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Data versus Literature? The Digital Humanities and Literary Studies

To the Editor:

I respect Andrew Kopec's essay "The Digital Humanities, Inc.: Literary Criticism and the Fate of a Profession" (vol. 131, no. 2, 2016, pp. 324–39) on many grounds, not least his commitment to connecting important developments in our profession to what he aptly terms "socio-institutional contexts" (325). And I share his interest in the technology he celebrates: this letter comes not to bury the digital humanities but to praise them. Nonetheless, many of his contentions about the culture at large, the academy, and the connections between them are problematic.

In writing that "by liberating themselves to match the pure flexibility of postindustrial work, the digital humanities can be deployed anywhere, in any context, unhindered by a craft tradition," Kopec plays two models of spatiality against each other, linking the practices he favors with the flow and fluidity not coincidentally associated with global modes of criticism, while the bad old days of craft and guild are implicitly linked to blockage and stasis (331). But the effects of the digital humanities on the workplace, whether in the academy or elsewhere, include significant risks as well as benefits: Kopec's view of these postindustrial practices is as idealized as the agrarian nostalgia he rightly protests. Yes, the opportunity to work from home or a table in Starbucks, setting one's own hours, has advantages for some people, but it is not necessarily good for those with small children and limited space. And although Kopec rightly emphasizes that working remotely does not preclude the potential for teamwork, in practice the home office is often isolating. Such arrangements can also encourage employers to assume that people are available 24/7. And surely this type of postindustrial work facilitates regarding its participants as outside contractors, thus contributing to

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1557 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the attending loss of benefits and security suffered by our own adjuncts—treatment that to his credit Kopec deplores—and to the decrease in tenure-track positions. Moreover, the stereotype that older workers cannot fulfill the digital responsibilities their positions might entail has led to the dismissal, in several senses, of people who still have a lot to offer.

Far from merely being a hindrance or an exemplum of the antimodern, the medieval craft tradition established practices and values that may provide a positive precedent for the academy today: a respect for training and skill; an obligation to apprentices and other, newer members of the group; and, above all, guild traditions that anticipated the labor unions that have offered valuable protection to our colleagues.

Although Kopec occasionally, especially in a few endnotes, acknowledges distinctions among the critical movements he condemns, on the whole the essay neglects significant differences among the American New Critics and conflates the American New Criticism, close reading of other types, formalism, and the new formalism in their many incarnations. To be sure, some of the American New Critics do distrust, even demonize, historical analysis, and others merely give lip service to its significance. But, to cite just two examples, the importance of not only literary but also other forms of history is celebrated by Reuben Brower and Richard Poirier in their introduction to the collection *In Defense of Reading* (E. P. Dutton, 1962, pp. vii–x) and realized in studies like Clay Hunt's *Donne's Poetry* (Yale UP, 1954). Moreover, by devoting nearly one-third of the essay to the branch of the New Criticism associated with agrarian nostalgia, Kopec gives short shrift to the many American New Critics whose politics are more progressive. Not to mention, of course, William Empson himself. Indeed, instead of being "invigorated" by the Southern Agrarians and others holding similar political views (326), many modern close readers and formalists persuasively distance themselves from those positions.

Kopec's representation of the new formalism, which borrows some of the categories from the binary and often oversimplified view of it in Marjorie Levinson's influential *PMLA* essay "What Is New Formalism?" (vol. 122, no. 2, 2007, pp. 558–69), is also open to challenges. Far from eschewing the study of history, many new formalists cite it as the distinction between themselves and earlier formalists. (That claim has, however, been disputed, notably by Susan J. Wolfson. In "Reading for Form without Formalism" [*Literary Matters*, vol. 3, 2010, pp. 14–15, www.alscw.org/publications/literary-matters/index.html], she emphasizes that earlier formalists were in fact engaged with history, a point she develops, with several other observations germane to my letter, in "Romantic Poetry: Formings without Formalism" [*Oxford Handbooks Online*, edited by Colin Burrow and Thomas Keysmer, Oxford UP, 2016, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013,112]).

Pace Kopec's own analysis and John Guillory's powerful insights into tensions between close reading as an academic practice and the types of reading fostered by the new media ("Close Reading: Prologue and Epilogue"; *ADE Bulletin*, no. 149, 2010, pp. 8–14), many practitioners of formalisms, old and new, neither ignore nor scorn the digital humanities. The dichotomy between data and literature that Kopec posits is undercut by these practitioners' studies, which often draw on data gleaned from digital analyses to generate and substantiate formalist and new formalist analyses. Witness, for instance, the work in genre studies, a field central to both older and newer formalisms, in an essay by Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore, "The Hundredth Psalm to the Tune of 'Green Sleeves': Digital Approaches to Shakespeare's Language of Genre" (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2010, pp. 357–90). Similarly, in "Shakespeare's Construction," Daniel Shore emphasizes the necessity of digital tools in exploring what he terms "linguistic forms," and he practices what he preaches through some subtle close readings (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2015, pp. 113–36). Sometimes described as one of the founders of the new formalism, I myself recently applauded and employed the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1557 Published online by Cambridge University Press

digital humanities in my own critical work, such as "'Some New Pleasures'? Donne's Lyrics and Recent Critical Approaches," forthcoming in the *John Donne Journal* (vol. 35, 2016).

While Kopec's essay generalizes too broadly about many types of criticism, it also skirts movements that might compromise his theses. In particular, how about the role of close reading in deconstruction?

But given the intelligence and scope this article so often displays, continuing to list disagreements is less valuable than asking why it goes wrong where it does. Might this question lead us to challenge the privileging of overly bold theses and the whole role of teleology when we write—and are written by—the history of our profession?

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Reply:

I appreciate Heather Dubrow's thoughtful response to my essay "The Digital Humanities, Inc.: Literary Criticism and the Fate of a Profession," which finds in the digital humanities and new formalisms competing objects of professional desire. Dubrow objects to what she sees as several important flaws in my article, including its "idealized" portrait of postindustrial flexibility, its distorted genealogy of the new formalism, and its overly bold style. A few potential lines of response to these charges come to mind: the irony of the fact that I'm writing this letter at home on a laptop while my two small children play in the background (#ScholarSunday); my essay's attempt to link an explicit economic polemic to the present without endorsing the "cultural politics" that most, if not all, formalists denounce; the corporatization of the university recently made concrete for me when my home institution, under the rubric of "strategic alignment," eliminated majors in women's studies, philosophy, French, and German; and the identification of "critical university studies" as the site of boldness in our era of "new modesty" (Jeffrey J. Williams; "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism"; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 Jan. 2015, www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-in-Literary/150993/). In this short reply, though, I would like to respond to the concern that seems most pressing to Dubrow—that the "dichotomy between data and literature . . . is undercut by" recent digital scholarship.

In fact, studies like the one by Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore to which Dubrow alludes reinforce, rather than undercut, my claim about the dialectical opposition between data and literature. In considering the convergence of digital humanities and formalist disciplinary constructs, my essay concludes with Ryan Cordell's work on Nathaniel Hawthorne, "'Taken Possession Of': The Reprinting and Reauthorship of Hawthorne's 'Celestial Railroad' in the Antebellum Religious Press" (*Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013, www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000144/000144.html). Although I did not make this argument in my essay, it struck me as I was writing it that the conflict between data and literature had not been resolved insofar as Cordell's fine scholarship appears in an issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (a special issue on "the literary") rather than in a mainstream literary-studies journal. Cordell's subsequent publication in a venue like *American Literary History* ("Reprinting, Circulation, and the Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers"; *American Literary History*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2015, pp. 417–45), of course, does bridge the traditional and the digital. So too does the issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* that contains Hope and Witmore's article, a special issue titled *Shakespeare and New Media*, which I was unfamiliar with before reading Dubrow's letter. And yet, as of October 2016, these crossover successes strike me as exceptions that prove the rule. In her introduction to the same issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Katherine Rowe offers a well-theorized account of the digital and its

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1557 Published online by Cambridge University Press