

In the Key of English

RICHARD NASH

Welcome back. Musicology is now behind us, French and Italian still lie before us—*now* is the time for English. I am Richard Nash, Professor of English here at IU, and it is my great pleasure to facilitate the discussion of these papers by Michael Gavin, Associate Professor of English at the University of South Carolina, and Nick Valvo, Lecturer in English at Northwestern University. Gavin's first book, *The Invention of English Criticism, 1660-1715* (Cambridge, 2015) demands our careful attention for at least two reasons. First, he insists that the unruly, contentious, and highly personal realm of lampoon, invective, and railery played at least as important a part as did the more polished and urbane participation in a bourgeois public sphere in the creation of modern "criticism" (to which I raucously say, "Hear, hear!"). And second, no less important to this crowd, I am sure, the cover art of his book displays one of the most execrable Edward Collier letter racks of all those so very familiar to us.¹ Having provided us with a more unruly origin for literary criticism, Michael is now turning his attention to exploring new models for literary history—which bring him and us to the digital humanities and questions of scale. Nick Valvo's recent dissertation "Penurious Payments: Debt, Dependence and Communal Form in Eighteenth-Century England" (University of California Davis, 2017) has already given rise to publications in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* and *Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation* and, judging from the titles alone, I have the impression—correct me if I am wrong (though not too loudly)—that the dissertation may be about to grow into not one but two monographs. Whether or not I am right about this, it is clear Dr. Valvo has a deep and abiding interest in two subjects: the parish and death. This means that while in the eighteenth century he would have been destined for the clergy, in the twenty-first he will be banished to an English Department.

What is it then that we will be discussing in this session? Exactly what you would expect to discuss in an English Department: the parish, religious affiliation, geographic analytics, quantification, and—of course—mathematical structure (so dear to all our hearts). For it is a truth universally acknowledged that an English professor in possession of a good paper shall never be in want of an area of expertise (as long as the paper is written *in English*—this is how we define our 'discipline'). You may say this characterization is unfair and I would only say in reply, "That's what you get for asking me to do this comment."

Having introduced our presenters, however glibly, let me—before they heckle or haul me off stage—destroy their arguments. I will give them each a chance to respond before opening the boards to serious questions from the serious audience. I am not going to attempt to be either fair or comprehensive in my summaries. For the diligent among us who have already thoroughly familiarized yourselves with their arguments, I will be gesturing toward a few landmarks that may well remind you of a larger vista that you recall still more clearly than I do. For those of you still struggling with the arduous voyage that

¹ Editor's Note: The Center's founding director, Dror Wahrman, had recently completed his study of these paintings; see *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art and Illusion at the Founding of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

brought you here or the whirl of activities that have distracted you thus far, my remarks will be intended to conjure a distant land that you can only vaguely imagine but that you will desperately hope to explore more carefully with more expert guidance. In short, think of my remarks as one of those “bad” eighteenth-century maps: not drawn to scale and full of provocative errors.

In particular, as I discuss some of the features from Michael’s essay, you may want to re-acquaint yourself with the various maps, graphs, word clouds, etc. he presents and that either supplement or replace the more prosaic mode of argument which he offers in a dozen earlier pages. That argument is a theoretical argument—I know I am on safe ground here because he writes, “my argument is primarily theoretical”—to explain and defend the proposition that might be called “the historical-geospatial-semantic hypothesis.” Unlike many theoretical arguments, however, this one—though it sounds truly daunting (historical. geospatial. semantic. hypothesis)—turns out to be quite user friendly: “Similar places in similar times tend to be described using similar words.” At the risk of over-simplification, my observation (and I will pose it as a question), has to do with the juxtaposition of the “similars” and of the “tend to be.” The claim would be dramatically different and I think both more and less dramatic, if one could replace “tend to be” with “are.” But “are” in that sentence would flatten the world entirely.

What I take to be the importance of the argument being advanced is not that similar words describe similar places in similar times, but that this is a tendency strong enough to be generally reliable but not universally predictable. And that, moreover, such general tendencies have use value, especially for big-data analytic approaches, by charting expectations within which deviations either do or do not deserve greater attention. I want to press that and suggest that the historical-geospatial-semantic hypothesis allows us to map the world that early-modern geographical texts *sought* to find against which we might better consider the world they actually did find. Do you agree that this is implicit in your argument? I am both drawn to the idea and a bit nervous about it. You write on page seventeen “The goal of creating several different models is not to evaluate them for consistency or accuracy against some putatively objective reality. Instead, the purpose is to find points of commensurability across them and to highlight areas of divergence ... so to unpack shared axes of spatial reference over EEBO [Early English Books On-line] documents.”

The questions that then follow are, it seems to me, questions about how knowledge of the world in this period was organized *as knowledge*, in accordance with the geospatial-semantic hypothesis. Now this may be right, or it may not be—you tell me—but if it is, then I wonder if you have not ‘buried the lede’ (as they say) since so many of these writers claimed to be driven by a series of empirical commitments that insisted on consistency and faithfulness to much more than a putative reality. How deeply at odds, in short, is your epistemic mapping with the empirical claims of those whose works you are mapping? Finally, a small point: on page 19, you reassure us that “cosine similarity is a variation on the very simple measurement of the ‘inner product’ or ‘dot product’ that all humanists learned in middle school.” I reply with the charge that you must have attended a private school, because you claim to have learned anything in middle school at all! So I encourage you to tell us more about how you do—and more important, how we might be brought to do (remember, there are almost certainly people in this room who think of a “vector” as a sportscar)—the actual nuts and bolts of what you are doing.

Nick Valvo's initial claim was less theoretical than historical, but presented in the form of an equally lucid hypothesis: "That the apparent discontinuity [can be resolved] by considering *the specific vision of the state from which liberalism sought emancipation*—or, to make my connection to our chosen theme more explicit: its scale." What I take from Nick's analysis is that the parish, which had functioned for centuries as the mode of communal life that organized spiritual, economic, political, and affective relations, was coming to its end. It began to fade out in the late eighteenth century. I am reminded of Raymond Williams' helpful triad of dominant, residual, and emergent modes—for one sees in this analysis, I think, the parish transitioning from a dominant to a residual function in organized social life, even as one sees emergent sentimentalism gaining greater ascendancy. It's the rhythm of that movement that I find especially interesting. "It should be easy to see," Nick writes, "how sentimentalism is in tension with parochial cultures of neighborliness. From the perspective of sentimental disinterest, the whole gamut of parochial relationships can be indicted as worldly and self-serving for the way they combine affect and self-interest." I am not sure what I see written more clearly between the line of Nick's analysis. Is this the defining feature of the genre of the novel, where the tensions between the parochial and the cosmopolitan define how communal organization will be realized? It seems to me that is one direction this analysis might lead. Or is it a defining feature of the republican nation-state that we see here (I have been thinking a lot about the current immigration ban lately)? In either case, I invite both of you to respond to my comments and I invite our listeners to gather their thoughts and prepare their own questions.