A-1. THE ESSENTIAL CONTRADICTION

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In the paper for which this is an abstract I ask what digital humanities, as a singular, autonomous field of study, shares *intellectually* with the humanities. I argue that the common ground all share is the endlessly productive question of the human raised with increasing urgency by the progress of the techno-sciences from which computing arose.

The six and a half decades of digital humanities shows development in three phases:

1) an incunabular period, from beginnings in 1949 to the public release of the World Wide Web in 1991;
2) domination by a widely felt imperative to populate the Web with primary and secondary sources, from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s; and
3) the current period of widespread growth in the academy, including departments, appointments and doctoral programmes – but also re-emergence of troubling questions from the incunabular period, chief among which is the one on which this paper is centred.

Historical recovery of the incunabular period offers us a look into the time when scholars first encountered computers. Although the Industrial Revolution had profoundly affected the societies of which scholars were a part for two centuries prior to the incunabular period, and automation for a century or more, the "thinking machine" was something disturbingly new. However little the great majority of scholars may have had to do with computers then, in the industrialized West they could not have avoided intense and persistent exposure to the sometimes wildly exaggerated promises of the computer and to the threats arising from its adoption by government, commerce, industry and the military. These threats, the subject of jeremiads by public intellectuals, were amplified by the overarching presence of Cold War paranoia backed by frightening nuclear weaponry and occasional accounts of near catastrophic mishaps. Thus we can infer that the scattered expressions of trepidation and seemingly anomalous reassurances in the professional literature of the humanities attest to more than they seem. The silence of the majority of scholars is, I think, in part explained by what the computer, deeply complicit in the bureaucratization and militarization of the world, must then have signified.

Today is very different in many respects. The near ubiquity of computing, to the point of being unperceived as well as unremarked, is a fact of life in the urban world. Digital humanities is now popular, seen by some as a saviour of the neglected humanities. But a Foucauldian history of the present, focused on that incunabular past, rescues from it just what digital humanities needs to show itself more than popular. The question is, does it belong in any fundamental way to the disciplines with which it presently cohabits?

We need reminding that confrontation with technology, computing technology in particular, is as Heidegger said nothing essentially to do with technology. It has to do with the meaning which our confrontation evokes from and fits to a new device as it is culturally assimilated and begins to change its host. And, Heidegger went on to say, the confrontation is best staged in a realm that is half-way between. Hence the place of digital humanities, at the cross-roads of computing and the humanities. A Foucauldian history shows us exactly what self-aware practice of the discipline reveals: it is the ancient confrontation of the human with something humans have invented. Hence the common ground staked out by Immanuel Kant, when he defined all of philosophy as embraced by the anthropological question, "Was ist der Mensch?"