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Book reviews

A companion to digital literary studies

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A companion to digital literary studies, a volume in the *Blackwell companions to literature and culture series*, collects the voices of conspicuous scholars in a brand new field of research, voices which address technical, methodological and epistemological concerns related to the creation, publication, circulation, preservation, accessibility and interpretation of digital literary texts. This international collection of articles, edited by Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman, includes an editorial introduction, thirty-one articles and an overview of electronic resources.

In their introduction Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman remark that the phrase *digital literary studies* is insufficient to describe "a meeting of interests that represent the most important change occurring in the field of literary studies today" (p. xviii). When presenting the collection of essays, Alan Liu proposes to read them as depicting "a scene of new media encounter" (p.3) between the digital and the literary. This scene cannot be described as a border, he maintains, because the separation that formerly existed between codex-based literature and new media has long been breached to the extent that boundaries have turned into a zone of encounter. But this is not a new encounter, but one which has been taking place for a long time, as he shows in his account of the different moments in history when the literary witnessed and participated in the advent of new media. It is precisely in the writing of a history of new media where media theory metadiscourse is created—the discourse by means of which media ecologies adapt to the environments is they cross over new borders.

Shaping any history of new media encounter, says Liu, there are certain underlying propositions—an "overall narrative genome" (p.6). First, the new media are generally approached in terms of otherness, as a stranger to the land. The identity of new media is narrated as a life cycle which encompasses a moment of colonization or enchantment,

then a moment of disenchantment, and finally a moment of surmise—the moment when the new technology becomes part of the social landscape. As all other histories concerning the human, the story of new media has historical, socio-political and subjective dimensions. Also, histories of new media are unpredictable and reversible, since they are "messy" (p.9) modernisation narratives which try to account for long processes filled with arbitrariness and contingency. There is something in new media which is old, and something in old media which appears to be new when seen from new scenarios—thus, histories are both instances of *déja-vu* and of *avant la lettre*. Likewise, new media may both be libertarian and democratic on the one hand, and subjected to neo-authoritarian practices which call for specific programming models on the other. Finally, Liu explains that the study of new media requires to analyse not only the way in which (re)presentation is made possible through them, but also how notation is constructed and carried out so that (re)presentation becomes feasible. As he is in favour of seeing these narratives as traversed by imagination, Liu considers that a general goal of the *Companion* is "to tell a good story of new media encounter that has the maturity of a good world of messy, reversible, and imaginative possibilities" (p.16) Specifically, the *Companion* will attempt to answer some difficult questions, among them the extent to which literature, which is concerned with the less tangible aspects of the human, can be—or how it will continue to be—part of a territory like the digital, so much related to databases, statistics and complex programming.

The reader of the *Companion* will be introduced to the benefits of digital technologies regarding the study of all literary texts, even of Greek and Latin classics. In *ePhilology: When the books talk to their readers*, Gregory Crane, David Bamman and Alison Jones list among them the fact that this technology reaches all sites in the world, it is hypertextual, dynamic and self-regulating, it learns from readers and adapts to their needs. Never before did readers have such a wide access not only to literary texts, but also to critical discussions, to analyses of all kinds and to scholarly polemics as they have now. In *Knowledge will be multiplied: Digital literary studies and early modern literature*, Matthew Steggle, for instance, illustrates the power of digital media in their encounter with literary studies by alluding to readers' novel access to scholarly debates surrounding Shakespeare apocrypha, specifically the case of *The funeral elegy*.

Many of the essays produce historical narratives of the development of different forms of technology applied to the production and the reading of texts, and methodological proposals regarding the way in which digital tools contribute to literary studies: machine translation, different forms of analysis, complex statistical studies; the reproduction and dissemination of old or rare texts, the building of ever more comprehensive dictionaries, the compilation of growing databases of literary texts and criticism, the supplementation of rare texts with images, critical apparatuses and extra

primary material, the possibility of searching for leitmotifs within the texts which allow for different narrative sequences. It also provides for the presentation of a text and its translations or of different manuscript versions of the same text, so it could be said with Dirk Van Hulle that "digital literary studies seem to intensify the relationship between a published work and its textual memory" (p. 157).

One of the drawbacks of digital projects which were intended to make literary texts widely available is pointed out in *Disciplinary impact and technological obsolescence in digital medieval studies* by Daniel Paul O'Donnell, who reports on projects which, thought ambitious and expensive when they were carried out, because of the technological obsolescence of the media chosen soon dated to the point of making unavailable the texts they intended to divulge. Another problem which is addressed in the *Companion* is related to an emphasis on quantity over quality. Peter Damian-Grint surveys bibliographies and related resources in *Eighteenth-century literature in English and other languages: Image, text and hypertext*, and concludes that the number of literary texts produced in this century and made digitally available is still small, especially in the case of those written in languages other than English. What makes prospects more somber still is that the projects which address high-school or college students, he states, are low quality and scarce. His opinion as to eighteenth-century digital collections is that they will certainly be of use to scholars, but will soon be technologically dated as well.

Nineteenth-century literature is attractive for the World Wide Web because it is unencumbered by copyright restrictions, and therefore many projects have been undertaken which favour teaching and scholarly work. These projects are surveyed by John A. Walsh in *Multimedia and multitasking: A survey of digital resources for nineteenth-century literary studies*. The author draws a parallel between the present age and the Industrial Revolution in terms of growing literacies and fast technological changes. In *Hypertext and avant-texte in twentieth-century and contemporary literature*, Van Hulle maintains that the metafictionality of twentieth-century literature is reinforced by digital media—the fragmentariness of modernist texts, for example, is enhanced by the possibilities afforded by hypertexts, while present-day hyper-poets and writers are trying to incorporate and parody digital elements and procedures to printed texts, playing with time and space in innovative ways and effecting what could be considered a paradigm shift.

The thirteen articles in Part III, entitled *Textualities*, introduce the reader to new practices and genres ushered in by the new scenario of digital literature. The section starts with articles which centre on the literary text and on reading. In *Reading digital literature: Surface, data, interaction, and expressive processing*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin defines *digital literature*, dates its origin in the 1950s and introduces pioneer critical

studies on the topic. The author remarks that critical works on digital literature should operate with some type of model, proceeds to explore *Tale spin* (1976), a story generation programme and, finding current models insufficient, presents a new one.

The use of questions in the title and in different sections of *Is there a text on the screen? Reading in an era of hypertextuality* and an allusion to Stanley Fish's famous essay on reading are Bertrand Gervais' discourse strategies to address the status of texts in today's era of hypertext and linked computers and their impact on reading, writing and the production of knowledge. The author identifies three gestures involved in every act of reading (manipulating, understanding and interpreting) and analyses the factors that explain our reading difficulties in an era of hypertextuality. Cross-reference in this article leads to *Reading on screen: The new media sphere*, where Christian Vandendorpe traces the history of reading in the western world, which he considers associated to that of the book (from scroll, through codex to E-book). He comments on *Grazing, browsing and hunting*, the three modes of reading proposed by M. Heyer (1986), considers different metaphors used for text representation and, in the last sections, deals with the challenges posed by the advent of hypertext, announcing a future when "the printed book will have more and more difficulty meeting the expectations of most readers" (p. 213). Johanna Drucker's *The virtual codex from Page space to e-space* focuses on substitutes for traditional books and shifts from descriptions of familiar forms to those of "their reinvented shape in an electronic context" (p. 217). The author dismantles a series of preconceptions associated with both the bound codex and the electronic book. She presents electronic environments for reading and authoring as indebted to print culture and promotes "extending the ways a book *works*" rather than "simulating the way a book *looks*" as we shift into digital instruments (p.217).

The next essays deal with the more playful aspects of digital literature. *Handholding, remixing, and the instant replay: New narratives in a postnarrative world*, by Carolyn Guertin, provides a description of digital narrative as a battleground where the drive for fragmentation proper to the digital and the linear trajectory of narrative are at war, and indicates that in these scenarios reading has become a visual task of browsing while the concept of story has been substantially altered. The author characterises "what passes for narrative in digital storytelling forms" (p.233) as hyperactive, post-modern, post dramatic, self-reflexive and repetitive, and highlights digital narrative indebtedness to instant replay, remixing in disco music. Marie-Laure Ryan's *Fictional worlds in the digital age* clarifies concepts which are crucial to understand "fictional practices that take advantages […] of the most distinctive properties of digital media: interactivity, multimedia capabilities, volatility of inscription, and above all networking" (p 251). It explores the implications of those properties for fictional works existing both in the traditional and in the digital media, and after considering public online worlds where users

meet under the disguise of avatars, proceeds to praise videogames for the interactivity they allow for and for resolving the long-standing conflict between "ruled" and "make believe" games. References to the basic components of online games and to the implied player complete the article. In *Riddle machines: The history and nature of interactive fiction*, Nick Montfort characterises interactive fiction (IF) as potential narrative based on textual input and textual output, and describes constituents of the form such as player character, non-player character, parser, world model and conventions. When tracing the history of IF, the author also refers to developers and companies, to IF communities, and to the rise of IF in languages other than English. The first part of the title acquires meaning when IF is compared to its literary relatives: the novel and the riddle. The article is enriched by a transcript of a piece of IF and by a list of recommended IF pieces available for free download.

Technical aspects acquire more relevance in the next essays within this section. In the opening part of *Too dimensional: literary and technical images of potentiality in the history of hypertext*, Belinda Barnett and Darren Tofts explore three "early hypertext designs" (Vannevar Bush's Memex, Ted Nelson's Xanadu, and Douglas Engelbart's On-Line System) and some associated issues: accessibility, selection, categorising, storing, retrieval of information. According to the authors, the "founding fathers" were visionaries who gave prominence to the images of potentiality displayed by hypertext. In the last two sections the authors deal with early hypertext fiction and alternative poetics characterised by a sense of unending. Assuming that installed digital literature is a genre set in the context of other disciplines and art forms, Mark Leahy, in *Private public reading: Readers in digital literature installation*, deals with a series of aspects that distinguish installed digital literature from other digital literature, namely its location, third dimension, materiality, embodied reading and public reading. Reference to current literature on the topic and descriptions of instances of the genre help appreciate the singular mode in which the installation of digital literature "addresses its readers" and the type of reading practice "it elicits from those readers" (p. 315).

Digital poetry, performance, gaming and blogging are the topics of the next four essays. In *Digital poetry: A look at generative, visual and interconnected possibilities in its first four decades*, Christopher Funkhouser considers digital poetry a conglomeration of forms which constitute a new genre of literary, visual and sonic art and deals with a few of those forms (computer poems, graphical poems, hypertextual and hypermedial poetry). Derridean and Lyotardian concepts help Funkhouser characaterise digital poetry as "typical of the postmodern condition" (p 330). Though digital poetry is considered a by-product of the digital revolution and a genre which has received quantitative impetus from the WWW, the author identifies a long list of predecessors and highlights elements of this type of poetry already present in age old literary works and genres.

Two apparently distant relatives, computer technology and the performance arts, are brought together under David Saltz's lenses in *Digital literary studies: Performance and interaction*. The author considers different uses performance scholars and practitioners have put computers to serve; he presents applications used in pedagogical and/or research projects (performance readers, static space and live performance simulations), considers their shortcomings and alerts on the dangers involved in their acritical use. The impact of recently developed applications on the way the performing arts are being practised and the role acquired by computers in the performance itself are also analysed. Saltz concludes that the use of computers does not add "a new tool to an old discipline" but challenges "basic assumptions about performance" (p. 346).

Andrew Mactavish's approach to digital games uncovers an "important object of study for scholars" (p. 348), yet one with no firm ground underfoot as a discipline. *Licensed to play: Digital games, player modifications, and authorized production* introduces digital games as an emergent form of youth culture, considers the status of game players as co-creators and stresses the creative potentials of digital games. The author advocates for the study of digital gameplay in their enabling context and his analysis centres on "the production of player created derivative content" (p. 352) or modding, an issue that necessarily leads to discussion of corporate interests, copyright laws, knowledge sharing ethos, post fordist commodities and end-user license agreements. Closing this section, *Blogs and blogging: Text and practice*, by Aimée Morrison, provides an overview of the blogsphere, makes considerations about the term *weblog*, refers to the essential and optional characteristics of the genre that distinguish it from its kin, examines the cultural and technological factors that turned blogs mainstream and presents blog taxonomies which pave the way for considerations about such controversial issues as blogging in the academy, codes of ethics for bloggers and an evaluation of the future of the blogsphere.

Part IV- *Methodologies* includes eleven articles which impinge on different issues related to the contribution that computing can make to the field of the humanities, especially considering the changes it can introduce to representation. The first essay in this section, *Knowing…: Modeling in literary studies*, starts asserting that what we do shapes who we are, and that computers are making us complete new tasks daily, which in the long run will change our identities. Willard McCarty summarises the developments made in natural sciences regarding the concept of modelling and simulation to discuss the epistemological implications of computing for the humanities. Can computational modelling be of any help to the humanities, as it is to experimental sciences? He concludes that it might, as long as we use modelling as a tool to study that which cannot be modelled.

John Lavagnino's *Digital and analog texts* brings to the fore the discussion about the way in which modes of representation impact our experiences and on the way we

read and interpret texts. Lavagnino appeals to the history of the use of the categories in twentieth century engineering, cybernetics and cognitive science, and maintains that the distinction between the analog and the digital acquires meaning when contextualized, and that it is valuable insofar as it "can help us describe some practices in the use of texts more precisely (p. 402). In *Cybertextuality and philology* Ian Lancashire also explores the digital text, but this time through the concept of cybertext, and centring on the processes of authoring and reading, of analysing literary texts and also of contributing to linguistic analyses, to memory tests and to author self-monitoring. Computers can now quantify and analyse authors' actions in an unprecedented way, promising to throw light on the creative process by making it possible to study "authoring sessions" which writers could start to donate to research.

The digital is addressed from the perspective of publication and circulation in the next two essays. Welcome by some humanists and feared by others, the "move to digital production and dissemination" (p. 434) of scholarly publication in the humanities is Kenneth M. Price's centre of attention in *Electronic scholarly editions*. A series of open-ended questions posed by the author attest to his awareness of the amount of work to be done; of the high demand of social capital and of economic support required by scholarly editions which necessarily exact collaboration among librarians, archivists, academic administrators and funding agencies; and of the need that electronic scholarly editions adhere to international standards. Terminological distinctions, considerations about preservation, digital libraries, archives, databases and narrative are the central issues discussed and reference to outstanding digital editions help illustrate key points. In order to make digital texts available to the widest audience possible, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) develops sets of recommendations regarding the encoding of digital texts. These guidelines make a contribution to the humanities by establishing standard formats for data which make it possible to share texts and to analyze them no matter the technology available. This is the topic addressed in *The text encoding initiative and the study of literature* by James Cummings, who claims for more funding for the study of digital literature, now that efforts like that of the TEI are paving the way for the creating of digital editions.

In *Algorithmic criticism* Stephen Ramsey resumes the topic of the use of computers to study literature through "text analysis" via algorithms, a form of research which is conservative in spirit, in key with scientific methods and far from hermeneutic, argumentative standpoints. This may be welcome by those critics who distrust the methods associated with the humanities and embrace the possibilities offered by the revolution to be wrought by algorithmic criticism. Also of interest to critics is whether writing machines generate art, which is the question underpinning William Winder's *Writing Machines*. Acknowledging the invaluable support provided by formatters,

checkers, thesauri and printers, and acknowledging the functions of automatic templates, Winder is also aware of their shortcomings. He revises three paradigms-accelerated writing, artificial intelligence approach and automatic generation of art—to focus on the latter. The use of an ancient epitaph to illustrate the scope of *transmutation* and *transliteration*, reflections on the meaning of art, descriptions of syntactic, semantic and narrative templates, and considerations about topographies and mapping complete the article. The words "Can computers really write? Only if they can fly" (p. 513) provide a clear answer concerning author's stance. Literary scholars will also be interested in the possibilities afforded by computing to quantitative analysis. Building on overviews that discuss early advances in the field, in *Quantitative analysis and literary studies* David Hoover advocates for quantitative approaches as "innovative ways of "reading" amounts of text" (p 517). His assessments of quantification methods, statistical programs and artificial intelligence related techniques are complemented with exemplification. Two applications deserve fuller treatment and are analysed in forensic and literary contexts: authorship attribution and statistical stylistics.

Some of the issues discussed by G. Syaeed Choudbury and David Seaman in *The virtual library* are out-of-copyright texts, permission problems, funding sources, software tools that lead beyond mere searching and browsing, repositories and preservation, and librarians, digital specialists, cataloguers and programmers as "allies in exploring new forms of publication, production and dissemination" (p. 541). Though aware of the overwhelming mass of data of interest for the humanities which remain unexplored "because infrastructure and services to use them effectively in digital form remain in nascent form" (p. 542), the authors still consider that "digital libraries based on repositories will continue to ensure that the library remains a hub of scholarly activity" (p. 545). Also related to the creation of libraries is the format texts need to take in order to be studied. *Practice and preservation-format issues* by Marc Bragdon, Alan Burk, Lisa Charlong, and Jason Nugent centres on digital formats currently used in a series of research activities in the field of the humanities. Format propriety to a given task and "to each format its purpose" (p 547) are guiding principles that, in the authors' opinion should rule format selection. XML, PDF, TIFF, JPEG and JPEG 2000, five formats ubiquitous in web environment and frequently used by humanist researchers are discussed "in light of their facility in promoting associated discipline goals" (p.547) and their potentialities and drawbacks are considered. In *Character Encoding*, Christian Wittern remarks that "every digital text has to use a character encoding in its internal representation" and that people working with digital texts need "a basic understanding of what character encoding is and what the basic issues are" (p. 565). After elucidating the meaning and scope of terms such as text encoding, character encoding and mark up, the author explores the relationship of character encoding and writing systems to

concentrate on Unicode, "the most important coded character in use" (p. 565). These last three essays testify to the importance of technical issues to text creation, circulation, preservation and accessibility.

The closing section, *Annotated overview of selected electronic resources*, by Tanya Clement and Gretchen Gueguen, reviews a sampling of freely available online resource in English. The materials selected cover a wide range of genres, methods, perspectives and traditions and are organized into three sections: digital transcriptions and images, born-digital texts and new media objects, and criticism, reviews, and tools.

The variety of topics and issues discussed, the academic rigour and the broad-minded and varied views displayed in the articles contribute to a plural text which, due to its cohesion, moves beyond the mere *compilation* towards a real *collection*, a complex textual system of interconnected, indispensable parts. *A companion to digital literary studies* may be considered seminal to literary studies, since it is published at a moment when the field is already consolidated but still young. Though it offers undergraduates tools to explore an astonishingly quick-changing and ever-expanding field, the book will probably find its largest audience among graduates and scholars, to whom it is highly recommended.

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