

**I'm happy to talk more at length about this essay or provide my notes, in which there's a lot of stuff that didn't make it in here, if any of this is confusing.**

Why, Stephen Ramsay asks, do we not yet have a literary criticism which utilizes computational textual analysis and digital literary study, though both of these methods are being used on books? Why have digital tools not truly been brought to bear upon literary studies' chief concern, that of interpreting texts? Ramsay argues that this is due in large part to the way in which these methods have been discussed in the context of the scientific method, rather than investigating the ways in which they fit closely with extant literary critical tools and questions. Essentially, Ramsay attempts to see the humanistic, rather than scientific, affordances of the digital — “the enormous liberating power of the computer” (3) — and to track the ways in which these methods can be used to enrich and deepen literary critical discussions.

One of Ramsay's chief concerns is to demonstrate that algorithmic literary analysis should not be considered within the same framework as scientific data and methods, as this forecloses the interpretive possibilities of digital methods and obscures the ways in which they actually fit with and echo the questions with which literary criticism is concerned. What if, Ramsay asks, instead of thinking about the humanities using the scientific method, we push the scientific method's use of data and experimentation more towards humanistic values? Digital analysis, Ramsay argues, has been viewed in the context of confirming or refuting hypotheses, and the discourse around algorithmic methods has revolved around utilizing these tools to arbitrate true-or-false statements — and to argue for a literary criticism that is more like science. (Perhaps interesting to consider in the context of Swarthmore's current much-bemoaned decline in humanities and Honors majors, Ramsay tracks the crisis formulation around the humanities, and literary criticism more specifically, in popular discourse, focusing on the demand that literary critics adhere more to scientific methods.)

Ultimately, Ramsay writes, not only does this position ignore the way in which the biggest and most foundational “assumptions” of literary criticism actually emerged from centuries of vigorous debate and recombination, growing out of one another: asking for literary criticism to be more like science, when discussing digital methods, focuses too heavily on using data in true-or-false binaries at the expense of asking more interesting questions. In attempting to refute the discourse which tries to push literary criticism towards scientific methods, Ramsay looks closely at literary criticism's own methods and goals, perhaps most specifically the way in which it utilizes evidence. With *The Waves*, Ramsay explains, critics are not only considering the facts of Woolf — evidence is just the material with which critics attempt to construct persuasive arguments.

Though Ramsay acknowledges that the logic of computation is tremendously scientific, he points out that allowing our understanding of these methods to end at that point forecloses more interesting interpretive work (in an example, Ramsay illustrates the way in which people using this method, committed to a scientific vision, have deeply interpretatively limited themselves). Ramsay repeatedly returns to and is concerned with “the hermeneutical foundations” that seem to force us into declaring that algorithmic analysis must follow the lines of scientific logic and remain entirely separate from traditional literary criticism, with no productive intersections arising. Ramsay asks, Can we really not use data or visualizations to

engage in a discussion which might bring us closer to literary critical conclusions? Thus, Ramsay attempts to consider the literary critical discourse rather than the limits of computational analysis.

Around page 9, the essay really starts to heat up for me, as Ramsay digs into and attempts to define the purpose of literary criticism and the qualities that for me make it so interesting: “But in literary criticism — and here I am thinking of ordinary ‘paper based’ literary criticism— conclusions are evaluated not in terms of what propositions the data allows, but in terms of the nature and depth of the discussions that result,” he writes. In other words, to take Wallace as the example again, we are not asking, “What can we conclude about *The Waves*?” but rather, “From which interesting and new and persuasive angles can we approach and discuss *The Waves*?” Again, on page 10, Ramsay writes, “We may ask ‘What does it mean?’ but in the context of critical discourse this is often an elliptical way of saying ‘Can I interpret (or read) it this way?’” We are not attempting to end the conversation but rather to advance some compelling and convincing new arguments or possibilities, which makes literary criticism seem much more positive about knowledge than it has been constructed in the opposed-to-scientific-method discourse Ramsay summarizes. This all applies to the use of evidence, as well: ““The evidence we seek is not definitive, but suggestive of grander arguments and schemes” (10) — it is used to open up further discussion of these books.

Ramsay attempts to show the role which text analysis can play in helping “the critic in the unfolding of interpretative possibilities” (10). Utilizing a critical discourse about *The Waves* — that there are differences in the language used by characters, based on their gender, Ramsay points out that though it seems that the novel has one unified style, it seems that one could also read and understand its along underlying distinctions, and that one could understand this through reading — but also by using a computer!

In one of the most interesting and powerful sections of the essay’s conclusion, Ramsay explains that critical reading practices are already highly dependent upon algorithmic methods. Any time someone puts for a reading of a text — an interpretation — they are actually putting forth “a new text in which the data has been paraphrased, elaborated, selected, truncated, and transduced” (16), in many ways doing exactly what the computer does. This is what close-reading practices, or flipping to certain passages throughout seminar, or focusing on certain themes in a book in our Honors essays, or analyzing content through a certain Marxist or feminist or Marxist-feminist lens, or situating it within a historical context, is actually doing.

The computer can “read” texts, do this work, in a “rigidly holistic” fashion — it can access what we want to look at across a huge group of books, and then it can visualize this information for us in a way which is TOTALLY DIFFERENT from the book’s material form of words on a page. Or is it so different? “Rather, it is the same thing at a different scale and with expanded powers of observation. It is in such results that the critic seeks not facts, but patterns. And from pattern the critic may move to the grander rhetorical formations that constitute critical reading” (17). We need not dispense with the interpretative element of criticism in order to develop an algorithmic criticism, Ramsay argues — we truly need it.

Basically, Ramsay concludes, the reason an algorithmic criticism has not yet emerged is that we have looked at this the wrong way: “We might say that...literary criticism is insufficiently scientific. We might even long for a ‘scientific literary criticism.’ We would do

better to recognize that a scientific literary criticism would cease to be criticism” (15). While science seeks only one answer to a problem, assuming that this answer certainly exists, this is not at all the case with literary criticism: “We are not trying to solve Woolf. We are trying to ensure that discussion of *The Waves* continues” (15). For me, this helped to clarify the point of studying English at all — though this as a basic premise can appear frustrating, it’s also incredibly rich and allows so many interesting discussions and so much question-raising. Computational logic, Ramsay ultimately argues, is deeply and completely compatible with this goal of criticism.