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Intertwinglement; or a Request by Way of a Story
Honors Convocation
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Clichéd though this sounds, I really am honored to be standing here before you, even in this faux-medieval, rayon get-up, honored to have been nominated and honored to be designated teacher of the year. I can say sincerely that last April 14, when I learned that I had been chosen, was the highlight of my teaching life. As I floated west across the quad after that convocation, with a huge grin on my face and unaware that I was expected at the president's house for lunch, I somehow felt that the thirty years I had spent working at my vocation, my calling, had been validated.

The door to fond reminiscence slammed shut, though, when "the horror, the horror" fully dawned on me: like Sir Gawain at the Green Chapel, I would have to return in one year and a day to face my greatest fear, not of beheading, but that I would have to return to give The Talk. [**Munch**] How could I possibly follow my learned and eloquent predecessors? What on earth could I talk about? As professors Bushman and Muirhead caught me heading into the Dugout for a PB&J sandwich and redirected me to the president's house, I thought, hey, those twenty minutes will be mine to fill; after all, I am Teacher of the Year [**Happy Munch**]. What'll I talk about? I'll talk about me!

In fact, I'll start egocentrically but finish exocentrically, shifting to your egos, your "I ams." I want to leave you with a visual metaphor that might help you conceptualize what you have learned here, help you pass through the disciplinary silo walls that enclose you, and see the liberal arts education you've charted in all its

intertwingled complexity. First, a word on form. [**MM Triptych**] When I began writing, The Talk took over and organized itself like a triptych, a tripartite picture or panel, the outer wings of which fold over the inner section. This gladdened my medievalist heart and led me to follow another medieval convention: labeling sections of long, tedious texts with part numbers. [***Incipit pars prima***] And so, here begins part one; or, as might have put it, "Here begynneth the Booke of the tale of Terkla." And here you groan for the first time.

[Beach/HWY1] I was born and raised on God's Patio, a few miles from southern California beaches and two miles from what Jack Kerouac <u>should</u> have called the Road to the Golden Eternity: Hwy 1, Pacific Coast Highway, PCH, the asphalt artery running the length of the state and perpetually pulsing with all manner of beautiful strangeness. Like so many of you, I am a suburban child. The police called my neighborhood Sleepy Hollow [**Hollow**], not because they were fans of Washington Irving's *Legend*, but because they felt sure that nothing untoward or illegal, let alone exciting, happened there. They were mostly right; I doubt David Lynch could find a nefarious underworld beneath the nicely trimmed lawns in my patch of east Long Beach.

Eventually my friends and I realized that we were seeking <u>some</u>thing else, a place less sleepy and less hollow, and we heeded the siren of the eternal road. Products and perpetuators of SoCal car culture, we devoted what the parents called our "formative years" to driving and hitchiking **[Hwy 1]**, trying to absorb central and northern California's sublime landscapes. There we thought we'd find answers to the questions we hadn't yet asked and new perspectives that would transport us from

hollowness to solidity. We hoped we were among those Kerouac calls "the mad ones, the ones who were mad to live, mad to talk, … desirous of everything," and we sought kindred spirits. Out on the continent's edge we did encounter outsiders, those whom the *Beowulf* poet would have named *eardstapsa*, "rim-walkers," and some of us met ourselves. [**Conversation**] These encounters often led to old-school social networking with other travelers, face-to-face tale telling and conversations, which I mean in this rather broad sense.

The image conjured up by "having one's being in a place or among persons," reminded me that "network" and "text" have weaving in their etymologies. [**Network/ Text]** "Text" derives from the Latin verb *texere*, "to weave," and first appears in English in two fourteenth-century quest narratives, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman*. As we wanna-be mad ones traveled—questing would be an overstatement—had conversations and heard tales that induced in us perspectival shifts, we wove into the texts of our lives the stories of others, and they wove our stories into theirs. At the time, we didn't conceive of this as building narrative networks, but that's what we were doing [**Node**]. Each of us was a node, the crisscrossed center point in a unique network, which, in turn, crisscrossed myriad other networks. The more we delved into each other's stash of stories and ideas and empathized with each other, the closer we drew together as an in-group of outsiders, of societal "rim-walkers." [**Hobbit cover**]

And then there was *The Hobbit*. Like many longhaired, bead-, bandana-, and bellbottom-wearing wanderers, I was listening and reading my way out of suburbia: FM radio, border radio, songs of protest and rebellion; Aldous Huxley, histories of

witchcraft, Carlos Castañeda, sci-fi. And then, in 1969, if Woodstock memory serves, I discovered *The Hobbit: Or There and Back Again*. I transferred my devotion for California's coastal redwood landscapes to Tolkien's Middle Earth, where I met Gandalf, Smaug, Beorn, Elrond, and Bilbo, the reluctant traveler and, like myself, hirsute map lover. Tolkien's alien world and the elves, especially the elves, captivated me, as did his invented languages and *The Hobbit*'s runic script. [**Hobbiton**] Confession here: I have twice driven hundreds of miles to Hobbiton, USA, fittingly located on California's redwood Avenue of the Giants [**Grave**]; have visited Tolkien's grave in north Oxford [**Pub**]; and have genuflected once or twice at the Inklings' snuggery in the Eagle and Child. [**Hobbit title page/futhorc**]

I discovered that Tolkien was a scholar of Old English literature and northern languages and set about looking into his biography and literary treasure-hoard. I found that he took his runic alphabet from the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*, that beo is "bear" in Old English—no surprise, then, that Beorn has affinities with Beowulf and that he shifts shapes from man to bear and back again—that "Middle Earth" comes from Old English *middengeard*, [**Smaug**] Smaug from *Beowulf*'s dragon, that Gandalf is the avatar of Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century Merlin, and that Tolkien found elvish inspiration in medieval tales like "Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, "Marie de France's "Lanval," and in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's tale.

In Middle Earth, I saw such strands converge hazily into the narrative network that lies beneath and behind this bedtime story that has kept so many virtual travelers reading into the wee hours. When I followed the strands and read what Tolkien read,

when I took a chance on Old English and Old Icelandic, I merged my network with his ever-vaster one. I soon saw how little I knew of the real world underpinning Middle Earth and realized that I could never visualize Tolkien's network. However, my disappointment was countered by the abiding curiosity about the Middle Ages that wandering through Tolkien's landscapes awakened in me. Simply put, while traversing Middle Earth I met the **[medievalist]** I have become.

[Incipit pars secunda]

When I began thinking about teaching undergraduates in 1992, I saw this analogy between face-to-face road-trip conversations and the figurative conversations we have with artists through their works. I realized, too, that while reading and looking we are moving through space. During these acts of ocular locomotion, we move our eyes move from one location, one page, to another, from one area of a painting to another, from one spot on a sculpture to another, from one map image to another. As we move from center of attention to center of attention, as Rudolf Arnheim has shown us, we embed in memory grids, road maps of our ocular experiences that connect these points of stimulation. Each time we read or study an artwork, we chart an alternate route through or over it, discovering and linking different centers of attention. Our relationships with these works deepen and mature as we lay these knowledge grids atop one another and connect them to others we, and others, have made.

Putting artworks in conversations with one another helps us grapple with unfamiliar material, which makes us uncomfortable, by establishing analogies with the familiar, which eases our cognitive discomfort. The perspectival shifts that the unfamiliar generates are central to learning and so to teaching. Finding such material to present to students at an institution like ours is pretty easy; but for those of us who work in the wayback time, it's even easier. A few quick examples from my medieval world should make the point. The most remarkable shift comes in cosmology. [**Geocentrism**] As many of you know, the Middle Ages took place in a geocentric universe, thanks largely to Claudius Ptolemy's second-century treatise on astronomy, the *Almagest*. This was comforting for members of the human species, since it meant they and their earth were at the literal center of all creation and had the Creator's attention. [**Heliocentrism**] Not until Nicolaus Copernicus pointed out this error in his early-sixteenth-century *De Revolutionibus* did humanity see the heavens and its place in them from a heliocentric perspective. This celestial decentering wasn't good for the species' ego.

Getting literally down to earth—and many of you knew this was coming—I'd like to talk about the perspectival shift that medieval images of the world cause students. [**MParis/HWY 1**] On the left, we see what looks a bit like a modern road map. This thirteenth-century itinerary map by Matthew Paris, monk, historiographer, chronicler, and cartographer at the abbey of St. Albans in the south of England, lines up major towns and cities in western Europe and connects them to the Holy Land. Since the city images are conventional, and since they and the map's layout bear no

resemblance to architectural or topographical reality, it was useless as a road map. Then again, as an aide to meditation and prompt to virtual travel it was of great use to Matthew's Benedictine bretheren. Through meditation on the road and city images, they would have projected themselves in 3-D into the map and traveled its virtual road to the Holy Land, their Ultimate Land of Story. [**Psalter Map**]

This beautiful map is from a thirteenth-century book of psalms and is likely a copy of King Henry III of England's monumental wall map, which was destroyed by fire in 1263. Like *The Hobbit*, the London Psalter Map and its contemporaries present to their viewers select sections of the story webs embedded in their creators' mindmaps. Since the seventeenth century, mapmakers have tried to re-present reality accurately—they all fail, of course, but that's another story. Their maps are meant to be practically useful and are the forebears of the images we see on Google Maps. The Psalter map requires modern viewers to recalibrate their reading habits and assumptions about how and why maps are used. [**Mercator, Peters**] (We did this in a less dramatic way when the Peters projection challenged Mercator's image of our world.) [**Psalter Map**] The Psalter map's information is arrayed around [**Jerusalem**] <u>the</u> center of attention for a medieval Christian: the *omphalos* or navel of the world. This is the nexus through which pass the virtual threads weaving together the map's images and inscriptions, the connecting point through which all stories are to be understood. **[Psalter Web]**

Each image and inscription on maps like this, each node, signifies a narrative derived from books, artworks, and other maps. Conceptualizing each of these centers of attention as URLs allows us to understand the meditative process of mapgazing.

Clicking on a node calls to mind the story it signifies, upon which a monkish viewer would meditate. Each time the viewer pondered the map's vignettes, he would weave new strands into his knowledge web and be one step farther along his Road to the Golden Eternity. Getting him to heaven, and not, say, to the next town, was the goal of such maps. By imagining the Psalter map as one node in a network of maps, we can see and tap into its source array that intertwines history, myth, science, theology, and the arts.

OK. What about literature? Well, **[Geoffrey Chaucer's]** *Canterbury Tales* exemplifies this literary artist's mindmap, his intertwingled story collection. Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Tales* are set in the geocentric world of the Psalter map, an image with which he would have been familiar. He would have seen some of the countless maps illustrating manuscript pages, and, as Clerk of the King's Works, Chaucer might have seen Heny III's monumental world map in Winchester Great Hall. **[Chaucer web]** We don't know where Chaucer went to school, but his writings show us the magically clever mind of a man who read widely and deeply in multiple languages, who had friended many a writer.

The textual world of Chaucer's pilgrims looks as unfamiliar to students as the world of the Psalter map. Still, attentive virtual pilgrims soon develop webs of connections not unlike those produced by the mapgazer's ocular journeys. Even a naïve reader recognizes some of Chaucer's sources without recourse to explanatory notes. For instance, the Knight's Tale is set in ancient Athens and Thebes and features the usual cast of bickering pagan divinities. I've never had a student without some

knowledge of either this setting or these gods. However, until they read the notes, they don't know that Chaucer imported the tale from Giovanni [**Boccaccio**], who was a major source for the Canterbury *Tales* and whom Chaucer never credits. In short, the longer we "go … on pilgrimage" with Chaucer, the wider and deeping our image of his sourceweb becomes. [**Chaucer Web 2**]

So what? Well, what I said about reading *The Hobbit* and gazing at maps holds true for the *Canterbury Tales*: when we read Chaucer, we connect to his sources, each of which, each node, is the center of its own network. Each nodal network is woven through other networks, which are woven through still others, and so on, seemingly *ad infinitum*. Visualizing and working with these meta-networks can be depressing or exhilarating, because when we get a glimpse of Chaucer's vast array, we realize how much he knew and how little of that we'll ever know. On the other hand, this exhilarates those who follow the array's links to deepen their knowledge of Chaucer, his work, and his times.

[Incipit pars tertia]

Those of you who are still awake see where I'm headed: that's right, to [**facebook**], the medium that "helps you connect and share with the people in your life." The network woven through every facebook page is analogous to the web arrays threaded through medieval world maps **[GCFacebook]** and to those we construct by reading *The Hobbit* or the *Canterbury Tales*, where each reader's idiosyncratic mash-up of Tolkien or Chaucer is the nodal center of attention. Like an old-school networker, a

facebook page's owner inhabits the central node to which are connected her friends, all of whom are centers of their own facebook networks, which in turn comprise other page networks with their centers. The page owner invites friends into the network and can see them at that level, as medieval mapmakers and authors virtually invited source-friends to their networks and held them in pre-digital memory arrays. Old- and new-school neworkers are the nodes to which information flows, and all decide which friends to include or exclude, what to edit, and what to transform.

These networkers do differ, however, and, as W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us, "every difference makes a difference." Information flows <u>from</u> Chaucer's source-friends <u>to</u> his readers, while it flows from <u>and</u> to their digital counterparts, who are interactively engaged with their friends in ways old-school artists and friends couldn't imagine. This interactivity means that the nodal ego can be reshaped constantly through network reconfigurations. **[Face, Fact]** The modern facebooker is a constant autobiographer, writing and presenting her book by making and presenting her face to a meta-network of friends. Knowing that "face" and "fact" derive from *facere*, "to make" highlights this ongoing process of self-creation.

All of this provides us with a vibrant metaphor for the undergraduate ego, which exists in a unique state of fluidity, a self with room for growth that dwarfs webspace. [**Nosce te ipsum**] Few minds fulfill their potential by staying in Sleepy Hollow or the Shire, by refusing to see from different perspectives. Their paradigms stay in place, as long as they don't venture too deeply into the messy array that is life, even facebook life. What I'd like you to see—and here's my request—is that the

structural analogies I've offered tie facebook architecture into an ages-old tradition of knowledge and self weaving. More importantly, though, I hope that image helps you visualize the web of knowledge and self your are creating and presenting through the network of which you are the center, a center tied to every other network in this room.

More particularly, I hope this visual metaphor prompts you to conceptualize and utilize your liberal arts itinerary. Doing so means picturing and meditating on the ego-centered network of experiences you've woven since 2007 and traveling the paths you've charted. Turn the geocentric concept on its head, and visualize it as an egocentric web. Set and see your major (or majors) at the center, and visualize your 32 courses as interlinked centers of attention, each with its own network of networks. If you release yourself from your disciplinary node, your major, and move out from center to substantive intertwinglement, I think you'll see how what you learned in psych courses enriches discussions of characters in a novel, how what you learned about light in physics allows you see a Vermeer painting in a new way, or a Jorie Graham poem; how reading Plato in a humanities course raised provocative questions about the Book of Genesis; how …. Well, I hope you get the idea. Give it a try, and let me know what happens, eh? [**terkla@iwu.edu**] Thanks for listening.