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Literature in the Digital Age
An Introduction

Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction guides readers through the most salient theoretical, interpretive, and creative possibilities opened up by the shift to digital literary forms such as e-books, digital archives, electronic literature, and videogames. While Digital Humanities (DH) has been hailed as the “next big thing” in literary studies, many students and scholars remain perplexed as to what a DH approach to literature entails, and skeptical observers continue to see literature and the digital world as fundamentally incompatible. In its argument that digital and traditional scholarship should be placed in dialogue with each other, this book contextualizes the advent of the digital in literary theory, explores the new questions readers can ask of texts when they become digitized, and investigates the challenges that fresh forms of born-digital fiction pose to existing models of literary analysis.

Adam Hammond is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University. He is coauthor of *Modernism: Keywords*, and his articles have appeared in such journals and newspapers as *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Walrus*, and the *Literary Review of Canada*.

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ADAM HAMMOND

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Preface: The Excess of Seeing

In August 2013, I traveled to Brighton for the annual gathering of the Modernist Studies Association (MSA), the biggest academic conference in my field. I had been to the MSA conference many times before, but this time there was a twist: I was going to participate in the conference's first-ever "poster session." Humanities conferences normally consist of oral presentations and seminars, and the MSA's decision to include a poster session – a common model in the sciences – was meant to recognize the growing prominence of Digital Humanities (DH), the area of humanities research concerned with and conducted with the aid of digital technology.¹ Much of my work in the preceding years had focused on developing computational methods of tracking multi-voicedness in modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, and I was glad for an opportunity to present this digital work to my fellow modernists. After a long intercontinental flight with an unwieldy poster tube and several computers in tow, I arrived brimming with enthusiasm.

However well intentioned, the poster session was a disaster. In an effort to attract maximum traffic, the conference organizers had set us up in the refreshments area. My booth – I sat behind a table with a large poster to my left and a laptop in front of me to "demo" my work – was directly across from the coffee station. On the first day of the conference, I was asked many questions ("Where is the toilet?"; "Which way to room 312?"; "What time is the plenary?"), but none pertaining to my research. In the visual vocabulary of the humanities conference, a person seated behind a desk, in the vicinity of a laptop, was staff – not someone with something to say about literature. On the second day of the conference, in a novel if somewhat desperate effort to attract attention to our work, the conference organizers suggested we set up during the wine and cheese reception, always a popular event. It was indeed packed – though no one, it seemed, was in the mood to discuss natural-language processing. One conference goer, gesticulating wildly in the course of a lively conversation with a colleague, knocked my poster off the wall. My booth was quickly identified as a convenient place to discard empty wine glasses and dirty napkins. The final straw came when one scholar, needing both hands free to

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illustrate the point he was making, carelessly deposited a half-eaten piece of cheese on the keyboard of my MacBook. I packed up my things in a rage and spent the rest of the conference attending panels and plenaries, leaving my booth unmanned.

I present this story as a parable of the place of Digital Humanities in literary studies today. On the one hand, there is enormous excitement about digital approaches. Ever since William Pannapacker declared it the humanities' "next big thing" in a much-discussed blog post written from the 2009 Modern Language Association conference,² DH has served as a beacon of hope in a field perpetually beset by existential angst. At a time when jobs, funding, and public attention are in short supply in literature departments, DH promises all three. Yet for all its attractiveness and its practical and material advantages, literature departments have had a hard time embracing DH. This reluctance has been partly a question of ideology: many scholars, having imbibed the Romantic opposition of art to technology, remain deeply suspicious of the application of quantitative scientific methodologies to something as uncertain, elusive, and, well, as *human* as literature. It has also been simply a question of time. Although scholars have been using computers to conduct humanities research for more than a half-century, the term "Digital Humanities" is barely a decade old, and its methods and assumptions are still slowly trickling into the consciousness of most scholars.³ Laudable as it is for a conference organizer to include a poster session in a major humanities conference, it is unreasonable to expect all the attendees to know what a poster session is. Depositing a half-eaten piece of cheese on a laptop remains, sadly, a more natural reaction for many established humanities scholars than, say, grabbing the mouse, exploring the digital exhibit, and asking a series of probing questions about machine-learning models and *p*-values.⁴

In *How We Think* (2012), N. Katherine Hayles explores the rift between digital and so-called traditional humanists. Surveying a number of DH centers in the United States and the United Kingdom, she describes two prevailing models for digital scholarship in the humanities: an "assimilation" model, in which digital resources are deployed primarily to assist established researchers in traditional text-based interpretation, and a "distinction" model, in which digital scholars increasingly work outside of literature departments, focusing their attention on digital theory, digital culture, and born-digital forms such as videogames, whose relationship to "literature" is uncertain and problematic. Hayles warns against both these polarized models, calling instead for balanced "approaches that can locate digital work within print traditions, and print traditions within digital media, without obscuring or failing to account for the differences between them."⁵ Hayles's call for hybrid approaches is important,

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in part, because literature and literary research are themselves quickly hybridizing. For all the rivalry between digital humanists and print-focused traditional humanists, it is increasingly difficult today to locate pure specimens of either digital or analog scholarship. Even if you reject algorithmic analysis of Shakespeare (see Chapter 5) or stop short of teaching the Flash poetry of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (see Chapter 8), you would be hard pressed to avoid writing up your research on a word processor, communicating with colleagues via e-mail or social media, or disseminating your research in digitized periodicals. Likewise, it is difficult to discuss Flash poetry without discussing the traditions of oral and printed verse – and even more difficult to discuss an algorithmic analysis of Shakespeare without discussing Shakespeare. This is why Matthew Kirschenbaum and Sarah Werner reject the notion of a “transcendental ‘digital’ that somehow stands outside the historical and material legacies of other artifacts and phenomena.” The field of the digital is rather, for them, “a frankly messy complex of extensions and extrusions of prior media and technologies.”⁶ To understand this “messy complex,” we must become, in Maryanne Wolf’s memorable coinage, “bitextual”:⁷ conversant both in print and digital literary conventions and aware of the complex ways they intersect and overlap.

Given my training in literary modernism, Maryanne Wolf’s call for bitextuality immediately calls to mind Virginia Woolf’s description of androgyny in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), where she argues that the creative mind becomes “fully fertilised” only when its male and female halves are able to exist “in harmony together, spiritually co-operating.”⁸ Hayles’s appeal for mixed scholarship that acknowledges the differences between digital and print-based approaches, yet strives for fruitful combinations of the two, in turn reminds me of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “excess of seeing.” In his early ethical philosophy, Bakhtin notes the way that, in any conversation,

I shall always see and know something that [my interlocutor], from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him.⁹

Woolf’s androgynous mind and Bakhtin’s “excess of seeing” provide us with models for imagining the productive interaction of print-based and digital literary scholarship. If a rift exists between the two approaches at present, it is helpful to imagine them as two distinct hemispheres of a single mind or as interlocutors in dialogue. Each participant in this conversation, each

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hemisphere of this linked mind, is able to see something that the other cannot. This means that, for each side to be able share its insights with the other, both must learn to speak the other's language.

This book argues that both print and digital literary traditions have something to tell us about each other. Their encounter presents an enormous opportunity to revisit and revise our received methods of reading, interpreting, and teaching literature – as well as an occasion to adapt traditional literary approaches to the task of explaining and coming to terms with the digital world. Most fundamentally, the encounter of print and the digital presents us with the opportunity to sharpen our sense of what literature is, what it is becoming, and what it is for. But to make the most of this productive encounter, scholars and students trained in print-based approaches need to be able to talk to those steeped in the digital. This book exists to facilitate this conversation.

Although this book is occasioned by the rise of Digital Humanities, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of DH or an assessment of the ways it is reshaping the humanities as a whole. The field of DH and the variety of approaches it encompasses are simply too vast for that, and my own specialized training as a literary scholar prevents me from venturing too far into digital work in history, philosophy, art history, or religion. Nor do I attempt to provide a systematic critique of the state of digital literary studies today, an exhaustive list of literary DH projects, or a particular intervention in this subfield.¹⁰ My intention is much broader: it is to explore what is at stake for literature and literary studies in the transition from print to digital forms. This is a book for anyone interested in literature and its future: undergraduates, graduate students, faculty in literature departments, and readers of all kinds. It assumes interest in and commitment to literature but no expertise in digital literary studies. For those interested in taking the plunge into DH, this book will serve as a gateway drug, providing a way into more specialized work and introducing some key texts and resources. (It will not, however, single-handedly turn such readers into Digital Humanists.) For all other readers, this book will serve as an accessible introduction to the major questions that digital approaches and digital technologies are raising for the study of literature. My hope is that such readers will put down this book convinced of the importance of attending to and respecting the digital world.

This book is arranged in three parts. The first, “Is Literature Dying in the Digital Age?,” introduces the volume's main themes. It provides an intellectual context for current anxieties and enthusiasms for the digital and argues that periods of technological transition like our own have historically presented, and present today, fruitful opportunities for asking big literary questions.

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Part II, “Digitization,” investigates claims that the making-digital of originally print-based literary texts allows for unprecedented access, permits us to ask new questions of literary texts, and implies new models of scholarship. The chapters in this section argue that digital techniques and resources supplement, rather than supersede, traditional modes of literary analysis such as close reading, while also making the case that engaging with literary digitization often leads to a deepened understanding of print. Part III, “Born Digital,” focuses on new digital literary forms that incorporate affordances such as digital distribution, interactivity, and multimodality. These chapters look at how digital self-publishing serves both to challenge and to reinforce the notion of individual authorship, how interactivity serves to reinvigorate traditional modes of literary analysis such as narratology, and how multimedia forms such as videogames force us to reconsider the boundaries of the literary. The concluding chapter, focused on contemporary print fiction, argues that the experience of print is today inescapably structured by the experience of the digital.

Each of these sections is focused on problems rather than solutions – on exploring the literary questions raised by the transition to digital forms rather than trying to answer them definitively. Individual chapters are organized around detailed case studies and close readings that seek to uncover complexity and ambivalence rather than to achieve comprehensive scope. I take this approach because knotty problems and interpretive cruxes are precisely what make our historical moment such an exciting time to study literature. Because digitization is happening around us and we do not have critical distance from it, we do not yet possess any settled sense of its ultimate significance or where it is taking us. In the midst of this turmoil, it is far more interesting to debate issues than to predict outcomes. This is true of the undergraduate classroom, where this book can be used as a starting point for exploring and unpacking the literary questions posed by digital forms – a critical activity for which close reading of representative texts and resources remains the most productive approach. It is true also of digital literary scholarship generally. Traditional scholars have long been suspicious of digital work based on their perception that it seeks hard-and-fast incontrovertible answers through the application of quantitative scientific approaches. As I seek to show throughout this volume, however, the best digital scholarship shares with the best traditional scholarship a commitment to uncovering new problems, new texts, and new approaches. Far from threatening to close it down prematurely, the best digital scholarship promises to enrich the humanities conversation and to keep it going.

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have collectively convinced me of the enduring merits of the collaborative venture called “print publication” (see Chapter 6).

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