

CRITIQUE AND IMITATION

JEFF DOLVEN

Critical theory is a modern project, and one mark of its modernity is its generally skeptical attitude toward imitation. Even for those theorists who accord imitation its ancient place as a capacity fundamental to the shaping of self and society, modernity requires a therapy of understanding, of interpretation, for the reformation of injustice and suffering. The imitative impulse itself does not offer an answer; indeed, it may be the problem, and even if it is not, it is still no tool for the disillusionment we need. Some version of such skepticism is itself ancient. Before Aristotle's *Poetics* put imitation on a durably technical footing, bringing it into official culture (and to a place of honor it would occupy for more than two millennia), Plato had already established the basic terms of modern suspicion. Imitation came into tradition under a shadow in the famous allegory of the cave. It was darkened too by Plato's concerns about the unreflective way we learn the attitudes and habits of the company we keep.¹

Nonetheless, a deliberate, pedagogical kind of imitation, imitation of past writing, played a central role in literary pedagogy (and, *mutatis mutandis*, pedagogy in the other arts) until well into the last century. Learning to reproduce the styles of the past flourished as a way of knowing the past, keeping an open avenue between the imitation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, understood to be fundamental to human learning, and the principles for analysis and for making modeled in the *Poetics*. Plato's concerns about the young man who may be drawn to imitate unworthy models (Socrates points to slaves and women) would continue to echo, a warning bell never silenced altogether, but Erasmus saw nothing wrong with experimenting in the voices of others along the way toward one's own distinctive but still polyglot idiom. Likewise Dryden with his Shakespeare, or Ruskin's mixed exhortations to artistic and moral imitation, or the Shakespeare reductions Pound prescribed for the young Basil Bunting. It is the last century that has seen the practice fall into disuse. There are many reasons for this change, including the response of humanist scholarship to the prestige of the sciences (with their ideal of an objective method) and more recently the rise of creative writing as a separate faculty in higher education. The tradition's traditional choice of models, in an era of expanding canons, has not helped. The reception of critical theory, however, has also had a role to play, and taking up the present editors' provocation—the prospects for thinking after critique—that role is what I want to consider here.

Raymond Geuss, in *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, identifies three characteristics that such theories share. The first is the claim that the forms of understanding they promise are inherently emancipatory: to know the world critically is to be more free in it.² With most students of the subject, he considers Marx and Freud the two principal architects of that ambition. Their relations to imitation are in some respects quite different. It plays little explicit part in the elaboration of Marx's critique of capitalism. His best-known treatment of the subject, in *The German Ideology*, adopts the conceit of the camera obscura, which projects through a pinhole, into dark space, an inverted image of the world outside. The scene reprises the projections of Plato's cave, and the work of Marxian analysis lies in recognizing, and righting, the ideological inversion of these shadows.³ Mimesis is to be overcome by analysis. Freud's investment in imitation is more fundamental, if we take it to ground his concept of identification. We are defined, he tells us, by our identifications with others; by introjection of their behaviors and attitudes, which become patterns for our own actions, originally (in the case of our parents or other early models) and ongoingly (in the worlds of acquaintance, membership, and so on). We resist the recognition of these debts because they threaten our sense of autonomy, but they are the stuff of which the self is made. Freud's answer to whatever distress these identifications cause us, however, is not a search for more appropriate models. What he offers instead is an alternative to imitation, the talking cure, psychoanalysis. Analysis may exploit imitation (in the dynamics of transference), but it is understanding as an act of translation that is emancipatory, bringing our impulses into the ambit of conscious choice.

What the two thinkers share is a confidence in hermeneutics, a project of interpretive self-detachment from the habits of thought and action that make up our ordinary accommodations to the business of life. Neither recommends a view from nowhere, but both propose a set of terms and concepts that constitute a distinctive, critical discourse, one that is different from the way we otherwise think and talk, and that has propagated itself in ways that make the sound of Marx and the sound of Freud immediately recognizable. Jerome McGann offered literary studies an influential formulation of this general aim in his 1985 book *The Romantic Ideology*, which undertook to describe the "uncritical absorption" of much writing about Romanticism "in Romanticism's own self-representations." This absorption comes at a cost for understanding, as does the reverse operation, treating the past as a mirror of our own preoccupations: such "cooptation must always be a process intolerable to critical consciousness, whose first obligation is to resist incorporation, and whose weapon is analysis."⁴ Historical difference is the ally of understanding, and taking its measure is necessary if we are to learn something about the other. It is easy to align such a recommendation with an ideal of critical objectivity, even though that alignment scants the reflective structure that McGann proposes (the capacity of critique, as a historical enterprise, to work both ways; to show us ourselves precisely by refusing us a mirror). It does not require much more coarsening of the idea to see it as a recommendation that criticism must be about its object without being like its object. Understanding is opened; imitation is proscribed.

That coarsening is not an inevitable consequence of critical theory. But I do take it to be collateral damage of some of its polemical impulses, and its frequent reduction, by friends and foes alike, to tropes of unmasking or unveiling.⁵ What kinds of knowledge are at risk, if that reduction is the lesson we take? There might be said to be three. The first is the feel for techniques and materials that is cultivated by practical imitation, for factors that constrain and channel all productive activity. If you think of making as a series of choices, you better know the constraints upon those choices if you have worked the same stuff (the same diction, prosody, paint, stone). The second is the knowledge gained by giving yourself over to another voice. Such self-surrender can be reflexive in the manner that McGann describes, an experiment in otherness that allows for the opening up of a critical distance. But that distance opens because of a moment of tame ecstasy (need it be tame?) in which you collapse your detachment, abandon your habitual vantage in favor of the sensibility you imitate. If an idiom is an ideology, you allow yourself to be interpellated, to make for yourself the choices of another time or place or mind. The third kind of knowledge is attunement to the networks of affinity and distinction that are generated by these practices of imitation. This is the knowledge of style, across social space and across time. One can measure its varieties and vectors with a connoisseur's neutrality. But the dynamics at work are desirous, covetous, and they fasten on intimate matters of craft and subtle signatures. Entering into those dynamics (which is to say, trying them out for yourself) is a way of revealing what matters there and how.

It should be said: critical theory has internal resources for reckoning with these questions. As Geuss points out, another unifying characteristic of the enterprise is that it is immanent to the culture, not objective but reflective.⁶ Theodor Adorno is among those who make the embeddedness of the project clearest, describing in "Cultural Criticism and Society" how the critic must "relate the knowledge of society as a totality and of the mind's involvement in it to the claim inherent in the specific content of the object."⁷ He is not detached from his object, which is ultimately his own culture, but implicated in it, and necessarily—at a minimum—using some of its commonplaces to think with. Foucault offers another kind of answer in his later work, as he moves toward the idea of critique as an art of existence. That is an art, as Judith Butler understands it, that comes to take social norms as *materia poetica*: "social norms intersect with ethical demands, and . . . both are produced in the context of a self-making," she writes.⁸ The life-poet works after existing forms. Some modern art will meet such a poet-critic half-way, or nearer: Hal Foster has written recently of "interventionist models in art (from Dada to the present) in which critique is produced immanently through techniques of mimetic exacerbation."⁹ The artist who can make his or her target obvious has accomplished at least a rudimentary mimicry. If the mimesis is genuine (rather than, say, the mere reproduction of a stereotype), then there is a necessary, enabling complicity—a folding together of subject and object—however critically that complicity may be framed.

This cento of qualifications could be extended. Nonetheless: it remains the case that the practice of imitation (and perhaps the pleasure: Aristotle finds it rewards us, no matter its

object) is challenging to accommodate to the project of critique. Under critique's auspice, and even under the watered-down auspice of "critical thinking," there is a customary interdiction of the affinities between critic and text. Analyze, but do not imitate. Be about, but not like. That difference can have many moods, from knowingness to outrage to reverence to cool neutrality. Discriminating among them is not my point here. What I want to query is the treatment of the difference as an absolute value, for it can discourage practices that are old, powerful ways of knowing the the arts of other times, other cultures, other minds. Imitation will tend to close those differences. It does not in itself know history or faction; it is subject indiscriminately to the charisma of otherness. It is uncritical. For just that reason, substituting a pedagogy of imitation for a pedagogy of critique is no answer.¹⁰ But a dialectical relation to the exercise of that faculty will serve us well, dialectical in the sense that it recognizes the vitality of imitative excursions (not appropriations, but extravagances), while insisting too on the complementary moment of critical reflection. What this dialectic would most insist upon is that we let go of imperatives like Jameson's famous "Always historicize."¹¹ No: at least, not if that means that we should strive to bring every moment of our thinking under the immediate pressure of dialectical thought. Imitation is before critique. It should also be after critique, and then before again, and then after again. And so on.

Jeff Dolven

Princeton University

NOTES

¹ For Aristotle's treatment of imitation, see Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 31–39. Plato discusses imitation as art-making in Book X of *The Republic*, and imitation as a dangerous way to learn in Book III; see Plato, *Republic*, trans. R. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 265–73, 68–77. Matthew Potolsky's excellent *Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 2006) begins by contrasting the Platonic and Aristotelian accounts (15–46); his account of Marx and Freud (137–8, 118–24) guides mine as well.

² Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–2.

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 154; Michael Taussig interprets the passage in *Mimesis and Alterity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21–23.

⁴ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 1, 2.

⁵ Bruno Latour is among the diagnosticians of this tendency, how critique forgets its immanence, relying (for example) on an essentialist concept of nature to critique the constructions of society, or on the reverse; see *We Have Never Been Modern*, tr. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993), 62.

⁶ Geuss, *Critical Theory*, 2.

⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 209. The essay ultimately recommends a dialectic of immanent and transcendent criticism: "Finally, the very opposition between knowledge that penetrates from without and that which bores from within becomes suspect to the dialectical method" (209).

⁸ Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 225.

⁹ Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (Winter 2012), 4.

¹⁰ For a usefully skeptical account of the pedagogy of imitation (and the philological knowledge that abets it), see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). Surveying the Renaissance origins of the liberal arts, Grafton and Jardine describe how a curriculum focused narrowly on style can displace or defuse the political challenges of almost any text.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

RESPONSE TO MARK GOBLE AND JEFF DOLVEN: THE MAKER RETURNS

MIKE WITMORE

While each does so in his own way, both Mark Goble and Jeff Dolven respond to the challenge of thinking what comes after critique by focusing on practices of “making”—in the case of Goble, the making or “materialization” of capitalist modes of production in Chris Jordan’s art; in the case of Dolven, the manifold forms of imitation that have been employed in artistic practice (and ethical reflection) from antiquity. Each writer makes his case with considerable subtlety and verve. I am aware that in aligning both writers along a single axis of *poiesis*, I simplify their positions in a manner bordering on caricature. But perhaps some form of caricature can be admitted, if only because in this case, the reduction of complexity allows for a particular relationship to be resolved more clearly.

The essays are similar in the alternative they offer to a particular self-distancing mode of critique, one that requires a subject to stand apart from its object. Dolven summarizes this practice with the maxim, “be about, not like,” an imperative that acknowledges critique’s pretention to transcend, however provisionally, those forms of kinship that align the critic with his or her object. If you are writing about the stars or flowers, you need not transform your mind—as the medieval metaphysicians used to argue—into a star or a flower. This hermeneutic of self-distancing is legitimate, in Dolven’s view; it must, however, be part of a larger iterative cycle, one in which a critic’s encounter with historical or cultural “otherness” becomes the occasion for an “imitative excursus.” Such an excursus will acquaint the critic with “practices that are old, powerful ways of knowing the arts of other times, other cultures, other minds.” Making, in the form of an extravagant (rather than appropriative) imitation, returns to the fold of thought as a complement to critique. In the exhaustion of critique, then, imitation finds its true and perhaps ancient therapeutic power.

Goble moves in a different but related direction: he too senses exhaustion within the tradition of critique, making the point (much as Latour did in 2004) that its capacity for self-reflexivity has been co-opted in startling ways. The so-called flat ontologies of the Speculative Realist school seem to offer a productive alternative, but only by abandoning or dulling our capacity to assign value to certain interactions in the absence of a critical human intelligence. Combatting what I am tempted to call the “species narcissism” that has animated decades of philosophical reflection on human language, these ontologies assign the same

likelihood of transcendence to a hammer or yeast culture as they do to a thinking subject. Both are zero, and so the view from nowhere that we associate with critique is interchangeable with a view of the planet in which all humans have, apocalyptically, disappeared. The point for Goble, it seems to me, is that the threat of such a disappearance ought to be sufficient to prompt more careful thinking about the ecological consequences of late capitalist production, consequences that pose an existential threat to the thinker as well as the world (no matter how they are connected). Here it is another form of making—Chris Jordan's art, which evokes an "uncannily emergent world of 'actants' and 'quasi-objects'" —that makes a bid to "convey the 'dark' or 'black' ecologies of late modernity." Rather than evoking the end of modernity, Jordan's art literally is that endpoint, made up as it is of materials that defy the very human claims to transcendence which ground our claims to be custodians of something called nature.

Each of these writers, then, suggests that the tradition of critique is exhausted and likewise gestures toward a supplemental practice of *poesis* which, while not displacing critique completely, may prepare it and us for the OOO flatlands to come. Because this is an affirmation of Latour's diagnosis, we ought to be able to learn more about the implied state of exhaustion from the remedy itself. Latour, for his part, is intervening in a set of debates within science studies, arguing that a certain strand of post-structuralist critique has reached a state of late-period decadence. A symptom of that decadence is the adoption of the "constructivist" stance by critique's opponents (climate deniers), suggesting perhaps that the once demanding dance steps of full-fledged critique have succumbed to parodic inversion. (Thus, Latour's call for an even more elaborate account of social forces that identify a matter or "thing" for public concern, a shift from waltz time to tango.) Goble seems aware of this inversion as well. Recent attempts by Meillassoux and Brassier to subtract, radically, the human from the world have substituted a "view from nowhere" that seems little better than the "view from everywhere" promised by Enlightenment rationality. To these extremes is opposed a somewhere, not over the rainbow, but in the objects incorporated into Chris Jordan's art, an art whose materials gain meaning by virtue of their location within an environment (a bird's belly) or economy (late capitalism). Where there was once an excess of critical thinking or, in the case of climate deniers, an avoidance of thinking, objects that have been *made into something* seem now to pull us back from eschatological extremes.

One senses that opening bids are being taken on another kind of knowledge—what the rhetorician Giambattista Vico called "maker's knowledge"—that didn't fare particularly well during the heyday of critique. The famous Vichean formula, "*verum et factum convertuntur*," states that to know something is to be able to make that something. Far from an arm's length view of the world, maker's knowledge implies a willingness to engage with the craftiness of things, with the materials, practices, and operating environments that make these things possible. (One can ask about the range of things that can be "made," but this is a secondary matter, since the answer changes from year to year.) In offering a response to this interesting recourse to "making," I want first and foremost to ask why this particular mode

of understanding has come in for a second look?¹ What is it about the current conjuncture that makes making—understood as a mode of constructive inquiry rather than self-exempting analysis—a live prospect as a successor to critique?

To answer this question, we need to understand better the critical and historical situation being gestured at in these pieces, the sequence of events that leads us to say that critique is *definitively* exhausted (i.e., exhausted in a way that it has never been before). That sequence needs to be better described and understood, and the apocalyptic tone of at least some descriptions of the situation ought to be studied. (How does the end of critique adopt, for example, the rhetoric of previous “ends:” the end of modernity, the millennium, the Cold War, etc.) How can we be so sure that the current conjuncture is an Event rather than a modulation into a new key of criticism?

These essays provide a partial index to the social and political trends prompting such an Event or modulation, whatever the case may be. I might add to this sketch a couple of other trends in North American literary criticism, a few of which are worth noting. Literary criticism over the last decade has, for example, become more self-consciously eclectic, even curatorial in its outlook and self-presentation. One sees this move toward curation not simply in contemporary journal articles and university press offerings, but in para-academic ventures such as *Cabinet* magazine, which highlights the aesthetic choosiness that goes into selecting objects of study. If exhibitions or iTunes playlists can be made, so too perhaps academic projects. Another development: some forms of criticism, particularly criticism of the algorithmic sort practiced in the so-called digital humanities, have adopted practices of mapping, modeling, diagramming, and visualization, all of which are exercises in making something on the way to understanding that something. Design consciousness runs high in these circles, and design seems to be gaining ground as an academic—because practical—discipline. Here too making is part of the practice of criticism, not its exclusive object. Finally, and most importantly, there is the schism that now exists within universities between doing “research” and teaching “writing,” the latter a skill imparted increasingly by adjunct faculty or members of newly professionalized creative/professional writing staff. How has the conscious export of “writing” from literary research contributed to our current sense of the belatedness of critique? Is critique all that is left, a remainder that looks increasingly insufficient, once this particular territorial transaction is complete?

These and other changes need to be better understood if we are to evaluate the appeal of critique’s successors. That there is a narrative of exhaustion within the profession, there can be no doubt. However one chooses to cast it, this narrative fuels an incipient hope that making—mimetic, artistic, diagrammatic—can re-orient a critical practice that is now criticized for both over-extending its techniques of analysis and underestimating the ability of non-academics to appropriate our guild secrets. In pointing the conversation back to “the current conjuncture,” I am perhaps parroting Jameson’s imperative to “Always historicize!” I hope this is not the case. I am convinced, nevertheless, that until we understand better the relationship between these two parts of the discussion—until we understand how any spe-

cific rhetoric of exhaustion clears the way for the return of the maker—I doubt we can know fully what to make of this new opening for *poiesis* in a post-critical landscape.

Mike Witmore

Folger Shakespeare Library

NOTE

¹ A second look here means a reprise from its prior appearance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during which, according to Amos Funkenstein, the “ergetic ideal” of maker’s knowledge acquired its modern articulation. See Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 290–345; see also Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) and Antonio Pérez-Ramos, *Francis Bacon’s Idea of Science and the Maker’s Knowledge Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

CODA

JEFF DOLVEN

Michael Witmore's response identifies making, poiesis, as a common term in my essay and Mark Goble's, and he wonders if there might be a ripeness to this return to "maker's knowledge." The immediate sample is small, but I would like to think he is right. There are any number of reasons, intellectual, ethical, technological, institutional, why the humanities might do well at present to represent our work as creative, as makerly, as well as critical. (Not least of them is the practicality of craft as a pedagogical project. What does an English department teach?) But in this brief postscript let me just reflect on what strikes me as a surprising similarity between my version of making and Goble's.

That similarity is a wary relationship to the maker's agency. Goble's version is broadly speaking postmodern, at least insofar as he allows Latour and other of the object-oriented ontologists to help him read Chris Jordan's photographs. The power of those images lies in the "waver[ing] in and out of view" of the artist's agency: at one scale, the pattern of bottle caps seems a clear product of a designing mind; at another, it could only be emergent, a symptom or a sample of something global and quite beyond the artist's control. In that aesthetic trouble, some hybrid of purpose and purposelessness, lies the critical power of the work. (Is it fair to say that Jordan makes a critical image of our own helplessness; or even of an idea of our helplessness that OOO has fostered?) Whereas my version of this agential caginess is early modern, imitation as a way of knowing from the inside, with an attendant surrender of our own preferences and codes and habits—albeit a surrender bounded by a strong sense of imitation as a deliberate practice.

The differences would be worth parsing. But for the moment, a word about why making might carry with it for both of us an at least provisional qualification of agency. (It is so notably not a return to a Romantic idea of strong authorship.) The project of critique has installed an idea of the critic who, however immanent his or her techniques, claims a kind of knowledge that is also a form of exemption. Critique has its theoretical defenses against that remove, but they are not always strong enough in practice. To be sure there is a lordly making that is likewise above its models and materials. But by contrast, Goble and I are both talking about making as a kind of aesthetic complicity. We share, I believe, some sense that such complicity could be a good in itself; at least, that it could be beautiful. Also a sense that it is a possible ground of judgment and of action. Chris Jordan's vision of complicity,

as Goble describes it, projects us past our agency, perhaps to provoke a salutary, activist recoil. For me, imitation is a way of knowing and a way of making value that the humanities cannot afford to scorn, if we continue to regard some share of our activity as sustaining a relationship to tradition. Critique is its necessary complement, but must not displace it. "Our hands are dirty," says Goble, and it's true, but the only thing for it may be to get our hands dirtier still.

Jeff Dolven

Princeton University

RESPONSE TO MICHAEL WITMORE AND JEFF DOLVEN

MARK GOBLE

A few weeks ago we learned about the world's "first test-tube burger," made out of meat grown from stem cells in a laboratory funded by Google founder Sergey Brin. The highly publicized new product received mixed reviews from tasters, but for the scientists and investors behind the project—named "Cultured Beef," as if hoping to appeal especially to fans of the nature-culture hybrids that Bruno Latour calls quasi-objects—the risk of some complaints about the burger's flavor was well worth what was gained in showing that potential consumers were unsatisfied largely because their critiques were based on what they knew about, and wanted of, real meat. This "Cultured Beef" is decidedly not the sort of "imitation" that Jeff Dolven explores in his provocative contribution to *ELN's* forum on critique, nor is it the result of "making" in quite the way that Michael Witmore describes in his insightful reading of my brief essay alongside Dolven's. Yet both Dolven and Whitmore, drawing on longer histories that go back to classical and Renaissance traditions, help us better understand how Latour, Chris Jordan, and even some of the figures associated with Speculative Realism and flat ontologies are at once imagining a boldly artificial future—with neither untouched nature nor privileged human beings to critique our relations to it—that recalls some aspects of a pre-Romantic epoch before Foucault's "man as such" and his various others, whether technological or natural, were invented.

While Brin's burger was not to everybody's liking, the logic behind the enterprise is much harder to resist as the global costs of meat consumption become increasingly ghastly to consider. "There are basically three things that can happen going forward," Brin argues, "One is we will all become vegetarian . . . The second is we ignore the issues, and that leads to continued environmental harm. And the third option is we do something new."¹ Of course the success of this particularly "new" solution to a familiar set of problems—which will require that millions of human carnivores will someday put their mouths where Brin has put his money—depends on the ingenuity of a team of researchers at Maastricht University to make a laboratory beef that is as satisfying as the "old" flesh that Brin and others ardently believe we will realize we can't afford.

I admit that there is only so much meat on the bones of this example for thinking through the state of our own discipline's concerns about the ongoing viability of critique. The

humanities in particular look to be facing a global shortage of resources right now that is as dire as it is manufactured, and no less real for being the making of various actors—from state legislators to university administrators—who could choose to do otherwise. Though it would be wise to wonder if they ever will. The present economic crisis has only accelerated deeper forces that have been placing pressure on our disciplines for decades, and while many of these trends are disconnected from the actual substance of our scholarship and criticism, it certainly does feel at times like there has been a feedback loop in recent years between worries about the value of critique and the value of the humanities in general. Some of the “para-academic ventures” that Witmore cites, like *Cabinet* magazine, make me think of other emerging platforms for high and even rarefied languages of literary and cultural debate that are making criticism more available outside the pages (and password-protected paywalls) of academic journals without trading on a reflexive antagonism about what academics do. Perhaps this is another sign that some of the unintended consequences of the rise of creative writing “as a separate faculty,” borrowing from Dolven, are now being reckoned with as *Cabinet*, *n+1*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *nonsite*, *The New Inquiry*, and other publications are allowing scholars to be critical again without being constrained within the genres of evaluation or theoretical critique. We can all hope that these efforts continue to flourish, and that they inspire virtuous imitation.

Witmore also names the “algorithmic” sorts of criticism associated with the digital humanities as a related genre that has struck many as possibly one of critique’s most powerful successors. For not only do such paradigms as “distant reading” and other modes of large-scale data analysis and visualization promise the revelatory insights of critique itself—showing us what inherited ways and habits have left us blind to see—but they also make mere critics into “makers” by leveraging the speed and information-processing of computers to do things that human readers cannot do for themselves. The fact that much of the best work in this emerging field has, as Witmore observes, been informed by a design aesthetic that itself invokes the power of graphic design and the product demo in new media culture only adds to its appeal. It is also easy for the rhetoric of digital humanities to supply the same exhortations to get with the program and advance (or else!) that for so long made new modes of theoretical critique into objects of such desire, anxiety, and aspiration.

What I take from this exchange with Dolven and Witmore—and what I also find entirely encouraging about the broader contours of the intellectual moment that has occasioned *ELN* to think about what might come “after critique”—is a sense that while many of the critical practices that we had naturalized may now seem dated, or even artifacts from another time and world, there remains an openness to new assemblages of appreciation, advocacy, information, and argumentation. We might not be following in the footsteps of what critique has been, but we are also finding that our imitations of it can still be satisfying. And if not for everyone? Well, it wasn’t like the old critiques were there to make us happy either.

Mark Goble

University of California, Berkeley

NOTE

¹ "Google Co-Founder: The Man Behind the \$300K Test-Tube Burger," <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/google-founder-sergey-brin-man-300k-test-tube/story?id=19872215>, retrieved on August 17, 2013.