

Literary enquiry and experimental method: What has happened? What might?

Willard McCarty

Professor of Humanities Computing

King's College London

Computing first became involved with the humanities before, with or after Turing, depending on how you define both. In the canonical story, digital computing entered the picture as help for concordance; others point out its nearly contemporaneous entry with attempts to automate translation. As with artificial intelligence, early successes led to visionary predictions, which by the late 1970s began to look grossly premature. Subsequently, the history of literary computing has attested to slow, steady gains, especially in computational stylistics. But literary computing has been repeatedly punctuated by the lament that, as Rosanne Potter said in 1989, it has “not been rejected, but rather neglected”. The promised transformation of criticism has not happened. The most insightful commentary on the problem, from Susan Wittig and Richard Bailey in 1978 to David Hoover in 2007, has consistently pointed to an inadequate concept of text.

It would be a serious error to conclude simply that theory has been the culprit and is the only saviour, for that would be to imply the unqualified primacy of theory in research. We know that in the context of research computing is experimental in character – that it brings something very much like experiment into the humanities. We know from the history and philosophy of science that, as Ian Hacking said decades ago, “experiment has a life of its own” and contributions of its own to make (1983: 150). We know that it does so asynchronously in interaction with theory. But while experimental enquiries into works of literature have yielded substantial progress in particular areas, they have repeatedly demonstrated the truth of Wittig’s and Bailey’s observation. It’s now theory’s turn.

In this lecture I will start from Northrop Frye’s hint of how we would have responded and Jerome McGann’s work in bringing more adequate theory to computational criticism. I will then sketch my ideas of how to model forward and outward from works of literature into “the world of others’ words”, as Bakhtin said. The lecture will be Anglo-American in critical outlook, but wider perspectives will be most warmly welcomed.