“Today is Friday”: Of Hemingway, Hegel, and Holy Lances

William Douglas Mastin and Kevin Andrew Spicer

Every treatment of Ernest Hemingway’s 1927 one-act play, “Today is Friday,” that we have been able to find seems incredibly content and satisfied to say that this play is about Jesus Christ and his crucifixion. We think that such a reading is possible only by either ignoring or not correctly noticing a sizable quantity of incredibly ambiguous details in the piece. Although we like to think that we understand quite well why the consensus seems to be that the story is about Christ, we think that Hemingway time and again places what would seem to be a rather self-evident conclusion into a space that makes it anything but. Indeed, we think there are quite a few intentional formal and structural elements that make it quite difficult to feel safe and secure in subscribing to the consensus. Moreover, we find so many of the typical Christian (or Catholic or even non-theological, too) readings of this story to be unable to deal with all the indeterminacy and ambiguity present within the story—and we find it quite plausible to suggest that these ambiguities are perhaps purposefully designed to invite this all-too-common reading that is largely unwarranted, to our minds. We hope to make our case by paying exceedingly close attention to as many of the play’s tiny little peculiarities and oddities as we can—all in the hopes that we can show that there is enough evidence to say that Hemingway’s very careful utilization of multiple “indexical” expressions (legible already in the very title of the play) invite a reading of the play that hearkens to Hegel’s treatment of similar ideas in the opening chapter on “sensuous sense-certainty” in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*—and that heavily problematizes the idea that “Today is Friday” is quite obviously and clearly about *that Friday* of Christ’s death.

Hemingway's piece is, like a great many of his short stories, brilliantly and ingeniously titled. Consistent with most of the other stories in the *Finca Vigía Edition* of *The Complete Short Stories*, the title is short, three words long—one might be inclined to say there is no way something so short could tell one "everything they would need to know," but we think there is a reading of this story that makes such a sentiment very understandable. Things already appear to become more clear and precise when we read the first italicized sentence of the stage directions: "Three Roman soldiers are in a drinking-place at eleven o'clock at night" ("Today Is Friday" 271). A three-word title and one short sentence and readers can make some guesses as to when and where we are—and there is little doubt that if they zeroed in on a very important day (a Friday, of course) where Christ's crucifixion had occurred earlier that day—we think that this is a more than plausible speculation. For those that are slightly more cautious and less susceptible to wanting to leap and take the title and first sentence as so seductive, exorbitantly enticing; more cautious readers will continue along and see a slew of details that might strike them as significant and noteworthy. The "Hebrew wine-seller" waiting on these three soldiers is known as George; it's unclear if this is really his name—"George" is a name of Greek origin and so its application to a Hebrew man might be read as odd (that said, there are, admittedly, plenty of Greek names that have Hebrew predecessors/equivalents, "Paul" and "Saul" might come readily to mind for many)—or if this is just what the soldiers, who are regular customers, old-timers, one might say, here at this "drinking-place," call him; whatever it is these men do as soldiers during the day, it might appear clear that perhaps the weight and gravity of it does not go unregistered by them, or at least by one of them: the "3d soldier" complains of a nagging "gut-ache" ("Today Is Friday" 271) and this trip to the bar seems so routine that the first soldier asks George to mix up the same drink for his fellow Roman that fixed his own stomach ache "the other day." So routine is this

whole scenario that George can boast—as any good bartender can, one supposes—of having the cure for what singularly ails one: "You were in a bad shape, Lootenant," George says, "I know what fixes up a bad stomach" ("Today Is Friday" 272). The third soldier's response to the medicine—which elicits a reply from the second soldier that is equally worthy of note—provides a detail that the cautious reader will no doubt grip strongly: "[*The third Roman soldier drinks the cup down.*] Jesus Christ. [*He makes a face*] *2d Soldier*—That false alarm!" ("Today Is Friday" 272). Hopefully, readers chasing the seductive title and first sentence might be forced to slow their role here just slightly—the second soldier's anachronistic use of Christ's name as an expletive would arguably support a reading where we cannot be completely sure if the today that is Friday is really *that* "good" Friday. If such a proper name has already solidified and congealed into the common noun-ness of a swear word, then we would seem to be in some time that would be well beyond that of the incredibly significant trio of days so central to the entire Christian tradition. This line of thinking that would like to withhold judgment would obviously garner even further traction, perhaps, through the second soldier's exclamatory "That false alarm!"

But things become, in the very next line of dialogue, even more strange when the first soldier wades into the line of conversation: "Oh, I don't know. He was pretty good in there today." This sentence would seem to positively radiate ambiguity—unmoored even slightly from its surrounding context, it becomes downright uncanny, bizarre, highly peculiar. This phrasing, where we once more get this key signal word from the title, "today," can be supplied with a number of potential ways to further flesh-out the semantic space we want to include it in—or to figure out which "notional set," as Adam Zimmerman has used this term from cognitive linguistics to talk about F. Scott Fitzgerald's rhetorical prowess (177)—in which we might read it. Many have gone to analogies of sports—football seems quite common, taking up a remark of

Carlos Baker's that the dialogue "read[s] like a locker-room discussion among high-school sophomore football players" (Baker 169), as is that of boxing (see also Smith 155; Flora 149, 151; Dick 199), but one might also follow Melvin Backmann (9) and Kathleen Verduin when they do not find the bullfighting analogy to be a bit too much "on the nose" but incredibly spot on (31–32). At the very least, we are obviously dealing with a kind of activity that would involve some quantity of repetition ("pretty good in there *today*" would seem to immediately get one thinking of past days when the performance was subpar or even downright awful).

Of course, one need not go solely to something in the sports realm: one could just as easily imagine this being said of an actress whose performance this time today was "pretty good" out there. (In fact, Dick's reading also picks out this repetitive element of the theater and drama itself: "… the first soldier discusses the crucifixion of Christ as a recurrent event—as if it were a dramatic performance in which Christ, as actor, sometimes performs well, sometimes not" (199), but we are going to want to submit this to quite different questions than he does in his essay.) Regardless of which pragmatic situation one might use to best parse this sentence, what is key for us here is the fact that whichever notional set one picks (Dick uses the language of "cognitive linguistics" to say that "boxing becomes the target source domain through which the soldiers understand the domain of the crucifixion of Christ" (199) this set must include something like iterability, repetition, the possibility of *performance* of some kind. We take Dick's reading to be largely unfazed by what causes the two of us to be incredibly confused, as the obvious question looms: does the crucifixion of Christ belong to a notional set with this one absolutely required criteria of iterability here that we have mentioned? What exactly would it mean to say that

Christ's crucifixion could be "a dramatic performance" (and thus repeatable) at all in the first place—is such a thing even possible?[1]

If one was hopeful that Hemingway was content to just float such a thought—leaving it lingering in the air, as it were, without much further impact and resonance—such a hope would be quickly dashed. In a piece that cannot be said to be long or lengthy, this phrase is repeated on six total occasions throughout the play. Indeed, Hemingway has his Roman soldiers return again and again to this repetitive or reiterative metaphor of the performativity of this day's events. The first Roman soldier notes that crucifixions are, as already mentioned, all too routine; he has seen so many: "Ain't I seen 'em? I seen plenty of them. I tell you, he was pretty good in there today." We then get a highly significant gesture and statement from the second soldier: "[*The second Roman soldier smiles at the Hebrew wine-seller.*] You're a regular Christer, big boy" ("Today Is Friday" 272). Hemingway's typical parsimonious style and technique get us wondering what would such a smile signifies? Would it serve merely to produce a kind of deflationary effect on a reading that would like say that this story is clearly about Christ, but not the Christ that might simply share this moniker as a title for "the anointed one"—which is itself already a translation (read: repetition) of the Hebrew word for "Messiah." As a great many New Testament scholars have shown in excruciating (no pun intended) detail, these words were very much "in the air" at the time The smile might thus serve (or just further support) the way in which, as Derrida argued in numerous places, one of the simplest ways one can show that the "properness" or "singularity" of a name is not simply by showing that somebody other than you probably has the same name, but by constantly dissolving (as so many of the poems by Francis Ponge that were submitted to

[1] One might think here of René Girard's fundamental contention that "Christ's death was not a sacrificial one." Indeed, for Girard, Christ's death is not repeatable: "[t]o say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices …" (210).

such rigorous reading in *Signsponge* do) the propriety of the proper name into a small army of common nouns—a phenomenon that *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* would seem to have encrypted in the very interpretation of Jesus's name as "God saves" (108)

We recognize that—depending upon one's own individual theological allegiances and commitments—all of the tiny little details in Hemingway's treatment that really do seem to point to Christ (but, precisely, *not* the Christ who might have shared the title of "Messiah" with others): the lines where the soldiers would seem to be talking about Mary Magdalene ("You see his girl," one of them says, to which the second soldier replies, "Wasn't I standing right by her?"); the spot where the soldiers register the fact that the women are the only ones that "stuck by him" while dying on the cross; even the moment when one says to the other, "You see me slip the old spear into him?" ("Today Is Friday" 273). This last little detail is nothing short of surprising, downright shocking even. Of the Passion narratives, none of the synoptic Gospels mention it and, as is fitting for the uniqueness and distinctiveness of John's Gospel, his is the only one to add the very singular detail about the soldier who spears the dead Christ. What is quite thought-provoking here is that Hemingway takes the spearing (a detail that would thus be in contrast to something like the "breaking of the legs," *crurifragium*, which John's narrative explains as occurring because of the Jews' desire "to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath" [John 19:31] and that other scholars note was a common Roman practice to hasten death) and iterates it, puts it into a space and moment where it is repeated: the second soldier's response to the first's spearing Christ is: "You'll get into trouble doing that some day" ("Today Is Friday" 273). One could also note that the adjective "old" in "slip the old spear into him" here too makes clear this placing of the act within a field of iteration, repetition; not only that, but the fact that this description in John is quite unique (and would thus seem able to be

read as not simply describing something that was just part of Roman crucifixion practice as the breaking of the legs was) further places the singular and specific into the realm of the mundane, prosaic, and also highly repetitive.

What effects can this plethora of repetition, iteration, and citationality produce? One way to put it to work is the way many Christian readings of the play have. Nickel seems quite certain that all this reiteration—in combination with the "choice of the present moment, *today*" in the title—illustrates the idea that "each time one revisits the story, like each annual celebration of 'Good Friday,' one relives the original Friday. Likewise, in the re-enactment of the Passion through the Mass on Good Friday, participants symbolically relive the moments of Christ's Passion and crucifixion" (90–91). Joshua Hren's "The Centurion's Tale," published in *First Things*, picks up Nickel's reading and utilizes it essentially without modification: "Although all three men have seen countless crucifixions, the third soldier (for reasons he cannot articulate) feels his way of life—his very being—has been eclipsed by what he saw at Christ's crucifixion" (Hren). As already noted, this would be a reading that we understand to be quite seductive: it is quite enticing, this desire to read some kind of powerful revelation or epiphany here on the third soldier's part, but we think that a bad stomach ache and simply "feeling like hell" is not enough for us to conclude anything remotely looking like what the Centurion says—at least in Matthew's version—when he sees Christ's death: "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). (One could also further note that we do not even much resembling Luke's Centurion, who says that it is clear that "this was a righteous man" [Luke 23:47]—unless one wants to say that "he was pretty good in there today" is Hemingway's little allegorical substitute for "a righteous man," which could be *prima facie* possible, but a bit of a stretch, at least from our perspective.) Indeed, the title of Hren's short essay is telling: Hemingway's "Today is Friday''

cannot be rewritten or retitled as"The Centurion's Tale"; we think it is clear that this is *not* the Centurion's story—and not simply because it is radically unclear if any of these soldiers are supposed to be read as the Centurion; and even if they were, this would beg credulity itself since none of the soldiers seem to say anything remotely like what Matthew's or Luke's Centurion does. Indeed, we imagine Hemingway's picture here as one where the Centurion didn't go with them to the bar this Friday night.

There is much more to be said about precisely why we are rather dissatisfied with the confidence so many readers have felt in saying that the play is actually about Christ on that Friday. We have parsed several small, yet strange details within the play itself that seem far more problematic than they would need to be if the story was designed to unambiguously be about Christ. We would now like to transition just slightly here to spotlight the title of Hemingway's piece—which always seems to be an absolute prerequisite when discussing his work, especially the short fiction. We hope this excursus into distinctly philosophical territory (Hegel) strikes readers as firmly anchored in peculiarities we have already highlighted in Hemingway's text itself. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, takes up the problem of ambiguity as both a linguistic and perceptual issue of the subject. The central position of the form of consciousness in the opening to the *Phenomenology* is that what one experiences in "sense certainty" is the fully unmediated being of the object. What is most clear is *this* thing, *here*, *now*.

> *What is the this*? If we take it in the twofold shape of its being, as the *now* and the *here* … The Now … proves itself to be nonexistent. To be sure, the *Now* itself maintains itself but as what is not the night; likewise, it maintains itself vis-á-vis the day … This self maintaining Now is thus not an immediate Now but a mediated Now, for it is determined as an enduring and self-maintaining Now *as a result* of an other not existing, namely, the day or the night. (Hegel 61–62).

And in the same way, speaking of space instead of time, Hegel notes:

> … *here* is the tree. I turn around, this truth vanishes, and it has inverted itself into its contrary: *Here* there is *not a tree* but rather *a house*. The *Here* itself does not disappear, rather it *endures* in the disappearance of the house, the tree, etc., and it is indifferent to being a house, a tree. (62).

These indexicals, though perhaps hollow, are not empty. To say "here" or "now" does introduce form, but form cannot specify content. Just as Hegel says, the *Here* persists in the absence of everything but the possibility of space and an observer to say "here"—the same is true of the Now. And, though the indexical is profoundly *un*certain, ambiguous, and nondescript, it is not self-contradictory. *Here* is not *there*. The indexical may make such a distinction impossible to draw, but does not allow distinction itself to be dispensed with. Still, we are compelled to use these indexicals, and perhaps indexicals in general, in the face of their ambiguity:

> Rather, I am pure intuiting, and I stick with, namely, that "Now is daytime", or else I also stick with "Here is a tree". I also do not compare the Here and Now themselves with each other; rather, I cling tenaciously to an immediate relation: "Now is daytime." (64).

This, which has the same structure as its two component parts, the Here and the Now, this structure being a purely negative one. *This* does not indicate any item in particular, instead existing as a pure indexical for which identity must be fashioned—fashioned, yes, and always imperfectly and uncertainly. In the same way, in Hegel's conception of the Now, it has passed as soon as the attempt at specification is made. So too with the *This*—as soon as its identity has been crafted, the truth of its identity becomes stale and dull. *This* is an absence that is compelled by the *I* to be present, not as an absence but as a presence, as that which it is not. The indexical, in this way, fails to achieve anything but a profound ambiguity, ever-present and unresolvable.

Hegel's examination of place and time are quite apt in another way as well—for what are space and time (here and now) but repetitive concepts? Indeed, what are particularities, with respect to concepts, but repetitions? If they couldn't, of what use would the concept be? If a concept were to serve in relation to only one particularity, that concept would necessarily represent the entirety of that particularity, and would therefore cease to be a concept. Indeed, if a

concept serves in relation to a finite number of particulars, the same is true, and the concept disappears into those particulars. The concept, in order that it maintain its title, must be general enough to encircle a multitude (one supposes, an infinity) of particularities, but particular enough to identify itself as singular and distinguishable from other concepts. This necessary generality necessitates, in turn, the necessity of repetition. For, if the concept must encompass an infinity of particulars, the concept must be *repeated*, in one way or the other, in each particular, or else cease to exist as relevant to the particular. But if the concept must contain within itself an infinite repetition *of* itself, the distinction between the concept and any one of the particularities repeated in it becomes foggy. The concept therefore loses its definition as singular and finds itself lost in a sea of imitators and copies. It does not disappear, however, and constantly reasserts itself, without success, as the originary, the absolute, the king. Yet, an onlooking *I* is unsure which of the infinite repetitions is the primordial one—here again is the ambiguity of the *This*. *This* repetition implies *every* repetition, and the listener cannot be quite sure *which* repetition *This* is straining to point to.

What could escape such limitations? That is to say, what might be said to be at once totally unmistakable (which is to say, known in its particularity) and profoundly singular? Such an one would demand an *im*mediate relation to those who perceive it—no substitution may be made for another "just as good." There can be no such other, else this One lose its infinite, yet totally known particularity. This One demands unrepeatability—to speak of repetition is to speak of the dilution of *the* One into one *among* many. Those who experience this One find it to be both entirely itself and tremendously potent—it has escaped the necessity of the totally particular to fade into an empty concept. The One achieves what no other one could—it finds itself fulfilled without finding itself absent.

Is there any One which better fits this perspective than Christ? Christ, under Christian teaching, is the One to end the repetition unredeemed of human sinfulness. He is that which is at once universal and particular—He is both God and man. His death was the crucifixion to end crucifixions—not one among many, but the One among many. None could take his place on the cross. Christ takes the place of all other men while, himself, a man. He is God made flesh: at once self-identical and outward-facing. He does not fade into the concept of His Father, but maintains His potency as God on earth. His life on earth was His only life on earth—He will not return till judgment horns sound. Any who claim His name are false: His life may not be repeated.

Now, a blasphemous question: how does one recognize Christ? In a crowd of false prophets, that is, each claiming the title of redeemer and messiah, how ought I, who am limited in my perception, identify him? Or, to take a more potent case, how ought his crucifixion be identified? From the multitude of crosses that spanned the Roman Empire, which one was Christ's? Even with His body still hanging there, by what mark is He to be identified? Indeed, how ought I call to Christ? Not by His name, to be sure. To call for "Jesus Christ" is to call for "the anointed savior of the Lord," not for the humble carpenter of Nazareth. The name of the savior appears purely as a procurator, an empty structure, an indexical. How ought I call *that* man, my savior? His name does not admit of an answer. Christ may be at once son of God and son of man, but we are only the sons of men. We know not the divine, and cannot know. The false prophet is not false to us, nor is he true—we have not the capacity to judge him as one or the other. The question persists: how am I to know Christ, son of man? He is man, not God, to me. On earth, His universality vanishes to make space for his singularity as a man. His life was a mortal life—*there* and *then*, not *every*where and *every*when. His followers interacted with a

singular, not a universal. His crucifixion was the crucifixion of a man among other men. If we are asked—'which man is He?'—we cannot answer (indeed, this very same quandary seems to have bothered John the Baptist too when he sends along his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are You the Coming One, or are we to look for someone else?" [Matthew 11:2]). There is no Centurion to affirm: "Truly, this [is] the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54). Men are, with respect to the divine, homogenous and substitutable, indistinguishable from each other. If I cannot grasp you in your total particularity, your status as savior becomes the same as Christ's, which is the status of 'perhaps.' And, of course, if all are, perhaps, Christ, the specification of Christ becomes a fool's errand. Are we all, therefore, not fated to commit blasphemy by substitution? Will we all not question Christ? Are we not all on the road to Emmaus?

It is important to keep in mind the potency of these ambiguities, and to avoid a theory akin to a distinctly Leibnizian one. That is, to encounter ambiguity seriously, without denying it, one must be acutely attentive to the state of the particular as ontological foundation. A naïve or dishonest confrontation with ambiguity may attempt a reduction of the particular to the concatenation of generalities. *This*, such a confrontation might claim, is not totally individual and singular, but is rather a compendium of parts, and may therefore be explained entirely by its parts. The ontology posited under this view is one of definition, completeness, and order. Ambiguity has no place in it; ambiguity, under this ontology, may only exist as the intermediary between differences, rather than as that which stands against both difference and equivalence. It is our view that such ontologies deny totally the infinite breadth of singularity, constitutive of ambiguity. Only the realization of uncapturable singularity can allow the proper encounter with the ambiguous *as* ambiguous.

To this end, we must notice that Hemingway's play refuses the attempt at the resolution and removal of ambiguity of the crucial questions in the play. As we have noted, the play cannot be definitively and irrefutably located in time—the indexicals "today" and "Friday'' give no indication whatsoever. Too, we find that the play is not well-located in space. The only definite place in the play is"a drinking-place," very appropriately ambiguous. The soldiers are Roman, it is true, but this too gives little indication of their location. At its height, the Roman empire had conquered the entire Mediterranean, what is now Spain, England and Wales, and sections of northern Africa—a tremendous area, with Roman soldiers in every crevice of it. The soldiers in the play may be in Rome, or in Jerusalem, or in any other place in the empire where wine was readily available at eleven o' clock at night. Where are the soldiers? We must answer in ignorance. They are somewhere, we may say with trepidation, but it is quite a peculiar sort of somewhere. It is a somewhere and a somewhen in which neither time nor place can be said with specificity—that is, said with any distinction from every other *where* and every other *when*. This is, perhaps, of no matter. What is of true interest is the subject of the soldiers' conversation. Who have they crucified? There are several suggestive data:

> *1st Soldier*—You see his girl?
> *2d Soldier*—Wasn't I standing right by her?
> *1st Soldier*—She's a nice looker.
> *2d Soldier*—I knew her before he did. [*He winks at the Hebrew wine-seller*]
> *1st Soldier*—I used to see her around the town.
> *2d Soldier*—She used to have a lot of stuff. he never brought her no good luck.
> *1st Soldier*—Oh, he ain't lucky. But he looked pretty good to me in there today.
> *2d Soldier*—What become of his gang?
> *1st Soldier*—Oh, they faded out. Just the women stuck by him.
> *2d Roman Soldier*—They were a pretty yellow crowd. When they seen him go up there they didn't want any of it.
> *1st Soldier*—The women stuck all right.
> *2d Soldier*—Sure, they stuck all right.
> *1st Roman Soldier*—You see me slip the old spear into him?
> *2d Roman Soldier*—You'll get in trouble doing that some day. (273)

So many elements tempt the reader towards certainty: a partner of some romantic variety, devoted women by the cross, weak-kneed followers, and someone stabbed with a spear. One

might determine these elements through the Gospels (in which they are well-defined) in the same order: Mary Magdalene, Christ's mother, her sister, Mary, wife of Clopas, Christ's twelve disciples, and the Holy Lance. Are these pieces of evidence particular *enough* to pick out the topic of conversation as Christ's crucifixion, as opposed to any other crucifixion? We suppose not: it is far from guesswork to suppose that many crucified men were accompanied to their crosses by their wives and mothers and that those same men were abandoned by their friends at the last. In the cross-temporal context Hemingway writes (Rome crossed with 1920's America), it would not be terribly surprising that a man's wife might have "known" other men before her marriage. Too, as we have already mentioned, the spear which pierced Christ, seeming to be one of the definitive signifiers of Christ, is identified by the soldiers as something repeated, which is to say non-singular. To say "the old spear" is indicative enough of this, but the comment "You'll get in trouble doing that some day" (which might be paraphrased as 'You, who have done that so many times before, ought not to do it anymore, else you be punished') removes any singularity from the spear. These images, which are so particular in the Christian canon, are found in Hemingway's play to be naught but indexicals: contingent, non-singular, purely structural. The crucified man has identity, we suppose, but it is not an identity that we know—his *This* is floating and shifting, indeterminate and ghostly. Is it not of importance, also, that Hemingway has written this conversation *as* a play, that which may be played over and over again, with each repetition using the same script, which is to say the same *This*, shifted to different identities? Can any of this be said of the true Christ's death? Of course not. His death is the unrepeatable, the absolutely unique, the *One*.

Further, returning to the soldier's repeated phrase, "He was pretty good in there today," we find it to be nothing more than a string of indexicals, compounded to form an ambiguous

whole that holds ambiguous sway over an ambiguous object. Given our discussion of the indexical, a claim of certainty of meaning for any word in this sentence would be quite foolhardy. “Was” and “in” express relation only, and the rest express the hollow husks of specificities. How good was “he” (whoever he may be) in “there” (wherever there may be) today (whenever that may be)? He was “pretty good”—what more ambiguous comment could be made about any performance in any domain?[2] “His” performance was neither good nor bad, but “pretty good.” This sentence, therefore, itself functions as a higher-level indexical. It contains the space where content and specificity would reside, but are found to be absent. What to make, then, of the soldiers’ exchange:

> 2*d Soldier*——Why didn’t he come down off the cross?
> 1*st Soldier*——He didn’t want to come down off the cross. That’s not his play. (“Today Is Friday” 272)

Who, other than Christ, *could* choose to come down off the cross? And who, other than Christ, could view His own crucifixion as a “play” for one thing or another? Is this, at last, where Hemingway’s infinite sequence of indexicals comes to an end?

We can only hope here that readers are willing to grant us that we are not terribly interested in simply being overly skeptical just for skepticism’s sake. In order to strengthen such a desire, we would like to take a quick detour—by way of a small historical study— and then proceed to a favorite pastime of the academic world, just a tiny bit of hair-splitting—but we would like to try to produce split hairs in a way that is quite laser-like, hopefully surgical in its precision. It is clear that the atmosphere of Hemingway’s piece possesses a quality that appears

---

[2] We tend to agree with Terence Fletcher from Damien Chazelle’s *Whiplash*: “There are no two words in the English language more harmful than ‘good job’” (Chazelle).

to sync-up quite nicely with what so many scholars of early Christianity have excavated not only from this tradition's sacred texts, but from numerous contemporaneous works as well. As we have hinted at a couple of times before, it is hardly a new thing to note that, during the time of Christ's life, there was more than one "Messiah" in the air—indeed, the Jewish community of the time was not somehow unaware of many strains of militantly revolutionary ideas about Jerusalem's ideal relation to Rome (cf. 110). Although such a thing is easy to infer from the Gospel accounts themselves (Pontius Pilate is quite concerned about which kind of "teacher" or leader or Messiah Christ really is, when all is said and done—and Luke's narrative makes it undeniable that Christ is killed because he is taken as a political revolutionary and agitator [Luke 22:36]), the work of Biblical scholars like John Dominic Crossan (*The Birth of Christianity*, *God and Empire*, *The Historical Jesus*, and many more) and N. T. Wright's monumental 4-volume work, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, have done so much to help us further flesh-out and understand many of the no doubt uncountable number of different contexts (theological, political, sociological) swirling around during Christ's lifetime. Such work would seem to easily give the lie to the idea that we know which Messiah we're talking about when we speak of Christ as *the* Messiah. Additionally, we think that if this is the case for the tradition's texts, then it is also equally the case for Hemingway's own little piece. Moreover, we think that even if one could properly curtail all these different contexts and say that, at least as far as the New Testament is concerned, we can all be very sure that Christ is Christ there. But, as Bradley H. McClean notes in his *Deleuze, Guattari and the Machine in Early Christianity*, this "assumption … that every occurrence of the name 'Christ' in the New Testament designates the *same* referent … is highly problematic" (114). As McClean correctly wonders, how safe can we be when we utter the customary idea that, somehow, Mark's Christ is really the same as Matthew's or Luke's

Christ or the Christ of John who is the "Son sent by the Father God" (114)? McClean's position would be all too well-supported by all the historical work: not only do we have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John's quite different Christs, but we have "many other Christs besides" which ultimately means, for McClean, that "we cannot speak of a single, unequivocal referent that is 'Christ.' Indeed, the proliferation of Christs in early Christian writings fragments the term 'Christ' to such an extent that it loses any essential *truth*" (114). "Today is Friday" would seem to quite effortlessly encapsulate all of this: it is not absolutely unequivocally the case that what the soldiers are doing at the bar is "conceptualiz[ing] the execution as drama—re-creating it as if it were a passion play" (Dick 199). We think it is true not to just say that the soldier's are not doing a re-creation of the Passion, but that Hemingway's text isn't doing such a thing either.

Granted all of this, we would still like to forestall a potential objection that our analysis is too obstinate—we are willing to grant that so many elements here in this play do point us to the Jesus Christ of Christianity—and that what Hemingway's play is meant to pick out is that absolutely singular and unequivocally clear case that is Christ's death: the women who stick by him, the "pretty yellow crowd" that deserts Jesus, the "old spear" reference, and much more. However, we do think that the most significant detail of all in the story is one that Dick does explicitly mention but turns largely only in the direction of his main thesis about the significance of theater as metaphor and as form here—and that is the line from the first soldier when he answers the second soldier's question—"Why didn't he come down off the cross?"—with the words, "He didn't want to come down off the cross. That's not his play" ("Today Is Friday" 272). Dick's reading is plausible and not one that we would wish to deny, but we do think this word "play" here is quite aptly chosen on Hemingway's part: "Jesus' part has been written in advance. His role has been predetermined. He has followed the script even though the play has a

tragic ending" (200). When thinking through this line, we need to also keep in mind that this word also functions in this other "notional set" of the field of repetition, iteration, citation—obviously, there are roles to be played when focusing on this metaphor of theater, but this would also seem to be the case with these other regimes of repeatability as well, especially those of sports. We do not want to belabor the obvious point here, but it seems important to recall that sports are *games*. Certainly, we can imagine a boxer in the ring playing the long game, where one move is just one element in a much longer strategy of sorts—no quick rush for the knockout in the first round, the "play" will be one we where we take up some patience, wear down our opponent; one could also think of the poker player whose facility for subtlety, subterfuge, and a stone-cold face are all part of much larger scheme or program; chess players too will often use this idiom and idea as well when considering various possible moves. This last quality of the way "that's not his play" immediately opens up the idea of *possibility* as such is also exceedingly important for us here too. So, just as "that's not his play" gets one thinking about all of the other possible moves that could have been made at the moment, it also strongly suggests a degree of patience, waiting—the right moment for attack may not be at this point here, now—; "that's not the best play" points one immediately to something futural too.

Games have moves, plays, strategies—and, perhaps most important: "opponents." High school football players have opposed teams, boxers have other boxers, matadors have, at the very least, the bulls. Very explicit opponents might not be an absolute requirement here, of course. The golfer out on the links for a leisurely Sunday round on a sunny day may be only competing against herself; the matador too would have not only the bulls, but also himself as well: repeated performances in these cases obviously give us some kind of standard performance (either external or slightly more "internal" to the player of the game/sport). If Christ is playing some

kind of game, how are we to think of this? Who is the opponent? Is the opponent an internal one, external, or perhaps both? And what other repeated performances does Christ have if we need to have some kind of metric with which to judge an iteration as either "better or worse" than another? Is this the point where it becomes so significant to remember all the other Messiahs and all the messianism that were "in the air" at the time? This seems plausible: there were so many other competing political revolutionaries and agitators against Rome—in this case Jesus himself clearly had no shortage of other competitors out on the golf course at the time. However, the question of who's really playing the game here might seem simple enough to handle—and perhaps in a way that need not get one into a gnarly aporia—there are numerous candidates for who the key players are here that one can infer simply from all the good historical scholarship.[3] Completely isolated on its own though, the first soldier's remark would seem to suggest an awareness of Christ's (and God's) playing the long game. Whoever was crucified on this day, Friday, whenever that day was, he was the only one who could have gotten himself down off the cross. But gotten down to what end and to what purpose? Only to proceed like some Jewish accounts that the savior would perhaps then proceed to lay waste to Rome and once more take the Jewish people out from under the yolk of this new Egypt? Or would that play not have been

---

[3] This idea of a "game" involving Christ's death is not foreign to the Christian tradition—far from it, in fact. Joseph Campbell reproduces in Volume 4 of his *Masks of God* series an illustrated page from a twelfth-century manuscript that he describes and interprets: "What we see [in the image] is God the Father in heaven, fishing for the Devil in the form of the monster Leviathan, using for his line the kings of the royal house of David, with the Cross for his hook, and his Son affixed there as bait. For the Devil, through his ruse in the Garden of Eden, had acquired a legal right to man's soul, which God, as a just God, had to honor. However, since the right had been acquired by a ruse, God might justly terminate it by a ruse. He offered as ransom for the soul of man the soul of his own divine Son, knowing, as the Devil did not, that since the Second Person of the Trinity is beyond the touch of corruption, Satan would not be able to lay hold. Christ's humanity was thus the bait at which the Devil snapped like a fish, only to be caught on the hook of the Cross, from which the Son of God, through his resurrection, escaped." (18). Christ's death as a game of divine fishing—not too far away from "Today is Friday," perhaps. On the very next couple of pages Campbell cogently rehearses St. Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur deus homo?* response to this whole "ransom theory of salvation." For us, Anselm changes the players but not the fundamental game structure: in his text the whole incarnation becomes a kind of game God plays with himself rather than with the Devil.

far enough in the future to call it part of the "long game" at all? Maybe this one was to come down off the cross and produce a purely theophanic event—the long term consequences of which perhaps being even further draped in mystery. As is so typical of Hemingway's penchant for ambiguity, the soldier tells us there is "a play" here, but to claim that they or we really know at all what that play is strikes us as still just too uncertain, unclear, enigmatic—and we are very skeptical that we can say we know precisely because we now know how the rest of the story goes.

Even if one could feel on solid ground that we knew what the play was—that the play here is really, for example, the play of the entirety of Christianity's whole history of salvation as Christ's fundamental mission—we would still have this nagging splinter in our minds wrapped around the very same first soldier's frighteningly confusing repeated remark: "He was pretty good in there *today*." All we have here in Hemingway's play is this ghostly, uncanny suggestion of Christ's performances of his own death through repeated iterations—and not in same way that one simply folds this day into some kind of ritual or "litany" (as Nickel describes the repetition of the soldier's bizarre remark (90))—we thus have an absolutely singular and unrepeatable event that is directly submitted to repetition, iteration. One's mind reels a little here, imagining different scenarios where Christ dies his death in a multiplicity of different ways: perhaps one time his death is somehow less heroic, or his death comes more slowly or more quickly.[4] Dick says we know that "Christ's death is predetermined," his role is already foreseen, but Hemingway asks us to imagine all the different ways this ultimately predetermined end might not just possibly have occurred, but that *did somehow occur*. This "[h]e was pretty good in there"

[4] One could also go to Ernest Renan's account of the crucifixion in his Life of Jesus where we read that Christ probably died really quickly, due to his "delicate organization" Verduin. In one of the parallel universes created out of Hemingway's play, this turns out to be true and not merely speculation on Renan's part.

opens up a veritable plethora of contingencies (each move of the game, each element in the performance, would seem not to have been something that "could have gone differently," but, surreally, actually did go radically differently). "He was pretty good in there today" leans incredibly strongly on this "today," too, we should say, such that it's possible there were days before this day where different moves could have been played—and even more absurdly, perhaps, the sentence suggests that there were prior, previous, earlier games where *the moves and plays were different.*

Things are far too knotty here to be content with saying that "Today is Friday" dramatizes or even just simply "narrates" the Crucifixion. These temporal contortions and oddities (including, too, the detail that this thing gives us Christ's name as a swear word) put us in a time that is after Christ's death—but we still think the seductiveness of the idea that the soldiers are actually talking about Christ is possible, but then that places us both somewhere after his death and, yet, somehow "before" in the sense that the play is just one more game, one more interaction, of the whole entire Passion. The singular and unique death of Christ seems to have already happened, numerous times before. If our exegesis still strikes our readers as far from clear, we understand this complaint; one feels as if they need to twist the very structures of grammar, wrenching time and temporality and tense in locutions like saying that the event of Christ's death is in a space and time here where "what happens happened (again)" or something as odd as "what's happened happens (again)"—and this simply because we think the play makes it such that we cannot borrow the repetitive mantra used frequently in Christopher Nolan's own mind-bending film, *Tenet* ("whatever happened happened"): the wrenched temporal structure of "Today is Friday" would not seem to be fully captured by such a little phrase.

It perhaps goes without saying that we cannot accept Ben Stoltzfus's assertion in his *Gide and Hemingway: Rebels against God*, that "[t]here is no evidence of intentional blasphemy in any of his works" (41). Indeed, it strikes us as incredibly curious that just pages later in that very same text, Stoltzfus refers to "Today is Friday," but does not really read it or submit it to critical scrutiny, being content to notice the significance of the fact that "one of the Roman soldiers admires the stoic way Christ took his suffering" (43). This reading is consistent with much of the secondary scholarship—wonderfully canvassed by Verduin—that focused on the "Christ figure" in Hemingway's work as connected to the somewhat tired, old critical saw of his machismo (22). (John Killinger's book is also quite curious on this front, the only mention of the story in *Hemingway and the Dead Gods* occurs on a single page and very little is said there about the piece other than to subscribe to this focus on stoicism [79].) Although there is no doubt that a focus on the "heroic" Christ could hardly be called "blasphemous," we do think that "Today is Friday" is a text that should be put in conversation with this larger concern, given that we think it quite right to agree with Verduin and say that one can note numerous Hemingway texts where blasphemous positions on Christ and the Christian tradition are visible and legible: "[a]s in the letters, Hemingway's fictional references to Christ often flirt with blasphemy …" (21). We think that if anything by Hemingway could be considered "intentionally blasphemous" (assuming we could come to consensus about what these two words might mean, given their highly problematic statuses both separately and when paired-up together), then "Today is Friday'' definitely fits the bill—the machismo and stoicism line of argument does not get us there, but this focus on repetition, iterability, and citationality in the play certainly does. To come at this from a slightly different direction—and to make it very clear where we need to part ways slightly with Verduin—one could say that she is admittedly correct when she notes that"the successive

tortures of crucifixion are enumerated as methodically as in any of the Lives of Christ" (31)—this seems an appropriate description of the details that are provided by the second and third soldiers; those two do talk about what can be considered "successive" moments in the crucifixion as a whole. However, as we have tried to argue, this does not fully capture the effects of the first soldier's "[h]e was pretty good in there today," where the indexical jumps its confines slightly and cannot be fully incorporated into or appropriated by the idea that all we get here is a narrative descriptive of "successive moments" within the crucifixion or Passion *tout court*.

Actually, it is possible to dig a little further into Verduin's essay to show that the presence of what we are arguing for here occurs in her very own essay. A little further on from the last quoted passage, Verduin draws readers' attention to a passage in Hemingway's much later *Death in the Afternoon* where he is discussing Goya's *Cristo Crucificado* (1780); this piece, "which Hemingway had seen in the Prado, could serve, he writes, 'as a poster for the announcement of a crucifixion in the manner of a bullfight poster. A crucifixion of six carefully selected Christs will take place at five o'clock in the Monumental Golgotha of Madrid, governmental permission having been contained (*Death in the Afternoon* 208; qtd. in 31–32). For Verduin, this passage illustrates something ritualized, but what we find curious is that Hemingway *does not* give us one Christ who is endlessly iterated and ritualized—rather, he gives us *six* different Christs (fascinatingly, this is the same number of times that the first soldier gives his repeated"[h]e was pretty good in there today" utterance). We do not solely have just one Christ, solidified into ritual here, we have six of them—and that strikes us as not simply curious, but really significant. Already to have "six carefully selected Christs" scheduled to die at five o'clock is perhaps not simply "skirting with blasphemy," but outrightly provoking such a reading. To take the most singular of all events ever and have it scheduled to occur not once at

all, but six times, seems to fit the blasphemy bill well- and easily enough. How much more blasphemous to do with all this what Hemingway does in “Today is Friday”—to take that absolutely singular event and submit it itself to repetition, iterability, and citationality. This is not simply a “skirting with blasphemy,” but a full-on embrace of it, a full-on embrace of the idea that the Passion is not a singular event, but a recurrent one, one that can be repeated, one that can be iterated, one that can be cited—but not simply or solely reiterated and repeated *through ritual*. As we have hopefully shown, this is not quite what we have here given the strangeness and peculiarity of all those indexicals—indexicals that shine brightly right from the very title of this scintillating little play.

Works Cited

Backman, Melvin. "Hemingway: The Matador and the Crucified." Modern Fiction Studies, vol. 1, no. 3, Aug. 1955, pp. 2–11.

Baker, Carlos. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story.* Collier Books, 1988.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology.* Penguin Books, 1968.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.

Dick, Christopher. "Drama as Metaphor in Ernest Hemingway's 'Today Is Friday'." *The Explicator*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2011, pp. 198–202.

Flora, Joseph M. *Reading Hemingway's Men Without Women.* Kent State University Press, 2008.

Girard, René. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World.* Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, Stanford University Press, 1987.

Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* Translated by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon.* Scribner's, 1932.

---. "Today Is Friday." *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, The Finca Vigía Edition*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987, pp. 271–773.

Hren, Joshua. "The Centurion's Tale." *First Things*, 28 Feb. 2020, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/02/the-centurions-tale.

McClean, Bradley H. *Deleuze, Guattari and the Machine in Early Christianity*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

Nickel, Matthew C. *Hemingway's Dark Night : Catholic Influences and Intertextualities in the Work of Ernest Hemingway.* New Street Communications, 2013.

Renan, Ernest. *The Life of Jesus.* Brentanos, 1863.

Smith, Paul. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. G. K. Hall, 1989.

Stoltzfus, Ben. *Gide And Hemingway: Rebels Against God*. Kennikat Press, 1978.

Verduin, Kathleen. "The Lord of Heroes: Hemingway and the Crucified Christ." *Religion and Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 21–41.

Whiplash. Directed by Damien Chazelle, Sony Pictures Classics, 2014.

Zimmerman, Brett. “Fitzgerald as Prose Technician: A Short Catalog of Rhetorical Devices.” *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 149–99.