


Varieties of Digital Literary Studies: Micro, Macro, Meso

Simone Murray <simone_dot_murray_at_monash_dot_edu>, School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, Monash University  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6213-2146>

Abstract

Digital literary studies constitutes a broad church. However, the field tends to divide into, at one pole, quantitative, macro-level studies of historical literary texts and, at the other pole, close-readings of individual born-digital literary works, typically hyper-avant-garde in conception. There is, in practice, little interplay between the two groupings. This article sketches a proposed “meso space” in between the two extant levels. Drawing on methods from book history, literary sociology, cultural studies, and digital media theory, this mid-level approach examines digital technology’s role in recasting the institutions of contemporary mainstream literature: the impact of powerful new digital intermediaries; the blurring of author/reader/reviewer roles; and the continued existence of print artefacts within online environments.

If literary studies is to survive the twenty-first century, it will need to reinvigorate its ambitions and methods by forging closer links to the study of other media rather than clinging to ever more tenuous claims to exceptional status. [Felski 2008, 21]

By the first decade of the new millennium, evidence was mounting that the ‘high theory’ of ideology critique had played itself out as literary studies’ governing paradigm [Eagleton 2003] [Sedgwick 2003] [Latour 2004] [McDonald 2006] [Felski 2008] . ^[1] The energy and sense of liberation that had propelled successive waves of structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, new-historicist, and queer theory in the academy seemed to have reached a point of diminishing returns. Once revolutionary modes of analysis had ossified into rote posturing, with talk of radical revisioning oddly transmuted into received wisdom. This sense of a discipline in stasis was not only intellectual but also institutional — existential even. Universities’ political paymasters and research-funding bodies have increasingly insisted that disciplines demonstrate their vocational utility and real-world ‘impact’. Undergraduates, voting with their feet, indirectly registered the same message via declining enrolments, while graduate students — surveying a parlous academic job market — opted for other, presumably safer, careers [Gitelman 2020, 378–79] [Zhang 2022].^[2] This already precarious disciplinary status quo was then massively destabilized by the COVID-19 pandemic’s shock to higher-education systems worldwide as revenue from international students collapsed in the face of travel bans and local lockdowns. In a discipline long prone to gloomy prognostications about its future, English scholars of even a more optimistic cast had to admit, by 2020, that the doomsayers really did have a point (*Endgame*, 2020).

Against this post-millennial background, engagement with the digital world seemed a logical pivot for the humanities, given information and communication technologies’ wholesale transformation of all aspects of contemporary western life since mainstreaming of the internet in the early 1990s. For literary studies in particular though, this turn to the digital came freighted with heavy baggage. Mid-1990s ‘death of the book’ discourse had pitted an all-conquering ‘electronic literature’ (eLit) against an ostensibly obsolete print medium, and had left many literary humanists with an active distaste

for digital triumphalism [Kirschenbaum and Werner 2014, 406–7]. Strategic errors made by digital boosters in positing the digital as implacable rival and inevitable successor to print had served to polarize debate and made it harder to adopt middle-ground positions. As it transpired, eBooks and the printed codex negotiated an uneasy marketplace *modus vivendi*, but traditional literary scholars and former eLit enthusiasts were slower to do likewise. The rise of Digital Humanities (DH) discourse from around 2005 threatened a repeat of 1990s hostilities, this time with adherents of quantitative ‘distant reading’ at loggerheads with advocates of traditional hermeneutic close reading, who accused their adversaries of not reading at all [Eve 2019, 3–4] [Gitelman 2020, 372].

I have no intention here of buying into such stale, polarized, and unproductive debates. Indeed, superseding them is the starting point for the present discussion. In spite of the self-presentation of both eLit advocates and DH-ers as radical agents of change, their reconfigurations of the literary studies discipline have, if anything, not gone far enough. Both approaches remain essentially text-centric, differing principally on whether a niche group of very recent texts is painstakingly interpreted, or a large corpus of often obscure historical texts is digitally skimmed. Broader questions of how digital technologies might reconfigure academe’s now century-old literary studies project by looking beyond the text to an encompassing socio-economic reality remain largely unasked.

At the outset of the present discussion, some definitional clarification seems in order. In talking about ‘digital literary studies’ I denote principally literary works, deploying whatever medium, created since the late decades of the twentieth century. These have been produced, circulated, and consumed in the context of a digital literary sphere (however much the parameters of that sphere have expanded and its agents have multiplied over subsequent decades). But, by extension, much of the following argument about practising a ‘literary media studies’ is also relevant to analyzing literature produced in earlier, pre-digital eras, with due allowance being made for the varying medial environments and socio-economic contexts of specific periods and geographical locations. It is a broadly sociological, media-aware disposition I am advocating, not one with strict chronological cut-off points.

Currently, our intellectual schemas for making sense of the digital paradigm’s epochal impact on literary culture remain inadequate. Digital literary studies continues to miss the larger significance of digital technologies for contemporary literary culture because it takes either too micro or too macro a perspective. On one hand, studies of eLit have existed since the late 1980s, and focus on close-reading individual born-digital texts, usually of an avant-garde nature with at best coterie audiences. On the other hand, the last decade and a half has seen the efflorescence of DH approaches which machine-read extensive historical literary corpora to gauge large-scale statistical trends in genre, authorship, and nationality. However much their chronological frame differs, the guiding methodology remains at some level hermeneutic. Thus, DH scholar Alan Liu may be correct in his claim that “the contrast between the practices of close reading and the digital humanities is so stark that it is changing the very nature of the ground being fought over: the text” [Liu 2012, 494]. Yet, text-centrism of either stripe still mostly disregards the material world beyond the text itself: the agents of production, circulation, and consumption; the commercial context of the book trade; and the legal, political, and cultural policy frameworks that impinge upon or facilitate the flow of texts.^[3] While often exemplary research about this intermediate space does exist (see below), it is currently scant and scattered, too often existing as a corrective to the main currents of eLit or DH research rather than, as should be the case, constituting the starting point for an overarching reorientation of the literature-media interface around sociological concerns. We are thus left, in an era of rapid book-world changes, with a troublingly partial understanding of how digital technologies are transforming the very *institutionality* of contemporary, mainstream literature.

To resolve this impasse, we urgently require what John Frow, discussing the future of literary sociology, terms a ‘mid-level concept’ (2013, [2010]) — namely, an analytical framework straddling, on one hand, innumerable individual literary texts and, on the other, the unwieldy abstraction that is ‘literature’ [Frow 2013, 227]. Literary studies has attempted, over its roughly century-long institutional history, to fill this ‘mid-level’ space with various organizing schema: periodization; genre categories; and diachronic accounts of national literatures [Frow 2013, 221, 227]. But these too remain near-exclusively text-centric. The *why* and *how* of literature’s arrival on the scholar’s desk for painstaking close-reading are factored out of analysis, and the text’s relationship to an abstractly configured form of identity politics has, in recent decades, dominated proceedings. The still too-often hazy technological and institutional apparatus that moves a given book into the scholarly ambit and makes it available for close-reading I here dub the ‘meso’ space.

I borrow this terminology from the field of economics where scholars since the 1980s have also proposed a mid-level category to bridge that discipline's traditional bifurcation into microeconomic and macroeconomic frames [Dopfer et al. 2004]. The aim of such renegade economists is to capture those political-economic forces governing the space between individual economic actors and the broader structures within which they operate. Largely in parallel, a conceptually cognate 'new institutionalism' has, since the early 1990s, also emerged within the discipline of sociology [Powell and DiMaggio 1991] [Thornton 2012]. It has a similar interest in 'mid-level' or 'meso' intermediaries that shape cultural phenomenon (for example, commercial organizations, public-sector entities, regulatory frameworks, social networks) and which exhibit a strong degree of self-perpetuating autonomy. Such an institutional focus helps integrate the abstract totalities of 'society' or 'the economy' at one extreme and the empirical specificity of atomized individual choices at the other.^[4] The approach also evinces a refreshing self-consciousness that the level of reference chosen for analysis profoundly influences the research questions formulated, the types of evidence sought, and the resulting conclusions [Thornton 2012, 14].

7

By analogy, in the literary studies context, the various institutions of authorship, publishing, retailing, reviewing, and readership provide compelling 'mid-level' analytical frames for compiling thick descriptions of precisely *how* digital media are fundamentally reconceptualizing literary culture.^[5] The attractive relativism of the meso approach avoids, in this context, both the sweeping technological determinism of medium theory and the futile insularity of individual case-studies unmoored to larger theoretical schema. Vitally, the new institutionalism illuminates that literary entities are not mere externalities of an aesthetically autonomous literary culture; they are constitutive of it in that they profoundly influence what achieves recognition as 'literature'. Literary studies' long preoccupation with the linguistic minutiae of the textual artefact thus needs supplementing with sociological awareness of the *material* world beyond the text (in the word's dual technological and economic senses), without pitting the two perspectives against each other or subordinating one to serve as mere illustration of the other's explanatory paradigms. The way out of literary studies' currently troubled, defensive pass as outlined at this article's opening is thus multi-step: firstly, to reconceive the discipline in cultural-sociological terms. Secondly, to investigate how the current wave of accelerating digitization is changing that sociological context. And thirdly – as I sketch in this article's final section – to use the opportunity provided by these contextual changes to rethink literary studies in far-reaching ways: its objects of study; institutional settings; analytic methods; potential publics; and pedagogical practices.

8

Digital literary studies: The current state of play

Before diving into such subtopics and appropriate methodologies for exploring the digital literary studies meso space, it is instructive first to provide a fuller picture of the current state of play regarding both eLit and DH. Specifically, it is enlightening to examine how these fields may be currently shifting or even, tentatively, converging. DH has emerged as a prime area of research renewal and public interest in the humanities in the wake of high theory [Burdick et al. 2012] [Gold 2012] [Terras 2013] [Jones 2014] [Gold and Klein 2016] [Gold and Klein 2019] [Crompton 2016] [Eve 2022]. The field builds upon mid-twentieth-century work in stand-alone humanities computing, but reorients it for the networked and Web 2.0 environments comprising the core of contemporary media and communications. It makes explicit the humanities' continuing relevance for twenty-first-century culture and society, rejecting inherited notions of a qualitatively-oriented humanities as epistemologically opposed to quantitative computing technologies [Liu 2012, 502]. Refreshingly, DH also moves humanistic methods away from critique as the end-point of analysis towards the building of research tools usable by others, including the general public [Jones 2014, 10] [Battershill and Ross 2022, 172–73].

9

Literary studies has long been at the forefront of DH initiatives, with digital literary studies representing one of its most fertile subfields [Siemens 2007] [Hammond 2016]. Partly this is due to literary studies' long history with computing technologies dating back to the 1960s mainframe era (bibliographic textual editing, concordances, stylometry, and author attribution). Partly also it is because literary studies is among the most textual and word-based of humanities disciplines and therefore a natural match for logocentric computing technologies [Drucker 2009] [Kirschenbaum 2012]. While digital literary studies constitutes a broad church, the dominant strand involves data-mining and visualizing of vast corpora of digitized print works from, predominantly, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are used to highlight trends by author, date, nationality, genre, or keyword [Moretti 2005] [Moretti 2013] [Underwood 2013]

10

[Underwood 2019] [Jockers 2013] [Bode 2014] [Jones 2014].

Largely in parallel with these developments, since the late 1980s information and communication technologies have disturbed literary studies' default assumptions by demonstrating that the printed codex is not literature's sole and inevitable platform. Scholars of eLit have investigated how network structures such as hypertext facilitate multilinear narratives, reconfiguring relationships between author, text, and reader, as well as reconceptualizing texts as mutable and evolving — 'processural' in Astrid Ensslin's phrasing [Ensslin 2007, 34] [Bolter 2001] [Hayles 2002] [Hayles 2008] [Landow 2006] [Tabbi 2017] [Rettberg 2018]. Conversely, such research has rendered newly visible the linear logic and particular affordances of the *print* medium through a salutary process of defamiliarization [Hayles 2002] [Hayles 2013] [Emerson 2014].

11

While both digital creative works and computer-powered research tools have made their presence felt in contemporary literary studies, the two fields have tended to operate in parallel. As Martin Paul Eve differentiates, "to read *digital* or electronic literature closely...is not the same as close reading literature, *digitally*" [Eve 2019, 10]. Scholars of born-digital works largely congregate under the banner of the international Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) and produce belletristic, frequently fine arts-inflected, close-readings of experimental digital works, almost all of which have readerships largely confined to the community of their creation. Whereas scholars deploying digital tools to perform quantitative analyses of large historical corpora tend to congregate variously at Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations-sponsored meets or the US-dominated Modern Language Association's Digital Humanities special interest group, and to publish in journals such as *Cultural Analytics*.^[6] Leading terrestrial sites of this second, principally quantitative arm of digital literary studies research — such as the Stanford Literary Lab (formerly led by Franco Moretti) and McGill University's .txtLAB (directed by Andrew Piper) — are mostly North American-based and, for reasons of US copyright, confine their research to pre-twentieth-century literary history [Jockers 2013] [Da 2019] [Eve 2022]. This leaves DH scholars with surprisingly little to say about the structures through which *contemporary* creative literary works circulate. While the ELO is more international in its membership, with significant nodes in Scandinavia as well as North America, it has the opposite problem: its preferred procedure of close-reading highly contemporary works is plagued by hardware and software obsolescence. This results in a discipline forever trying to shore up its scholarly memory [Montfort 2004]. These twin challenges leave the impact of the digital realm on *contemporary, mainstream* literary cultures chronically under-examined.^[7]

12

While this sketch of the digital literary research landscape is accurate in its generalities, there are promising recent signs that both eLit and DH scholars are starting to acknowledge the missing 'meso' level. Richard Jean So's *Redlining Culture* (2021) undertakes quantitatively-informed analysis of how 'minority authors' have been consistently marginalized in the historical workings of the 'U.S. literary field' [So 2021, 2,3]. But he nevertheless introduces his book with an overview of accelerating conglomeration among US trade publishers over the second half of the twentieth century. It is a welcome DH avowal that "the economics of American literature — production, reception, and recognition" emphatically matter [So 2021, 5, 7–11]. By looking outside of the text and observing how digitization transformed the entire book production and retailing industries via word-processing software and point-of-sale stock-monitoring technologies, So makes a vital connection between the material and institutional contexts in which literature was produced and the digital programs with which we might parse it. The digital ceases to be a neutral tool which we *apply* to texts *ex post facto*, but a cultural force with which book industry participants were wrestling and which authors were sometimes explicitly addressing in their work [Kirschenbaum 2016].

13

A further green shoot appearing in the previously barren meso space is the recent explicit rebadging of eLit scholarship as a form of DH. There are precedents for such a maneuver, such as Scott Rettberg's "Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities" chapter for Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth's discipline-defining anthology *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (2016). Nevertheless, in practice, most ELO adherents have tended to hold themselves somewhat aloof from post-millennial DH developments, pointedly insisting that their own academic project dates from at least the 1980s. But digital literary studies modes of affiliation are perceptibly now in flux. Dene Grigar, former President of the ELO, co-edited the volume *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices* (2021) which proclaims unambiguously that "electronic literature *is* digital humanities" [Grigar 2021, 3]. Her

14

echo of the title of Rettberg's article — "one of the inspirations for this book" — underlines eLit's belated surrender to the rhetorical and institutional pull of the more modish label [Grigar 2021, 3]. Taken together, works by the likes of So, Rettberg, and Grigar suggest that previously operative binaries between eLit and DH (contemporary versus historical; qualitative versus quantitative; creative versus analytical) are losing their valency. Their synthesis prompts the enticing question of how much the contours of the digital literary landscape might shift further still.

Conspicuous by their absence: Technological, institutional, economic, and social contexts

The lingering lacuna in current conceptualizations of digital literary studies becomes especially apparent when we zoom out to consider the technological, institutional, economic, and social changes underway since the early 1990s adoption of the Internet across western societies. Indisputably, the landscape of contemporary mainstream literature has been transformed. The gatekeeping authority of trade publishers has been partially usurped by self-publishing and crowd-funded publishing initiatives via which anyone may anoint themselves an author. Circulation of literary works and venues for book discussion have been similarly transformed by the rise of born-digital periodicals, internet retailing, social-media book promotion, and online writers' festivals. Thirdly, consumption of literary culture has been revolutionized by traditionally passive, silent, and anonymous readers using interactive technologies to network in online book clubs and to recast themselves as amateur literary critics via online book review and ratings platforms. Each wave of social-media has been co-opted in turn by a subsector of bookish users to facilitate digital book talk, whether via litblogs, bookTube, bookstagram or, most recently, bookTok. Reader becomes reviewer and, more problematically, de facto publicist and content producer. This last point underlines digital technology's greatest disruption of codex-based literary culture: how the previously distinct roles of producer, disseminator, and consumer have become impossibly blurred. As various functions in book historian Robert Darnton's famous 'Communications Circuit' are elided, single agents take on multiple, combined roles [Murray 2013].

These changes have not, of course, passed un-noticed by academe. Scholars drawn from book history and media archaeology (Matthew Kirschenbaum, Lisa Gitelman, Martin Paul Eve), communication and cultural studies (Ted Striphas) and cultural sociology (J. B. Thompson, Laura J. Miller) have analyzed the significance of the contemporary book world's pervasive digitization for their respective disciplines. While several of these scholars have backgrounds in literary studies, they nevertheless keep in view the material specificity of the book object, so often rendered a transparent and passive substrate by traditional formalist close-reading approaches. Because of this extra-textual awareness, their works explore the effect of digitization on book culture without the ominous 1990s sense of the entire book format being under threat. For those scholars in the group trained in sociology or communication on the other hand, the pre-eminence of the book as a media format was never an article of faith. Thus, the rise of other media formats signals not ignominious demotion of the book but merely the reorganization of an always-evolving informational ecosystem. The book – let alone the text — is never considered self-sufficient; it is, rather, the locus at which multiple commercial, regulatory, social, and cultural forces converge. To understand the book in the current era is inevitably to be redirected outwards to these larger contexts. It is this invaluable sociological perspective that such scholars bring to contemporary understandings of the book.

Work undertaken to date in this meso zone should be applauded for its willingness to examine digital technologies' impact on the contemporary literary world. It also, at points, shades into the more DH arm of digital literary studies (for example in So's recent book or the work of Martin Paul Eve). But here again the conception of the digital's role appears to be primarily quantitative: harnessing the enumerative power and analytical scale of digital data to ask new questions about how Bourdieu's literary field functions. Proponents of more textually-oriented, quantitative 'cultural analytics' approaches, such as Piper, are careful to pre-empt objections from those schooled in literary critique by stating that distant reading is not (*pace* Moretti) a substitute for close-reading, but rather a filtering tool and complement for detailed textual analysis [Piper 2015, 67]. In the view of such self-styled academic bridge-builders, the two methods represent 'commensurable' approaches [Long and So 2016, 237] [Eve 2019, 3–4]. Yet such work has been less ready to ask *qualitative* questions of the digital paradigm itself, specifically, how the rise of digitization affects the inter-relationship of traditional agents in the literary field. As a result, the digital tends to feature as transcendent — a neutral,

15

16

17

external tool invoked to aid analysis but not itself complicit in the economic or sociological framing of the object of study. Where the textual corpus chosen is largely historical, this factoring out of the digital's agentic role may be defensible, though it occurs also in contemporary-focused work. For example, Laura B. McGrath, in a study of the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century book world, has illuminatingly deployed quantitative DH methods to reveal how US publishers overwhelmingly use 'comparable title' data from white authors when estimating likely sales for manuscripts under consideration, to the detriment of writers of color [McGrath 2019]. Yet, her analysis is more an *ex-post-facto* study of the top 500 titles used for 'comping' by the current book industry than of the impact of rapid and ongoing datafication on the industry itself. The problem, she implies, lies more with the composition of the specific *corpus* of comp titles chosen than with the act of 'data-driven acquisitions' *per se* [McGrath 2019]. Accordingly, the digital still functions primarily as a neutral aid for scholarly examination, rather than featuring as itself the object of critical study.

Despite much evidence of vibrancy in the digital literary studies space, mainstream literary studies has been predominantly silent about the impact of the digital within the contemporary book world.^[8] US scholar Jim Collins (a Notre Dame professor with, significantly, joint appointments in Film and Television as well as English) memorably pinpoints this omission. In a 2013 interview, Collins spoke of his frustration at not being about to pose the kinds of production- and consumption-oriented questions in his English classes that he habitually would in his media studies courses:

...you should look beyond the classroom if you are talking about contemporary fiction. The last couple of times I did the postmodern fiction class...I realized that Amazon and adaptations and Oprah Winfrey – they were like the pink elephant in the room, that everybody knew was there, but nobody really knew how to talk about, and so *we just stayed with the text* and talked about literary style and individual genius and postmodern historiography and things like that. So it was that sense of dissatisfaction. What are we missing by not talking how literary fiction circulated, how it could become part of day-to-day life, for everyone, not just for the literary critics and my students? It seemed to me that if we wanted to really understand contemporary reading cultures, we had to do that as well. [De Bruyn 2013, 198, emphasis added]

To remedy this anomalous situation, Collins proposed what he dubs "literary cultural studies" [De Bruyn 2013, 197]. This, like cultural studies, would take issues of technological, institutional, economic, and social context seriously. Text and context would be held in dynamic relationship, posited as mutually constitutive, without superimposing the epistemological claims of one discipline on the other [Thumala 2021, 103]. It can thereby avoid the "sociological absolutism" that has bedeviled many previous parleys between the literary studies and sociology disciplines, in which literature is allotted the thankless task of 'proving' sociological precepts [Frow 2013, 219] [English 2010, xii–xiii]. Discernible behind Collins's remarks is du Gay et al.'s famous 'Circuit of Culture' model from their 1997 book about the Sony Walkman. In this widely-influential cultural studies diagram, the textual representation of the object remains important for elucidating meaning, but it is contextualized against a much broader background incorporating producer motives, audience behaviors, modes of social-identity facilitation, and forms of regulation. The effect is a 360-degree perspective on the life of a cultural object.

The phrase 'literary cultural studies' may appear, at first glance, an oxymoron. Cultural studies, in its British and Australian strains, grew of course out of a revolt *against* the exclusive study of a highly limited historical canon of English literature. To the extent that cultural studies has *ever* been interested in analyzing books, it is usually only those works so debased and disparaged in traditional literary studies as to have been rendered symbolically 'unclean': pulps; romances; horror; westerns; comics etc. What is radical and refreshing about Collins's brand of 'literary cultural studies' is that it brings the sociological gaze of cultural studies to analyze afresh literary studies' original object of study: literature. More than this, Collins and his ilk eschew the knee-jerk relativism of cultural studies orthodoxy to parse the concept of 'literariness' itself. Here considerations of aesthetic value are not ruled out of bounds at the outset but are instead reconfigured as sociologically brokered: by analyzing, say, the disputes of amateur lit-bloggers, paid book reviewers, and literary academics around a single work we are watching aesthetic evaluation being hammered out in real time by agents wielding differing degrees of economic, institutional, and social capital.

The direct upshot of Collins's frustration with the prevailing bifurcation of literary and media studies paradigms was his path-breaking monograph *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (2010). But the broader project of building a 'literary cultural studies' or — in my preferred formulation — 'literary media studies' for the digital remains unrealized. This is the 'meso' level of digital literary studies alluded to in my title. A meso-level digital literary studies must borrow from cultural sociology's new institutionalist mindset to account for the influence of contemporary technological, institutional, economic, legal, and social factors which intervene between individual texts and the totalizing abstraction of 'Literature'. It should take the coexistence and interpenetration of print and digital domains as its intellectual ground and closely analyze the complex flows of content between them. Doing so gives us tools to understand why the 'literary' not only continues to exist in a digitally-dominated mediascape (contrary to 1990s predictions), but how users deploy digital media to cultivate specifically *literary* modes of self-presentation: the virtual Goodreads 'bookshelf'; the artfully curated bookstagram feed; the dark-academia-inflected BookTok persona.

Domains of Disciplinarity: Constructing 'Eng. Lit.'

How did we arrive at the point that sociological understandings lie outside mainstream literary studies' order of business? The various institutional, epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical choices made from the late decades of the nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth century in establishing English literature as an academic specialism have cast long shadows. More particularly, for present purposes, they have inhibited the current discipline's conceptual repertoire when attempting to analyze contemporary literary works. Before proposing, in this article's final section, how literary studies might productively open itself up to contemporary digital developments, it is first necessary to trace here key contours of the original 'Eng. Lit.' project. My purpose in doing so is to examine both the legacy of those choices and to discern alternative paths not (yet) taken. Decisions made while inventing the new discipline were phenomenally successful in ensuring literary studies' dominance within humanities divisions during the mid to late twentieth century [Hunter 1988] [Graff 2007] [English 2012] [Doyle 2014]. But, by the twenty-first century, many of these in-built assumptions have grown more hobbling than enabling, and demand re-examining to assess their continued utility.

Object of study

Literary studies' first hurdle was that analyzing English literature appeared too irreducibly subjective a practice to qualify as a legitimate academic subject. Not even requiring mastery of a foreign (or, even better, dead) language, the would-be discipline lacked both intellectual rigor and an established canon, threatening to evaporate into dilettantish impressionism and a disturbingly feminine enthusing over poetry [Eagleton 1983] [Guillory 2002] [Atherton 2005] [Baldick 2006] [Banfield 2006] [Olsen 2016]. One strategic counter to these perceived weaknesses was to compile a catalogue of 'great works', thereby importing into the fledgling discipline theological traditions of scriptural collation, evaluative winnowing, and hermeneutic scrutiny. Early-twentieth-century formalist celebration of internal complexity and interpretive paradox by critics such as T.S. Eliot led to a preference for condensed literary forms, an intellectual debt repaid by the New Criticism's championing of Modernist poetry [Eliot 2009] [Baldick 2006]. Literary works were routinely disassociated from their debasingly 'Philistine' material production context in the mass market so as to strengthen claims to high art [Arnold 1865, 16–18]. 'Close reading' protocols thus produced a stripped-down textual artefact of the words on the page, variously expressed by proponents as "the concrete experiences which are poems" or, still more tersely, "the text itself" [Richards 2017, 71] [Wimsatt 1946, 481]. New Criticism thus dismissed at a sweep authorial biography, institutional carriage, and socio-cultural reception as so much superfluous encrustation [Hilliard 2012]. Similarly, a text's historical origins were systematically devalued to bolster claims to such works' timeless relevance [Eagleton 1983] [Doyle 2014]. Literary professors unremittently discouraged students' own creative efforts (at least until the burgeoning of creative writing programs in certain, previously marginal, institutions from the mid twentieth century); it was deemed presumptuous for students even to aspire to the hallowed category of Author. Thus the complex processes by which literary works come to be were effectively obscured and mystified. Longstanding critical silence about the formative role played by Modernist literary institutions in the invention of 'Eng. Lit.', reinforced by an overwhelming preoccupation with the literary past, served to quarantine the new academic construct from the very sociological forces that brought it into being.

Institutional setting

Where a discipline sits within universities has deep significance for the ontologies and epistemologies it internalizes. The structure of the late-nineteenth-century university in which Eng. Lit. was established had its roots in medieval curricula dominated by Classics, philosophy, and history. This disciplinary triumvirate had only belatedly and grudgingly expanded to incorporate contemporary foreign languages [Graff 2007] [English 2012] [Doyle 2014]. Early literary studies' mode of isolating valued texts from their historical context seems borrowed from Classics and was a conscious attempt to free literature from its subordinate status as an offshoot of history and linguistics in the earlier academic formulation of philology [Jefferson 1986] [Graff 2007] [Liu 2012] [Underwood 2013]. Significantly, literary studies never put down institutional roots in the social sciences – coalescing during this same period – and hence missed those disciplines' characteristic view of cultural phenomena as sociologically produced [Lepenies 1988]. This predisposed Eng. Lit. towards a form of Romanticist creator-worship — disavowed in New Critical theory but avidly reinforced in practice. Individual genius was responsible for bringing great works into being, with the enabling contributions of literary intermediaries (publishers, editors, reviewers, booksellers etc.) reduced to, at best, attendant midwives or, at worst, agents of textual 'corruption'. The upshot was a radically dematerialized and decontextualized understanding of literary works that was only partially corrected by the waves of ideology critique that transformed literary studies from the 1960s onwards. While such revisionist approaches reconfigured literature as a locus of social power struggles, they overwhelmingly understood cultural politics as conducted at the level of textual representation and interpretation, rarely via material processes of production, circulation, or consumption.

24

Analytic mode

One especially deleterious legacy of English literature's institutionalization has been its inability to account for readerly affect. This analytic blind-spot puts it at a grave disadvantage in attempting to explain a digital literary sphere everywhere powered by readers' emotional investment in books. Academic literary studies' prime goal of reducing (or appearing to reduce) subjectivism in interpreting literary works was designed to create the appearance of reproducibly 'scientific' knowledge. Hence the preference for literary techniques (poetic forms, figures of speech, narrative point of view etc.) that could be taught as transferrable between individual works. The first causality of such a drive for systematism and scientific replicability was readerly subjectivism ("the affective fallacy"), in that an idealized Reader who served to model preferred interpretations was substituted for actual, individual readers. The second casualty was authorial subjectivism ("the intentional fallacy"), as examining a literary creator's motivation was likewise declared intellectually out of bounds [Wimsatt 1946]. This strategy could largely hold sway in an era where authors had limited technological ability to publicly disseminate their artistic intentions or readers their profusely varied interpretations of texts (cf. [Radway 1991]). But it is near impossible to maintain when authors commonly use social media channels to commune directly with their readerships and highly affective readerly responses permeate the internet [Murray 2018] [Pierce 2020]. In fact, the scale and intensity of readers' emotional responses to books constitute the very currency of online book culture.

25

Literary studies' publics

In the domains of object of study, institutional setting, and analytic mode, literary studies was attempting to invent a discipline in something of a vacuum. Yet when it came to the issue of potential audiences for the new discipline, Eng. Lit's proponents faced the opposite problem: vernacular literary works already had *too much* of a public, namely, the general readership for books and periodicals. Popular readerships tended to view with suspicion these newly self-appointed academic 'experts'. Worse, vernacular print cultures had long incubated their own arbiters of value in the form of literary reviewers, acquisition editors, and publishers' readers — all of whom were equally chary of the *arriviste* so-called 'Vigilant School' [Gibson 2021] [Graff 2007]. As a defense, literary studies designed itself as a consciously antiquarian project — unwilling to award contemporary works the laurels of greatness until they had been "confirmed by time" [Leavis 1960, 21]. The discipline's immediate publics, as a direct consequence, became claustrophobically insular: fellow academic literary critics; their graduate students; and the school students their undergraduates progressed to teach in their subsequent careers [Eagleton 1983] [Hunter 1988] [Hilliard 2012]. An assiduously maintained town-and-gown distinction arose between literary academe and the contemporary book world, at least in so far as its intellectual

26

engine-room was concerned. Credentialed graduates might disseminate New Critical principles and methods among secondary and continuing-education students, or even via textbook publishing, but the line of influence ran only one way.

This situation was, perhaps surprisingly, compounded by the linguistic turn in literary criticism from the 1960s onwards. While proponents of ideology critique championed intellectual movements such as Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, and queer theory as injecting a necessary socio-political relevance into the study of literature, the abstruse vocabulary in which their ideas were couched was rarely accessible to readers beyond the institution's walls. So long as literary studies remained relatively confident of its academic position, buoyed by high enrolments against a background of limited alternative humanities offerings, such disengagement from wider literary publics could be perpetuated. But with government funding and rhetorical support for the humanities now under threat across the western world, such habitual insularity appears suicidally short-sighted [Graff 2007] [Fitzpatrick 2011] [Liu 2012]. A literary studies that cannot demonstrate its relevance to contemporary publics grown accustomed to the rapid interactivity of digital environments and chary of being told what to think by self-appointed critics cannot expect to continue for long.

27

Professing the discipline of literature

Any discipline is as much a formative process as it is a given entity; it reveals itself through the habits it inculcates in students, thus naturalizing the choices of an earlier generation as simply 'the way things are done'. As Elaine Showalter neatly sums up this process of academic reproduction: we typically "do[] unto others as was done unto us" [Showalter 2003, 4]. In its earliest decades, literary studies pedagogy was dominated by 'practical criticism': close-reading seminar exercises; the essay (often read aloud to a tutor); and summative exams [Richards 2017]. Given the *belles-lettres* origins of the discipline, this choice of the essay as the characteristic assessment form makes some sense, obliging students to hone their writing skills by using "the best that has been thought and known in the world" as rhetorical models [Arnold 1993, 79]. At that time, technological platforms and academic enthusiasm for iterative or collaborative forms of assessment were scant, hence the student remained locked into a too-often airless dyad with their lecturer or tutor: drafting and submitting work largely in ignorance of what fellow students were writing or thinking, an isolation exacerbated in Britain by the Oxbridge tradition of one-on-one tutorials [Hilliard 2012, 4]. Such one-shot, essay-based, summative forms of assessment have continued as literary studies' pedagogical norm. Yet now that highly collaborative virtual learning platforms have become undergraduates' habitual learning environment (and never more so than in the shift to online teaching accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic) maintaining the model of literary education as a process of imitative apprenticeship to the lecturer's hermeneutic sensibility is manifestly out of date.

28

In sum, print culture has long constituted literary studies' unacknowledged condition precedent — the ground for its existence and its presupposed medial norm. Raman Selden's stunningly offhand comment, in the first edition of his bestselling 1980s literary theory primer, reveals how baked-in this assumption is: "we may omit the 'contact' [i.e. medium] for the purpose of discussing literature; it is not of special interest to literary theorists, since contact is usually through the printed word" [Selden 1985, 3–4]. Deeply embedded assumptions about print's immutability and transparency explain many of literary studies' long-evident oversights: its unease with anonymous oral traditions; its tin-ear for drama as performance; and its protracted hostility to subsequently invented filmic and broadcast media. Faced with the rise of digital media from the late 1980s, and especially during the increasingly internet-dominated 1990s, literary studies' response was, in the main, to double-down on its valorization of print culture. Perceiving digital media as an existential threat, literary studies chose in the main to ignore it, or defanged the new rival by adopting it as helpmeet for print-centric forms of research. For their part, digital advocates hardly helped matters with their 'death of the book' zealotry and zero-sum predictions of the medial future [Coover 1992]. But by the third decade of the twenty-first century, with print and digital media manifestly continuing to coexist, the explanatory inadequacy of such winner-takes-all conceptions is clear. Analysts of the contemporary literary sphere need not nail their colors to either mast, but are instead optimally placed to describe the increased interpenetration and interdependence of digital and literary culture. Doing so promises to open new horizons for the study of literature, potentially securing a future for a discipline sorely in need of good-news stories.

29

Dimensions of literary studies reconfigured by the digital literary sphere

I have mentioned various scholars drawn from media archaeology / book history, communication / cultural studies, and cultural sociology who work in the new-institutionalist 'meso' space, investigating the interrelationship of print and digital formats, the digitization of contemporary academic and trade publishing, and the dominance of online book retailer Amazon, among other topics. But to read their admirable work, located as it is outside the Eng. Lit. mainstream, is to become uncomfortably aware of how little such meso-level digital analyses have percolated through the discipline of literary studies itself. It is too tempting for scholars, whether a dwindling old guard of literary humanists, the now-dominant proponents of post-1968 ideology critique, or even those most recent Young Turks — DHers themselves — to disregard the piquant implications of such research by filing it under other, sociological disciplinary headings. They thereby miss the crucial significance of the meso space for the future of literary studies itself. A mid-level framework prompts 'big picture' questions about how our discipline was originally institutionalized, its current contours and, most importantly, how we might best harness digital technologies to secure its future. Specifically, meso-scale digital literary studies productively throws into question the five key aspects of literary studies' traditional self-conception outlined above, posing fundamental questions about disciplinary identity.

30

What counts as 'literature'?

Not only 'born-digital' experimental literary works long championed by the ELO but also new digital paratexts such as audiobooks, book trailers, videos of writers' talks posted online, amateur readers' reviews, and book-centric social-media posts expand the definition of 'literature', presenting new objects for literary analysis. As texts which both embody literary expression and mediate literature's role with wider communities (retailers, critics, readers) they pose new questions about the porousness of the literary text and its encompassing social domain. They also foreground the relationship between literary value and economic capital in ways that demand detailed description of the commercial dimension of books rather than the New Critical tactic of simply bracketing it off.

31

The shift in such texts' material substrate from print to digital necessitates that literary scholars enact far-reaching changes in theory and method. To comprehend fully the production history, institutional circulation, and consumptive patterns of a given literary work, researchers will have to cast their nets far wider than the codex itself, delving into the less familiar terrain of internet archiving, social-media scraping, and analogue downloads of questionable legality [Kirschenbaum and Werner 2014, 451]. This is assuming that relevant research material lies in the public domain which, given the fiercely data-hungry and proprietorial Amazon's stranglehold over the contemporary book industry, can never be assumed [Murray 2019]. Thus, a meso-framed, sociological perspective on twenty-first-century literary objects requires fundamental rethinking of literary studies' default sources of evidence and its habitual close-reading method. Familiarizing ourselves with research techniques drawn from the rapidly converging media and cultural studies field — interviews and surveys, internet ethnography, algorithmic criticism — is essential given the contemporary book's place within a converged media landscape. When the industry producing the objects we study changes, so must we.

32

Where is literary studies situated?

Literary studies, as a traditionally textually-oriented humanities discipline, in past decades engaged in often fractious relations with newer humanities subjects which had a primarily sociological self-conception, notably cultural and media studies. Maintaining such hostilities seems self-defeating when the humanities and social sciences alike face crises of legitimacy, funding, and enrolments, albeit to varying degrees. Rethinking literature sociologically permits us to move past these academic turf-wars to explore what kind of epistemological and institutional configurations best combine strands of humanities and social science expertise, drawing in undergraduate and graduate students from diverse catchments and helping to revitalize the discipline.

33

To date, such a synthesis has been impeded by too often quarantining sociological understandings of the literary industry and readerly behaviors from mainstream literary studies under the banner of 'book history' or 'publishing studies' [Carter 2016, 49]. Incorporating print-originated *and* born-digital texts into literary studies syllabi, and contextualizing these with studies of the 'literary system' would demonstrate how *all* interpretations of a text are influenced by medium and context. Literary works require, in N. Katherine Hayles's phrasing, "media-specific analysis" (2004). We cannot hope to understand the 'digital' in digital literary culture without borrowing from the conceptual

34

toolbox of media and cultural studies. Work underway and plentifully cited within its own disciplinary settings about media platforms and affordances, interactivity, algorithmic culture, user-generated content, social-media performativity, digital-native research methods, and public humanities outreach complements and illuminates more traditional book historical procedures. The traffic is far from one way either. We can bring to media studies scholars a keener awareness of prior phases of media transition, the long overlaps between media formats, and the resilience, democratisation, and transmedial fluidity of twenty-first-century literary studies — a discipline that cultural studies too readily likes to straw-man as stodgy and elitist.

How do we talk about literature?

Demotic forms of literary criticism such as cultural journalism, book reviewing, and reading-group discussions have long and rich histories. However, these extra-academic or “paraliterary” forms of book discussion have too often been belittled or ignored by a literary academy jealously guarding its expertise and needing a ground against which to define itself [Emre 2017]. This has had the unfortunate effect of long bifurcating professional and amateur readers, alienating broader constituencies with which literary academe might have made common cause. The recent academic rediscovery of affect promises belatedly to legitimize lay readers’ emotional responses to texts within literary studies [Gregg 2010]. This, of course represents a direct challenge to one of the precepts undergirding literary studies’ institutionalization over a century ago: the expunging of subjectivism in interpreting texts. Contemporary academics must engage in the delicate balancing act of recognizing that emotionally-invested modes of reading among book enthusiasts never went away, while simultaneously preserving their own status as professional interpreters of the literary scene. Readerly affect can, as Rita Felski has demonstrated in a trilogy of recent books, itself be the subject of academic analysis for what it reveals about dispositions towards literature (2008, 2015, 2020). Yet Felski barely mentions the massive archive of *online* readerly evidence (blogs, bookTube reviews, bookstagram posts, and viral TikTok videos) to test whether her inferences about highly-educated academic readers are more broadly verifiable. In engaging with such readerly data, it is equally important not to idealize readerly affect as necessarily resistant, but instead to acknowledge how emotionally authentic reader responses to books are avidly data-mined by media platforms in the interests of fine-tuning their algorithms and driving advertising revenue.

35

Who are literary studies’ contemporary publics?

Related to the above, literary discussion by this point in the twenty-first century must move beyond a narrowing coterie of professional critics to engage meaningfully with broader publics demonstrating interest in literary matters: e.g., books and arts programming in mainstream media; writers’ festival audiences; face-to-face book clubs; book-focused social-cataloguing platforms such as Goodreads; and social-media ‘book talk’ communities. We need to “build better bridges,” in Felski’s phrase [Felski 2008, 13], with these lay readers, long alienated by the abstruse vocabulary and paranoid reading strategies of ideology critique, to cultivate a public humanities mode of literary scholarship. In doing so, we need to guard against any suggestion that we in academe are bringing ‘enlightenment’ to the benighted masses. Such academic rank-pulling seriously misunderstands the flattened hierarchies and interactive norms of online literary culture. Rather, academics need to educate themselves about the protocols governing online literary discussions, attend in good faith to debates already ongoing in digital fora, and grapple with thorny ethical issues of how to research online readerly communities in ways that share research outcomes with the communities studied.

36

Conversely, and more confronting for the academic ego, what might literary studies *learn* from the affective investments and dialogic practices of non-professional readers, now so abundantly discoverable online? As Carolyn Dinshaw astutely observes, “amateur literary activities can expose and critique professional literary activities” [Dinshaw 2012, 24]. Non-credentialed literary commentators have eagerly embraced the internet’s characteristic distributed architecture and the democratic access it permits. But at the same time, they demonstrate resilient interest in mechanisms for cultural evaluation and discrimination (e.g. cumulative book review ratings, community-endorsed litbloggers, ‘top’ bookTubers etc.). There is no necessary contradiction here: such readerly communities seek a voice in the weighing of literary worth and are restive with literary evaluation taking place behind closed doors and then being handed down, from on high, by an academic clerisy. Rather, they want broadening of the parties to literary discussion and for critics to publicly state their evaluative criteria, with all verdicts being open to debate. Academic expertise still holds value for this group, if

37

academics can trade the familiar role of incontrovertible authority for one of dialogic participant, and can make their arguments in language intelligible to an interested layperson. The success and growth of literary-centric, publicly-oriented websites such as Literary Hub is heartening in this regard.^[9] A niche-targeted content aggregator, it showcases content drawn from academic presses, cultural journalism (print-based and online), and blogsites. Its curatorial tone is well worth emulating: discerning but not exclusionary, smart but fun. Literary Hub's default inclusion of a comments function beneath each article offers a model for how this new style of literary academe might talk to – and, importantly, with — bookish publics.

How best to teach literature?

Digital literary environments' characteristic textual instability, collaborative authorship, and commercial-creative blurring prompt reappraisal of literary studies' inherited pedagogical modes. Since the discipline's institutionalization in the early twentieth century, our pedagogical practices have remained remarkably static: lecture/seminar/tutorial teaching modes; close-reading analytic method; and predominantly one-shot, essay-based assessment [Fitzpatrick 2011]. By contrast, digital technologies enable students to work collectively, for staff to engage students in ongoing scholarly projects, and for established researchers to mentor students' interventions into popular literary discussion through public-facing assessment outcomes [Battershill and Ross 2022]. The dominant pedagogical practice within literary studies can shift from an expert scholar attempting to cultivate like-minded acolytes through a system of apprenticeship, to a facilitator model in which academics provide theoretical and contextual tools for students to reconsider their existing involvement in print and online modes of literary discussion. The aim is to make students conscious of their position within book culture, denaturalizing it as a neutral window onto self-evidently great writing. What if, for example, the end-of-term research essay morphs into a critical examination of Amazon's terms of service, a series of BookTube videos about the current Booker Prize shortlist, or credited contributions to an evolving DH database? Such alternative modes of assessment need not amount to abrogation of critical rigor for the fashionably flaky, nor exploitation of undergraduate labor for academics' own career advancement. They simply involve applying literary studies' critical mindset to a broader array of technological, institutional, economic, social, and cultural mediators than the discipline is accustomed to acknowledge.

38

The meso-level digital literary studies advocated here is thus not merely a supplementary project of *adding* digital texts to the standard literary studies curriculum: innovation as minimal-effort quick fix. Instead, the digital era necessitates root-and-branch rethinking of the literary studies discipline across multiple domains: object of study; institutional siting (with its implications for theory and method); epistemological aims; envisaged audiences; and pedagogical practice. Thus, for all the claims over the last decade and a half that DH represents a radical attack on traditional literary studies (whether emanating from proponents or opponents), viewed in this light DH hasn't gone nearly far enough. The same can be said for eLit, to the extent that it still considers itself a separate academic project from DH. Digital technology is not simply a tool for expanding our textual corpora or devising new modes for reading those texts, but an opportunity to recast the whole nature of literary study.

39

Conclusion

As we enter a third decade of 'postcritique' literary studies, it is clear that waiting the digital out is not an option. Conceptions of a print culture posited in steadfast opposition to the digital have been disproven by the consumer trends of the last 25 years and were, in any case, always ontologically suspect. Media historians have long disputed neatly successionist views of a newer communication technology wholesale replacing an earlier medium. The intellectual challenge — and payoff — instead lies in observing different mediums' patterns of complex interdependence, mutual cannibalization, and unexpected revivification. Literary studies' post-millennial pivot towards the digital has been welcome in providing our discipline with justification for its continued twenty-first-century relevance. However, the ways in which digital literary studies is currently configured have exposed a hollow middle between, at one extreme, micro-scale studies of contemporary born-digital works that are often closer to fine arts practice, are accessed by miniscule publics, and are likely to become technologically obsolete within a decade and, at the other, macro-oriented studies of pre-1923 literary history (now almost a century in the past). Neither of these domains provides a viable roadmap for a literary studies discipline seeking to engage meaningfully with the mainstream of contemporary culture. It is not so much

40

that embrace of the digital has been a mistake for literary studies but that the embrace has been awkwardly set up. Digital technologies not only provide new platforms for existing texts, they normalize new modes for producing texts, radically expand networks for circulating them, and greatly empower readers who seize the opportunity to become textual producers in turn. Digital sociology offers the necessary tools to broaden our analytic gaze to capture this sense of a digital literary sphere in dynamic flux.

To return in closing to the Jim Collins interview mentioned earlier, he speaks of the urgency of the literary academy looking up from its texts and its now-familiar ideological constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality to engage fully with the *materiality* of contemporary literary culture: “for me to teach contemporary fiction I should now talk to my students about how they come to it, how it circulates, what’s going on *outside* as well as inside the classroom” [Collins 2010, 197]. Such an expansive mindset allows literary academe to converse with communities of paraliterary enthusiasts with whom we have so far had little traffic: the burgeoning and vociferous audiences for writers’ festivals; book clubs; online reviewing; and digitally-hosted book talk in general. Many of these groups have for some decades turned away from academic literary critics as taste arbiters, alienated by the arcane terminology and suspicious reading protocols they encountered in undergraduate curricula or endured in diluted versions as high-schoolers. We cannot afford to pass up this opportunity to make common cause with a sizable body of literary enthusiasts among the broader public, not with literary studies buffeted by falling enrolments, governments’ vocational agenda, and insecure patterns of academic employment. Demotic brands of literary criticism never went away; we just lacked the theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools (and yes, perhaps, the willingness) to engage with them. With the advent of the digital literary sphere, these extra-academic literary discussions are better archived, more discoverable, and more socially porous than ever before. We are thus faced with the choice Rita Felski identifies in the epigraph to this article: to retreat in the face of digital culture and to define literariness in ever-more circumscribed and aesthetically exclusive ways. Or, to embrace what the digital literary sphere has to offer our discipline: new things to study; new ways to talk about them; and – crucially – new audiences who may well want to hear what we have to say about how contemporary literary culture actually functions.

Notes

[1] Refer, “it is possible that the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ — widespread critical habits indeed, perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself — may have had an unintentionally stultifying side effect: they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” [Sedgwick 2003, 124]. See also: “There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old” [Felski 2008, 1]; and “There is a growing sense that our intellectual life is out of kilter, that scholars in the humanities are far more fluent in nay-saying than in yay-saying, and that eternal vigilance, unchecked by alternatives, can easily lapse into the complacent cadences of autopilot argument....At a certain point, critique does not get us any further” [Felski 2015, 9].

[2] James F. English notes, in his statistically-ballasted study *The Global Future of English Studies* (2012), that the number of US undergraduate English majors was relatively stable during the first decade of the twenty-first century, but that English’s share of all bachelor’s degrees awarded fell in response to competition from, inter alia, communications and media studies courses [English 2012, 13–19, 19].

[3] There is some irony in Liu’s over-emphasis on DH’s challenge to traditional literary studies’ ideas of the text, as his chapter elsewhere urges DH to widen its critical aperture by engaging in specifically critical examination of “power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world” as practiced in “new media studies and media archaeology” [Liu 2012, 495, 501]. Compare Matthew Kirschenbaum and Sarah Werner’s appreciation that economic, political, and institutional issues necessitate broadening the scholarly gaze beyond the text itself: “This, then, in broad strokes, is the media ecology in which contemporary authorship, book publishing, and reading now finds itself, a text-centric world that is categorized by new forms of short-form interaction, new economic models, new metrics of visibility and reputation, and new forms of viral dissemination, as well as a polyglot riot of devices, platforms, systems, and services, most of them held tenuously together in something known vaporously only as ‘the cloud’” [Kirschenbaum and Werner 2014, 408].

[4] “The new institutionalism...comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn towards cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supraindividual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals’ attributes or motives” [Powell and DiMaggio 1991, 8]. Sociologists, they note, “find institutions everywhere” (9).

[5] Not coincidentally, the founder of new institutionalism, Walter W. Powell, was also co-author of the first sociological attempt to map contemporary US book publishing, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (1982). Patricia H. Thornton and William Ocasio have likewise undertaken research into the higher-education publishing industry (1995, 1999, 2001, 2004).

[6] <https://culturalanalytics.org/>

[7] Making a similar point about the relative lack of intellectual exchange between book history and DH, Matthew Kirschenbaum writes “in 2014, book history shades ineluctably into media history” [Kirschenbaum and Werner 2014, 425].

[8] James F. English has been a rare voice advocating for building bridges between literary studies and cultural sociology, if not cultural studies *per se* in its English and Australian formulations (2010): “We have succeeded all too well in containing the ‘threat’ posed by cultural studies, missing many opportunities to widen the [literary studies] discipline’s aperture to new literary objects, new pedagogical strategies, and new, less tried-and-true forms of interdisciplinarity — in particular, those that would open conversations with ‘the dreaded quantitative social sciences’ and encourage our use of empirical methods” [English 2012, 150]. His book elsewhere distinguishes between US-style cultural studies, which is more akin to identity politics mixed with area studies, as contrasted with the transmedial forms of cultural critique associated with British cultural studies pioneers such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams (184, n.59).

[9] <https://lithub.com/>. See also, in this public-humanities vein, The Conversation international network of websites (with its tagline ‘Academic rigor, journalistic flair’) and the Ivy League-associated Public Books (with its imperative “Think in public”).

Works Cited

- Arnold 1865** Arnold, Matthew. “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” *Essays in Criticism*. London: Macmillan. 1-41 (1865).
- Arnold 1993** Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP (1993).
- Atherton 2005** Atherton, Carol. *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge, 1880-2002*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan (2005).
- Baldick 2006** Baldick, Chris. “Literature and the Academy.” *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Patricia Waugh, ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP. 85-95 (2006).
- Banfield 2006** Banfield, Ann. “I.A. Richards.” *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Patricia Waugh, ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP. 96-106 (2006).
- Battershill and Ross 2022** Battershill, Claire, and Shawna Ross. *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom* 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic (2022).
- Bennett et al. 1999** Bennett, T., M. Emmison, and J. Frow. *Accounting for Tastes*. Melbourne: Cambridge UP (1999).
- Bode 2009** Bode, K., and R. Dixon, eds. *Resourceful Reading: The New Empiricism, eResearch and Australian Literary Culture*. Sydney: Sydney UP (2009).
- Bode 2014** Bode, K. *Reading by Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field*. London: Anthem (2014).
- Bolter 2001** Bolter, J. D. *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*. 2nd ed. NY: Routledge (2001).
- Bourdieu 1993** Bourdieu, P. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. Cambridge, UK: Polity (1993).
- Burdick et al. 2012** Burdick, A., J. Drucker, P. Lunenfeld, T. Presner, and J. Schnapp. *Digital_Humanities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2012).
- Carter 2016** Carter, D. “The Literary Field and Contemporary Trade-book Publishing in Australia: Literary and Genre Fiction.” *Media International Australia* 158: 48-57 (2016).
- Collins 2010** Collins, J. *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke UP (2010).
- Coover 1992** Coover, Robert. “The End of Books.” *New York Times Book Review* 21 Jun. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html> (1992).

- Coover 1999** Coover, Robert. "Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age", Keynote address, Digital Arts and Culture conference, Atlanta, GA http://nickm.com/vox/golden_age.html (1999).
- Crompton 2016** Crompton, Constance, Richard J. Lane, and Ray Siemens, eds. *Doing Digital Humanities: Practice, Training, Research*. London and New York: Routledge (2016).
- Da 2019** Da, Nan Z. "The Computational Case Against Computational Literary Studies." *Critical Inquiry* 45.3: 601-39 (2019).
- Darnton 1990** Darnton, R. "What Is the History of Books?" [1982] *The Kiss of Lamourette*. London: Faber. 107-35 (1990).
- Davis 2015** Davis, M. "E-books in the Global Information Economy." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18.4-5: 514-29 (2015).
- De Bruyn 2013** De Bruyn, B., and J. Collins. "E-readers, Deconvergence Culture and McSweeney's Circle." *Image [& Narrative]* 14.3 <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/viewFile/373/292> (2013).
- Dinshaw 2012** Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Durham, NC: Duke UP (2012).
- Dopfer et al. 2004** Dopfer, K., J. Foster, and J. Potts. "Micro-meso-macro." *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*. 14.3: 263-79 (204).
- Doyle 2014** Doyle, Brian. "The Invention of English." *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*. Eds Robert Colls and Philip Dodd. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury. 113-40 (2014).
- Driscoll 2014** Driscoll, B. *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-first Century*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave (2014).
- Driscoll 2015** Driscoll, B. (2015) "Sentiment Analysis and the Literary Festival Audience." *Continuum* 29.6: 861-73 (2015).
- Drucker 2009** Drucker, Johanna. *Speclab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2009).
- du Gay 1997** du Gay, Paul, et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (1997).
- Eagleton 1983** Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell (1983).
- Eagleton 2003** Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books (2003).
- Eliot 2009** Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." [1919] *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent> (2009).
- Emerson 2014** Emerson, Lori. *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P (2014).
- Emre 2017** Emre, Merve. *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2017).
- Endgame 2020** "Endgame: Can Literary Studies Survive?" Washington, D.C.: Chronicle of Higher Education. [ChronicleReview_Endgame.pdf](#) (2020).
- English 2010** English, James F. "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After 'the Sociology of Literature'." *New Literary History* 41.2: v-xxiii (2010).
- English 2012** English, James F. *The Global Future of English Studies*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell (2012).
- Ensslin 2007** Ensslin, A. *Canonizing Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions*. London: Continuum (2007).
- Eve 2019** Eve, Martin Paul. *Close Reading with Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP (2019).
- Eve 2022** Eve, Martin Paul. *The Digital Humanities and Literary Studies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP (2022).
- Felski 2008** Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell (2008).
- Felski 2015** Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2015).
- Felski 2020** Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2020).

- Fitzpatrick 2011** Fitzpatrick, K. *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*. New York: New York UP (2011).
- Frow 2013** Frow, John. "On Mid-level Concepts." [2010] *The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies*. Crawley, WA: U of Western Australia P. 211-29 (2013).
- Gibson 2021** Gibson, Richard Hughes. "The Idiosyncratic School of Reading." *The Hedgehog Review* 13 Jul. The Idiosyncratic School of Reading | THR Web Features | Web Features | The Hedgehog Review (2021).
- Gitelman 2008** Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2008).
- Gitelman 2014** Gitelman, Lisa. *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents*. Durham, NC: Duke UP (2014).
- Gitelman 2020** Gitelman, Lisa. "Not." *Further Reading*. Matthew Rubery and Leah Price, eds. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP. 371-80. (2020).
- Gold 2012** Gold, Matthew K., ed. *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P (2012).
- Gold and Klein 2016** Gold, Matthew K., and Lauren F. Klein, eds. *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P (2016).
- Gold and Klein 2019** Gold, Matthew K., and Lauren F. Klein, eds. *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P (2019).
- Graff 2007** Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. [1987] Chicago: U of Chicago P (2007).
- Gregg 2010** Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke UP (2010).
- Grigar 2021** Grigar, Dene. "Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: An Introduction." *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices*. Eds Dene Grigar and James O'Sullivan. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 1-5 (2021).
- Guillory 2002** Guillory, John. "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines." *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*. Eds Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 19-43 (2002).
- Hallinan 2016** Hallinan, B., and T. Striplas. "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture." *New Media and Society* 18.1: 117-37 (2016).
- Hammond 2016** Hammond, A. *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge UP (2016).
- Hayles 2002** Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Mediaworks pamphlets. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2002).
- Hayles 2004** Hayles, N. Katherine. "Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis." *Poetics Today* 25.1: 67-90 (2004).
- Hayles 2008** Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame (2008).
- Hayles 2013** Hayles, N. K., and J. Pressman, eds. *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P (2013).
- Hilliard 2012** Hilliard, Christopher. *English as a Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP (2012).
- Hunter 1988** Hunter, Ian. (1988) *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan (1988).
- Jefferson 1986** Jefferson, Ann, and David Robey, eds. *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Batsford (1986).
- Jockers 2013** Jockers, M. L. *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. Topics in the Digital Humanities series. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P (2013).
- Jones 2014** Jones, Steven E. *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities*. New York: Routledge (2014).
- Kirschenbaum 2008** Kirschenbaum, Matthew. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2008).
- Kirschenbaum 2012** Kirschenbaum, Matthew. "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?"

- [2010] Debates in the Digital Humanities. Ed. Matthew K. Gold. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. 3-11 (2012).
- Kirschenbaum 2016** Kirschenbaum, Matthew. *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP (2016).
- Kirschenbaum and Werner 2014** Kirschenbaum, Matthew, and Sarah Werner. "Digital Scholarship and Digital Studies: The State of the Discipline." *Book History* 17: 406-58 (2014).
- Kirschenbaum et al. 2020** Kirschenbaum, Matthew, et al. *Book.Files: Preservation of Digital Assets in the Contemporary Publishing Industry*. College Park, MD, and New York: U of Maryland and the Book Industry Study Group (2020).
- Landow 2006** Landow, G. P. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. 3rd ed. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP (2006).
- Latour 2004** Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30.2: 225-48 (2004).
- Leavis 1960** Leavis, F.R. *The Great Tradition*. [1948] London: Chatto and Windus (1960).
- Lepenes 1988** Lepenes, Wolf. *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP (1988).
- Liu 2012** Liu, Alan. "Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Ed. Matthew K. Gold. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. 490-509 (2012).
- Long and So 2016** Long, Hoyt, and Richard Jean So. "Literary Pattern Recognition: Modernism between Close Reading and Machine Learning." *Critical Inquiry* 42.2: 235-67 (2016).
- McDonald 2006** McDonald, Peter. "Ideas of the Book and Histories of Literature: After Theory?" *PMLA* 121.1: 214-28 (2006).
- McGrath 2019** McGrath, Laura B. "Comping White." *Los Angeles Review of Books* 21 Jan. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/comping-white/#> (2019).
- Montfort 2004** Montfort, N., and N. Wardrip-Fruin. "Acid-free Bits: Recommendations for Long-lasting Electronic Literature." *Electronic Literature Organisation* 1.0 <http://www.eliterature.org/pad/afb.html#sec2> (2004).
- Moretti 2005** Moretti, F. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London: Verso (2005).
- Moretti 2013** Moretti, F. (2013) *Distant Reading*. London and New York: Verso (2013).
- Murray 2012** Murray, S. *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*. New York: Routledge (2012).
- Murray 2013** Ray Murray, P., and C. Squires. "The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit." *Book 2.0* 3.1: 3-23 (2013).
- Murray 2018** Murray, S. *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP (2018).
- Murray 2019** Murray, S. "Secret Agents: Algorithmic Culture, Goodreads and Datafication of the Contemporary Book World." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Published online 5 Dec. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419886026> (2019)
- Olsen 2016** Olsen, Stein Haugom. "The Discipline of Literary Studies." *Literary Studies and the Philosophy of Literature: New Interdisciplinary Directions*. Eds Andrea Selleri and Philip Gaydon. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 37-64 (2016).
- Pierce 2020** Pierce, Jennifer Burek. *Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P (2020).
- Piper 2015** Piper, Andrew. "Novel Devotions: Conversional Reading, Computational Modelling, and the Modern Novel." *New Literary History* 46.1: 63-98 (2015).
- Piper 2018** Piper, Andrew. *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2018).
- Powell and DiMaggio 1991** Powell, Walter W., and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds. *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (1991).
- Radway 1991** Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. 2nd ed. [1984]

Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P (1991).

- Rettberg 2016** Rettberg, Scott. "Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities." *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*. Eds Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell. 127-36 (2016).
- Rettberg 2018** Rettberg, Scott. *Electronic Literature*. Cambridge, UK: Polity (2018).
- Richards 2017** Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement*. [1929] London and New York: Routledge (2017).
- Schreibman 2016** Schreibman, Susan, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, eds. (2016) *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- Sedgwick 2003** Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP. 123-51 (2003).
- Selden 1985** Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Brighton, UK: Harvester (1985).
- Showalter 2003** Showalter, Elaine. *Teaching Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell (2003).
- Siemens 2007** Siemens, R., and S. Schreibman, eds. *A New Companion to Digital Literary Studies*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell (2007).
- So 2021** So, Richard Jean. *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*. New York: Columbia UP (2021).
- Striphas 2012** Striphas, T. "What is an Algorithm?" *Culture Digitally* 1 Feb. <http://culturedigitally.org/2012/02/what-is-an-algorithm/> (2012).
- Striphas 2015** Striphas, T. "Algorithmic Culture." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18.4-5: 395-412 (2015).
- Tabbi 2017** Tabbi, Joseph, ed. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic (2017).
- Terras 2013** Terras, Melissa, Julianne Nyhan, and Edward Vanhoutte, eds. *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate (2013).
- Thornton 2012** Thornton, Patricia H., William Ocasio, and Michael Lounsbury. *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure, and Process*. New York: Oxford UP (2012).
- Thumala 2021** Thumala Olave, María Angélica. "Exploring the Sacrality of Reading as a Social Practice." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 9.2: 99-114 (2021).
- Underwood 2013** Underwood, Ted. *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP (2013).
- Underwood 2019** Underwood, Ted. *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change*. Chicago: U of Chicago P (2019).
- Wimsatt 1946** Wimsatt, W.K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Sewanee Review* 54.3: 468-88 (1946).
- Zhang 2022** Zhang, Dora. "Is There a Future for Literary Studies?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 14 Mar. Step Aside, Quit Lit and Adjunct Lit. Here Comes Retirement Lit. (chronicle.com) (2022).
- Zwar 2016** Zwar, J. "Disruption and Innovation in the Australian Book Industry." Research paper. Sydney: Dept of Economics, Macquarie University (2016).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.