

The project of Milad Doueïhi's *La Grande conversion numérique* is to reflect on the ways in which digital culture, which he characterizes as a liberating environment marked by open access and the freedom of users to manipulate digital objects, comes into a contestatory relation, if not into outright contradiction, with traditional models of cognitive and social organization. As a work of advocacy, the book summons us to develop a new understanding of literacy, by which Doueïhi means a kind of digicultural competency, a capacity to navigate a communicative labyrinth that goes beyond the ability to read and write in accord with established epistemological and expressive conventions and, for intellectuals and scholars, opens onto unprecedented experiments with the way research is conducted and knowledge is organized and, ultimately, with the way human relations are constructed and conceptualized. In the humanities, we are certainly able to perceive the adventures his book evokes in describing, say, the formation of digital objects in the Web 2.0 environment. But for most of us—I take the practitioners of the digital humanities that Kathryn Hayles described yesterday afternoon to be, for the time being, relatively exceptional—it is fair to say that our scholarly norms and habits and our self-validating reflexes generally tend to insulate us from the turbulence we know is out there. Most of us, I suspect, quietly hope to leave the digital humanities to future generations and not to have to reckon strongly with it ourselves.

The gentle, low-key, reassuring tone and muted voice that Milad sustains in his books and in the paper we've just heard might lull us into wondering if his interventions in the debate about our scholarly future don't constitute just another recuperative modernization—one that will help us domesticate digital technology just as we've tamed and assimilated all those other transformative technologies that the historians of knowledge and education weave into their retrospectives. Perhaps, in other words, we can situate the challenges of the digital as obstacles that his analytic account of the possibilities it opens up and of the displacements of established orders it has already occasioned is helping us overcome. The message would be, in sum, that we can corral the digital beast and maintain the hard-won order we've achieved here on the scholarly ranch. Or at least his point would be that a compromise or peaceful coexistence akin to the one Kathryn Hayles described yesterday afternoon, which would allow the traditional humanities and digital humanities to complement and inflect one another, is a reasonable

objective. But the alternative take on this that should perhaps command our attention at least momentarily is that Milad's picture of digital culture is telling is something more incisive—to wit, that the humanities really have to change, that digital culture beckons toward a paradigmatic shift that is not just evolutionary, but rather more revolutionary, more threatening, too destabilizing to be managed with gradual adaptation and pious rearticulations of received wisdom about the eternal value of the humanities. It is toward an interrogation focused on this latter prospect that I would like to point by formulating some questions that Milad's talk has indeed raised, but that I propose to reformulate in terms more naïve and less subtle than his. Perhaps this will induce him to comment on them with less circumspection than is his wont.

The first question, which in some respects perpetuates the classic contrast of scientific culture with that of the humanities, concerns the opposition of the two contemporary cultures that now seem coexist to somewhat uneasily, the print and the digital. The overwhelmingly dominant transformation that Milad highlighted in his paper and that is utterly irreversible in its force moves from the print into the digital by converting print objects into digital objects in a way that confers upon the digital two vital, comprehensive functions: on the one hand, its capacious repositories take over much of the task of preserving and providing access to what was the print record, which in its print form will become less widely disseminated and more concentrated in material archives that henceforth serve mainly as guarantors (the way gold once did for money); on the other hand, beyond this function of *reproduction* there is one of transformation, as the digital also pursues the task of *recontextualization*—of repositioning the textual and imaginal components of the print record in a dynamic context that subjects them to readers' prerogatives to determine their meaning through a process of collective glossing. This recontextualization is infinitely open or, to use Milad's apt epithet, extensible. The very process of digital archiving that purports to preserve the original in its inviolability also serves to unsettle the sanctity of that original, once associated with a meaning established by the author's intent, but now subjected to an ongoing supplemental, multiple recasting by a community of editing and interpreting readers whose participation in the text's transmission makes them authors of the text-embracing commentarial corpus

that goes expansively forward. Such, then, is the apparent paradox: authorship is a process that the readers, over time, take over; they preserve it by dis-seminating it.

How new is this process? In what respects and to what extent does it differ from that of the pre-digital era, when the tasks of critical editors and critical readers also came to be understood to be vital to the determination of meaning that took place in the pre-digital order termed *intertextuality*? Don't the emergence of the critical edition and eventually of reception theory and reader-response criticism reveal reader-privileging functions that are historically inevitable, whatever the medium of transmission, and that the digital medium, with its networking impetus, seems simply to intensify and, as Susan Buck-Morss suggested yesterday afternoon, to democratize? Is the divide between the status of an author or a text in print and in digital format radicalized—made culturally more significant—by the openness to glossolalic proliferation that the digital ushers in? Or does the digital transformation really just carry out a new and massive monumentalization, an acceleration of a trend toward the desanctification of the author and the so-called original (really an editor's invention) that we've long understood and that, collectively and institutionally, we've been both promoting and fending off for various purposes, noble and ignoble?

A great deal of scholarly activity is devoted precisely, as Milad notes, to resisting that trend. The resistance typically takes the form of reproducing the print record in digital environments as intellectual property. The digitized property is accompanied, moreover, by powerful new tools and methods for studying that property that have a dual effect on its status: that of further consecrating it as a valued commodity accessible for a price and that of further exposing it to collective appropriation as a readily accessible cultural good. While as Milad suggests, citing the experience of the film and recording industries as evidence (and we could also invoke the fate of newspapers with their on-line supplements to what they print, and thereby observe the damage of a print-to-digital transition that might not offer cheerful lessons to the scholarly publishers whose well-being concerns us here), the latter effect seems to have the upper hand, why should it? Precisely what ground or line of judgment makes it valid to claim that the former effect—restrictive resacralization—is unfortunate and that the latter—public ownership—is to be preferred?

Another question arises when Milad turns his attention specifically to humanities scholarship and publishing. As an anthologically driven site of scholarly interaction that allows the researcher to follow the production of texts, images and ideas with a degree of thoroughness unimaginable in earlier times, the digital medium does assemble and make accessible an incredible mass of information along with powerful tools for searching within it. To some extent, as Katherine Hayles explained yesterday, the digital humanities are developing means of managing that mass and extracting insights from it. This new research paradigm proper to the digital humanities is necessary because the detail that digital scholarly resources makes available and infinitely extensible is simply not commensurable with the limited powers of understanding that the traditional humanistic scholar, however intelligent and erudite, can bring to bear on them. But will such a new research paradigm necessarily displace or even directly affect either the paradigms of intelligibility or the axiological practices that are at work in the traditional humanities? Or to put the question in terms closer to those used in Milad's talk, what is it about attention to digital objects that will be regenerative for humanities scholarship?

My final question, which Milad's paper raises explicitly, involves publishing practices or models in the digital environment. In the publishing-crisis literature he mentions briefly, the conventional view ties the problems encountered by academic publishing, which are perhaps extreme in the humanities and the arts, to the market for its products and the need for commodified research and knowledge to provide adequate income to its producers. As Peter Potter pointed out this morning, this market problem is aggravated for scholars and academic presses by the development of electronic publishing and electronic or virtual libraries. There is no doubt, moreover, that the open source framework represents an ideal for the pursuit and dissemination of scholarly work that has, in the abstract, great appeal for the community of scholars and for critics of academia who attend to the biases and inequities that a market-based economy visits upon players at all levels, in all institutional sites, of the academic world.

What digital culture seems ultimately to suggest as an alternative would be the ready, systematic electronic publication of all scholarly work made available by participants in the enterprise and a whole new structure for enabling the community to access, use, and evaluate it. The vision is one we might think of as a general, multi-level

ontology representing the revamped practices of humanistic scholarship. This structure would embrace and configure the various discrete ontologies of the digital that Milad evokes cautiously in his paper, even while he asserts that, in the interactive environment of web-based scholarship, “scholarly publishing takes on a new role and a new function.” So my question for Milad, in the terms of his account of digital culture, is this: who would be responsible for thinking this new scholarly ontology and along with it academic publishing’s new role and function? What institutional agency could preside over their elaboration and implementation? In other words, is a sweeping ontological reformation, one that would to carry the effects of the digital over into the traditional humanities and overhaul them decisively, thinkable as a deliberate project?