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David J. Nordloh

Indiana University - Bloomington

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Computers for Word People

Susan Hockey, *A Guide to Computer Applications in the Humanities* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). \$16.95.

Robert L. Oakman, *Computer Methods for Literary Research* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1980). \$14.95.

Any mention of computers among humanists is likely to arouse strong passions, but they are no longer simply the older, more absolute passions of disdain on the one hand for any diabolical plot to train a machine to do human—or, in cases of concordancing and indexing, vaguely inhuman—work, or on the other a wholehearted acceptance of electric salvation from drudgery. They are now more complex emotions: interest in dramatic possibilities but uncertainty about ways to proceed, or happy installation of computer components and processes but an expensive fear that someone, somewhere, is doing the same work better and faster and cheaper.

In this context of transition, the publication of not one but two books about computers and their uses specifically directed at humanists is an opportune event. It is hardly

necessary to say that neither book is fully up-to-date; any purchaser of a pocket calculator has learned how quickly one incredible chip displaces another. Neither Hockey nor Oakman devotes any significant space, for example, to a description of stand-alone mini-computers, those self-contained tabletop units with much of the flexibility and even the storage capacity of the room-filling mammoths of ten and fifteen years ago, or to the variety of word processing programs, first developed for general secretarial and journalistic use, now available in conjunction with these more portable, more affordable units.

But obviously both authors went at the subject of computers in humanistic scholarship with a clear sense of the futility of complete timeliness. Their aim is not a comprehensive survey of technological innovation but a general introduction to the ways computers handle literary materials, the versatility of computer processing, and the application of computer methods to research done by scholars who study human languages in one or more of their aspects.

Thus both books contain chapters on the mechanics—or

electronics—of computer processing, and on means of putting literary material in and getting it out (an especially significant issue, since words, and even the letters that make them up, constitute a much more elaborate base of information than do the numbers and mathematical operations toward which computer development was originally directed). Both discuss such individual applications as concordances and other forms of alphabetical sorting, stylistic analysis, textual editing, and information retrieval.

There are differences, of course. Hockey has a chapter on vocabulary studies, collocations, and dialectology, and another on sound patterns, all issues Oakman includes in his single chapter on stylistic analysis. Hockey ends with a chapter on starting a project, surveying material Oakman offers in his introductory sections; Oakman concludes with a survey of future considerations. Hockey adds a brief general bibliography to the individual chapter bibliographies, none of them annotated; a glossary of computer terms; a list of acronyms, abbreviations, and computer names (Ah! the delights of *HAWKEYE* and *LOUISA*); and a list of useful addresses (unfortunately, only the addresses of the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing in England and various archives of raw text in English, Latin, and Greek). Oakman omits the technical sections and supplies instead a carefully divided thirty-four-page “selected” bibliography of items on literary computing; the selection is very skillful, and the bibliography effectively supplements the annotated lists of further readings appended to the individual chapters.

The presence of the technical appendices in Hockey's book and their absence from Oakman's, the sparseness and offhandedness of the one bibliography and the careful lavishness of the other suggest the most significant difference between the two works. Although both intend to be general introductions addressed to interested scholars unfamiliar with computers and their operation, Hockey's book often becomes too technical and moves off its intended point: a long section on the mathematical principles applicable in stylistic analysis, for example, is too arcane. Oakman is more successful at explaining complex mathematical or mechanical features, and he supplies them only if a reader needs to know them to understand a general process. Hockey tends to work backward, from examples of finished research to a discussion of the reasons certain systems or programs do not work (particularly her survey of concordances). Oakman, more consistent with the introductory orientation both authors propose, moves forward, describing how general computer capabilities can be put to specific uses. Hockey's illustrative material consists mostly of facsimiles of computer printouts, and at times too many virtually redundant examples of alternative printing formats; Oakman, though he also provides some of this material, adds photographs of various items of computer machinery and, even more impressively, “flow-

chart” diagrams of the various processes. Oakman's book, indeed, is clearly superior as an educational tool. Hockey offers a kind of archive, a summary of what has been or can be done. Oakman, besides doing that and doing it just as comprehensively, teaches the fundamental logic of computer programming. He describes the on-off switch system which is the electronic basis of computing, then explains the Boolean logic customarily employed in this two-position structure, and then by means of prose description and the flow-charts identifies even the most complex treatments of material as involving sequences of two-part options. The interested reader learns to think in the terms computer-processing requires, as Oakman moves from a flow-chart of the Monopoly game to one outlining a computer collation program.

As a result, Oakman's book, although the title seems restrictive in its reference to “literary research,” is finally better as a treatment of the whole range of computer applications than is Hockey's. The availability of both books offers a Boolean choice, but the On switch is clearly Oakman.

DAVID J. NORDLOH
Indiana University