

James Smithies, “*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: Rethinking the Technology of Literature & Culture”

Abstract: We have known for several decades that too much emphasis on the printed text blinds us to the oral and performative power of literature and culture, and their socio-technical dimensions. The oral dimension to Homer’s epics and technical dimensions to digital scholarly editions provide just two examples, at either end of the historical record, that point to the need to rethink the way we read and interpret literature and culture *as systems* rather than texts in the narrow sense of the term. The epistemological implications of this change in critical perspective are profound, however. Advances in deep learning that facilitate the emergence of literature and culture from computational systems suggest autonomous new modes of creativity, reminiscent of alien intelligence, and yet we must resist the pull of mysticism and vitalism. What exactly is a ‘system’ in literary and cultural terms, and how do we manage what Rudolf Otto referred to in the early twentieth century as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that accompanies confrontation with vanishingly complex ideas? How do we retain awareness of the engineered nature of computational systems, and the humanity implicit in them, while also constructing modes of critical interpretation appropriate to their epistemological and ontological significance?

James Smithies is a Professor of Digital Humanities in the Department of Digital Humanities, King’s College London. He was previously founding director of King’s Digital Lab and Deputy Director of King’s eResearch. Before working at King’s James worked at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, as Senior Lecturer in Digital Humanities and Associate Director of the UC CEISMIC earthquake archive. He has also worked in the government and commercial IT sector in the UK and New Zealand, as a technical writer and editor, business analyst, and project manager. His approach to DH is presented in *The Digital Humanities and the Digital Modern* (2017). Recent projects include the Critical Infrastructure Studies Collective, and the MaDiH project that mapped digital cultural heritage infrastructure in Jordan.