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# PRECONDITIONS

When Willard McCarty proposed that we “ask in the context of computing what can (and must) be known of our artefacts, how we know what we know about them and how new knowledge is made,” he undoubtedly meant to lift our gaze above the merely practical matters suggested by the term “humanities computing” (McCarty 1231). For to ask such questions “in the context of computing” is to suggest that computing belongs in the rarefied atmosphere of epistemology—that it is less a matter of doing (or allowing, or facilitating) this or that with the human record, and more a matter of providing an additional, and perhaps an uncommonly fertile, occasion for theoretical musing and contemplation. For McCarty, actual results are less important than the insights gained from the juxtaposition of mechanism and mind. The field can proudly and justly describe itself as “the quest for meaningful failure” (1232).

Against this view stand those who regard computers in the humanities as providing a welcome relief from the radical skepticism of contemporary humanistic thought. Here, after all, is a machine that not only gives answers but also demands them—a device that is wholly intolerant toward equivocation and uncertainty. In this view, the computer represents an emancipation from the ironic imprisonments of postmodern excess. Even without supposing that computation leads toward (or even begins with) objectivity, some see it as a way to get beyond the beached solipsism that characterizes modern *discours* and toward its right and proper end in *raison*. It is scientific method joined to humanistic inquiry. It is the dream of Descartes tempered by the dream of Leibniz.

Computers are perhaps chief among those tools we routinely describe as “changing everything,” and yet neither of the desiderata stated above are

particularly startling when offered as descriptions of that change. Both try to dilate the revolution in terms of what is already familiar to us: the former, by installing computation within the context of present theoretical concerns; the latter, by claiming it for the partisans of older, surer methods. One tries to kick away the ladder; the other holds to it more firmly than ever. Eloquent expressions are to be found on either side. If, amid all the excitement that presently surrounds computing in the humanities, one still hears the two most dreaded of all academic judgments—"Is that all?" and "What does this have to do with us?"—it is undoubtedly because we have mostly chosen to describe ourselves either in terms that are meant to comfort the larger and older disciplines from which this new community of practice was formed, or to suggest that ours is too radical a break to be contained by them. Like all revolutions, digital humanities derives some of its kinetic energy from swinging between these two poles.

This is a book about literary text analysis—a particular form of scholarly engagement within the much broader field of interests, concerns, and endeavors we now call digital humanities. But it is more fundamentally a book that tries to locate a hermeneutics at the boundary between mechanism and theory. The "algorithmic criticism" proposed here seeks, in the narrowing forces of constraint embodied and instantiated in the strictures of programming, an analogue to the liberating potentialities of art. It proposes that we create tools—practical, instrumental, verifiable mechanisms—that enable critical engagement, interpretation, conversation, and contemplation. It proposes that we channel the heightened objectivity made possible by the machine into the cultivation of those heightened subjectivities necessary for critical work.

The precise nature of scientific inquiry, well revised and reimagined in recent years by theorists and historians from a variety of disciplines, is well beyond the scope of this book. But for decades the dominant assumption within humanities computing—evident even in the most recent examples cited in these pages—has been that if the computer is to be useful to the humanist, its efficacy must necessarily lie in the aptness of the scientific metaphor for humanistic study. This work takes the contrary view and proposes that scientific method and metaphor (or, more precisely, the use of these notions within the distorted epistemology we call "scientism") is, for the most part, incompatible with the terms of humanistic endeavor. The dilation of algorithmic criticism begins, then, with a consideration of how that scientific method has been used and abused within humanities computing itself.

Envisioning an alternative to the strictures of the scientific metaphor entails reaching for other, more obviously humanistic models. Chapter 2 takes

up this challenge by turning to the scientific imaginary as it appears in the realm of art. The variegated history of the *querelle* between art and science is, again, beyond the scope of the discussion offered here, but it will not be controversial to assert that art has very often sought either to parody science or to diminish its claims to truth. Within this important post-Romantic strain of critique, this work isolates another voice that has sought to find a common imaginative ground between art and science. The chapter begins with Alfred Jarry's inauguration of the "science of 'Pataphysics" and ends with the literary refraction of Jarry's *Gedankenexperimenten* in the work of the Oulipo. The latter, in which the terms of art and criticism are uniquely joined, informs algorithmic criticism's emphasis on the liberating forces of (computationally enforced) constraint. I argue, moreover, that this important modernist genealogy points to the primacy of pattern as the basic hermeneutical function that unites art, science, and criticism.

Chapter 3 takes up the literary critical analogues to the poetics of constraint. The notion of "deformance" provides the critical framework for a discussion of conventional criticism as an activity dependent upon the notions of constraint, procedure, and alternative formation. It is in this light that computationally enacted textual transformations reveal themselves most clearly as self-consciously extreme forms of those hermeneutical procedures found in all interpretative acts. Close analysis of several apparently diverse critical works—from readings of the *I Ching* and Saussure's anagrams to medieval poetry and Shakespearean sonnets—reveals the essential deformative nature of critical reading.

Programming, which algorithmic criticism reframes as the enactment of a critical reading strategy, undergirds all of these meditations. Chapter 4 delves deeper into the terms of this variety of textual activity, in an attempt to unite the reductive calculus of computation to the broader act of critical narrative. Using the Turing test as a guide, I attempt to locate the theoretical components that would allow computer-assisted criticism to be situated within the broader context of literary study. These considerations make way for chapter 5, which surveys some of the newer text-analytical tools—claiming them, unabashedly, as potential instruments of algorithmic criticism.

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