Poiesis Ex Machina: Cyborg Poetics and Digital Humanities

As digital humanities continues to establish itself as a viable and necessary means of critique within the academy, scholars question not only the methodology of the work produced, but also the value of such work for scholarly criticism and literary studies. Paranoia and hyperbole typically overwhelm these discussions, such as whether the humanities have been co-opted by STEM fields or if digital humanities constitutes a last-ditch effort to save the dying discipline. However, there have also been considerable moves in scholarship to change the conversation and focus on the radical potentials of technology for literary study and literary study for technology. At center of these discussions, for both proponents and detractors of digital humanities scholarship, is the question of what knowledge is produced and how that knowledge functions beyond the confines of the academic article or illuminated webpage. For critics such as Alan Liu, the question is not what constitutes knowledge itself, but the application of that knowledge beyond the discipline:

While digital humanists develop tools, data, and metadata critically...rarely do they extend their critique to the full register of society, economics, politics, or culture. How the digital humanities advances, channels, or resists today’s great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate, and global flows of information-cum-capital is thus a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects with which I am familiar. (491)

Liu calls for the digital humanities to advocate further cultural criticism which would encompass STEM fields, other disciplines at large, and the political and social realms in order to take on a
leadership role so that “by creating a methodological infrastructure in which culturally aware technology complements technologically aware cultural criticism can the digital humanities more effectively serve humanists by augmenting their ability to engage today’s global-scale cultural issues” (502). While Liu’s argument—that digital humanities can change the world—may appear idealistic, his focus on such revelatory potentials asks humanists to see technology and critical metadata as a means to “serve” the capabilities and circulation of contemporary scholarship. In this formulation, the digital humanities are a pathway into the future that gives humanists a voice and a platform to enact knowledge rather than just professing it.

It is this call to action, or the idea of enactment, that requires further consideration of the machinations of digital humanities which aim not to replicate or prove literary scholarship, but to produce new work as a site of mediation between the human and the digital. While literary scholars have taken to technology as a means of scholarly production, literary artists and writers have taken to the same technology as a means of composition in the forms of various electronic literatures (e-literatures). In the composition of digital poetry (e-poetry, cyber-poetry, computer poetry, etc.), a unique challenges arises that does not accompany most digital scholarship: rather than preserving an existing poem, the technology is designed to permutate and construct a new poem according to an algorithm written by a person, perhaps a poet, perhaps a programmer, or both. In his contribution to A Companion to Digital Literary Studies, Chris Funkhouser describes the various methods and forms these digital poetries can take, but remarks, “Someone who wants the computer to write a Petrarchan sonnet, for example, and expects it to write it as well as Petrarch, is asking the machine to perform the wrong kind of task” (302), creating a division between the poet and the poem as well as delineating that the task of the computer-generated poem is not the same as a perfect imitation of Petrarch. This position, that computer-generated
poetry, like computer-attended scholarship as part of the digital humanities, returns to the question of the value of technology for critical work with a resounding rebuff, signaling that these questions are insufficient and do not pose us towards a cultural critique.

Following this line of inquiry, we must assign value to digital subjects rather than objects in order to give meaning to digital poetry as creators and critics. Through re-centering discourse upon the acts of creation rather than the view of scholarly and creative products, I hope to engage with the idea of a cyborg poetics, thinking about how computer-generated poetry necessitates the creators and readers to respond as digital humans, and in turn for digital humanists to situate this work in academia and beyond. To accomplish this, I seek to identify the forms and methodology of computer-generated poetry, define cyborg poetics, and then make a larger argument about the cultural significance and action of poetry. My entrypoint, that conversations describing the death of humanities reflect conversations about the death of poetry, engages the idea that digital humanities can give a new life to new forms of poetry, and that the poetics must reflect our future selves, cyborgs, rather than idealizing a pre-modern mankind. Further, I hope to end with the suggestion that in contrast to an archetypal “mankind,” cyborg subjects offer new potentials to marginalized populations through new digital terrains. While this move might betray another kind of idealism from Liu, I hope to extend this idealism into a practical application of digital humanities that centers creative possibilities for our technologies and ourselves.