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Engaging the humanities: the digital humanities

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We seldom speak of the electrical, known one of the great salons of Paris in the eighteenth century or one of the coffee houses of Vienna in the nineteenth. 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 whom the computer (perhaps even the net-enabled cell phone) is the first essential tool of every piece of academic work. 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-

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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

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 young 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) jour-

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 cannot 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

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.

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. 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-

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 products 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.

sary to take sides in any of the wars of the last century to observe 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

concrete steps we need are undoubtedly-very nearly every reason for pessimism ly few in number, but must be marked as well. Which will prevail? The jury is by imagination, reach, and courage. out.⁴

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 have 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

4 I am happy to express my thanks to Pauline Yu and Steve Wheatley of the ACLS for asking me to organize and chair a panel at the May 2008 annual meeting of the ACLS in Pittsburgh on issues related to the theme of this essay, and to Peter Bol (Harvard), Tara McPherson (USC), Don Brenneis (UCSC), Jim Chandler (Chicago), and Mike Keller (Stanford) for their lively, provocative, and imaginative participation in that forum. This essay would not have taken the form it does without the benefit of that conversation.