Digital Humanities Meet Literary Studies: Challenges Facing Estonian Scholarship

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The aim of this paper is to check out the limits and possibilities of DH as a concept and to determine their suitability for literary research in the digital age. Our discussion is rooted, first, in our long-time experience in working with digital models of the Estonian literary history narrative, which are based on literary sources and cultural heritage and, second, in the synchronous study of digitally born new literary forms.

Having dealt with these subjects already for twenty years, we would now attempt to fit our previous research into the context of DH and start to examine the relations between DH and literary studies. Our most general question in this discussion is whether DH can essentially be considered as a tool/method for literary research or is it an entirely new approach in literary studies.

The concept of DH has found active use only in the recent decade, covering a wide range of different areas. In literary research, the adoption of the possibilities offered by DH has been slower than in other fields, mostly because the application of traditional tools of literary research does not require the study and processing of massive amounts of texts which should be done with the help of computer technology. Although the field of DH is broad, in Estonia this concept has rather been used as a synonym for methods of quantitative computer analysis: linguists have already for decades used it very productively in analysing text corpora and computer linguistics has developed into an independent discipline.

In recent years, the application of DH as a method of computerised analysis and the extensive digitisation of literary texts, making them accessible as open data and organising them into large text corpora, have made the relations between literature and information technology a hot topic.

Massive digitisation of cultural heritage – archives and books – was begun at Estonian memory institutions in the early 2000s, at the same time posing a fundamental question: how to select what is important among millions of different books?

Several literary historical projects were initiated even earlier as to offer alternatives to digitisation projects. In Estonia, research on the electronic new media and the application of digital technology in the field of literary studies can be traced back to the second half of the 1990s. The analysis of social, cultural and creative effect (see Schreibman, Siemens, Unsworth 2016: xvii-xviii), as well as constant cooperation with social sciences in the research of the Internet usage have played an important role in Estonian literary studies.

Up to the present, our research has followed three main directions: 1) new forms of literary genres in the electronic environment; 2) digitisation of earlier literature and the creation of a digital bookshelf; 3) development of a new model of the literary historical narrative for applying in the digital environment and the creation of interactive information environments.

1) Digitally born literature and the appearance of other new forms of art have been examined in Estonia since 1996, when the first hypertextual poems were created (e.g. "Trepp" by Hasso Krull), followed by more complex works of digital literature combining different media (text, video, sound, image). Our question is how could the digitally born literature (both "electronic literature" and the literature born on social media, e.g. twitterature, Alt Lit) be fitted into the context of DH? Which are the specific features of digital literature, which are its accompanying effects and how has the role of the reader as the recipient changed in the digital environment? What is the meaning of the concept of hybridity regarding this type of literature? How far can the margin of digital literature be extended to be still called literature? However, the central question is whether DH is able to offer a new framework for analysing digital literature, while so far, highly varied approaches have been used, e.g. the studies of hypertextuality, cybertexts, trans- and intermediality, participation culture, etc.

2) The project for digitising earlier Estonian literature and creating a digital bookshelf "EEVA. The Text Corpus of Earlier Estonian Literature" was created at the University of Tartu in 2002; it makes accessible mostly the works of Baltic German writers. The project is based on the concept of geocultural literature. Books published in all languages in the old Provinces of Estonia and Livonia in the 16th and 17th centuries were digitised. Biographical information about the authors adds much value to the project, which was based on voluminous traditional literary historical research and resulted in a digital bookshelf, where the books can be browsed in the image format https://utlib.ut.ee/eeva/

3) Three large-scale projects for digital representation of Estonian literary history were initiated during the years 1997–2007, with the objective of developing a model of the new literary historical narrative for applying in the digital environment and creating new interactive information environments. These activities were based on the visualisation of the networks of relations between literary works.

   a) The Estonian Literary Museum carried out an Estonian Tiger Leap project "ERNI. Estonian Literary History in texts 1924-1925" in 1997-2001. The project tested the method of reception aesthetics in representing the Estonian literary history of the 1920s. Its objective was to use a relatively limited amount of well-studied material in testing a new type of literary historical narrative and it was based on the visualisation of the network of relations between literary texts and metatexts in the form of hypertext. http://www2.kirmus.ee/erni/erni.html

   b) At the University of Tartu, the project "The Estonian National Epic *The Kalevipoeg*" was developed within the framework of the project CULTOS (Cultural Tools of Learning: Tools and Services *IST-2000-28134*) in 2001–2003. Again, it was a project for visualising literary relationships, requiring the knowledge of the source text and intertexts and reproducing them in the form of a network of intertextual relations. A new software was developed which enabled to explain the relations between the

epic and new multimedia artefacts (literature, art, music, theatre, TV broadcasts, comics, caricatures, etc.).

c) The project "Kreutzwald's Century: the Estonian Cultural History Web" (Kreutzwaldi sajand: eesti kultuurilooline veeb) (in progress) was created at the Estonian Literary Museum in 2004 with the objective of modelling and representing a new narrative of literary history. This was a hybrid project which synthesised the study of the classical narrative of literary history, the needs of the user of the digital new media theory, and the development of digital resources for memory institutions. The underlying idea of the project was to make all the works of fiction of one author, as well as their biography, archival sources, etc., dynamically visible for the reader on an interactive time axis. The scope of the project required the inclusion of all works of fiction published in 1850-1918. Special software was developed for creating the networks of relations between the authors and their works. Kreutzwald's century visualises literary history through the texts and cultural heritage. By now, this project has been in progress already for 15 years, and a voluminous corpus of literary texts has been created. Based on the works of literature digitised for this long-term project, a three-year project "Estonian Literary Classics", carried out with the support of the Estonian Ministry of Culture, made the digitised works accessible for readers in the form of e-books (e-pub format) free of charge. http://kreutzwald.kirmus.ee/

These projects and the research results will now need a further conceptualisation in the context of DH. The projects were not simple digitisation projects, but each of them had their own unique literary theoretical concept, focussing on the creation of relations and the visualisation of textual networks without using quantitative methods. Visualisation of networks was preceded by long-term research using traditional methods, which were based on different theoretical frameworks, such as reception aesthetics, semiotics and narratology. In addition to these traditional methods, the studies of new media and communication (ICT) were also taken into account. At the same time, Estonian projects were not based on single texts, but on literature as a system: the focus was on visualising the sources of literary history and revealing their interrelations. The most important next question is to find ways for further development of the theoretical conceptions of such research and to ask if it is possible to apply the practices and tools of DH for creating new aspects for literary theory.

Thus, one of the aims of our paper is the mapping of different directions, practices and applications of DH in the literary theory of today. One topical question for instance is how to bridge the gap between the research possibilities offered by the present day DH, and the ever increasing resources of texts, produced by memory institutions. Here we encounter several problems. Literary scholars are used to working with texts, analysing them as undivided works of poetry, prose or drama. Using of DH methods requires the treating of literary works or texts as data, which can be analysed and processed with computer programmes (data mining, using visualisation tools, etc.). These activities require the posing of new and totally different research questions in literary studies.

Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth, the editors of the book *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (2016)*,* discuss the problems of DH and point out in their Foreword that it is still questioned whether DH should be considered a separate discipline or, rather, a set of different interlinked methods. In our paper we emphasise the diversity of DH as an academic field of research and talk about other possibilities it can offer for literary research in addition to computational analyses of texts.

However, the final and so far open-ended question is whether DH is essentially a tool for literary research, or is it an entirely new research approach? We need to know whether DH will essentially change literary research because its research objects are not traditional works of literature but digital works which are located in a digital environment. We ask whether DH will form a basis and offer opportunities for a new literary theory? Or perhaps, the artistic essence of a work of art remains the same irrespective of its environment and DH will simply offer a technical package for studying this artistic essence? A further discussion is needed for finding answers to these challenging questions.

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