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Engaging the humanities: the digital humanities

We seldom speak of the electrical, the automotive, or the aeronautical humanities, for all that those technologies have done to revolutionize the social order of scholarship and transform the practices of scholars. Someday we will no longer speak, I am sure, of the "digital humanities"; but for now the phrase is needed to distinguish the new objects, techniques, and contexts of study from those today's senior scholars inherited from their forebears. A full professor today certainly sat at the feet of scholars who never thought of using a computer for any scholarly purpose whatsoever and just as certainly teaches students for whom the computer (perhaps even the net-enabled cell phone) is the first essential tool of every piece of academic work.

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Twenty-one years ago, Willard McCarty, currently professor of humanities computing at King's College London, formed an email discussion group called "Humanist," open to all those curious about what computing could do for the humanities, or humanities for computing. The list still flourishes, but veterans of the first few years speak of the conversations from around 1990 as if they had known one of the great salons of Paris in the eighteenth century or one of the coffee houses of Vienna in the nineteenth. Before we scattered to evangelize and work in our own disciplines and subdisciplines, institutions and departments, we, a modest group of true believers, met at "Humanist" to share a future none had yet seen. It was beyond obvious to all of us taking part in those early conversations that the content, methods, and modes of organization of humanistic scholarship were about to be changed, and utterly so.

Were we right? No one reflecting on the changes in habits of consuming and producing information that have developed in the last two decades can fail to be astonished by what is possible. Oceans of text, libraries of journal contents, and tens of millions of words of email group, chat room, and blogosphere opining now surround us. A col-

lection of what I recalled as infrequent, brief, and desultory email messages over the last decade about a piece of personal business turned out, on downloading, to comprise 150,000 words – a book-length manuscript with no real physical dimensions at all, just miraculously present wherever on the planet my three-pound laptop should travel. JSTOR, Muse, Google Books, Early English Books Online, the Brown Women Writers Project, the Patrologia Latina Database, the Open Content Alliance, to name a few: considering the riches available at just the click of a mouse from these resources, I recall spending childhood years at an army post in the desert, where the homes and libraries probably contained less of the heritage of civilized culture and scholarship than what now travels on the hard disk of my laptop, certainly far less than what I can access from a hotel room in Beijing or Doha on that laptop. If I am now surrounded by more books, more physical paper than ever, it is in large measure because Amazon makes overnight delivery all too easy.

But is this a revolution or only automation? The solitary labor of scholars, the objects of their study (for the most part), and the vehicles of publication and communication remain surprisingly stable, close to what scholars have known for generations. We have nearly mastered the production of "electronic journals," whereby intellectual form and content duplicate the expectations of quarterly print journal publication of a generation ago, though the distribution now may be via PDF or other electronic medium as well as on paper. (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* has just been told that a major indexing service cannot handle our digital output because we do *not* provide PDF files imitating print.) We speak glibly of "electronic books," by which we mean collections of photographs or

PDF images of words arranged in a way that makes sense only if we continue to assume the physical form and limitations of the codex. When I read my colleague's offprint from a printout of a PDF that she has emailed to me, nothing essential has changed, except that I now bear the cost and effort of the printing myself. Pioneer of media theory Marshall McLuhan, who argued that the content of a new medium is, at its outset, an old medium, has, it seems, been proven right once again.

More surprising than the progress we have made are the promises yet unfulfilled. We live in an age in which communication media are in a near-constant state of upheaval, with consequent dramatic relocation of authority and influence in cultural relations. But our classrooms today still look and feel like our old classrooms, with technology often present only in the form of high-end presentation facilities for instructors or as the topic of a guerrilla war to determine whether students shall be allowed to use their wireless laptops in class, whether those laptops might be used in the real service of their learning – or might be used just to surf, chat, and gamble, the better to fill the distraction and boredom that were probably there all along.

This peculiar position of humanistic learning, betwixt and between pasts and futures, has occasioned reasonable and thoughtful comment for some years now. The 2006 report, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, published by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and arising from the discussions of a blue-ribbon commission organized by the ACLS, introduced humanists to the word *cyberinfrastructure* as a way of provoking reflection on the proximate and future needs of scholars for hardware, software, services, and leadership de-

signed to allow us to make best use of information technology in our work. But we remain stuck.

When humanists gather to discuss these subjects, three themes emerge from their conversations. First, they remain preoccupied with issues of traditional publication. Harvard University, long a hotbed of innovation and iconoclasm, has contributed its mite to the debate by this year requiring its scholars to distribute their work freely to the world on an open-access model, assuming as it made that requirement the obligation of creating, hosting, and preserving an "institutional repository" to manage the distribution. While it is a relief to think that Harvard's fine scholars will finally begin to see their works have the influence they deserve, it is fair to wonder whether this action solves a real problem or only strikes a pose. After at least fifteen years of evangelism for Open Access, there exists no proven business model for sustaining that practice as a general means of publication, and traditional (often commercial) journal publication remains robustly healthy, having demonstrated for fifty years that commercial publishers can distribute more scholarly and scientific information more widely than ever before in history. It is a real and important question whether the subscriber-pays journal can or should be replaced by the author-pays (or author's-institution-pays) journal that is free to all readers; but what remains without question is the fact that, even in cyberspace, there are no free lunches.

Preoccupation, meanwhile, with the best technique for distributing traditional materials to audiences that do not yet know they want them distracts from other concerns. Scholars who discuss these issues know well that a fundamental social transition has not yet taken place. What does it take to become a scholar and acquire the standing and resources to pursue a life of learning? The road to tenure for humanists still runs through the editorial offices of university presses. Learned societies and even provosts have declared firmly that full faith and credit should be given to innovative forms of publication and scholarship, but printed monographs reign. Nowhere has it been established that you *cannot* get tenure for digital work; but in the absence of proof that you *can*, prudence decrees that the book is the thing. Given the rising age of assistant professors (as more time is spent pre-tenure on post-doctoral work, short-term jobs, and the like), we see more and more scholars spending more and more of their earthly lives waiting for the liberation that tenure begins. It is not proven that waiting for one's forties is the best way to ensure a career of innovation and experimentation.

Preoccupation with existing forms of publication and concern for career-making prudence dominate conversations that sidestep a deeper anxiety. In principle, we know that there are tools and techniques at hand that could radically alter existing paradigms of work and open new doors of inquiry and understanding; but who will show us how to use them? For a historian to learn database design, GIS, or techniques of multimedia presentation is no easy thing – and the senior historian is not the first person to look to for instruction. A monograph based on the paper archives of nuns in Montana seems a whole lot easier to imagine and execute than an investigation of the economic geography of ecclesiastical institutions that integrates census and real estate transaction databases, mapping tools, visual archives, and oral history from all fifty states (much less one that crosses na-

tional borders), and prudence once again prevails. It is as though we have moved into a space far larger – vertiginously, acrophobically larger – than the one we have traditionally occupied, and we respond by keeping to our habitual scope and sphere of activity. While there are leaders in imagining new kinds of work with new kinds of results, the ordinary business of departments of humanistic learning goes on in 2008 much as it did in 1988 and even 1968, for all that the personnel may be refreshingly more diverse than before.[1]

We as humanists must challenge ourselves to ask whether and how we will imagine that new space within which we can work now, and how we can begin to occupy it well. Everyone recognizes that waiting for technologists to provide tools and, worse, tell us what to do with them is no solution, for the questions of scholarship must come from scholars. But the power of imagination does require concrete supplementation from those who know what the tools can do. So far, only locally and episodically have we found settings within which innovative scholars and sympathetic technologists can enter into a dialogue of experimentation and interrogation, the better to find good and important questions that can *now* yield answers hitherto thought impossible. Institutions build-

ing repositories to hold the inert content of the work now published in multiple forms at least should be constructing laboratories for real innovation and experimentation and making it possible to populate them with the senior and junior scholars and resourceful technical interlocutors who can collaborate in inventing a future we have not yet entered.

Such institutional ventures face obstacles not insurmountable, but daunting nonetheless. The resources that would be devoted to creating such research and development opportunities to support our own professional future are seen inevitably as taking away from the resources needed to deliver instruction and scholarship in the present. Ask any department chair how many faculty lines she will give up in order to get such a laboratory and the answer is likely to be a firm "zero" – and not only or necessarily because departments look first to the upholstery of their own nests, but more likely because the economics and governance of higher education make it most probable that every academic unit is too thinly staffed to deliver the highest quality education at its current level of ambition to the crowded classrooms that we face. When there are too few professors, diverting resources to invest in the future is superficially unattractive. Can we successfully make the case that it is, at any rate, necessary?

And what if we succeed? Let me caution first that we should make sure we know what we will do if our dreams come true. Long inured to an economics of scarcity, in which every fragment of information from our cultural past is lovingly cherished and studied in detail, we have yet to think seriously and remake our cultural practices to cope with the inevitability that information supporting virtually every kind of scholarship will, in time, be available in an

1 From 2002–2006, the National Humanities Center presented an annual Richard W. Lyman Award (with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation) for achievement in humanistic scholarship making resourceful use of information technology. The recipients, Jerry McGann of Virginia, the late Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason, Robert Englund of UCLA, John Unsworth of Illinois, and Willard McCarty of London, are exemplars of farseeing work.

abundance that will demolish any attempt to do justice to each piece of evidence in traditional ways. The nineteenth-century novel is an object of loving study for all of those who do not have to read every single novel published in that hundred years; but Google will soon make something approaching that totality ubiquitously available and in principle unavoidable. What makes sense as a proposition about that subject when no living individual or even no conceivable team of scholars can master the material? That question has an answer or answers, and the exhilaration of the next generation of study can and should come from innovative, iconoclastic scholars beginning to ask it.[2]

Second, we should remember that Euro-American humanists have not made the world their oyster in the last generation. The work of serious scholars in the humanities is a tiny fraction of the totality of global investment in higher education or in cultural production. In the world of commercial cultural products, such relative rarity is a sign of a niche market, a luxury product.[3] For us, however, the risk is rather that of becoming an orphan brand, scarce enough to be neglected and not valuable enough to be cherished. It is not neces-

sary to take sides in any of the "culture wars" of the last century to observe that the nature and form of the work of humanistic scholars since the 1960s has produced self-marginalization more than envy or admiration. Even within the academy, small, tense conversations occur when it is observed that humanities-wide peer review bodies (reading applications for distinguished fellowships, say) show a strong predilection for work in history and historicizing cultural study over critical work in literature or theory. Even academic publishers express concern at the relative sag in sales for literary scholarship.

No amount of digital tintinnabulation or expulsive labial frication can in themselves find an audience. Some work naturally expects and is satisfied with an esoteric readership. But historically the best work for the few has existed on a continuum with work that makes itself, at least, understood to the many and succeeds, at best, in making clear that what goes on in the quiet of a seminar room is important in itself, even for those who do not understand it. We have undeniably lost ground in the contest for respect.

Can a more resourceful kind of scholarly performance in new spaces help us in winning back respect and resources? Packaging is unlikely to be enough. A combination of original work and imaginative presentation is what is needed. We are unlikely to come to such a combination without fresh thinking about what we do, but we are equally unlikely to come to it without fresh thinking about how we do it and how we present it to an audience.

The community of scholars is alive and lively. None of the fears I express here represent inevitable loss, nor is innovation unimaginably far away. The

2 Jonathan Gottschall of Washington and Jefferson College offered a first-pass answer at just such a question in a May 11, 2008, article in *The Boston Globe*. The article anticipated his book *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

3 In a lecture at Georgetown in 2006, the eponym of a famous global luxury brand said that he judged the maximum size of a luxury product's market was $3 billion; sell more than that and you lose your cachet. Yves Saint-Laurent was sniffingly dismissed as a luxury goods maker who had become vulgar in that way.

concrete steps we need are undoubtedly few in number, but must be marked by imagination, reach, and courage. We should fight our battles to preserve and ensure the right to quote, study, and make reasonable scholarly use of the cultural record without undue limitation by unenlightened application of the copyright statutes. We must work with publishers, librarians, and public agencies to make sure that the cultural record (including, increasingly, the digital record) is preserved for the future. Thinking through what it is to "edit" that record – that is, to make it intellectually accessible for serious users – will require innovation and deserves the respect of promotion and tenure committees. Access to resources, technical and human, that support scholarly ambition is a battle to be fought at the local level, but one to be supported by wise public funding and philanthropy nationally and internationally.

In the end, the work is ours. Do we have the right questions to ask? Do we have the right disciplinary alignments? Are we making the new (including the very products of cyberspace) a part of our own sphere of study and interpretation as responsibly and carefully as we maintain the old (and link the study of old and new)? Will we be ambitious enough in our questions to find answers large enough and worthy of our culture and our contemporaries? We are the heirs of a long tradition of civilization and its cultures, but that means that in our space and time we *are* that civilization, which can only be what we in the academy together with the many beyond the academy's walls, living in a common space of imagination, analysis, and truth, make of it. There is every reason for optimism about our chances as scholars to maintain and expand a place in the culture's discourse; but there is very nearly every reason for pessimism as well. Which will prevail? The jury is out.[4]