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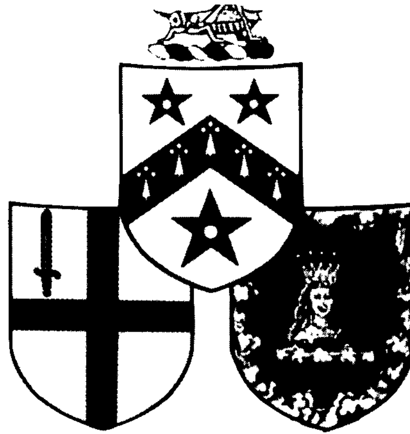

LOST IN HYPERSPACE

A Lecture by

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7 May 1998

Lost in Hyperspace: Hypertexts and Textual Value

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[Apologia: This transcript is a written version of a lecture which contained extensive demonstrations of the hypertexts in question. Hence it offers a considerable amount of detailed description, that, although I fear it may get in the way of the argument, is necessary to give a realistic idea of what these texts do and how we might respond to them.]

What is Hypertext? Well, first and foremost it is a medium that has the potential to rival the book. In effect, it has become the primary means of organising communication with the general public by way of computers. Although it started as a specialised technique, it is now generic to nearly all electronic communication that uses words. BUT, what *is* it? Quite simply, instead of the page being in a linear order that we read from start to finish, with hypertext it becomes possible to read 'vertically', moving through a text by following keys or indicators that tell you where you can go next.

These keys might be point-blank questions, such as those on bank cash machines. We are given a specific set of choices, to opt for a savings, a chequing, a deposit account, for example. We move the pointer to the correct line, and the computer takes us to the next relevant page. This is hypertext at work. And those keys to choice could be simply page number references, akin to those we find in children's books that ask: If you want the princess to go through the middle door, go to page 21; if you want her to go through the left-hand door, go to page 43; and so on. The keys can be typographical, say an italicised word, or colour co-ordinated, or numbered, or indeed they can be put before us in the form of maps.

I would like first to have a close look at the web novel by George Ryman, *253*. *253* is a version of what I call a central text hypertext – I'll come back to this. At its centre, it has a series of 253 short, page-long, stories about people sitting on the underground. There are seven carriages, with 252 seats, plus one more seat for the driver. What Ryman has done at the basic level is provide a physical description, a set of interests, and a short piece of stream of consciousness, for each person. And this is a full train. Clearly the device depends partly on the familiarity many of us have with travelling on the underground. The clothes we wear are potential indicators of so many social and cultural issues, so the physical description tends to hook the reader in with an immediate visual representation, that I personally think has more impact for being presented in words rather than as a graphic. The set of interests is rather like a capsule introduction, part cliché, part serious, part entertaining, in much the same way that we might make a brief acquaintance of someone at a party or over lunch or at a meeting. These interests though have another function. They allow the reader to follow a set of readings that are specific to the interests – I'll come to this in a moment. The third element, of the stream of consciousness that is offered for each person on the train, is a fairly standard first person account of passing thoughts.

Significantly, each of the three sections has a slightly different narratorial voice. The physical description focuses on the visual, but is also capable of making implicit social comments by describing a dress as 'New Age', rather than 'long and colourful'. The voice that tells us about interests is a curious combination of sarcasm, irony, satire and parody, all of them explicitly devices for social and political critique, even if the critique is fairly conservative. But the voice that offers the internal thoughts of the characters is quite various, and very personal. Ryman does not hesitate to exploit the first person voice, and all

that it calls up in terms of the readers' response. We tend to believe first person voices. We tend to listen to them more intimately. And the overwhelming effect of these sections is emotive. They also often end on an anticipatory note which has at least two effects: first, they tend to keep the reader reading, not because we want to find out what happens to this character, but because the way we are deprived of finding that out, generates a desire to find out *something,* so we read on to another character. At the same time, it is possible, within this hypertext novel, to add one's own ending. Indeed, Ryman encourages us to respond by writing our own 'seat-pages' for another carriage that he promises to turn into another novel.

This brings me to the larger structure of the hypertext. If it has the central set of 253 texts as a base, it allows for a number of other kinds of communication. When we first enter the *253* website, we are met with a series of topics from which we can choose. We could find out more about the site, or go and look at an explanation for why *253* came into existence, or possibly go to an advertisement. This introductory page works in a way similar to the introductions to books. We find out a little about the writer, including the fact that he has set the journey on a date that could be quite arbitrary, but which is highly significant for him, since it is the day he found out that a close friend was dying from AIDS. Now what exactly do we do with this information? is it 'true'? or is this a narratorial voice that is indicating the emotive quality of much of what follows? We also find out about the conditions of publication, and that Ryman works for a company that could produce similar hypertexts for ourselves, should we want it. Hence this might be simply a great advertising gimmick. Yet we also find out that Ryman, or his narrator, has a profoundly satiric take on advertising, since the 'advertising' page contains a spoof on those 1950s-style 'improve your memory' advertisements in newspapers, by suggesting that if you read this novel you will be able to impress your boss with your erudition and aesthetic insight....

At the foot of the introductory page, we also find out about the primary sites that we could visit apart from the train carriages themselves. One is the Journey Planner, which offers a map of connections between the different characters on the train. In a graphic that echoes the London Underground map, there are 'stations' that are called 'chocolate' or 'Gulf War syndrome', and these are elements taken from the set of interests that are given to each character. Hence the reader could read through *253* only looking at the sites interested in 'Gulf War syndrome' for example. Or we could read the entire text, but not character by character, rather topic by topic. Among the sites listed at the foot of the page we could also go directly to 'the end of the line', which, it transpires, is the train crashing. Counter to convention, Ryman does not allow anything to happen on this train, but it does come to an end, because it crashes. Furthermore, it is possible to read the internal thoughts of each character just as the crash is happening. This is rather macabre, but the reader doesn't have to read it, and it can also be considered a meditation on death. All these options are available to the reader; the response depends on how the reader chooses to contextualise herself or himself.

As the reader reads, there are certain structural devices that guide us. Each carriage comes with a location map of its own, that is a simple representation of the seats, and in each place is typed the character's name and main interest. We can simply use the mouse to click on a name, and the relevant page description comes up. We are also allowed to visit the immediate seat before and after the one we are visiting at the moment, and Ryman occasionally sets up intercommentary as one character looks at another, or becomes aware, for example of a scuffle further down the carriage (and you can immediately go and find out what those scuffling characters think they are doing). Every time we visit a seat and read the material, that seat changes colour on the carriage map, so that we can visually recognise where we have been, which seats/characters we have already visited. And this is a happily stabilising strategy that helps the reader to cope with the sheer number of potential

characters. Most important is the amount of white space on each screen, which reminds the reader that they are in a fairly familiar environment, that has just been loosened up a bit.

I have spent some time considering this hypertext, because I think it is clearly designed and that it incorporates a number of generic strategies that I'll go on to talk about in other hypertexts. But what I have not considered is the overarching effect of reading in this manner, nor the underlying persuasive rhetoric that it employs. Without further critical interchange it is difficult to assess, but I would characterise it as a text close to the kind of stance taken by Charles Dickens: densely plotted, using the novel in a radically new way – Dickens to appropriate the periodical publication that came to dominate nineteenth century literature, and Ryman to appropriate the hypertext web publication -- and potentially highly manipulative, drawing on cultural and social prejudice and cliché, with just enough of a distanced narrator to call these into question at the same time as exploiting them. The 'end of the line' is one of the more contentious elements of the text, but one which needs careful critical attention.

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What I would like to do now is look back over earlier examples of hypertext, to get a better idea of how we might find guidelines for reading these texts.

When hypertext first came into the public's imagination it seemed to promise a utopia of intertextuality and interconnection: A text that would be flexible, self-regarding and therefore critical, and would fully involve the reader. It is no surprise that Ted Nelson's early hypertext was called XANADU, the site of Samuel Coleridge's famed pleasure dome. Many people, faced with the potential in hypertext for interconnecting texts, reacted at first by constructing what I call *central text hypermedia* – this was the first impetus I had as well. I had a vision of being able to place a Jane Austen novel in the centre of a web of other information concerning the historical and social background, the language of the novel, a study of genre from the period, an analysis of that novel in the context of her other writing, the critical responses to it over a period of years, the cultural effects it was having on us today. The project envisaged only got to a planning stage, with a few student trials, since with the programs we had available, the structure simply became too unwieldy. We had tried to provide routes through to important secondary texts, but, in the absence of the WorldWideWeb and access to archive sites, we had to scan whole books in ourselves, try to provide connections to other programs that would make concordances and allow for language analysis. In those days, ten years ago, this required heavy-duty computers that simply were not available to the undergraduate students who we wanted to help. But in addition we inadvertently discovered that this kind of text is not necessarily helpful to the reader. This vast expanse of knowledge at their finger tips left them feeling overwhelmed and confused. In fact, all we had needed to do was provide references out to the library locations of associated books, or to ancillary computer programs. In our attempt to bring texts physically 'nearer' the user, we had also reckoned without the effects of habitual research: that the space around a library or the mere bodily exertion needed to get there, were all tied up into the reader's patterns of study; that they wanted the context of other people around specific stages in the research process, which the computer erased.

There are, however, working hypertexts of this encyclopaedic kind. The Brown University 'Dickens Web' is an example that has many of the elements typical of central text hypermedia. In my opinion the structure has the potential to be of considerable use, especially when one would like to direct the user's response. One unexpected outcome of the work done on the Jane Austen hypertext was the gradual realisation that we had consistently directed the student reader toward 'history'. Now I know history is important, but

I had not known how important it was for my own pedagogical style, until the hypertext revealed it to me.

A different kind of hypertext structure can be thought of as *topic-driven*, and this is the kind of hypertext that we can find on the Web. The first experience I had of helping to design this kind of text occurred when the Chemical Pathology department of the St James Hospital in Leeds asked me to think about how to organise all the little bits of paper, often useful hints stuck on the side of a filing cabinet, so that they could be helpfully accessible to any staff that might need them. What we couldn't do was disrupt the conventional method of categorising any of this information, since swift thinking in emergency situations often runs along well-worn paths. Medical staff train for years in highly structured knowledge, and so we basically had to try to find an analogue for that structure. Similarly, the Web browsers I talked about in the last lecture have to mimic some aspect of how users usually find out information. I mentioned that they often offer pages with lists of topic titles that are familiar to a discipline or to a bookshop, so that the user recognises that they can choose a topic in the way that they might physically 'go' to a section of the library or shop. The choice is usually made by using a computer 'mouse' to pass the cursor (which locates the exact point on the screen which is currently active, and is often shaped like an arrow) over the words on the page. When it changes shape (to say, a hand, rather than an arrow), we can click the mouse key to choose that word. These choices typically refine into smaller and smaller subsections, for example: they move from Humanities, to Literature, to Poetry, to Specific Poet.

A third kind of hypertext structure, that I call 'multidocument' hypertext or *labyrinthine* hypertext, is possibly the most expected within the hypertext world. These hypertexts allow for a large number of documents, written, visual and aural/oral, to be incorporated into a site. Once there, the reader can wander around the documents at will, but is usually directed along specific threads of inquiry by colour coding or typographic clues. To draw again from my own experience, I was involved in the early stages of organising the Hartlib Papers Project at Sheffield University, which collection almost necessitated this kind of approach. The Hartlib Papers consist of many shoeboxes full of letters gathered by one Samuel Hartlib between 1630 and 1662. He had set himself up as an unofficial information agency, receiving letters from scientists and philosophers all over Europe and having them copied to the intellectual community around England. And he fulfilled the reverse process for that community as well, sending copies of letters by English writers back to the continent. Among his correspondents were Milton, Descartes, Pascal, Newton, and many others.

The task of the Hartlib Papers Project was to make the papers accessible by publishing them in electronic form. Rather than simply transcribing them into computer-readable text, the editors of the project decided to help the reader move around in this mass of documents by coding the letters by topic. Furthermore, every time someone searches the Papers in electronic form, their groupings of texts can become additional topical areas. For example, say someone wants to search the letters for information on tobacco use in the mid-seventeenth century: they would typically ask the database to search in the first instance for the word 'tobacco', and its variant spellings. While they are working through these texts, they may find that some of the letters refer them hypertextually to other letters which do not contain the word tobacco, but which some other user has at one time or another recognised as being concerned with the issue. By the time this reader/searcher has finished exploring the papers, there will be a set of letters which could be grouped together under the term 'tobacco' as a topical area of help to future researchers.

However, the labyrinthine hypertext is always in danger of losing the reader – or the reader is always in danger of becoming lost in the labyrinth: 'lost in hyperspace' as it has been put. There is often no way of knowing if you have visited all the documents in the text, or of

retracing your steps – although some hypertexts, as with an early version of the Hartlib Papers, a retrospective map can be produced. The retracing of steps is often vital to understanding the genesis of an idea, its conceptual environment and limitations. When we read books and other paper documents, we can make physical, visible piles of 'where we have been', but without this facility in a hypertext, we can easily get confused. Hypertexts challenge the fundamental critical assumptions of literary value which expect a single author, a linear reading from start to finish, and the consistent medium of print.

At the same time, the overall effect of reading the Hartlib Papers electronic edition is of reading a periodical from the seventeenth century – when, of course, they did not yet exist. When we read magazines, for example, we do not read in a linear way from beginning to end; we even jump around following the 'continued on page 103' notes to the completion of an article as we would follow a hypertext link. There is no one author of a magazine, although there is an editor, and in some senses the constructors of the hypertext take over the function of a guiding editorial voice. Finally, the medium for magazines is variously print, photograph, graphic, cartoon, and so on, in much the same way as hypertexts often use multimedia, including film clips and music. The experience of reading magazines is not dissimilar to reading a labyrinthine hypertext, it's just that we have learned to read periodicals in this way over 300 years, while the hypertext is quite new, and while analogous, not exactly the same.

For the moment, to help the reader learn how to read, labyrinthine texts need to be quite short in terms of the number of 'pages' or screens they hold. I myself would put this number at no more than 150 pages, and preferably less than 100. One well-known example of a literary text structured in this way is Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*. When we enter the hypertext, there is an initial introductory screen that tells us how to move around the labyrinth, what certain symbols denote about moving one screen forward or back, or how to go back to the beginning. The second screen, which we do not necessarily even see if we choose to go directly into the literary text, gives us conventional information about the author, the versions/editions of this text, the producers: the kind of information we would normally glean from the opening pages of a book. But once into the text we can wander wherever we want. If we move the mouse in order to pass the cursor over the text, it does not change shape when it reaches an area or word that would take us through to another page. Hence we are free to click the mouse key when the cursor is over any word on the page. Many words will not take us through to any other page, so we have to choose another area or word. Once we have clicked on an 'active' word, we are taken to another page or screen, from which we can repeat the process, or go back to the earlier page and choose another word from which to move out.

The end result of the process is that we appear to move relatively randomly through the text's pages. The experience of reading is quite different from reading a conventional book. There are fewer large scale generic clues to help us with interpretation, although there should be a word of caution here, since we may have a tendency to read more generically than usual precisely because we cannot assess the larger picture and so we use our readerly conventions to 'make sense' of the text. But on the whole we are focused on the level of the paragraph and the sentence. *afternoon* even has some pages with only one, or perhaps two, words. Of course, the longer we use/read the text the more we come to understand which word groupings are active and which are not. We may even come to recognise specific threads of interest, and eventually we will acquire a memory for all the pages of the text, which reveals the writer's streams of interest and probings that underlie the superficial patina of randomness. Now, this experience is one that feels random partly because we are not used to it, and as hypertext literature increases in quantity and familiarity I have no doubt that the experience of 'randomness' will reduce. In effect, the next level of

skill to be brought to hypertext literature, will be, just as with any other poetic, how it challenges its own conventions.

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At this point I would again like to look away from the electronic text and back to the book. The movement from one page to another in a non-linear fashion is something that writers have attempted to engage with for centuries. I spoke in the previous lecture of the use of indices and tables of contents, as well as the wonderful experiments of Laurence Sterne in *Tristam Shandy*, and I have mentioned above the way the periodical, which after all, has been the most popular mass printed medium for the last three centuries, deals with this issue. In addition I would like to point out the many attempts at the 'loose leaf' book, from early twentieth century writers such as Ford Madox Ford, to more recent poets like B P Nichol. Much concrete poetry has been an attempt to loosen up the apparent fixity of the physical book, and the implications of absolutism in that popular term 'it's down there in black and white'. Nichol is an excellent example of this. His books are radical explorations of the potential for print to convey different kinds of reading experiences. He plays, as have many twentieth century poets such as E E Cummings, with typography; and he frequently incorporates graphics. Book 5 of his tragically shortened autobiography *Martyrology*, uses the concept of 'chaining', which is similar to that of 'threads' in hypertext. The reader reads down a page, but at times finds a word with a superscripted number attached to it, the number inviting us to leave the current page and to continue by reading from the section associated with that number. The final volume of the *Martyrology* even scores most of its poetry onto a musical stave.

Nichol also produced many pieces of book art, by which I mean books constructed in a physically different manner to the conventional printed and bound gatherings that we associate with the word 'book'. Loose-leaf books are on the way to this kind of experiment, but there are very many other examples of this kind of work. For instance, the work of Deb Rindl, whose 'Thin Blue Line' is a classic example of the physical extension of a pun, that draws out the associations with the phrase to an end that would be ludicrous were it not for the formally pleasing aesthetic form of the foldout book, that creates a tension between joke and medium, that in turn becomes a commentary on the phrase. Similarly, Elizabeth Lemoine and Amy Gogarty's *Listener, and other texts* offers a simple yet highly effective piece of book art, that concentrates and concentrates on the process of reading. Instead of turning pages from right to left and so on throughout, the reader has to unfold each opposing pair of pages so that it reveals its contents. The first and final opening contain the expected information about the writers, the edition, the producers and the circumstances of the text. But the central openings, each on unusually textured or designed background paper, and each with specific typography, offer different approaches to reading experiences. The physical form of the book draws the reader right into the issues of reading that are being considered.

Hypertext, like book art, currently draws attention to its own physical form, precisely because it is so new. As implied above, I suspect that much hypertext will cease to do so as its forms become familiar. There is currently a debate about the way that hypertext, along with a number of other computing structures, can create 'emergent' phenomena. In other words, because it offers more flexible ways of moving around and combining textual elements, when those elements become juxtaposed in new and different ways they may generate completely unexpected and unplanned-for events. The reason for the concern over this debate is that in the field of Artificial Intelligence such emergent phenomena might lead to, for example, robots being able to take actions that are independent of their programming. In other words, they may mimic human intelligence, and possibly even take action against humans. There is some cause for concern about this in the area of robotics, since the robot-

constructions will be able to take action and have effects in the social and political world. Hence we have to be concerned about the ethics of the situation.

However, this concept of 'emergent' phenomena and independent event does not differ in any other way from human constructions like science and technology, which also have obvious effects on the social and political, or like the arts. When a scientist or an artist works on reality, phenomena emerge all the time from specific experience and experiment. When the public engages with those pieces of work, yet more phenomena emerge, often in interpretations. What makes these activities different to robotics, is that the effects are put into action by way of human agents who do have social and cultural training in what is acceptable and what is not. Let's say a reader reads a hypertext program that is built to generate new links when that reader visits a sequence of pages; those new links subtly change the overall structure of the text for the next reader. Readers of books do not change the actual words on the page; however, many of them go away and write different texts as a result of the act of reading. This is a function of the medium, but does not change the fact that new texts result. Another way of looking at this is laid out in a recent book by Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext*, in which he argues that electronic texts are 'ergodic', they require more interaction from the reader than do books. But the only sense in which hypertexts produce emergent phenomena and books do not, is that we are more used to books and we take their activity for granted. Once we take the activity of hypertexts for granted then we will forget that they are programmed by humans and begin to think that they have taken on some new and magical quality.

This said, hypertexts can make it much easier to represent the process of reading and interpretation, and the construction of different meanings and significances. The most recent hypertext that I have worked on is concerned with making available contexts for the study of Victorian periodicals. It is structured like a central text hypertext, but with nothing in the position of the central text. Hence the reader wanders around the groupings of contextual material, following the suggested pathways if they wish, but always needing to be aware of constructing the relevant connection to the periodical material under consideration that is physically in the different medium of print. The key facility that the hypertext offers is that of the readers making their own links between different pages, so that what happens is that their topic of interest gradually acquires a web of connections, a contextual nest is woven around it. The user may choose to keep the nest individual and specific to themselves; they may choose to develop it in discussion with others; or they may choose to join a group and develop it corporately.

The main point about the hypermedia nests is that they are on a scale small enough to encourage assessment of the implications of contextual strategy or patterns of links, on social actions. Here, most immediately, those social actions are concerned with how knowledge about periodicals is being constructed. The next stage of my project will be to turn the virtual nests of context that are made by users into a graphic representation that can itself be open to aesthetic interpretation in much the same way as a drawing or painting. What I am trying to do is find a way for the reader to think about the interactivity with the hypertext as necessarily engaged, in other words a way that makes it extremely difficult to take the medium for granted. The only way that we will be able to think of these texts in terms of responsible aesthetics, is if we can work on strategies for writing and reading that engage the writer and reader into the production and recognition of shared value.

To conclude, I would like to point to the work of Susan Johanknecht, currently teaching the MA in Book Art at Camberwell College of Art. She has produced a number of texts that run hypertext programs alongside the printed book in fascinating, elusive and synergetic ways. One such combination is called *of science and desire*. The book itself is a conventionally produced short book in which she is considering what might happen if we tried to produce a

GSCE physics explanation for events such as 'touch' or 'kiss' or 'stroke'. In itself it is a fascinating approach to a philosophical suggestion that emotions and sensory experiences are the source for conceptual categories, that is being pursued in challenging ways by people such as Alison Jagger, who has famously defined 'rationality' as just an *authorised* emotion.

Johanknecht's short book is, on its own, enigmatic. The black cover is extraordinarily sensuous, and anyone who has felt it always comments on its unusual texture. But the words and pictures inside the book demand longer and more acute attention. The accompanying CD program offers slow-motion enactments of the diagrams, that the reader/listener/viewer must watch in the entirety of their unit. In other words, we cannot just click out of a page that seems uninteresting. This arrests our attention, slows down the casual speed with which we usually consume images, and prepares us for thinking about what we see on the screen. And then, the screen images become accompanied by an overlaid voice that whispers the words that we find on the pages of the book. What is interesting is that when we return to the book, we read more slowly, we retain vestigial memories of the whispering voice, and the text becomes infused with different significance.

The other Book-CD combination by Susan Johanknecht with which I would like to end this discussion, *WHO WILL BE IT?*, is even more elusive. The 'book' version of this work is a small, detailed and carefully produced box. When opened, the 'reader' finds a thin layer of gold gauze that covers a set of printed tokens, rectangular cards that either have 'scissors' or 'rock' or 'paper' on one side and a short piece of poetry or poetic commentary on the back, or have a photographic image on them. There is also one token that explains how the reader might read/play the book, that clearly relates to the game of scissors/rock/paper. The accompanying CD program displays a small rectangle, possibly around the same size as the rectangular cards, on a black background that takes up the rest of the screen. In this rectangle there is a photograph of a box within which a large pair of shears rocks back and forth. The reader uses the mouse to click on the shears, and depending on at which point in its motion it is stopped, the photograph of the shears is replaced by various photographs of paper, scissors and rocks which then engage in a graphic interaction that plays out the logic of the game while a voice-over speaks the poetic commentary. These short pieces of graphic interaction are visually exquisite, at the same time as being slightly ominous. They engage our attention partly because, as elements in the game, they challenge us to an allegorical reading: what do the elements of the visual picture indicate, especially when viewed with the poetry being voiced over them. And those pieces of poetry are not necessarily the same for any one graphic; we may revisit a particular picture and have a different commentary being voiced over. Returning to the 'book' we are alerted to the potential in the words and pictures that, yes, we would probably have unleashed in the course of a slow and careful reading, but which has become pointed and prompted by the experience of the CD.

These book-CD combinations are not immediately gratifying and satisfactory in the way that *253* is, but they also generate highly complex responses that make us think about how we are reading in radically new directions. We need to think about both the satisfactions and challenges to the genre in sorting out how these texts can be valuable. Hypertext literature is full of such developments and will continue to engage readers over the next century just as much as the novel or the sonnet has done over earlier years.

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NB: In the course of the transcript of the last lecture I referred to a George Herbert poem, The temple. This poem, of course, does not exist. I was transposing from a Puttenham figure of 'the temple' while thinking of Herbert's poetry. A good example, and the one I referred to in the lecture itself, would be 'Easter Wings'.

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