MITH Director Neil Fraistat delivered the following lecture at Tufts University on April 10, 2014 and as a keynote to the conference held by the Australasia Association of Digital Humanities in March 2013. We make it available here as a contribution to the recent spate of essays and articles about the value and situation of the Digital Humanities in the current academic landscape. Citations for the quotations to follow.
In perhaps Percy Bysshe Shelley’s most urbane poem, Julian & Maddalo, the two eponymous characters replay a conversation that actually took place between Shelley and Lord Byron. Julian, who is Shelley’s counterpart, makes an impassioned speech about the possibility of radical social transformation, climaxing in the claim: “We might be otherwise—we might be all | We dream of happy, high, majestical.” To this Maddalo replies dismissively, “You talk Utopia…. I knew one like you | . . . | With whom I argued in this sort, and he | Is now gone mad.”

This exchange wonderfully illustrates the well-known double bind of Utopian discourse. On the one hand, for truly transformational change to be imagined, no less effected, one must “talk Utopia.” We need the discursive power of nowhere in order to figure somewhere else, to “be otherwise,” as Julian would have it. Utopian discourse, in short, gives futurity “a local habitation and name.” On the other hand, as Maddalo is quick to point out, Utopian discourse comes at great cost and contains within itself the seeds of its own undoing, shadowed by its all-but-impossibility, as it were, and entailing promises that are difficult to keep. The Utopian functions as a form of what Donald Davie and John Barrell have called “fiduciary” discourse that operates at a level of abstraction that forces us ultimately either to credit it as meaningful, or dismiss its entire enterprise. Utopian hopes can be cashed in, but they can’t be cashed out until the far end of time. They are futurity’s promissory notes.
From the rosy dawn of “old style humanities computing” in the work of Father Roberto Busa on the *Index Thomisticus*, begun in the 1940s, to the current high noon of our contemporary “Digital Humanities,” one key distinction between these two names for the field is precisely in their promise, or how their promise has been conceived. For a long while, computation in the humanities was primarily thought to be an extension of the work that humanists were already doing and it flourished, as such, in the fields of linguistics, stylistics, bibliography, and textual scholarship. Now it is thought by many to be applicable to all humanities disciplines and transformative of the humanities as a whole. It’s the Utopian promise of digital humanities—and its attendant promises—that I’d like to focus on today.

As the former President of the MLA Michael Berubé has noted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, humanists have “deposited so many of our hopes and anxieties” on the emerging field of digital humanities. “Somehow we expect the digital humanities to revolutionize scholarly communication, save university presses, crowdsourse peer review, and provide humanities Ph.D.’s with good jobs in libraries, institutes, nonprofits, and innovative start-ups. And the digital humanities will do all that by sometime late next week.” Rita Raley makes a similar point from another perspective: “It is universally acknowledged that the Digital Humanities have made important contributions to traditional scholarship in literary studies, in particular introducing provocative questions about scale, multimodal scholarship, and changing reading and writing practices. Still one might ask why and how it is that it has come to function as the solution to every crisis of disciplinary legitimacy and every methodological impasse.” As these two comments suggest, the Utopian
Promise of DH lives in stark tension with its ability to realize its own entailed promises.

It is worth remarking that only four years ago Digital Humanities was proclaimed as “the next big thing” on the academic scene. In fact, we haven’t quite emerged from a period of intense preoccupation about what precisely Digital Humanities is and isn’t. The intensity of interest in this question and the heated debates about it reflect the perceived high stakes of the answer. At an MLA session on “The History and Future of Digital Humanities” I found myself wanting to tell those in the room who were obsessing over exactly what Digital Humanities is to relax: I’m a Romanticist, and after some 150 years we still haven’t come to a generally agreed upon definition of the field--and that, oddly enough, has helped to keep Romanticism dynamic and vibrant. On the other hand, it has also made Romanticism as a field vulnerable to disappearing into the long 18th or 19th Centuries, which is to say that “fieldness” has very real material and institutional instantiations and consequences for Digital Humanities, as Matt Kirschenbaum, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, and others have argued.

Fitzpatrick saliently wonders, however, about the cost of “disciplinarity,” about “the degree to which we are now being disciplined by our need to define the field. What conversations won’t take place,” she asks, “now that our structure has become officially institutionalized?” Digital Humanists appear to stand at an intoxicating and relatively rare moment in the history of the humanities, at the cusp of what appears to be an emerging and transformative field that their own words and deeds can help to define; but Fitzpatrick’s cautionary note should bring
necessary sobriety to discussions about the exact meaning of Digital Humanities, since each of our attempts to define the field risks losing whatever is most vital and promising about it. And each conveys a vision of DH with certain promises to keep.

Of course, one of the largest questions in play is whether DH is, in fact, a field at all. Although many still consider DH to be an array of methodologies across the humanities disciplines rather than a field in its own right, most DHers appear to consider themselves engaged in a field with already well entrenched institutional roots. Where, then, is the there of DH? To those who would answer “Nowhere,” Steve Ramsey would retort: “Digital Humanities is not some airy Lyceum. It is a series of concrete instantiations involving money, students, funding agencies, big schools, little schools, programs, curricula, old guards, new guards, gatekeepers, and prestige. It might be more than these things, but it cannot not be these things.”

Fields, however, come with boundary lines, and defining the actual boundaries of DH is still one of the most contentious of issues, involving provocative and problematic oppositions between DH and new media studies; between making and theorizing; between method and ideology; between service and research; and between “big tent DH” and more restrictive definitions of the field. About such issues, I find especially interesting the following provocation by Mark Sample, with its call for innovation and disruption, though it might seem to fly in the face of some material realities I’ve just mentioned:

Stop worrying about definitions and categories and celebrate hybridity. Take advantage of all that the margin affords. Do what you do and keep doing what you do. Engage outsiders, build coalitions, and form tactical collaborations.
And move on when the time comes to move on, finding another periphery point to innovate and disrupt.

Sample’s tactics are founded on a compelling vision of the field as always not one, as it were—or to be more precise, that is always not one thing, but rather a dynamic process of thinking, making, and collaborating that is fundamentally concerned with how computation and algorithmic methodologies can lead to disciplinary interrogation, innovation, and transformation in the humanities. Such moves suggest Utopian possibilities for DH operating at the tactical, rather than the strategic level. While I am in sympathy with the continental distinction between the tactical as something to be celebrated and the strategic as something to be resisted, I believe that rejecting the strategic completely for the tactical risks leaving DH without larger agency and opens it up to the kind of neo-liberal co-option I’ll be discussing shortly. Both seem to me necessary for DH.

Indeed, what DH has perhaps most lacked are broad and compelling strategic visions of its own larger place and value both within and outside of the academy. As Johanna Drucker has noted,

the real challenge to digital humanities is still intellectual: how does work in this area contribute to theory, methods, or the corpus of humanistic study? This question goes right to the heart of ways we assess the value of tool-making, project development and management, institutional initiatives, programs. Humanities fields constitute themselves, like any discipline, through their theoretical approaches (ways of thinking), methods (ways of doing), and objects of study (pre-existing and constituted by the act of study).
I do think we have instances of each of these in our legacy of digital humanities projects, but the explicit articulation of this – rather than blunt assertion – is not yet fully developed or we would not have to keep making the case.

Drucker’s call for a more strategically self-reflexive DH seems fundamentally in sympathy with the field’s Utopianism, as does Alan Liu’s highly influential call for a DH more strategically engaged in cultural criticism:

To be an equal partner—rather than . . . just a servant—at the table, digital humanists will need to find ways to show that thinking critically about metadata, for instance, scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world. . . . How the digital humanities advances, channels, or resists today’s great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate and global flows of information-cum capital is . . . a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects with which I am familiar.

Since the publication of “Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” a little more than three years ago, Liu’s questions about the cultural politics of the field have resonated deeply and helped inform the development of the #transformdh movement, which aims to critique and address the relative paucity of DH work on race, class, gender, sexuality and disability, and it has been equally generative for the #dhpoco movement, which is doing the same for DH and post-colonialism. The extent to which these new movements become situated as oppositional to mainstream DH, or as a fundamental part of it remains to be seen,
but either outcome will have a crucial bearing on DH’s Utopian promise, which demands inclusivity, openness to critique, self-reflexivity, and the ability to be transformed as well as being transformational.

For some, there is a darker Dystopian way to interpret the current situation of DH. In the words of David Golumbia in a recent blog post:

to anyone observing the study of English in 1993 and today in 2013, the fact that the only new movement anyone is talking about in English Departments is one in which critique, politics, interpretation, analysis, and close reading are at best playing second fiddle—where people seriously say “more hack, less yack” as if they are watchwords for the discursive humanities, and declare that building a database is so inherently theoretical that no additional theorizing or contextualizing of it is necessary—the fact that it’s virtually impossible to get hired as primarily a critical scholar of the digital in English departments, when all we are in other topic areas is critical scholars—might appear something less than accidental.

Indeed, if Utopianism inevitably calls forth its dark other, such issues and others eventuated in what has been called “The Dark Side of DH,” the title of a highly controversial session at the 2013 conference of the Modern Language Association, which has been summarized dramatically by William Pannapacker for the Chronicle of Higher Education as follows:

That DH is insufficiently diverse. That it falsely presents itself as a fast-track to academic jobs (when most of the positions are funded on soft money). That it suffers from “techno-utopianism” and “claims to be the solution for
every problem.” That DH is “a blind and vapid embrace of the digital”; it insists upon coding and gamification to the exclusion of more humanistic practices. That it detaches itself from the rest of the humanities (regarding itself as not just “the next big thing,” but “the only thing”). That it allows everyone else in the humanities to sink as long as the DH’ers stay afloat. That DH is complicit with the neoliberal transformation of higher education; it “capitulates to bureaucratic and technocratic logic”; and its strongest support comes from administrators who see DH’ers as successful fundraisers and allies in the “creative destruction” of humanities education. And—most damning—that DH’ers are affiliated with a specter that is haunting the humanities—the specter of MOOCs.

While several of these charges are easily dismissible and “the specter of MOOCs” is an absolute red herring, the damning heft of them together is well summarized by Pannacker: “In short, DH is an opportunistic, instrumentalist, mechanized response to the economic crisis—it represents ‘the dark side of capitalism.’” In this Dystopian figuration, DH is, in effect, a neoliberal conspiracy against the humanities that has been successful for all the wrong reasons. Even though most DHers believe that they are precisely what stand between humanists and such bottom-line neoliberal reconfigurations of the humanities, I think that this Dark Sider claim needs to be taken seriously, conspiracy elements aside. For DH is a field whose master discourse includes such keywords as “innovation,” “disruption,” “transformation,” and, yes, “entrepreneurship.” All of these terms contain trap doors to the dark side, as it were. DH will thus always be at risk of becoming what the Dark Siders behold
and losing its Utopian potential without the kind of critical cultural awareness called for by Liu and others.

Golumbia, for example, asserts that inside the field a “narrow” understanding of DH as tool-building obtains, but because DHers understand that the “narrow definition” is unwelcome to many, they publicly pitch a “big tent DH” that is supposedly universally inclusive, “especially . . . [when addressing] outsiders, while continuing to insist on the ‘narrow’ definition in critical field-defining activities like funding and hiring.” In this view, DH has infiltrated English literary studies as, in effect, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, initially claiming “we just do what you already do, so you have to accept us as genuinely part of your project.” But once through the door DHer’s operative “narrow definition licenses almost the diametrically opposite sentiment: ‘what we do [by which Golumbia means tool building] is very different from what you do, so you have to change your standards and methods to get on board with us.’” Like many other things in the digital world,” concludes Golumbia, “DH ends up asserting both that it is ‘completely new and exactly the same’ as other forms of English scholarship.” I, myself, see little evidence of the systematic, field-wide exercise in bad faith described by Golumbia—nor do I see anything like consensus about the so-called “narrow definition.” Instead, I would agree with Patrik Svenson’s assessment that the self-contentions still visible in such definitions of the field involve its genealogy. For Svenson, what Golumbia calls “narrow DH can largely be traced to humanities computing – and . . . still has quite a few proponents. . . The broad definition [of DH] is newer and . . . more clearly associated with recent
buzz, white papers, and leadership level talk. It is also associated with many ‘newcomers.’”

Indeed, what I’ve been describing as the Utopian discourse of DH has emerged largely in the service of this “broad definition” and been the product of “recent buzz” (mostly from outside the field), “white papers,” “leadership level talk,” grant rhetoric, and manifestos. There is perhaps no stronger distilled statement of the field’s Utopian potential, for example, than in the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0, published in 2009, which locates the Utopian core of DH as being

“shaped by its genealogical descent from the counterculture-cyberculture . . . [intertwinings] of the 60s and 70s. This is why it affirms the value of the open, the infinite, the expansive, the university/museum/archive/library without walls, the democratization of culture and scholarship, even as it affirms the value of large-scale statistically grounded methods (such as cultural analytics) that collapse the boundaries between the humanities and the social and natural sciences. This is also why it believes that copyright and IP standards must be freed from the stranglehold of Capital.”

The genealogy of DH provided here is contestable in its historiography and logic: current DH Utopian values can’t be causally explained as mere restatements of the cyber-Utopian ferment of the 60s and 70s, as in the Manifesto’s claims beginning “This is why it affirms X and Y” or “This is why it believes Z,” but the direct linkage between the two is certainly ideologically strategic for the authors of the Manifesto, even though to my mind it opens DH to being dismissed as an ineffectual form of techno-utopianism.
The deep underlying logic of the *Manifesto* is that the affordances of digital multimediaility are fundamentally transformative for the academy, whose scholarly practices have been shaped for centuries by the affordances of print. DH thus seeks to play an inaugural role with respect to a world in which, no longer the sole producers, stewards, and disseminators of knowledge or culture, universities are called upon to shape natively digital models of scholarly discourse for the newly emergent public spheres of the present era (the www, the blogosphere, digital libraries, etc.), to model excellence and innovation in these domains, and to facilitate the formation of networks of knowledge production, exchange, and dissemination that are, at once, global and local.

This effort, in turn, calls for a DH that is not merely quantitative and tool-driven, but also “qualitative, interpretive, experiential, emotive, [and] generative in character.” Such a DH collapses the opposition between theory and making: “Knowledge assumes multiple forms; it inhabits the interstices and criss-crossings between words, sounds, smells, maps, diagrams, installations, environments, data repositories, tables, and objects. Physical fabrication, digital design, the styling of elegant, effective prose; the juxtaposing of images; the montage of movements; the orchestration of sound: they are all making.” This is a vision of DH that values process over product, co-creation over solitary production, the cross-disciplinary, the networked, the multi-modal, the curated, the shared, the hand-crafted, the re-mix, the provocation, and the provisional. It is a vision that highlights the very question of the materiality of critique, which too often in literary studies is seen only
in linguistic terms--reading, interpreting, writing--and it suggests that DH, like the visual and performing arts and other praxis focused disciplines, can stage critique beyond the alphanumeric, giving new force to the dictum that resistance always comes at the level of the materials. As Todd Presner would have it in this regard, “digital humanities is a practice and performance of making which is conditioned by human, social, and material contingencies, all of which have the potential to engage in transformative praxis.”

For the Manifesto, the field name “Digital Humanities” itself is a “strategic essentialism” that enables an array of like-minded people and projects to coalesce in a joint transformational project. The Manifesto draws a Utopian line in the sand, however, by rejecting any understanding of DH that “implies a digital turn that might somehow leave the Humanities intact: as operating within the same stable disciplinary boundaries with respect to society or to the social and natural sciences that have prevailed over the past century.” At the same time, it insists that DH be seen as effecting this transformation from a position within the humanities, “not from the outside with the Digital leading and the humanities following,” but rather in a kind of Blakean Marriage of Heaven and Hell, characterized by “fusions and frictions, in which the development and deployment of technologies, and the sorts of research questions, demands, and imaginative work that characterize the arts and Humanities merge.”

I readily confess myself to be of the Devil’s party on these issues. I’m drawn to the bracing bravado of the Manifesto and its recently published book-length extrapolation, Digital Humanities--co-authored by Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker,
Peter Lunenfield, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp—which promises a new humanities characterized by, among other things: disciplinary realignments, ambient data, thick maps, animated archives, student curators, citizen humanists, design-based thinking, and scalable hermeneutics. For these co-authors, Digital Humanities “represents a major expansion of the purview of the humanities precisely because it brings the values, representational and interpretive practices, meaning-making strategies, complexities, and ambiguities of being human into every realm of experience and knowledge of the world. It is a global, trans-historical, and transmedia approach to knowledge and meaning-making” at a cultural moment in which the “core creative activities of being human” are fundamentally shifting and “in which the values and knowledge of the humanities are seen as crucial for shaping every domain of culture and society”(1).

The boldness of these claims certainly answers Drucker’s call for DH to be situated strategically within the larger academic and human enterprise, which it enters in this account trailing entailed promises like so many clouds of glory. As the co-authors recognize by including a series of faux case studies and as testified by the skeptical response to the book from some segments of the DH Community on Twitter and in a recent review by Kathleen Fitzpatrick, this kind of “cloud-based rhetoric” raises the question of how it might be brought down to ground, of how to close the gap between the Promise of DH and realizable promises. In this spirit, I’d like to provide a street-level view on one key Utopian theme underlying present DH work.
To begin, let’s travel back in time to the year 1935, in which the *Yale Review* published an article by the historian Robert C. Binkley, claiming that “Micro-copying is a technique that will serve in the twentieth century to do what printing and publishing cannot always accomplish: give the reader exactly what he wants, and bring it to him wherever he wants to use it.” Binkley, who taught at Smith College, was deeply engaged in a project to create a more democratic scholarship and saw new technologies of reproduction, such as microfilm and mimeograph, as a crucial means for doing so. For example, while half-a-million pages of documents from one Depression-era alphabet agency were offered to libraries for the virtually unaffordable price of $5,000, the same documents on microfilm cost only $421. Such a massive reduction of the cost of printing and reproducing documents potentially allowed for a return to citizen scholarship, which had been stultified by the cost of printing and the resultant control by the publishing industry, which both limited access to crucial primary material and took the decision of whether to publish commentary and scholarship away from scholars, who could, wrote Binkley, “make only such contributions to knowledge as can be passed through the publishing process to enter the body of scientific truth.” In Binkley’s Utopian vision, the availability of inexpensive publishing and printing technologies would allow scholars who would otherwise be excluded from the production of knowledge to participate in its making and dissemination. He thus called for “not only a bathroom in every home and a car in every garage but a scholar in every schoolhouse and a man of letters in every town,” concluding, “[t]owards this end technology offers new devices and points the way.”
Binkley, it seems to me, outlines here what might be called the “participatory imaginary,” in which the academy is still enmeshed, involving who gets to participate in the work of the humanities, on what terms and with what consequences. If new technologies in 1935 seemed to point the way to widespread participation in the humanities, the massive turn to research in post-World War II universities ushered in an era of disciplinary specialization in the humanities that has had the cumulative effect of further separating the academy and the public. The amateur humanist or person of letters has been increasingly hard to find, and one perpetual academic refrain in current “humanities-in-crisis” rhetoric is that “they” just don’t get “us.” However, like Binkley, many DHers believe that technology and new devices are still pointing the way.

In a forthcoming essay, “Critical Theory and the Mangle of Digital Humanities,” Todd Presner identifies as the core Utopian idea of the Digital Humanities, “participation without condition.” For Presner this concept begins with how DH is making the walls of the academy porous through its “conceiving of scholarship in ways that foundationally involve community partners, cultural institutions, the private sector, non-profits, government agencies, and slices of the general public,” thus expanding “both the notion of scholarship and the public sphere in order to create new sites and nodes of engagement, documentation, and collaboration.” In so doing, DHers “are able to place questions of social justice and civic engagement, for example, front-and-center; they are able to revitalize the cultural record in ways that involve citizens in the academic enterprise and bring the academy into the expanded public sphere.” Ultimately, though, Presner’s
formulation of “participation without condition” is an ideal towards which DHers must aspire on the wings of “imaginative speculation and ethically informed engagement, one which promises—in the Derridean sense of the *arrivante*—to go beyond the limits and boundaries erected by prior formations of the humanities, many of which were deeply exclusionary and remain stratified in various ways today.” We could hardly be further here from Columbia’s self-enclosed, double-dealing field.

Presner’s discussion of DH’s participatory turn is developed both in terms of social justice projects that give voice and archive to those whose voices are largely unheard and to the practice of what some are calling “Digital Humanitarianism.” One salient example he provides of the latter is UCLA’s *HyperCities Now* project, which in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan worked with “a team of volunteers from GISCorps and CrisisCommons . . . [in mapping] more than 650,000 social media feeds onto GIS data (including flood zones, evacuation centers, traffic, and public phone locations) so that real-time decisions for coordinating disaster relief could be carried out.” As Presner points out, “[b]y harnessing and repurposing the affordances of existing tools and technologies, the digital humanities team . . . played a decisively interventionist, even public role in responding to and documenting the disaster.” This kind of groundbreaking public work demonstrates the tremendous promise of DH as it reaches beyond the walls of the university.

The more specific question of how to reach beyond the walls of the literary classroom figures in my own engagement with DH’s participatory turn, which I’d
I'd like to discuss after providing as context three statements, three questions, and two contexts.

The three statements: (1) David Marshall’s observation that the current academy is a 19th century institution in which a 20th century curriculum is taught to 21st century students; (2) The results of a study showing that 90% of humanities undergraduates don’t know that there is such a thing as humanities research; and (3) The assertion made by Donald Brinkman of Microsoft Research that humanists don’t just need “big data,” they need “deep data.”

The three questions: (1) How can humanists best curate and explore our datasets? (2) How can we bring our research into the graduate and undergraduate classroom?; and (3) How can we fruitfully engage the public, “citizen humanists,” in the work of the humanities?

The two contexts both involve the changing nature of Textuality itself: (1) The first concerns what Jerome McGann has recently described as “a globalized . . . transition from a “Textual Condition” to a “Digital Condition” in which our entire inherited cultural archive is being digitized and will require re-editing “within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination.” And nowhere is that shift more evident than in the changing forms of textual editions and archives themselves, which, as McGann points out, have always served as models or theoretical instantiations “of the vast and distributed textual network in which we have come to embody our knowledge.” (2) The second context concerns what Folger Executive Director Michael Witmore describes as “textual addressability.” Witmore argues that a text is a “text because it is massively addressable at different levels of
scale. Addressable here means that one can query a position within the text at a
certain level of abstraction. . . . The book or physical instance, then, is one of many
levels of address. Backing out into a larger population, we might take a genre of
works to be the relevant level of address. Or we could talk about individual lines of
print; all the nouns in every line; every third character in every third line.” Each
level of abstraction, including the book, is its “own provisional unity: stable for the
purposes of address, but also: stable because it is the object of address.” For
Witmore, then, massive addressability is an ontological condition of text, whether
one looks at the level of an individual text or the total population of texts. And the
wide, flexible range of addressability is increased exponentially by digitization,
which enables not just the exploration of further levels of abstraction at the macro-
level of iterative search, data analysis, and visualization, but also facilitates at the
micro-level the treatment of each word or mark of punctuation as an object of
curation.

By “curation” in this particular literary context, I mean a variety of activities
including transcription, correction, annotation, and encoding that make big data into
deep data. As the Google Ngram viewer has notoriously demonstrated, humanists
distrust “dirty” or decontextualized data. Raw OCR, for example, may be “good
enough” for certain large-scale data analyses, but it is just the beginning of a long
voyage of textual mediation for much other use. The job of curating this data is, to
say the least, massive in itself. Astronomers have, for example, successfully
employed digital technology to harness the energy, passion, and intelligence of
citizen scientists to chart the stars in projects such as Galaxy Zoo. Humanists have
begun to do the same in such successful efforts as the *Transcribe Bentham* Project at University College London, and the New York Public Library's *What's on the Menu?* Project, in which over a million people have participated in transcribing and mapping NYPL's historical collection of over 45,000 New York City restaurant menus. The success of that project has led NYPL to launch recently the *Ensemble* Project, through which the public will be engaged in transcribing a historical collection of theatre programs for use as an open database of the performing arts.

NYPL's successful adaptation of the open source software "Scribe," which was originally created by Zooniverse for the work of citizen scientists, is quite encouraging for humanists who wish to launch networked participatory projects themselves. I myself have been involved in three projects with similar goals of networked, participatory curation, one of which I'll briefly describe.

The *Shelley-Godwin Archive* is a project involving MITH and the Bodleian, British, Huntington, Houghton, and New York Public libraries. It will contain the works and all known manuscripts of Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, including in its current first phase all of Percy Shelley's working notebooks, of which there are twenty-two at the Bodleian, three at the Huntington Library, two at Harvard, and one each at the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and the British Library. We are now in the final year of a three-year first phase that also includes all of the manuscripts and authorized editions of *Frankenstein*.

Although the S-GA started out, like most electronic literary archives, with the primary goal of providing users access to rare and widely dispersed primary materials, we
are now taking advantage of the tremendous potential of its multi-layered architecture to re-conceptualize and design the whole as a work-site, or what some are calling an “animated archive,” whose ultimate goal is to make the S-GA material massively addressable in a form that encourages user curation and exploration: from the correction of transcription to the enrichment of metadata, to tagging and collaborative annotation, to community bibliography and commentary, to the application of tools for analysis and visualization, to the creation of on-the-fly editions and exhibits. Such an archive can ultimately take the form of a commons through which various discourse networks related to these texts intersect and become visible, from the academic to the citizen humanist, to the curious or the playful. And the data thus produced will itself be subject to analysis and visualization. Imagine, for instance, heat maps of user-generated activity that show precisely which sections of *Frankenstein* are provoking the most interest that could, in turn, enable further drilling down to elucidate the nature of that interest. Such data could, for example, lead to new pedagogical approaches to the novel and provide new evidence of its contemporary reception.

Last Spring we experimented successfully with a light-weight pipeline that enabled students from my Technoromanticism seminar at the University of Maryland and Andrew Stauffer’s Digital Nineteenth Century seminar at the University of Virginia to collaborate on the distributed curation of 100 pages of *Frankenstein* manuscripts. Their curatorial tasks included comparing and correcting the transcription of page images; distinguishing between passages written in the quite similar and therefore often confused hands of Mary and Percy Shelley; interpreting sequences of revision; and encoding the whole in XML based on the Genetic Edition vocabulary of the Textual Encoding
Initiative. Students were thus not only able to get a unique purchase on the still hotly debated question of how much of *Frankenstein* was actually written by Percy Shelley and gain a deeper interpretive understanding of this portion of the novel, but were also introduced in a very material way to a wide range of issues and methods raised by the migration of handwritten manuscripts into digital form and the new affordances thereby gained. The S-GA was publicly launched last Halloween with the release of all known manuscripts of *Frankenstein* and received 60,000 unique visitors from all around the world within its first 24 hours. We are now in the midst of a similar experiment with the distributed curation of Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* fair copy manuscripts.

Through such projects as S-GA, our aim is to help move humanities research into the classroom and out to the public in order to make students and citizen humanists active, knowledgeable, and critical participants in the great cultural transition now underway from a Textual to a Digital Condition. In so doing, we will be helping to build one sector of the radically expanded public sphere that is the ultimate Utopian hope of DH’s participatory turn. But it is worth noting even here that despite some promising successes, there is much difficult work left to do in creating the infrastructure, tools, methods, training, curriculum, documentation, and support that such a goal requires—all of which should give us pause.

All four of the writers featured in the S-GA are well known for their radical social critique. We, of course, hope that engaging in the curation of their work involves engaging with the quality and force of their ideas. The feminist work of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley still seem disquietingly contemporary. William Godwin and Percy Shelley themselves both
engaged in a deep-seated Utopian discourse that they ruthlessly and self-reflexively interrogate over the course of their careers, as in the excerpt from Julian and Maddalo with which I began. We would be failing these writers if we did not continually question our own practices in building the archive and if the participatory work the S-GA invites becomes merely instrumental. While there is a certainty of failure along the way, there are no guarantees of ultimate success. It is worth recalling in this context that for all of Robert Binkley’s foresight, his Utopian hopes for the promise of microfilm and mimeographs to create such a public sphere fell far short of reality.

Even though the street-level view of DH might thus call into question how realizable the cloud-based view actually is, it nonetheless depends on the future-oriented view from the clouds to enfranchise and guide its activities. Indeed, as Kari Kraus and Todd Presner have both pointed out, the future-orientation of DH is unlike most traditional humanities disciplines in its active pursuit of the speculative, the possible, the counter-factual, the conjectural, the alternate reality, and the Utopian. “Nowadays, utopian ideas have a bad rap,” remarks Presner, “because they appear hopelessly naïve or programmatically prescriptive; however, without an idea of change for the better, there can be no constructive social critique.” DH has ultimately opened up a fertile space through which the humanities can be thought “otherwise”--critiqued and reimagined, even as it itself draws critique.

A DH that “engages with not only what is, but also with what might be and what ought to be”; a DH that realigns humanities disciplines, altering their relationship to each other, to the social and natural sciences, and to the public; a DH
that revitalizes the classroom as a site of joint research; a DH that merges the
“development and deployment of technologies with the sorts of research questions,
demands, and imaginative work that characterize the arts and Humanities;” a DH
that revolutionizes “scholarly communication, save[s] university presses,
crowdsource[s] peer review, and provide[s] humanities Ph.D.’s with good jobs in
libraries, institutes, nonprofits, and innovative start-ups”—is a very tall order. DH is
not likely to accomplish these goals by late next week, or next year—and their
cumulative weight is all but insupportable. As Ted Underwood has observed, “In the
long run, disciplines can and do change . . . I’m just suggesting that both the fans and
the critics of ‘DH’ may have oversold the promise (or risk) of *immediate*
disciplinary transformation.” DH currently occupies a fantastical disciplinary space
in which its Utopian promise seems simultaneously to float free from the
impossibility of its entailed promises and to become victimized by them, in a dance
that is both radically enabling and potentially disabling. That is, perhaps the
ultimate cost of “talking Utopia.”

[END]