

That we were formed then say'st thou?  
and the work  
Of secondary hands, by task  
transferred  
From Father to his Son? Strange point  
and new!  
Doctrine which we would know  
whence learnt: who saw  
When this creation was? Remember'st  
thou  
Thy making, while the Maker gave  
thee being?  
We know no time where we were not  
as now;

Know none before us, self-begot,  
self-raised  
By our own quick'ning power, when  
fatal course  
Had circled his full orb, the birth  
mature  
Of this our native heav'n, ethereal  
sons.  
Our puissance is our own, our own  
right hand  
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof  
to try  
Who is our equal.  
—Lucifer, *Paradise Lost*

**E**ditors' note. Birthing a discipline is an intricate task, exhilarating and exhausting, unpredictable and contested, haunted by contradiction and even antagonism. While we know very well that the process is never linear, it seems that we cannot help but compose its history as a kind of chronology, a timeline of discovery, institutionalization, and the seemingly inevitable emergence of normal science. Disciplines enable intellectual labor within established protocols and assume the form of a moving consensus; they make a meal of conflict insofar as debate is part of the discipline's corpus, not its undoing. All this is nowhere more obvious than in conflicts about disciplinary forms, ends, and origins.

Figuring a new discipline, making metaphors to register its difference and yet weave it a place among the other disciplines, is essential but fraught and always to some degree blind: its insights cast shadows it cannot foresee. John Crowe Ransom complains in "Criticism, Inc." (1937), his polemic on behalf of the New Criticism: "It is strange, but nobody seems to have told us what exactly is the proper business of criticism" (327). Delimiting that proper business entails the power to define a theoretical object,

name the problematics it spawns and the projects, readings, experiments, and truths it engenders: to constitute a field. Ransom condemns his colleagues, literature teachers “styled professor,” who failed to create a standard for criticism, and bemoans the chaos where disciplined clarity ought to reign. “What is criticism?” he wonders. “Easier to ask, What is criticism not? It is an act now notoriously arbitrary and undefined” (342).

Of course, this once notorious lack of definition begat the field-defining intellectual force of New Criticism, which dominated literary studies for two generations. One might be forgiven for expecting that the academy’s long experience of bringing disciplines into the world would make the process less opaque, more predictable, even governable by some set of conventions. But as the essays on the digital humanities collected here demonstrate, our postdisciplinary moment has only made the interrogation of disciplinary boundaries, origins, and effects more urgent and more open to fundamentally diverging analyses. Our debates about how a discipline is raised and its distinctions acquired, and whose business it is to answer the question “what is . . . ?,” intensify as our consciousness of the artifice of disciplinarity itself deepens. These debates are no longer “late” phenomena that emerge when an established field turns to self-criticism, but are always already in play, shadowing the discipline even as it first arises, finds its footing, and claims its authority.

The contributors to this issue approach the digital humanities from radically different perspectives and come to fundamentally different conclusions concerning its origins, nature, proper and improper objects, possible futures, and current impact on the university and its others. The knowledge that the dazzling bringer of light, Milton’s Lucifer, brashly disavows, knowledge of a time “when we were not as we are now,” is explicitly at work in every essay collected here. This embrace of a heterogeneous past precludes the fantasy of self-begetting and seeks instead to comprehend the uneven process of differentiation by which a discipline comes into being, sustains its practice, and evolves. It refuses any single origin story and, therefore, cannot propose a single vision of the present or doctrine for the future. In its place, *differences* readers will encounter an illuminating debate that interrogates the very possibilities of self-making and transparent lineage. Exploring the shadows cast by various tales of the origin, our contributors propose rich, challenging accounts of the ongoing task of making meaning in the digital humanities and of “our own quick’ning power.”

**Works Cited**

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book 5. Literature.org: The Online Literature Library. [www.literature.org/authors/milton-john/paradise-lost/chapter-05.html](http://www.literature.org/authors/milton-john/paradise-lost/chapter-05.html) (accessed 18 Nov. 2015).

Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism, Inc." 1937. *The World's Body*. New York: Scribner, 1958. 327-50.