

“There and Back Again”: Travel and Scholarship

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A few nights ago, I was watching the televised version of Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*, the story of young Phillip Pirrip, known as Pip, who rises from a blacksmith’s apprentice to a young man of considerable fortune in early 19th century England. Pip is connected to the mysterious, decaying Satis House, where the lonely Miss Havisham resides amidst the faded ruins of her abandoned wedding feast. Although his new fortune allows him to live fashionably in London, he finds frequent occasions to travel back to the marshy lands around the Thames estuary in East Britain to see Miss Havisham and her young ward Estella. The critic Edmund Wilson wrote that Dickens’ novels “are freshened by breezes from an England of coaching and village taverns” (25). In other words, Dickens loved a journey. The author was fascinated by the relationship between changes in physical location and the alteration of perspective. While some journeys in Dickens’ novels are there purely for the excuse of fresh air, many are metaphoric. His heroes and heroines set out on foot, by carriage, by train, and--in the case of *A Christmas Carol*--by ghostly transportation. The journey presents the traveler with the opportunity to learn.

Pip’s journey from boyhood to manhood is a coming of age story, one of the archetypal story forms in Western culture. This evening, I’d like to engage you in thinking about journeying, education, and writing. “The link between writing and walking” the journey is a staple of literature, poet Adam Thorpe noted recently: “the impress of the foot [upon the path] and the pen [upon the page], the trace left behind, the notion of story as a journeying, the slow passing landscape ‘giving form to thought,’ the pacing on to a perceivable end” (Thorpe). This evening, I’ll guide you through reflections on literature, travel, and place, subjects that I hope will provide apt metaphors for your own explorations at the university. The words “university” and “universe” share a common root. A university is, after all, a “universe” in microcosm, a complete community that the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “body of masters and scholars engaged in giving and receiving instruction”. It is a place and a concept. In Classical Latin, the word *universitas* meant “the sum of things.”



The quest is one of the oldest motifs in Western culture. In its most essential form, the hero departs from home to search for knowledge; the hero has many adventures that often appear strange and

fantastic; and the hero returns home a wiser person. In his famous work on world mythology *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell called the quest a “monomyth” and, in his words, the motif is structured as follows:

The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder. Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won. The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (23)

A boon can be treasure or wisdom. The point is that the hero has been changed by the quest and emerges more knowledgeable and more cognizant of others. The quest motif structures religious texts, literary works, art, music, and scientific discovery; it pervades American culture and history in our mythology about the great open territories beyond the Mississippi River; it has challenged dreamers and explorers to search for the Grail, the Northwest Passage, the source of the Nile, and life on Mars; and, as Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz* says, “to go looking for [the] heart’s desire.”

The title of my talk comes from J. R. R. Tolkien’s novel of wandering and discovery, *The Hobbit*, published 75 years ago this week, on September 21, 1937. Returning to the gentle, agrarian community of Hobbiton after his great, but somewhat accidental, adventure with the wizard Gandalf and the company of dwarves, after encountering trolls, goblins, spiders, and the great dragon Smaug in the Misty Mountains, the humble hobbit Bilbo Baggins eventually sits down at his desk in Bag End to record his adventures. He titles his narrative *There and Back Again*: the quest in its most essential form. I would like you to remember this title as you travel through your college education. You too are on a quest that has already brought you to a new place. You are meeting people who will influence you, who will challenge you with problems to solve, who will inspire you to think in new ways. You will read things that engage your imagination and take you to new places that you can picture in your mind’s eye. You may travel even further abroad. You will bring with you a sense of home that is your center, “the world of common day.”

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Picture, for a moment, a map of your human experience. Where do you place your center, your home? You may be picturing a map of Wisconsin or a map of North America or a map of the world. But which map of the world is sufficient? Consider that the earth is a sphere, but a map is two-dimensional. All flat maps must distort the shapes of the continents in order to make them fit on the plane. And different maps center the world on different continents. Different styles of maps

are called “Projections;” among them are the Eckert and Mercator Projections, the Miller and the Aitoff. You can place North America at the center or India or Africa. Each one allows you to view the world slightly differently. Now, my point is that the world is still there, the physical landmasses do not move or change shape because of the projections of the map. However, our perceptions of what is important may change depending on what we see. There were once symbolic maps, such as the Bunting cloverleaf map from the 16th century. This map symbolizes the world, or at least the parts of the world important to the creators.

Some of the oldest maps of the world, dating from hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, show only Asia, Europe, and Africa. Originating from the area around the Greece and the Middle East, the maps depict the countries near the Aegean, Mediterranean. Cartographic theory, including the work of one of my early mentors, J. B. Harley, often focuses on early medieval Christian maps, the T and O maps of roughly the 7th century AD. T and O maps—or O and T, for orbis terrarum, and the design of a T within an O—show only a portion of the world: they orient East at the top (rather than our customary right side of the page) and place Jerusalem at the Center, as it is the center of the Christian world.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, the T and O map style became the Mappa Mundi. In the Ebstorfer Map, Jerusalem is at the center. Egypt lies along the left hand of Christ (to our right), and the Caspian Sea to our left. The Hereford Mappa Mundi from England also positioned Jerusalem at the Center, but included Great Britain on the map’s surface, as well. Mythographers make a connection between the center of the world, the naval, or omphalos, the center of life and civilization; as the individual travels farther from the omphalos, there are the great regions of the unknown, the places where the dragons and sea monsters prowl. Elephants, hippos, scorpions, and lions were often indicated on maps, but so were dog headed people, and men without heads.

And thus we can learn two things from this—first, that maps have a point of view that derives from their use to their culture; and second, that maps have the power to suggest stories about the world. In her account of living and teaching in Iceland, the writer Sarah Moss says, “Where you come from shapes what you see.” But we are also the carriers of information. As the monomyth of the quest is typically written, the hero is the blank page, waiting to learn. In a very well known essay titled “Why We Travel,” the biographer Pico Iyer reminds us that we carry knowledge with us and thus our presence as an agent in the landscape is just as important as what we absorb from others:

[W]e carry values and beliefs and news to the places we go, and in many parts of the world, we become walking video screens and living newspapers, the only channels that can take people out of the censored limits of their homelands. In closed or impoverished places, like Pagan or Lhasa or Havana, we are the eyes and ears of the people we meet, their only contact with the world outside and, very often, the closest, quite literally, they will ever come to Michael Jackson or Bill Clinton. Not the least of the challenges of travel, therefore, is learning how to import — and export — dreams with tenderness. (Iyer)

That last line—“learning how to import—and export dreams with tenderness” suggests to me one of the most foundational aspects of a liberal education: having sympathy for other peoples’ ideas.

And, of course, many quest stories carry a moral, that there is a dark side to the journey, that crossing borders can at times mean invading the space of others without understanding. In the 19th and 20th centuries, we can point to many instances of travel that were involuntary, sometimes deriving from persecution and misunderstanding, from the forced relocation of American Indians, the relocation of Japanese to camps, or the transportation of prisoners to Australia. Tales such as *Heart of Darkness* are important because they caution us that there is a morality to our quest. Are our contacts with others just? To what extent do our preconceptions bar us from treating others with sympathy? Who benefits from our boon? Who is excluded?

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I am going to return to home to close, to the self, in order to remind you that exploration does not need to happen abroad. Exploration is as much a work of the imagination and inquiry as it is a physical movement through space. There is perhaps no better writer to embody the metaphor of personal archaeology than Irish poet Seamus Heaney. His metaphor, and the title of one of his poems, was “digging.” Here are the last lines of that poem:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

Critic Dillon Johnston writes that “the poetic speaker’s direction was downward, through digging, the ‘dark drop,’ soundings, or ‘striking inward and downwards” (115):

Such probings are part of the poet’s effort to define the self, in great part by characterizing what is not-self and part of the unconscious, both of himself and of

his society. (115)

Writing about Heaney's poems in the *Harvard Magazine* in 2006, Adam Kirsch comments that a poet should be ethical. "A genuine artist almost always wants to feel answerable to something." Heaney is answerable to his history, both that of Ireland and that of his family. "[Digging] takes the form of a promise, a commitment from the poet to his father and grandfather, whose lives were spent literally digging the soil" (Kirsch). To quote Heaney:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.
 Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.

The layers of history that pervade Heaney's poems include the distant past of prehistory, secrets hidden deep within the Irish peat bogs, the history of Ireland's struggle to be free of English rule, and the poet's own personal history with language, learning, and the struggle for a poetic voice. In his Nobel Prize address, "Crediting Poetry," Heaney describes growing up "in the three rooms of a traditional thatched farmstead" in Derry, living the "kind of den-life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world." Yet, "the air around and above us was alive and signaling":

When a wind stirred in the beeches, it also stirred an aerial wire attached to the topmost branch of the chestnut tree. Down it swept, in through a hole bored in the corner of the kitchen window, right on into the innards of our wireless set where a little pandemonium of burbles and squeaks would suddenly give way to the voice of a BBC newsreader speaking out of the unexpected like a *deus ex machina*. And that voice too we could hear in our bedroom, transmitting from beyond and behind the voices of the adults in the kitchen; just as we could often hear, behind and beyond every voice, the frantic, piercing signalling of morse code. (Heaney "Crediting")

From those "short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from BBC to Radio Eireann," Heaney developed a love of the music of language. And here I return again to that metaphor that walking and writing are linked. Heaney describes his writing as "a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a

journey where each point of arrival - whether in one's poetry or one's life turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination” (Heaney “Crediting”).

Heaney’s crucible was the period known as The Troubles in Ireland, sectarian violence that pitted Irish against Irish, supporters of the Queen and crown of England and supporters of the independent republic, Protestants versus Catholics. Heaney writes of this time that he wanted a poetry, “true to the impact of external reality and . . . sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being.”

True to the world and true to the self. These are the points of the hero’s quest “into the wideness of the world beyond.” Life brings us face to face with the need to explore our own motivations and the inner reaches of our potential.

Let me, in close, cite the example of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, the real-life hero of Dave Eggers’ nonfiction novel *Zeitoun*, which is the common reading for all first-year writing courses at UW Oshkosh this year.¹

The story *Zeitoun* is set in New Orleans, after the deluge of Hurricane Katrina in 2006. It follows the adventures of one man, a Muslim painter and construction worker from Syria, who decided to remain in the city despite the mandatory evacuation order. When the waters rise, he sees a canoe, “floating above the yard, tethered to the house”:

Amid the devastation of the city, standing on the roof of his drowned home, Zeitoun felt something like inspiration. He imagined floating, alone, through the streets of his city. In a way, this was a new world, uncharted. He could be an explorer. He could see things first. (Eggers 94-5)

In the early days after the flood, Zeitoun uses his canoe to rescue people trapped in their homes and to find supplies. Eggers reports that, “He had never felt such urgency and purpose”. In the first day, he rescued five elderly residents. “There was a reason, he now knew, that he had remained in the city. He had felt compelled to stay by a power beyond his own reckoning. He was needed” (Eggers 106).

It was the responsibility to the city and its residents that kept him there, despite the potential danger to himself. I’ll tell you that things don’t go well for Abdulrahman Zeitoun, despite his initial success with rescues; however, that early commitment and enthusiasm that Eggers writes about in his book reflects the strong moral center that fosters Zeitoun’s quest into the city. Zeitoun had work to do in the flooded city of New Orleans. He was sympathetic to the plight of the elderly, the sick,

¹ Shortly around the time of this address, Abdulrahman Zeitoun was arrested for attempting to murder his ex-wife Kathy. He was acquitted of charges against him in July 2013 (see the article by Martin).

and the many animals left behind. His dreams of helping the city recover from the crisis of Hurricane Katrina led him on his quest to help others.

Interestingly, this link between work and travel is embedded in language. Originally, the word “travel” was the same word as “travail,” the word signaling “bodily or mental labour or toil” (*OED*). To travel was to labor and suffer. On this subject Iyer comments:

I like that stress on work, since never more than on the road are we shown how proportional our blessings are to the difficulty that precedes them [...] Few of us ever forget the connection between “travel” and “travail,” and I know that I travel in large part in search of hardship — both my own, which I want to feel, and others’, which I need to see. Travel in that sense guides us toward a better balance of wisdom and compassion — of seeing the world clearly, and yet feeling it truly. For seeing without feeling can obviously be uncaring; while feeling without seeing can be blind.
(Iyer)

You do not need the extraordinary adventures of Bilbo Baggins or Abdulrahman Zeitoun to find your sources of wisdom and strength. You can look “in your own backyard” like Dorothy Gale and find where you are “needed.” On your quest, be guided by a “balance of wisdom and compassion.” While “where you come from shapes what you see,” you come from here, now, this institution. Remember to explore this place--the university and the universe--clearly and with feeling.

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