint James can only be naïve or cynical. In by-gone times, history and legend were inseparable, today anyone who joins

them chooses to be a fool, afraid to question their miserable condition. (MORÁN, 1996: 185)

However, despite the manner in which Morán distances himself so greatly from other aspects of the pilgrimage, his account also reveals certain points of agreement with the universal experience of travelling the Way. Firstly, the need to alternate absolute solitude with the company of a trusted companion. Morán and Meseguer manage to make their journey in unison without this meaning that they always stick together. They usually walk about a hundred metres apart, each at his own pace. Nevertheless, each considers the other to be his indispensable companion. In their dealings with hostel landlords, pilgrims and local people along the way, they find support and ready understanding in each other. Along with their solitude comes, also, the very appearance of the pilgrim, the poor, tired look, like castaways, defenceless and needy, which also provides Morán and Meseguer with a kind of protection from the curiosity of strangers. Both work for a leading newspaper, but they never reveal this to anyone. It is their secret. This enables them to live the experience of the pilgrim as ordinary people, as no one in particular, like the millions of pilgrims who have passed along the same route, heading for the same destination. Social, economic, cultural and other differences become blurred along the Way of Saint James.

4. Fame, sentimentalism and vague spirituality

That same experience of passing unnoticed, although in this case with the hope of discovering some hidden spiritual treasure for himself, is what Hape Kerkeling, a comedian and famous television presenter in Germany, also sought. In the summer of 2001, after years of success in playing different roles in the show business world, Kerkeling decided to devote a month and a half to walking the French Way of Saint James. In 2006, he published *Ich bin dann mal weg. Meine Reise auf dem Jakobsweg*, which quickly became a bestseller. The effect that this book had on the German public is similar to that produced by Coelho and MacLaine on their American readers. For several years following the publication of Kerkeling's book, there was a considerable increase in the number of pilgrims to Santiago from Germany.⁷ Kerkeling titles each chapter with the name of the most relevant town on each day. Nonetheless, he partially abandons the style of the typical travelogue style by in-

⁷ Between 2007 and 2013, there were more German pilgrims than Italian along the Way of Saint James. Source: Annual statistical reports by the Pilgrim's Office.

cluding flashbacks that give the reader insight into his personal and professional life. In this way, by inserting episodes like a kind of memoir into his account, Kerkeling attempts to explain how his life led him to the decision to walk the Way of Saint James. Although, unlike in the case of Morán, religious motivations are not ruled out completely, Kerkeling's account quickly gives us to understand that his is not the position of the conventional pilgrim. In fact, the author takes the opportunity provided by different situations to level a series of more or less clichéd criticisms at the Catholic church, backed up by arguments that do not appear to be particularly firmly-grounded.⁸ Kerkeling's sensibilities are wounded particularly in two areas, those of homosexuality⁹ and the abuse of animals.¹⁰ Since the link between these two concerns and the Way of Saint James is by no means obvious, Kerkeling finds himself obliged to enter into a series of long asides in which the book veers away from what is normally found in a travel journal. None of this, however, prevents the author from giving a reasonably clear explanation of his understanding of the spiritual, as well as his view of the Church and what God means to him. The mere fact of wondering what God is, and admitting that he has done so, differentiates Kerkeling from most of the people around him, his friends and, in short, recent postmodern generations:

I lie in bed with the window wide open and wonder what God actually represents for me. Many of my friends have been estranged from the Church for quite some

⁸ "I think that any pronouncement supported or established by dictators is inhuman and culminates in disaster. And any authority that claims to represent humanity and peace in this world must roundly condemn every one of these pronouncements" (KERKELING, 2009: 99).

⁹ "And the way the Catholic Church avoids questions pertaining to homosexuality and many other important issues is inhuman and rife with disgraceful double standards. I know that my natural proclivity puts me in complete harmony with the world and myself, so why should I be forced by anyone to disharmony? Because a Catholic God aims to make me, and countless other millions, desperately unhappy and unnatural? Do they seriously believe that God is just as small-minded and ideological as they? Old men in flowing silk robes with expensive red and purple velvet appliqué want me to become what they themselves are not: a cowboy! That is flat-out absurd. When will a pope finally realize that the Gospel is not an adhesion contract!" (KERKELING, 2009: 98) Kerkeling dedicates the book "to Angelo, the love of my life" (KERKELING, 2009: 334) from whom he separated in 2011.

¹⁰ "A young hippie couple inside gives us a friendly greeting, which includes a devout wish that our inner Jesus awakens along the path. Maybe they ought to tone down their phony piety, I think to myself, when I see behind the hut, in the blazing sun, a German shepherd puppy on a three-foot leash. (...) These hippies are hypocrites, pure and simple. How can people listen to the constant howling of an abused creature while wishing for pilgrims to find the Christ within them? These people have most certainly not discovered Him for themselves. Everywhere on their sanctimonious wooden hut are crosses and pictures of Mary. These people make me sick!" (KERKELING, 2009: 248-249). And, later on, after saving a mistreated dog, he notes: "I've heard the most awful stories about the way animals are treated in Spain..." (KERKELING, 2009: 272).

time. They find it far-fetched, antiquated, frayed, rigid, and downright inhuman. Consequently they are also estranged from God. If his ground crew is in such bad shape, how must He be himself... if He exists at all! Unfortunately, most people say, "Don't talk to me about God!" I view the matter differently. I think there is a God—be He a person, an entity, a principle, an idea, a light, a plan, or whatever else. (KERKELING, 2009: 170-171)

Although, obviously, this is not a book of Theology, the author does provide an imaginative metaphor for God and the Church, described, as is habitual in his style, with a dose of humour:

I view God the way I do outstanding films like *Gandhi*: award-winning and superb! And the Church hierarchy is merely the local movie theater showing the masterpiece: God's projection screen. The screen may be crooked and crinkly, frayed and full of holes (...) A rotten showing does nothing to alter the significance of the film (...) God is the movie and the church is the theater that's showing it. I hope that some day we can see the film in 3-D and stereo quality, uncut and unadulterated. Perhaps we'll even be in it! (KERKELING, 2009: 171)

Like Morán in his book, Kerkeling oscillates between idyllic portraits of a small number of meetings with kind and friendly people, on the one hand, and furious criticism, expressed from an unconfessed sense of superiority, aimed at a certain predominant type of pilgrim. Rather than admitting the inconsistency of undertaking a pilgrimage in which God might as well be a person or an idea or a plan, Kerkeling pours scorn on pilgrims who firmly avow their faith in the Church. Around the beginning of his journey, the author notes: "Still, I have no desire whatsoever to join up with other pilgrims. Most of them appear to be ultra-Catholic, and so sure of themselves that I wonder why they're on a pilgrimage in the first place. They will be the same people when they complete their journey as they are now—assuming they make it all the way to Santiago" (KERKELING, 2009: 32). Nonetheless, soon after this he will meet an English pilgrim, Anne, with whom he will share much of the Way. However, Anne is, according to Kerkeling's account, even more sceptical than he is.¹¹ A few days into their journey together, the author learns that Anne is only taking the Way in order to raise funds through a local newspaper for research into

¹¹ "Anne is a lot of fun (...) Her comments about ultra-Catholic pilgrims are sidesplittingly funny. She really ought to host her own comedy show. Anne is a doubting Thomas herself, and she doesn't think much of the Camino and her fellow pilgrims. Her attitude is similar to mine, but harsher: 'It's all just rubbish!' She doesn't reveal to us why she is on the pilgrimage in the first place" (KERKELING, 2009: 200).

an illness that her sister suffers from.¹² Kerkeling does not seem concerned about Morán's idea of *authenticity* or anything like it. Anne is friendly and they help each other on their walk every day, so he is little affected by her rude comments about the Catholic pilgrims and their rites.¹³

For Kerkeling, taking the Way of Saint James is a way of facing up to oneself. It is a way of forcing oneself to think about the life one leads and the goals that drive one. The author claims to have found a kind of inner spiritual renewal as he travelled the Way, but particularly along the section from León to Astorga, a little over the halfway mark in his pilgrimage. Accordingly, for Kerkeling the Way of Saint James becomes a kind of "rite of passage", an initiation whose absence from the postmodern world he deeply laments: "In our Western world, which is practically devoid of spirituality, we suffer from a lack of ritual" (KERKELING, 2009: 330). That is what Kerkeling considers useful about the Way. The inevitable incommodities of the route place us, accustomed as we are to all the comforts and security of the richest, most highly developed part of the western world, in an extraordinary position, forcing us to endure a kind of *experience of poverty*: "The Camino is a ritual that offers a genuine opportunity to take up a challenge. Every one of us needs something to hold on to, but the only stability comes from letting go" (KERKELING, 2009: 330). Unlike Morán, Kerkeling seems to accept, probably due to his appreciation of a certain incorporeal spirituality, that the Way is not a gastronomic route.¹⁴ This is a vague, eclectic spirituality that does not change Kerkeling's previous mindset, but confirms him in it even more. That is why he does not hide his interest in eastern religions like Buddhism: "The theory of reincarnation also has to be given serious consideration. It is certainly conceivable that each of us has lived a thousand times, even though we have no memory of having done so" (KERKELING, 2009: 296). His

¹² "Her sister suffers from Crohn's disease, a serious chronic gastrointestinal illness for which there is no effective treatment because it has yet to be thoroughly researched. To collect money to fund research, a newspaper in Birmingham is publishing a weekly update on Anne's pilgrimage and putting out a call for donations" (KERKELING, 2009: 235)

¹³ "The international pilgrims' mass that follows is wonderfully un-Catholic and freewheeling: it's geared toward skeptical pilgrims like Anne. The young priest from Lugo wants to establish contact with the people, so he finds out where all of us are from, then suggests that we might like to recite a short prayer in our native languages. No one feels like going first, and most stare down at their loamy hiking shoes (...) when the priest points to her (...) she scrunches her face into a pillow again, and turns beet red (...) I'm unable to oblige, since I'm laughing so hard I can barely stay seated on the hard wooden bench. I always seem to be laughing in churches here. Good thing this institution has not figured out a way of driving me away altogether" (KERKELING, 2009: 293)

¹⁴ "Today's breakfast was the culinary high point of this journey. Apart from that, the cuisine is almost universally bad, not bad in the nutritional sense. It's good, nourishing food, just not creative or well prepared. After all, I suppose this is a pilgrimage, not a gourmet tour. You do learn to appreciate a simple ham sandwich" (KERKELING, 2009: 162).

final thoughts fail to particularly elevate the pseudotheological tone that went before, though they serve the author to close his book with a show of spirituality:

Tomorrow I fly home. Sitting in the train to Porto, I try to collect my thoughts about God and sum them up. The way I see it, "God" is a unique liberating spark that fans out infinitely to foster and embrace self-realization. By contrast, those who get swept up in any group aimed at robbing us of our individuality and dousing the liberating spark wind up crushing themselves in the process. (KERKELING, 2009: 331-332).

5. The pilgrimage as universal ritual experience

Previous to Kerkeling's journey, Nicholas Shrady, an American journalist living in Barcelona, seems to have had a similar experience to the German author. For Shrady, too, walking the Way was a kind of rite of passage.¹⁵ The journalist also saw the Christian origins of the pilgrimage as something malleable, something that can be adapted to a vague spiritual feeling supposedly shared by other religious practices in which the pilgrimage also has a place. To this end, Shrady also sought out "other pilgrimage routes, not only in the Christian world, but in the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Islamic traditions as well" (SHRADY, 1999: xv). The result of a decade of pilgrimages was the book *Sacred Roads*, published in 1999. Although Shrady notes that he received a Catholic upbringing, throughout the book he makes it quite clear that he lives in constant, deep doubt and in a religious eclecticism that is always mediated by the cold, rational worldview of a postmodern, liberal journalist. Lightly, he presents several religious options with varying degrees of popularity as demonstrations of dispensable superstition. From this standpoint, we can easily understand why, for someone like him, it is completely unimportant "whether or not St James's bones actually lie in the Cathedral crypt at Santiago" (SHRADY, 1999: 125). The reason for his interest in the Way resides in its historic and cultural importance, which he does not place in doubt. Like Morán and Nooteboom, Shrady recognises "the historical and spiritual reality of the Way itself" for which reason "...untold millions made the journey south from every corner of the Continent (...) were exposed to disease, highway robbery (...) seeking penance, invoking prayers, paying homage, and gaining questionable indulgences at the tomb of St James" (SHRADY, 1999: 125). However, unlike his two fellow authors, Shrady makes no bones about culminating

¹⁵ "Although I was born and reared a Catholic, my faith was, and remains, full of profound doubts, but the pilgrimage did help to satiate an ever-increasing, if ill-defined, sense of spiritual longing" (SHRADY, 1999: xiv)

his pilgrimage with the usual rites in Santiago Cathedral, praying for a series of people he had met along the Way and who had given him providential assistance, even though forced to join long queues and wait patiently alongside the faithful and sightseers alike: "When I placed my hand on the column, my fingers found the smooth, time-worn hollows where an incalculable stream of pilgrims had placed their hands before me. I bowed my head and gave thanks" (SHRADY, 1999: 155).

6. The secular intellectual on the Way of Saint James

The most recent account by a postmodern pilgrim among those discussed here is the book *Immortelle randonnée. Compostelle malgré moi* (2013) by Jean-Christophe Rufin, a leading contemporary French intellectual. A doctor and a writer, Rufin was also French ambassador to Senegal and is a member of the French Academy. Unlike the previous cases considered, Rufin chose the Northern Way rather than the French Way of Saint James. That fact that he had previous experience as a mountaineer and his desire to stay away from the more beaten tracks might explain his choice, although Rufin presents it as very much a random decision, the result, rather, of a chance conversation with a Parisian volunteer from the Association of Friends of the Way.

Rufin's account is the one that most emphasises our ineluctable nature as children of our time. In other words, we are postmodern, like it or not. And this implies a particular interpretation of the Way of Saint James: "Le Chemin est seulement un des produits offerts à la consommation dans le grand bazar postmoderne" (RUFIN, 2013: 69). However, at the same time, the writer shows no particular interest in undermining the prestige of either religion in general or the Church in particular. From his status as a socially-engaged, prestigious French lay intellectual who has received honorary doctorates from several universities, he has no need to attack a world that has long since disappeared. In fact, Rufin sees himself and his generation as the authors of that disappearance:

Des individus dans mon genre, également éloignés de la ferveur monastique et des appétits brutaux, sont des créatures nées de l'effondrement de l'ordre chrétien. Pire, ils en sont en même temps la cause. En luttant contre la suprématie religieuse, ces consciences libres ont fait émerger un nouvel homme plein d'orgueil qui prétend s'affranchir de la foi, de ses mystères et de ses règles, d'une part, et, de l'autre, des instincts primitifs, des appétits brutaux et du règne de la force. Cet homme moderne a proliféré à tel point qu'il a substitué à l'empire de l'Église celui de ses propres instruments: la science, les médias, la finance. Il a fait disparaître l'ordre ancien. (RUFIN, 2013: 152-153)

Rufin is led to this meditation by an anecdotic incident at a roadside restaurant in Asturias. Having just attended vespers sung in solemnity and austere beauty at a nearby monastery, the author finds himself berating some customers at the restaurant for their rude, aggressive attitude to the female staff. However, the waitresses themselves reject Rufin's gentlemanly intervention. This combination of monastic and savage life is what Rufin calls the "old order". Given that he is one of those that destroyed that order, no wonder he does not feel comfortable among its dying embers.

Rufin also recounts the moment that led him finally to extinguish any spark of Christian faith that he may have brought with him to travel the Way. As a habitual part of his pilgrimage, the author attends religious services at the churches that he encounters during his day's walk. It is as if the exercise of walking to Santiago de Compostela were not complete without such observances. And it is precisely his attendance at Mass in a village in Cantabria that leaves such a bad taste in his mouth that he pauses to describe the incident in full detail. In his account, he portrays both priest and congregation as the pathetic shadow of what popular faith was once, in the past:

La messe du monastère commençait tard et je lui préférâi celle, plus matinale, de l'église du diocèse, située un peu au-dessus (...) À ma grande surprise, il en ressortit [le prêtre] presque aussitôt, un surplis jeté de travers sur son costume. S'avancant vers le micro, il s'adressa sans tarder à l'assistance. Seul le signe de croix, exécuté à la hâte avant d'ouvrir la bouche, distinguait cette harangue de la prise de parole d'un homme politique pendant un meeting. Point d'homélie, aucun élément d'une liturgie reconnaissable, nulle référence évangélique; ce que le prêtre nous administra pendant d'interminables minutes n'était qu'une dissertation sans plan ni objectif sur l'actualité, la crise financière, la guerre en Lybie, le gouvernement Zapatero, la concurrence économique chinoise, le trafic d'animaux sauvages, l'avenir de la voiture hybride, la solidité de l'euro, la prévision des tsunamis, la raison d'être des parcs naturels, etc. (RUFIN, 2013: 157-159)

After this entertaining description of the charismatic priest, it is the congregation's turn. Rufin describes the faithful as an ignorant, brainwashed social group incapable of seeing what is going on:

Les paroissiennes, bien calées sur leur chaise, écoutaient en secouant par moments une tête par-dessus laquelle passaient pourtant la plupart des propos que l'artiller verbal leur lançait. (...) la messe de ce prêtre extraverti ne ressemblait pas à une messe. Mais celle était assez proche des talk-shows qui occupaient les écrans de leurs télévisions et elles n'étaient pas dépaysées. (RUFIN, 2013: 160)

Rufin's reasoning is not without its internal logic. If when I go to church I find the same things that I can read in the newspaper or see on television debate programmes, then I do not need to go to church at all.

Moreover, Rufin also describes the process by which the pilgrim gradually reaches a state when he or she can feel something like a religious conversion. Firstly, the pilgrim may begin the Way, at least over the first few days' travel, with the intention of dedicating part of his or her endless time of walking in solitude to thinking about personal plans and aspirations or, as in the author's case, his ideas for his next novel. However, the physical effort that the Way requires and the many details that he must attend to during the journey finally make it impossible to bring these intentions to fruition. This is the first reverse, a kind of early defeat in which the pilgrim's will is bent before the personality of the Way.¹⁶ To this psychological situation is added the more or less conscious certainty that physical discomfort, even bodily pain, has taken hold on us and will not loosen its grip in the days to come. In those circumstances, "il devient le plus tentant de se raccrocher à la dimension religieuse du pèlerinage", which gives "le grand avantage" over any secular thought "d'être soutenue par les multiples références religieuses qu'offre le paysage" to the point where Rufin observes that "le pèlerinage recèle des ruses inattendues pour nous conduire jusqu'à la foi" (RUFIN, 2013: 138). The pilgrim, tired and lonely, with no hope in his body or in his companions, with all profane thoughts rejected, abandons himself to the memory of the countless pilgrims who preceded him, burning with faith "comme si les âmes de ceux qui sont passés là venaient le soutenir, le gonfler, lui donner courage et force" (RUFIN, 2013: 140).

Rufin himself confesses to have gone through all these stages. He even leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty by ending this meditation, and the chapter, with the following promising words: "Pour moi, cette transformation s'est produite à la

¹⁶ "Le pèlerin obéit au Chemin, comme il l'a fait sans s'en rendre compte depuis le début, mais cette fois il s'exécute sans murmurer. Il a trouvé son maître. Chaque matin, il chausse ses souliers comme on enfilerait un bleu de chauffe. Ses pieds se sont adaptés à ses semelles, ses muscles se sont déliés, la fatigue lui obéit et sefface au bout d'un nombre connu de kilometres. Le pèlerin pèlerine comme le maçon maçonne, comme le marin part en mer, comme le boulanger cuit ses baguettes. Mais, à la différence de ces métiers que récompense un salaire, le pèlerin n'a aucune rétribution à espérer. Il est un forçat qui casse ses cailloux, une mule qui tourne en rond autour de son puits. Cependant, l'être humain est décidément fait de paradoxes et la solitude permet de bien les observer: le Jacquet s'extasie de trouver au fond de cette servitude une liberté inédite. (...) Je me souviens d'avoir décidé un matin que je consacrerai une journée de marche quoi qu'il arrive à parachever le plan du roman dont je projetais la rédaction. (...) Et je découvre avec stupeur que je n'avais plus aucun souvenir des pensées que j'avais laborieusement suivies pour répondre à mon programme du matin. Pire encore, je n'avais plus aucune envie de les retrouver. (...) Cette défaite de la pensée produit rapidement une véritable dépression." (RUFIN, 2013: 129-138).

fin du parcours cantabrique, tandis que, quittant la côte et piquant vers l'intérieur des terres, je m'approchai d'Oviedo" (RUFIN, 2013: 140).

However, the personal conversion of this postmodern author will be consistent with the loss of faith consummated by the diocesan "pseudo-Mass" and the initial description of the Way as a product of spiritual consumption that can be freely interpreted and used. What is it that was revealed to Rufin on the path to Oviedo, after he had left the Cantabrian coast behind? Let us see:

Et là, dans ces splendeurs, le Chemin m'a confié son secret. Il m'a glissé sa vérité qui est tout aussitôt devenue la mienne. Compostelle n'est pas un pèlerinage chrétien mais bien plus, ou bien moins selon la manière dont on accueille cette révélation. Il n'appartient en propre à aucun culte et, à vrai dire, on peut y mettre tout ce que l'on souhaite. S'il devait être proche d'une religion, ce serait à la moins religieuse d'entre elles, celle qui ne dit rien de Dieu mais permet à l'être humain d'en approcher l'existence: Compostelle est un pèlerinage bouddhiste. (RUFIN, 2013: 168-169)

In a manner that is more sophisticated than Kerkeling, more exaggerated than Shradý and, at heart, not so far from the cynicism of Morán and Nootboom, Rufin is satisfied by this tremendous identification of the religious experience linked to Saint James and Buddhism. For Rufin, being postmodern is no obstacle to making the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela; rather, it turns the twenty-first-century pilgrimage into a radically different event, one that can no longer be Christian nor have anything to do with the motivations that inspired millions of pilgrims in ancient times. The secularisation of the pilgrimage is complete. A sociology of the contemporary pilgrimage quickly leads to the following conclusion:

Le pèlerinage est en accord avec une spiritualité contemporaine plus syncrétique, plus flottante et beaucoup moins encadrée par l'Église. Nombre de ceux qui s'élancent sur les chemins de Compostelle sont attirés par des valeurs de dépouillement, d'union avec la nature et d'épanouissement de soi qui faisaient sans doute complètement défaut aux premiers temps du pèlerinage. Leur démarche est moins chrétienne que postmoderne. (RUFIN, 2013: 169)

In this selection of cases, then, we have seen how a number of postmodern writers link their personal experience of the Way of Saint James to a secularised and secularising vision, not only of the Way itself, but of contemporary society in general. In this vision of things, religion is reduced, at most, to vague forms of spirituality that are always subordinated to typically postmodern values. Among these postmodern values we have noted three in particular. Firstly, a certain sentimentalism: personal experience becomes something irrational, inexplicable, irreducible to a verbal formulation. Secondly, mistrust of society: reliable social relationships are

reduced to a minimum circle of friends. And, thirdly, a certain moral superiority complex: the intellectual, secular, well-educated pilgrim stands out above the rest, particularly pilgrims imbued with simple, solid faith.

These postmodern values are, precisely, notably present in works categorised as so-called children's literature that take the pilgrimage to Santiago as their theme. Let us now see how fiction aimed at younger readers attempts to transmit the same values that we have discussed above in our selection of postmodern travel journals.

7. Matilde Asensi's *Peregrinatio* as a prototype of the motivation behind travelling on the Way of Saint James in contemporary children's literature

Since the turn of the Third Millennium, we have observed a notable increase in the production of novels whose plots are linked to the Way of Saint James. Generally speaking, these are books designed to entertain and, basically, aimed at younger readers.¹⁷ Among the most interesting of these is Matilde Asensi's novel *Peregrinatio* (Ed. Planeta, 2004), described by the authors of the "Ranking of The Way of Saint James in Literature" as "a guide to the Way of Saint James in novel form".¹⁸ We shall devote the next few paragraphs to a discussion of Asensi's book. We have chosen this novel as it seems to us the most outstanding example from the point of view of literary construction and the most representative in terms of ideological background. Finally, we should note that the book has achieved excellent sales,

¹⁷ Among the different titles worth mentioning, we shall name a few by way of example: Toti Martínez de Lezea, *El verdugo de Dios*, Ed. Maeva (Embolsillo) 2008, classified as a historical novel on the website of the "Ranking of the Way of Saint James in Literature" (See <http://listas.20minutos.es/lista/el-camino-de-santiago-en-la-literatura-334900/>). Site visited on 25 July 2016. Many of the novels mentioned here are listed on this site. Similarly, the brief descriptions of the type of novel that we have attributed to the works in each case, in brackets, following the publication date and publisher, are from the same source); Pere Tobaruela i Martínez, *La cripta del Apóstol*, Ediciones B, 2013, (Novel. Adventure and thriller. Children's and young people's literature); Paloma Sánchez Garnica, *El alma de las piedras*, Ed. Planeta, 2011, (Historical novel); Peter Harris, *El secreto del peregrino* [The Pilgrim Secret], Ed. Debolsillo, 2010, (Historical novel, adventure, thriller); Ulrike Schweikert, *La maldición del Camino de Santiago*, Ed. Viamagna Ediciones, 2009, (Historical novel); José Luis Corral, *El código del peregrino*, Ed. Planeta, 2012, (Detective novel. Crime. Thriller.); Tracy Saunders, *Peregrinos de la Herejía* [Pilgrimage to Heresy], Ed. Boveda, 2009, (Historical novel); Concha López Narváez, *Endrina y el secreto del peregrino*, Ed. Espasa-Calpe, 2000, (Historical novel. Book for young readers from the age of 14.); Alicia Jarrin, *El falso peregrino*, Ed. Akron, 2009, (Historical novel); Matilde Asensi, *Iacobus*, Ed. Planeta, 2000, (Historical novel), and, by the same author: *Peregrinatio*, Ed. Planeta, 2004, to which the following pages are devoted, etc.

¹⁸ See the previous note.

which would appear to indicate that it appeals to wide audiences and, consequently, exercises considerable influence over the view that young readers take of the Way, having become an important cultural phenomenon within the field of study that interests us here.

8. The author

Matilde Asensi is a journalist and writer from Barcelona and, without a doubt, one of the most successful authors of literature for children and young people, both in Spain and, increasingly, internationally, in recent years. According to her website,¹⁹ the twelve books she has published to date (2016) have been translated into fifteen languages and have sold more than twenty million copies. Most of her novels are in the adventure or thriller genres and are set in different historical periods, from the first century and the Middle Ages to the present, and in different countries and regions of the world, such as Spain, Palestine, Italy, etc. Two of Asensi's novels make direct reference to the Way of Saint James. The first of these, *Iacobus*, was a bestseller and really launched the author to fame. The Way plays a background role in the plot of this novel, since it serves as the setting for a detective or crime story, somewhat in the style of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. That is why the second of the two books by Asensi that we mention, *Peregrinatio*, is of more interest to us here, since, in it, the Way itself is the main theme and even, metaphorically speaking, the protagonist of the story.

9. The main narrative categories

The time in which the novel is set corresponds to the period during the Middle Ages when the importance of the Way was rising. More specifically, the action takes place in the year 1324. The physical setting is provided by different stages along the French Way to Santiago de Compostela. However, the main character in the book does not end his journey in Santiago, but continues to Finisterre and, later, Lisbon. Jonas, the protagonist of the story, is a young nobleman, the son of the Knight Templar Galceran de Born (himself the protagonist of the previous novel, *Iacobus*). Concerned about his son's inappropriate behaviour during his stay at the court of Barcelona, Galceran decides to take over the young man's education himself, and orders Jonas to set out on the Way of Saint James. This will take Jonas away from

¹⁹ See <http://www.matildeasensi.net/>. Site visited on 27 September 2016.

the wicked influences of the port city to embark on a rite of passage aimed at enabling him to attain a new status, “not that of a knight, which you already are, but of a gentle man and a champion of an ancient knowledge” (ASENSI, 2004: 127).²⁰

The construction of the novel is interesting, as it is written in the second person singular and in the future, a clearly unusual narrative form within the realist genre in which the book should otherwise be classified. The author achieves an original, innovative effect by writing her story in the form of a letter written by the aforementioned knight, Galceran, to his son Jonas, in which, besides instructions as to how to proceed along the Way, she also includes detailed descriptions of all the stages that form the journey, along with explanations of the different symbols, rituals, traditions, etc., actually creating a kind of cultural and spiritual guide to the Way²¹.

10. The new paradigm of the pilgrimage

Despite exalting the phenomenon of the Way and the reason for making the pilgrimage, its purpose and its key moment, the arrival at the tomb of the Apostle, *Peregrinatio*, like most of the travelogues and reports discussed in the first part of this article, shows little or no concern for the paradigm of the medieval pilgrimage, which is discussed in other studies included in this publication. In short, the book displaces the purpose of walking as a symbol of human life in constant movement towards Transcendence (“with Saint James towards the good God”, as an old song sung by Polish pilgrims goes) with a quest for subjective, self-referential, vague, undefined spirituality, which is summarised in the final phrase of the book, quoted previously, in terms of “Ancient Wisdom and Knowledge”. However, these concepts are never actually defined. A “philological” reading of the book, that is to say, one that focuses particularly on the lexicon used in the narrative, reveals that the word “God”, the key, central concept in the theocentric vision of the medieval pilgrimage, does not appear even once. Likewise, the word “Christ”, which represents the central figure in the Christcentric worldview that motivates all pious actions in medieval Christianity, appears only as an adjectival expression, for example, as a synonym

²⁰ All the quotations proceeding from the Assensi’s novel are translated from the Spanish original by the authors of this paper.

²¹ The fact that the *narrataire* (we use the term according to Genette’s narratology in which the receiver of the narrative as a narratological figure is denominated this way; see Genette, G. (1972), *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil) is that of a young man who has somewhat “gone off the rails”, spiritually speaking, giving himself up to the delights of the big city, logically implies that it will be easy for the contemporary young reader to identify with the protagonist who, in this way, becomes, in reality, an implicit interlocutor.

for the Knights Templar, now abolished and replaced by the “Militia Christi”, or “Knights of Christ”, by the Portuguese King Denis. Similarly, at the end of the novel, this same king of Portugal, who proclaims our protagonist, Jonas, to be a “standard-bearer of ancient Wisdom”, is called “king and knight of Christ” (ASENSI, 2004: 127). However, Christ does not appear at any point as a religious or even historical point of reference.

The very absence of these words and the concepts they designate is hugely significant and, as mentioned, symbolises the displacement of the paradigm of the pilgrimage, its reasons, goals and meaning. However, the reader will find an even more significant and paradoxical absence in the text we are discussing.

11. A Way of Saint James without Saint James

At several points in the story, the narrator transmits a series of affirmations to the narrative voice that help to demystify or deconstruct various Christian motifs.²² However, we encounter our greatest surprise in the chapter in which the protagonist finally reaches Santiago, the city of Saint James, and the time comes to visit the tomb of the Apostle. Here are the instructions that Jonas receives from his father in advance of this sublime moment:

“The supposed relics of the Apostle Saint James (...) remain in the presbytery, below the main altar, inside a marble ark. I know that a religious fervor and piety which will accompany this moment will encourage you to accept the absurd idea that in front of you there really are the mortal remains of Saint James, but do not let the naïve devotion of the people influence you, as neither Saint James has ever been in this land, as it is demonstrated in the Gospels, nor his beheaded body has ever been brought back in a stone ship pushed by the wind, as it stands in a legend sustained by the Church” (ASENSI, 2004: 117-118)

In this way, then, young Jonas and, through him, the young reader of our day both learn that the entire original notion surrounding the Way of Saint James is founded on a false myth, an “absurd idea”, a ridiculous lie. We may well observe that this “truth” is proposed, moreover, not as a hypothesis, an opinion or one of

²² There are many examples of what we might call a *retro-pagan syncretism*: for instance, the explanation of the meaning of the image of Our Lady, or the Black Madonna, in the church at Villanua. According to the narrator, “the black images of Our Lady are signs which appoint to the places where this energy is present with a particular strength”. He refers to “the internal energy” of “The Earth, the Magna Mater, [which] pours out its own energy through some underground grooves” (ASENSI, 2004: 22).

the possible positions in the debate—a debate that has actually taken place among expert historians, archaeologists, palaeographers, etc., and continues even today²³—but as something so self-evident that it becomes practically dogmatic. Strangely enough, the author finds support for this argument in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, though without specifying this alleged reference at any time. And, if Jonas—or, by extension, the young twenty-first-century reader—should entertain a shadow of a doubt about this foundational dogma for the new paradigm of the “Way of Saint James without Saint James”, he is quickly given the following advice:

“Use your mind, Jonás. The evidence is strong enough, so there is no need for further inquiry. However, the truth does not diminish the value of the simple religiosity of the people. Accept with benevolence the faith of those who surround you and respect other people’s beliefs, no matter how absurd they may seem to you” (AsENSI, 2004: 118)

There is no doubt that, in this extract, there is a paralogism or perhaps a sophism, depending on the author’s intention and degree of knowledge, which is unknown to us. In the first sentence, the narrator advises the narrative voice to turn to reason (“use your mind, Jonas”), yet, in the next sentence, we find the affirmation that contradicts the premise: “The evidence is strong enough, so there is no need for further inquiry”. However, the narrator does not provide details as to what evidence this might be, nor even allude to it. Nor are we informed as to the arguments put forward by those who believe the contrary. In short, the text encourages dogmatism rather than the use of reason, which would inevitably lead to a questioning of all positions, an evaluation of differences and the autonomous process of gradually plumping for one or other of them or, in some cases, creating yet another different interpretation from those that already exist. Jonas, however, is instructed, in the same breath, to use his brain and not to investigate.

12. Conclusions: from the Way of Saint James to the Way of Priscillian. A covert homage to scepticism

Continuing, in order to fill the void that faces Jonas or, by extension, the young reader, who perhaps cherished dreams of making the pilgrimage to the tomb of

²³ As we can see in several works presented in this volume. Particular attention should be paid to Professor Enrique Alarcón’s recent archaeological and palaeographic research into the funerary inscriptions on the tomb of Saint James using latest-generation technology, which would appear to support the idea of the authenticity of the Tomb of the Apostle James.

a true Apostle, the narrator refers to the story of Priscillian. Not only that, but he does so in such a way that the original account is not only not diminished, but it is actually elevated, since the doctrine of Priscillian is a “beautiful heresy (...) based on equality, freedom and respect” (Asensi, 2004: 118). In a clearly apologetic tone, the narrator defends Priscillian and cannot but implicitly criticise the Church, which was responsible for Priscillian’s execution. Next, the young pilgrim learns about the only coincidence between the “legend” of Saint James and the “story” of Priscillian: the fact that the decapitated bodies of both were recovered by their followers. In this way, the deconstruction of the false foundational myth of the Way is completed.

In conclusion, this novel by Matilde Asensi provides an interesting and representative example of contemporary literary production in which the treatment given to the Way of Saint James works an authentic transformation of the paradigm of the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle and, by extension, the phenomenon of medieval Christian pilgrimage in general. Despite formal appearances (conditions that are at times austere, tiredness brought on by walking, getting in touch with nature, the countryside and so on, as well as the proximity of religious sites and objects), the goal and, consequently, the paradigm of a “postmodern pilgrimage”, as we have made clear in the preceding paragraphs, is very different. It is no longer a question of coming out of oneself to encounter the Other (both the Apostle, as an exemplary follower of Christ, and Christ Himself, as “God made flesh”), but of finding oneself in some kind of religiousness or spirituality of an esoteric, pantheist, initiatory, pseudognostic sort that turns out, in short, to be immanentist and self-referential. The goal is no longer the Apostle -who is authoritatively “thrown out of the tomb” and replaced by a *heretic hero*- nor God, in whose service the Apostle gave his life as a martyr. All this becomes a false, absurd myth, once dangerous but now harmless. In this way, then, the message that seems to be concealed in stories of this type is the implicit advice to adopt a sceptical attitude to the authentically transcendent dimension of the pilgrimage.

Both in fiction and in the autobiographical journals of postmodern pilgrims, then, we encounter the presence of the secularisation of the religious phenomenon, which is reduced to a vague spirituality. In this postmodern outlook, in which literature plays a particularly important role in transmitting, the pilgrimage is reduced to an aesthetic experience: “amid the often imbalanced, chaotic movement of everyday life and co-existence, one feels, if only for a fleeting moment, eternity in time, the hereafter, through images, often ambiguous and disconcerting, of the here and now” (Duch, 2010: 34).

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