

## The Literary And/As the Digital Humanities

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### Abstract

This essay introduces a special issue on *The Literary*.

The Digital Humanities depends in large part upon the literary. English departments, the institutional homes of literary studies, have been fundamental to the development of much of the content that constitutes the emerging canon of digital humanities research. Path-blazing projects combining humanities scholarship with digital computing have often centered upon literary subjects (such as The Victorian Web, The Whitman Archive, The Nines Project, and more); this short list suggests that literature and literary figures are often the subject of important initiatives in digital humanities archiving, such as these recent ventures in born-digital literature in the United States: The Deena Larsen Collection at Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, The Michael Joyce archive at The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Stephanie Strickland Papers at Duke University. In an essay titled “What is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?” republished in the recent collection *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Matthew Kirschenbaum posits two reasons why the DH has been centered in English departments and focused on the literary: “First, after numerical input, text is the most traceable type of data for computers to manipulate,” and, second, “there is the long association between computers and composition” [Kirschenbaum 2011, 8, 9]. No wonder, then, that data analysis in the form of Humanities Computing has proven to be such a boon, not only to scholars of literature in English, but to scholars of literature and letters, writ large.<sup>[1]</sup> But in the years since the emergence of the Digital Humanities from Humanities Computing, both computing and literary studies have changed in significant ways.<sup>[2]</sup> Digital data and databases have become indisputable resources for literary study, not just for archival research but also literary interpretation, and the amount of data available in text form — think Google Books, Project Gutenberg, and UPenn’s Online Books Page — continues to grow at an astonishing rate. Big data is big news, and visualizations have attracted the attention of those usually focused on text.<sup>[3]</sup> This situation begs the questions: What constitutes literary data, and what is the role of the literary in the digital humanities? These questions inspire this special issue of the DHQ.

1

We employ “the literary” in this issue to describe content but also approaches, methods, and perspectives for examining the formal aesthetics and reflexive practices of engaging with literature and literary criticism. But “the literary” is not limited to literature, to canonical texts, or even, for that matter, to texts and words. Rather, our focus on the literary assumes the inseparability of praxis and theory, art and criticism, and, of course, the operative binary in current DH debates — making and interpreting — across linguistic, visual, and data-driven platforms. This special issue seeks to show how the digital humanities can and should be understood as including and supporting literary interpretation. The digital humanities is not just a means of acquiring and accessing data about literary genres, literary history, and the reading and writing practices enabled by them. As the essays in this issue demonstrate, the conjunction of the literary and the digital humanities produce a rich set of provocations: What kind of scholarly endeavors are possible when we think of the digital humanities as not just supplying the archives and data-sets for literary interpretation but also as promoting literary practices with an emphasis on aesthetics, on intertextuality, and writerly processes? What kind of scholarly practices and products might emerge from a decisively literary perspective and practice in the digital

2

humanities? The essays in this issue engage with these questions and demonstrate ways of answering them. Before turning to them, we first want to further contextualize our rationale behind this issue.

## I.

In “the information age,” as our period is known, data is king. Statistics and polling data overwhelm our airwaves and news outlets. “Transcendental data” is, Alan Liu claims, the central precept and ideology of our digital culture [Liu 2004]. Specifically, Liu argues, digital data is thought to transcend specific material contexts and configurations. According to this logic, data needs no contextual frame to explain or process it; in and of itself, it is and means. In the cultural context of the “discourse network 2000” (as Liu calls it, updating Friedrich Kittler’s media-based epistemology), one might infer that information, not interpretation, counts. Medium, not meaning, matters. This entire paradigm runs counter to the rationale behind literary studies, a field dedicated to the interpretation and explication of meaning. Literary critics explain and interpret how meaning is made. They analyze texts in ways that illuminate the ideologies texts contain and thereby enable critique of them. Literary critics don’t take data at its word. The tools of literary critical exegesis, such as close reading, can help re-frame the problem of “transcendental data.” But to what extent might literary studies *itself* be considered a data-driven discipline? Recent innovations in the field of literary studies provide avenues towards answering this question in meaningful ways. In particular, the work of two literary scholars influence the essays contained in this collection.

3

Franco Moretti and Jerome McGann present very different interpretative methodologies and are rarely described in the same sentence, but these two scholars thoroughly inform how authors in this issue think through the relationship between the literary and the digital humanities.<sup>[4]</sup> Moretti pursues a move “from texts to models,” from close reading individual texts to “distant reading” data sets of literary information from a given period and location. McGann leads the way towards considering the “textual condition” of print publication and thus the various data-sets (textual edition, type of paper, geographic location of production, etc.) that constitute the material and bibliographic entity known as “a text.” We might think of McGann and Moretti as occupying opposite ends of the a spatial spectrum in their relative approaches to critical reading: McGann pursues up-close analysis that focuses on the material details and particularities of an individual text while Moretti zooms out to a far distance and maps the dataset comprised of many data-points known as “texts.” Yet, when we consider these strategies as working in tandem, as the essays in this volume prompt us to do, we see that these two thinkers share a critical strategy or, more appropriately, a critical agenda. They each show how the literary matters in our increasingly data-driven, digital culture by showing how literature possesses and provides data for interpretation.

4

Even the most traditional forums for literary scholarly discourse seem to be exploring the relationship between the literary and the digital humanities. The DH has been inescapable as a subject at recent conferences of the Modern Language Association (MLA). The MLA’s central publication, *PMLA*, presented a special issue, “Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” with an introduction by Jonathan Culler that asks a series of poignant questions: “Will criticism continue to be primarily interpretive? Are there new models of interpretation? Will literary studies and hence literary criticism need to take new forms? Will the move from a print-based to an electronic-based culture have repercussions for the concept of literature and hence for criticism?” [Culler 2010, 907]. Culler’s questions and the conversation they initiated, were, in part, a continuation from a previous issue of *PMLA* (Oct. 2007) that approached these questions through a more specific focus: “Database as Genre.”<sup>[5]</sup> Central to the debate in this issue, and in the larger discourse about the relationship between the literary and the DH, is the question of what constitutes knowledge production in the DH. It has been argued that the DH is about hands-on production of digital objects (archives, tools, images, etc.). This stance positions the DH in opposition to traditional models of literary scholarship, specifically to the practices of an individual reading, thinking, and writing to produce a textual or discursive product. This definition of the DH also proposes problematic distinctions between “making” an argument and making a digital object. After all, don’t websites, archives, visualizations, and algorithms also contain arguments? (And, if they don’t, how can DH scholars argue for such work to validate promotion?). The tension between traditional literary practices of interpretation and those of the DH motivates discussion about the present and future shape of the humanities.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, the MLA recently created a new executive position that marks a signal shift in the MLA’s directive to engage with digitality and address the

5

relationship between the literary and the DH. Kathleen Fitzpatrick (former professor of Media Studies and English at Pomona College) is now the MLA's Director of Scholarly Communication, a position that is decidedly focused on digital forms of communication and/as scholarly "products" and practices. This is not an isolated decision on the part of upper-management for the governing organization of literary studies. The necessity is evidenced by the fact that in the midst of a financial crisis that resulted in a dearth of new positions in higher education, the 2012 MLA job market list included well over thirty positions for professors with a research specialty in the Digital Humanities (not including fellowships and non-tenured jobs with this emphasis). This robust number reflects the fact that Digital Humanities is one of the few areas within literary studies to see job growth in the midst of an economic downturn.

Scholars within institutions of higher education are not the only ones considering the relationship between the literary and the digital. Consider, for example, the debut (in June 24, 2011) of the *New York Times' Book Review* column entitled the "The Mechanic Muse," whose mission is to "examine different aspects of [the] techno-literary complex." Its inaugural column framed the conversation within literary critical history, focusing particularly upon the figure of Hugh Kenner, the literary critic who "stressed the close kinship of modernist writers with the technologies of their time" and whose book, *The Mechanic Muse*, gives the column its name. Stanley Fish has also used his op-ed space in *The New York Times* to chime into the discourse about the recent influx of the digital humanities to literary studies.<sup>[7]</sup> Writing about the 2012 MLA conference, Fish calls the digital humanities "that new insurgency" that "has slouched into the neighborhood threatening to upset everyone's applecart." Fish notes that more than 40 sessions at the 2012 conference were devoted to the digital humanities, and this fact leads him to claim, "The digital humanities is the name of the new dispensation and its prophets tell us that if we put our faith in it, we shall be saved" [Fish 2011]. Fish is right to acknowledge the importance of the digital humanities' presence at MLA and in the future of literary studies more generally; but, as our special issue suggests, the digital humanities should not be understood as a new insurgent group retaliating against an older order. Instead, the DH identifies an emergent perspective for seeing how traditional literary scholarship provides the means for asking and pursuing interpretative questions, both about digital culture but also about other, older, and non-digital objects of study. It is not that the digital humanities can save literary studies but that, when viewed through a digital humanities perspective, literary studies does not need saving.

6

## II.

The impetus behind this special issue is an unabashed attempt to stake a claim for the importance of the humanities in our digital culture and, more specifically, a reminder about the crucial significance of literary studies. We took as our starting point a belief that the digital humanities and literary studies are intersecting and co-dependent. By the time our submission deadline approached, we realized that we were far from alone in this conclusion. We received an outstanding number of high-quality submissions: 45 abstracts submitted by scholars from 12 countries working across diverse disciplines — from English to legal studies, communication to psychology, education to computing, art history to information science. The essays herein explore points of intersection between the literary and the digital humanities from diverse perspectives. Some update close reading; others probe the boundaries of what counts as literary data. They make use of diverse humanities computing tools — mark-up, tagging, data-mining, and other forms of coding — and show how such tools can serve interpretive ends. Through a perspective informed by the digital, these writers analyze individual literary texts as well as the digital tools involved in reading them.

7

A few of our contributors pursue ways of merging traditional literary scholarship and digital research. In her analysis of the ancient aesthetic concept of ekphrasis, Cecilia Lindhe demonstrates how digital humanities work builds upon traditional hermeneutics. She argues for the tactile nature of ekphrasis in the digital age and uses case studies from digital art and electronic literature to argue for a multi-modal understanding of this ancient term. In " 'Taken Possession of': Hawthorne's 'Celestial Railroad' in the Antebellum Religious Press " Ryan Cordell focuses his textual analysis on a single literary text, one that has assumed multiple variations and has been largely undervalued by literary criticism. Cordell excavates the publication and reprinting history of Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Railroad," and he uses widely accessible word-tracking technologies and online research tools to do so. He then practices what he calls "zoomable reading," tracing the history of the text's reprinting even as he close reads its content in ways that rearrange the well-drawn territory known as "Hawthorne." His essay demonstrates how digital humanities methods of data-mining

8

can help us draw new conclusions about older literary works. Like Cordell, Ed Finn also pursues a middle ground between distant and close reading as well as between traditional literary criticism and emergent practices made possible by digital technologies. Finn uses online book reviews and recommendations culled from sites such as Amazon and LibraryThing as research data to propose a strategy for examining the larger networks involved in canon formation and the production of literary value. “Reading Díaz through Amazon” is an experiment in tracing reader reception via the online networks that actually connect readers and their books. The technologies and perspectives employed by digital commerce, in Finn’s words and example, invite literary criticism to explore the “middle ground” where critical judgments about the literary are made.

This same middle ground — the meeting places where readers find, read, and respond to texts — is another subject of interest for the writers in this issue. Yung-Hsing Wu’s “Kindling, Disappearing, Reading” provides a thoughtful analysis of Amazon’s Kindle and the ways that the material features and marketing strategy of the reading device promote a particular idea about what reading should be. Wu considers the introduction, promotion, and evolution of the Kindle. The result is a short “biography” that is as much about the acts of “ideological suturing” that Amazon pursues as it is about the specific reading device through which these ideas are made manifest. Whitney Trettien brings traditional bibliographical scholarship to her analysis of another form of digital remediation of print texts: print-on-demand. In “A Deep History of Electronic Textuality: The Case of *English Reprints Jhon Milton Areopagitica*” (coming soon) she analyzes POD editions of Milton’s *Areopagiticæ* to demonstrate how the anomalies and peculiarities of these variant texts, far from functioning as “transcendental” pieces of data, bear the material traces of their processes of automation. She shows how these traces, visible both on the surfaces of page and screen, are significant in the ways they signify. Matthew Kirschenbaum reflects in “The .txtual Condition” on the metadata of the literary by way of considering the data that structures the literary archive. Kirschenbaum reminds us that the archive is not just its content but also its metadata. “A writer working today will not and cannot be studied in the future in the same way as writers of the past,” Kirschenbaum claims, “because the basic material evidence of their authorial activity — manuscripts and drafts, working notes, correspondence, journals — is, like all textual production, increasingly migrating to the electronic realm.” This simple fact has vast implications for how we understand archiving and access, and Kirschenbaum’s essay suggests that the DH has lead the way in exposing and explaining this new terrain.

The material fact that digital texts are, at their core, composed of code and executed via sets of instructions processed by the digital machine inspires another point of intersection in this issue: a focus on code. Close reading computer code is a central and concrete way that digital humanities and literary studies intersect. Three essays in this issue illuminate this intersection by engaging and explicating the textual contexts and poetics of programming code. Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland’s “Cut to Fit the Toolspun Course: Discussing Creative Code in Comments” takes as its premise the claim that code can be poetry and vice versa. Their essay models this argument in its form. Presented as a javascript file that implements a “poetry generator” and a meta-commentary on this creative work, the essay encodes a dialogue about the practice of performing literary criticism on digital literature, i.e., literary works written in code. The essay models a method of experimenting with the forms used to encode discourse about the literary. It pushes criticism about the digital and about the digital humanities to move beyond describing the specificities of materiality in order to engage with it in the form and function of a critical essay. In the related arena of Critical Code Studies (as our contributor Mark C. Marino calls it), Mark Sample reads the paratextual comments in the programming code of such massively popular and commercially successful games as *SimCity* and *JFK Reloaded*. He does so in order to show how these texts include algorithms for producing gameplay *and* also encode social, cultural, and even capitalist histories. Sample illuminates “the contradictions between the playable algorithms of a game and the internal and usually invisible signifying structures of code” in ways that prove what can be gleaned from reading, even close reading, code. Mark Marino reads the code of a very different type of digital object and in a very different way. Instead of a commercial game, Marino analyzes the programming code of a conceptual and political art project/protest performance, “The Transborder Immigrant Tool.” Rather than reading the paratextual or marginal comments within the code, as does Sample, Marino argues that the code is itself poetry. Marino makes this argument while pursuing the political critique of his object of study, demonstrating that the study of code is not the study of rarified abstraction but, on the contrary, the consideration of a viable platform for enacting social change.

The potential for the literary to participate in political and social change *via* digital technologies inspires other essays in this issue. In “The End of Literature: Digital Forensics and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*” Mike Frangos pursues a postcolonial critical approach to considering the relationship between literary criticism and the digital humanities. He reads Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* as an entry point for considering critical theories of reading, specifically Moretti’s strategy of distant reading and Kirschenbaum’s notion of digital forensics. Frangos argues that although such strategies might imply the “not-reading” of literary texts, they actually reinforce formalism — and thus, close reading — in a different capacity. Frangos suggests that not-reading can be understood as a way of figuring political (and postcolonial) relationships and their effect on concepts of “the literary,” “world literature,” and the archive in ways that open new avenues for critique. Jacqueline Wernimont offers a feminist perspective on the complicated claim that digital humanities tools, and digital archives in particular, enable access in ways that democratize. Taking two central digital archives devoted to women writers as her objects of analysis, *Orlando* and the *Women Writers Project*, Wernimont discusses the ways in which the production, use, and theorization of digital archives is always already social and political. Her essay offers a model for thinking through the relationship between digital technologies and feminist thought as a means of offering an expansion, not a replacement, of social theory and networks. Robin Wharton demonstrates the urgency of thinking through the relationship between the literary and digital technology in the legal sphere. Rather than rewrite a history of copyright, her essay examines how judicial assumptions are informed by the literary and how the literary has influenced legal decision-making. She pursues an understanding of the feedback loop of production and reception of legal judgments in ways that also illuminate how academic arguments about the literary affect the larger society.

Finally, Sandy Baldwin’s meditative and idiosyncratic essay, “The Idiocy of the Digital Literary (And What Does It Have to Do with Digital Humanities)?” speaks to the meaningful tension at the center of the conflictual relationship between the digital humanities and traditional hermeneutic practice. For a burgeoning yet fledgling field that depends upon constant redefinition, such reflection is urgent and also complicated. Baldwin tackles this challenge in the form and content of his playful yet serious essay.

The essays that follow explore the effects of the digital humanities on the literary and, conversely, the influence of literary studies on the digital humanities. They are all exemplary attempts to consider how literary studies matters to digital culture. Collectively, they show how the humanities are, indeed, already digital. Gathering them together in this special issue, we hope to highlight and promote consideration of the scholarly opportunities that emerge at the interstice between the literary and the DH, which is the position of the humanities in an ever-increasing digital age.

## Notes

[1] For example, see the Perseus Project at Tufts, the Cervantes Project at Texas A&M, as well as a variety of corpus linguistics projects for a sampling of projects that use computational analysis to shed light on textual data.

[2] For more on this particular angle to the history of the digital humanities, see Kirschenbaum in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* and, in the same volume, Patrik Svensson’s “Beyond the Big Tent.” Svensson’s series of articles charting the history of DH have been published in DHQ; see “Envisioning the Digital Humanities”, “From Optical Fiber to Conceptual Cyberinfrastructure”, “The Landscape of Digital Humanities”, and “Humanities Computing as Digital Humanities.”

[3] There are many examples of this trend, but consider this recent, exemplary one: Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood’s visualizations of *PMLA* content in a blog post titled “What can topic models of *PMLA* teach us about the history of literary scholarship?”

[4] In particular, see Morretti’s *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* and McGann’s *The Textual Condition*.

[5] The debate was held in “The Changing Profession” section of *PMLA* (October 2007).

[6] For recent thoughtful and lucid explorations of these issues, see *Digital\_Humanities* by Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp as well as Katherine Hayles’s “The Digital Humanities: Engaging the Issues,” Chapter 2 in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*.

[7] More recently (January 26, 2013), Steve Lohr considers the role of big data in literary analysis in the *New York Times* “Technology” section.

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