Number, Measure, Scale (comment)

MARY FAVRET

I don’t have a summary, per se, but I have a lot of things—a heap of things, as it were—to say. I am not going to thank Rebecca Spang for giving me this role—I was awake all night, grinding my teeth so thanks a lot, Rebecca. But, no, really I do want to say it is lovely to be back at one of these workshops and to be reminded of how successful and animating they can be. I was also beguiled last night into thinking, “Wow, the graduate students here are so great” and then I sadly realized that I couldn’t say “our” graduate students any more. But they are fantastic: poised, articulate, talented, gracious (and smart!) and I really want to say as a visitor how impressed I am by the graduate student community here at Indiana University. After having been at this institution for so long, it is strange for me, but I have to step back and dissociate myself in order to congratulate you, our hosts, for having gathered and nurtured such outstanding young scholars. They really are impressive.

When these workshops are successful—and this one already clearly has been—they work because there’s a “craft” and a techne to it, an on-going work of fitting our different discourses together. It’s a collaborative enterprise: ego takes a back seat, curiosity and critical thinking come to the fore. The all too usual academic hierarchies do seem to fade away around this table and in this room as graduate students and full faculty work together on something dynamic. For me, at least, it redeems my faith in the value of face to face exchange (supplemented, of course, with pages, slides, food, and coffee). One way it is productive is that when the Workshop is successful, disciplinary borders do not fade away—they’re highlighted—but there’s safe passage in and out. It is interesting to me that there were fewer disciplinary collisions over the last few days than there have been at some workshops in the past, and I wonder about the work of numeration and digitization in serving as a solvent of some sort? I would welcome in this closing discussion if people from different disciplinary backgrounds would highlight what they found to be difficulties or obstacles.

So let me talk about a couple of things that I thought would emerge, but didn’t: the limits, as it were, to the scale of this operation. The geographical scale of our discussions was more or less limited to western Europe, with a slight detour to the Caribbean plantations. Despite Rebecca’s opening gesture toward a recent issue of Eighteenth-Century Studies on the eighteenth century and China, the scale of our conversation was in this sense rather narrow. So too, our temporal scale. Yes we ventured into the seventeenth century and a bit into the nineteenth, but those are the standard frame for many versions of a “long” eighteenth century. And I felt very powerfully the mirroring between our own historical moment and our object of study. However, given the recent prominence in discussions of the receding horizons of “deep time” and concerns about the Anthropocene, I was surprised that these different scales of time and temporality surfaced much less in our conversations than did what I would call the miniscule: the presto rhythms of a scherzo; or the gradations of change in fashion. Everything was very fine tuned, not alert to the grand scales of time; even in Nick Paige’s presentation where he said “You think you’re talking about the eighteenth century, but really it’s part of a longue durée”—well that du-
rée isn’t really all that longue. It’s partly the nature of a Workshop “on” the eighteenth century, but I thought we might have felt a longer stretch of temporality.

I also want to highlight a few themes, turns, threads that did run throughout. I was struck by the recurring drive toward a dyad of certainty-uncertainty, that sort of asymptotic verging toward closer and closer approximation. As if (as if) that was what scholarly endeavor were necessarily grounded upon—some running after certainty and measuring of uncertainty. I understand this as one way eighteenth-century concerns mirror our own contemporary ones. Because I am an “old person” now, I hear in Elizabeth Bond’s letter writers who want to know how to know (their epistemological questions), our own anxiety in facing a new media ecology, a new academic ecology, where we are forced to think about how we know what we know. And I was pushed to reflect back on when I was a “young thing” and my scholarly work had almost nothing to do with certainty/uncertainty. It didn’t occur to me that what I was working on had any bearing on such issues. So my question for us, I guess, is what alternative grounds for scholarship might we have? Perhaps not “certainty,” but something called truth, or meaningfulness, or richness? Concerns about power, or maybe about “beauty”? Which is only to say that certainty-uncertainty is but a small proportion of the academic venture, and our interpretive work has many alternatives.

The second consistent thread was the scale of the human, a question that came up most clearly as the erasure of human labor. Data, I think for us, is increasingly the realm of the non-human—of calculations performed by machines. There was a moment yesterday when somebody asked, “You have all this information, what’s your theory?” and I wonder if in our pursuit of certainties we have become wary of theory? Theory seems increasingly the domain of the human. Data is organized and managed by computers, the theory is ours to own (or disown). So the domain of the human is the theoretical—this is odd, it seems paradoxical to me: that theory becomes the venture, the risk, the gesture of intervention that is the human. And so today (but not twenty years ago), I would put “theory” beside “custom”—it is odd, and very un-Burkean, that “theory” occupies a place similar to “custom” because of their human dimension.

And in the midst of all of this I find myself touched by the glancing tributes to human hands in these papers: in the tactus, the manuscript pages of Josephine Miles, or the hand that hold the needle, the whip, the oboe, or the infant. But beyond the hand—which I think is a familiar place to go for human agency—I want also to think about the rhythms of poems and music that we carry within us. At least in the eighteenth century, these were not just printed on pages, or even performed and then walked away from, but they were carried in the body. They were memorized—you remembered songs, verses, prayers. So the body was a container for a number of rhythms and measures. What other rhythms were in these veins and bones? How do we track those measures, those lived rhythms? Elaine Scarry wrote long ago about body counts, reminding us that we count with our bodies—we use our digits, and that’s why we have “digitization” as we know it. If you look at histories of numbers, number words at the beginning were all scaled to the human body. That bodily register is still there.

Eighteenth-century mathematics descended in part from the stars. It was the astronomers who came up with many of the mathematical theories that mark the eighteenth century. One of them is the law of large numbers (which underwrites so much statistics). Earlier thinking about large numbers was that if you put more people in the room, you
would just multiply the errors—my error would be added to yours, my error would be compounded by Jonathan Elmer’s error, etc. etc., and we would just be making more and more mistakes. But the Law of Large Numbers says “no, no, that’s not true”—the larger the number, the more you can eliminate error and approximate truth. And this all started with wanting to measure the stars—a celestial gesture. That numbers would reduce human error and that the more humans you had the more error would be reduced seems a wonderful thing and makes a workshop like this useful—and there’s a part of me that wants to hold onto that idea, that humans correct each other. That you don’t have to associate “the human” with error.

What I heard yesterday, in various resistances to the ocular-centric characterization of the period and in Fritz Breithaupt’s question about the feedback of number and measure to the perceiving body, was a call for a richer phenomenology: how people experienced changing rates of change, changing registers of scale. Not just how they strove to order these experiences (through the ordinal functions of number) but how people in the eighteenth century encountered its disorders—the discrepancies of various scales, the clashing of registers (parish, parterre, toponym, surprise). Additionally, there seemed to be a desire to make felt the labor (the work) behind the numbers. Print hides labor just as much as numbers do, or as coding does. In this case, I take Josephine Miles (in Brad Pasanek’s paper) as indeed extraordinary: because she shows how “fanatical” and “heroic” this work is when performed by a human without assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Like the women who did the calculations for the NASA space program, and were forgotten by history until the recent film Hidden Figures.

My question is whether the desired return to the body—what the people I study call something “proven upon the pulses”—whether that impulse is produced by the removal to the level of abstraction. The Romantic impulse for embodiment, Wordsworth’s meditations on metrics and action: did these in fact require an abstracting notion of measure or pattern? In other words, is it possible we don’t experience the body until we have been disassociated from it, alienated from it? That we can’t perceive it until it has been taken away, until it has been modified and returns to us in another form?

So then, finally, I want to talk about affects. When Malthus wrote his treatise (Mary Poovey tells us), it wasn’t until he started putting in the charts that people got really enraged. And their rage, as Poovey tells it, was because they saw the charts as “bloodless”—Malthus’s bloodless accounting provoked a visceral response; bloodless-ness itself inspired full-throated anger and rampant anxieties. So one of the things this tells us is that numbers are not emotionally neutral things; there are affective and aesthetic registers of numeration, scale, measure. Numbers may be “bloodless,” but our response to them rarely is.

I noted distinct performances of affect in this workshop (even more so than in the workshop on affect and feeling we had a couple years ago). There was Nick Paige’s statement of relief at the impersonality of his graph, there was his characterization of Brad’s position as “melancholic,” but there was also the excitement that I think both Rebecca Spang and Simon DeDeo felt of something dramatic emerging (an “Aha!” moment) in their work. Someone talked about the “minimal” affective cost of interest and there was reference to Sianne Ngai, but also something was said to be “electrically clarifying.” So it seems to me that the discussion of abstracts such as numbers, measure, and scale has enabled—maybe even required—a real performance of affect, a heightened reg-
ister. I don’t fully know what conclusions to draw from this, except perhaps to say that we all need to perform our humanity more in these discussions.

One way to focus this might be to go back and look at the images, the visualizations we were offered of these various numbers and measures. Michael Gavin gave us clouds; Nick Paige gave us graphs—what happens if we look at these not as bearers of information, but as images, and think about our affective response to them?

I am particular interested in the white spaces of those images (and others)—how do we read them? I did not personally experience “relief” at Nick’s graphs. I kept thinking about those zigzagging lines, and I can’t help but think that the white space was housing some force, some historical force, pushing and pressing those lines around—I saw it as a landscape, with land masses being pushed up or pulled down by unseen tectonic forces. Or we could see the white space as an unmarked environment, how ever antiseptic. It’s not the environment that Gilbert White delicately articulated when he described his parish, it’s not the environment of the dunghill that Wharton suggests. It’s a different sort of environment and it is worth asking what environments—invisible or blanked out—surround and produce these numbers. So if we have the environment of French novels or of English verse or of letters in the affiches, then what is the white space? What isn’t being represented, what can’t be represented? It registers, I suspect, all the uncounted—heaps upon heaps of them, bordered by a just barely visible line. And so that makes me ask about all the slides that weren’t made, the “loser slides” (to borrow Pasanek’s borrowing from Malcolm Bull). What would happen if we could look at them? The slides we did see ask us, I think—and ask in a very powerful way—for us to look at what we cannot see. As critics, we have to attend to what we cannot see, what we cannot count or cannot hear: the silence between the beats, the blank allusion to what we still do not know.