

MAURICE S. LEE, *Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 277. \$39.95.

In his foreword to Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, David E. Wellbery spells out the book's devastating implications: "if literature is medially constituted—that is, if it is a means for the processing, storage, and transmission of data—then its character will change historically according to the material and technical resources at its disposal. And it will likewise change historically according to the alternative medial possibilities with which it competes. In this regard, too, Kittler's work leads to a radical historicism that finally dissolves the universality of the concept of literature" (Wellbery, "Foreword," in Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990], p. xiii). Literary scholars have accommodated this radical historicism in various ways. Some reject the premise: *If x is true, if literature is medially constituted, then literature will cease to be. Whoever said that x was true?* Stephen Marche's essay "Literature Is not Data: Against Digital Humanities" rejects the premise by arguing that "literature is terminally incomplete. You can record every baseball statistic. . . . But you cannot know even *most* of literature, even English literature. Huge swaths of the tradition are absent or in ruins" (Marche, "Literature Is not Data: Against Digital Humanities," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 October 2012; available online at <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/literature-is-not-data-against-digital-humanities>>). For Marche, fragmentation and open-endedness saves literature from the ontology of data; for others, literature is too small, too complete, to be responsive to data analytics, which work on large datasets with actionable goals.

Those more accepting of the premise have tended to treat literary periods—the long eighteenth century, Romanticism, early modern Europe, and so forth—therapeutically, as things that have to cope with an overabundance of print and reading materials. Book history attaches to existential crisis. Maurice S. Lee's *Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution* offers a history of this accommodation, and it models its own approach on readings in nineteenth-century Anglophone literature, including Charles Dickens's novels, positivist educational reform, and adventure novels.

As Lee documents in his book, this approach, or sensibility, has different disciplinary terminations: the quantitative study of literature, new media studies, bibliometry, sociology of literature.

Overwhelmed is a rich, nonpolemic sociology of the informational turn in literary historicism. Its title also describes the occupational hazard of spending too long with arguments about literature and the information revolution. Such complex historical forces can often return uninteresting dialectics for the understanding of literary evolution: literature did and did not adjust to its resemblance to not-literature; the rise of the statistical sciences did and did not jostle the literary psyche. At the level of individual readings, coping is shown to have different implications for narrative substance, the anxiety of influence, and negotiations of the marketplace, or is anticipated in different ways by the canonical authors of that period. As a prehistory of the digital humanities, *Overwhelmed* models something we have seen before, most notably in Andrew Piper's *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago Press, 2018), and it models it well.

Like those who have written such histories before him, Lee advocates an anti-anxiogenic outlook: the history of literature's proximity to sheer information turns up many surprises, but "an imagined history of unequivocal antagonism" ought not apply here (p. 221). Although the premise is Kittlerian, Lee's own mood hews closer to Roger Chartier, for whom reading's evanescent traces return us to the conditions of its own literal and imaginary production and circulation. "Old" new media studies, represented by figures like John Durham Peters and Lisa Gitelman, is another important influence for Lee. An author like Ralph Waldo Emerson, the subject of chapter 1, is said to build his transcendentalism on the ground of "untranscendental" information management, thus "articulat[ing] a set of moods toward reading under conditions of textual excess" (pp. 53, 56).

As a literary history, *Overwhelmed* begins by explaining Crusomania—the appetite for Robinson Crusoe novels and knockoffs—with reference to run-of-the-mill thought experiments in reading culture such as "what would you bring to read on a desert island?" It covers Emerson's program of reading-by-proxy and Nathaniel Hawthorne's allegories of "searching technology," Dickens's prescient "informational plots," Herman Melville's qualia in *Notes and Queries*. It ends with a carefully researched literary history of standardized testing and the (now probably closed) debate over the use of GRE testing in admissions to graduate schools.

As a methodological experiment, *Overwhelmed* begins with a comprehensive literature review of books at the intersection of

information history, book history, new historicism, and new media studies. It conducts a simple quantitative study of adventure novels including deserted island and lost world novels between 1816 and 1920, showing a statistically significant increase in the number of “quantitative keywords” in that genre. There, the more curious claim has little to do with the findings, for which more could have been done to rule out mechanical and mundane results. Rather, it is Lee’s conclusion (in agreement with Stephen Ramsay) that “quantitative methods can provide ‘constraint’ rather than “falsification” (p. 146). What is meant by this is unclear, but it seems important to mitigating anxiety about quantitative methods in literary studies that Lee claims “will integrate [these approaches] and indeed already has” (p. 152).

Data science (as an ambient disciplinary force if not as actual application) introduces fallacies to historicist argumentation, some of which Lee tackles with brio, some of which he replicates. Potentially devastating metadiscursive questions appear appropriately in the chapter on “Searching”: “Are historicist claims sufficiently falsifiable given textual excess, searching technology, and evidentiary inclusiveness?” (p. 63). Strong, intelligent claims and unfounded claims are both susceptible to falsifiability. Cherry-picking nonfalsifiability results from the optimization of electronic searches and data access. This is the most provocative claim in *Overwhelmed*, and its logical relation to the book’s own historicist work is (necessarily) unclear.

Prefiguration is a tricky line of approach if you are seeking to de-escalate a tension between so-called traditional literary studies and the quantitative sciences: I. A. Richards’s vague comments on stylometry is said to “prefigure [the] conflicts over distant reading today” (p. 123), but, by virtue of simply appearing earlier in the technological pipeline and thus being less precisely stated, it is also supposed to evidence a better, more reasonable time when people did not clash over such matters.

Overwhelmed repeatedly acknowledges that “anxiety” is a weak, because foolproof, heuristic for the history of literature and information. You can always posit that abundance overwhelmed someone without ever being challenged on the matter if textual excess is your evidence. The same goes for proximity, which motivates the following claim: “Even the mathematical calculations that appear in the margins of Emerson and Thoreau’s journals, or the algebra problems worked out in the title page of Dickens’s *American Notes* . . . suggest how the literary and the informational are not so

easily divorced” (p. 133). Such anecdotes illuminate in accordance with the literary historian’s skill, which is considerable here, but it is the equivalent of saying that because a mathematician read books and copied down favorite passages, mathematics and literature were inseparable for her work.

In fact, this wonky form of argumentation is formally tackled in Lee’s final chapter, on standardized testing and Charles Dickens. Lee reads Dickens’s bureaucratic reformers to show that the compartmentalization of time and attention matters: we give some parts of ourselves to accounting and counting, to statistical sciences, to standardization, at different times, with varying degrees of preoccupation. This split does not have to translate into a “life philosophy.” A character can believe in the quantifiability/testability of some literary knowledge without becoming a dyed-in-the-wool positivist, just as aversion to metrics-based educational reform does not make him an ethical antipositivist. Anxiety and consilience may not be an interesting frame for understanding historical actors in their changing environments, but mitigating one type of anxiety (totalizing beliefs, in this case) still proves salutary.

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CHRISTOPHER HERBERT, *Evangelical Gothic: The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to “Dracula.”* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 278. \$45.

Christopher Herbert’s *Evangelical Gothic: The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to “Dracula”* argues that nineteenth-century British literature features a rogues’ gallery of characters in whom the Evangelical appears vampirical. This argument offers Gothic thrills as it uncovers uncanny resemblances between Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and other well-known characters, including James Hogg’s *Gil-Martin*, Charlotte Brontë’s *St. John Rivers*, and, most unexpectedly, George Eliot’s *Dinah Morris*. Here, *Dinah*, the Methodist lay preacher in *Adam Bede* (1859) who leads poor, betrayed, but stubbornly superficial Hetty to repent before her execution, is revealed as a villain feeding off Hetty’s submission, rather than a heroine anticipating *Dorothea Brooke* of *Middlemarch* (1871–72).