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**"The ghost within the ghost in the machine": an interview with Jerome McGann**

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'Estudos Literários Digitais 2'

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‘The ghost within the ghost in the machine’:  
An Interview with Jerome McGann  
MATHEUS DE BRITO AND MANUEL PORTELA  
*CLP | University of Coimbra*



J. McGann. © Courtesy of UVA Communications.

**A**lmost three decades ago, Jerome McGann stated that if the Humanities were facing a crisis, it did not concern propositions on literary artifacts but our scholarly practices (1988). Attentive to these, he helped to bring them to the forefront of discussion in both textual scholarship and literary criticism. This work was not solely theoretical, but it was solidly built upon his long-time experience, first, as print editor of Byron's works (1980-1993), and, later, as hypermedia editor of the *Rossetti Archive* (1993–2008; <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>). Equally important for the development of his thought have been his teaching career as John Stewart Bryan Professor at the University of Virginia (1986–), and his many institutional appointments.

Changes brought about by digital textuality upon the modes of production and circulation of both literary works and scholarly discourses led him to publish one of the most seminal essays for rethinking the technologies and forms of the book in hypermedia environments (“The Rationale of Hyper-text”, written in 1995). Distinguished scholar and critic, McGann soon became widely acknowledged for his interventions on the Digital Humanities debates, for which his fifteen-year old *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (2001) is a sort of “classic”.<sup>1</sup> He has recently published *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (2014), gathering essays that follow from his pioneering book on the matter.<sup>2</sup> From Blake to Byron, from Dickinson to Drucker, from social text to online scholarship, his groundbreaking combination of philological investigation and philosophical provocation has resulted in textual artifacts and conceptual models that continue to resonate as we plunge deeper and deeper into the regime of computation.

McGann’s editorial and theoretical work on the social and bibliographic dimensions of textual events has been at the core of the Materialities of Literature PhD Program at the University of Coimbra. Focusing mostly on McGann’s recent work, our interview addresses the reasons underlying his critical moves, and looks at his scholarly poetics of interpretation as a material engagement with imaginative works.<sup>3</sup>

**1** Before *A New Republic of Letters*, you were planning a book to be called *Philology in a New Key*, a recurrent motto in some of your previous writings and lectures. Did you change your mind about the title, or do you still intend to publish something under this banner? It seems that there was a shift from an intradisciplinary issue, as addressed in these lectures, to an institutional one.

The title I wanted was *Philology in a New Key*—which was the title of a version of the second chapter as originally published in 2013 in *Critical Inquiry*. That title was important for my argument in two respects. First, it invoked Susanne K. Langer’s important 1941 semiotic investigation of expressive discourse, *Philosophy in a New Key*. Second, it implicitly argued that the study of discourse and discourse fields ought to be grounded in philology rather than philosophy: i.e., in a study of the history of social objects and

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed by Manuel Portela in *Comparative Critical Studies* 1.3 (2004): 371-376: doi: [10.3366/ccs.2004.1.3.371](https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2004.1.3.371).

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed by Matheus de Brito in *MATLIT* 4.1 (2016): 181-184. doi: [10.14195/2182-8830\\_4-1\\_11](https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830_4-1_11).

<sup>3</sup> This interview was conducted via email, from May 7 to June 19, 2016. A list of McGann’s works discussed or mentioned in the interview is provided at the end.

events rather than in formal and theoretical speculations. Philology—“the knowledge of what is and has been known” (*Die Erkenntnis des Erkannten*, August Boeckh). I also wanted to recover the term “philology”, which had long been the covering term for the study of discourse. It fell from favor in the mid-twentieth century when literary studies shifted their attention away from empirical and historical issues—and even away from a *theoretical* inquiry into the centrality of those issues.

In point of actual fact, my title was rejected by the press (not abandoned by me). It was judged too old-fashioned.

**2.** **What can** a *philology* mean today? By “*New Republic of Letters*”, one should take both a descriptive view of transformations taking place and a mildly normative statement on what remains in need of change. So: if, on the one hand, there is a current turn of attention toward textual media, is there, on the other hand, a consistent renewal of interest in history? Even if one might question whether or not the past is indeed something to which literary studies should be committed to, the more pressing question seems to be *how* could that be done.

Let me start by addressing the question of “*how*” an historical approach to discourse might be pursued. Look again at the three sections that organize the chapters of *A New Republic of Letters*: “From History to Method”, “From Theory to Method”, “From Method to Practice”. “Theory” remains an essential analytic tool, but the recurrent focus has to be pragmatic—as you say, “*how*”. Theory itself should submit to that pragmatic requirement, since an adequate methodology only justifies itself in a practice focused on actual discursive objects and events. When you mean to investigate, say, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, what *in material fact* do you actually have in mind? If that question has not been asked and answered in your critical inquiry, you may be speculating about literary work in general and even in interesting ways. You will not be engaged with objects and events. Even more consequential, you will not have recognized the fundamental authority—the *theoretical* consequentiality—of objects and events: what Byron called “the dead but sceptred Sovereigns who still rule/ Our spirits from their urns.” Or as Faulkner famously wrote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

So because “how” is indeed the determining question, I organized the book’s argument to climax in two chapters that are immersed in very particular discursive facticities: first on how Poe’s work shapes and gets shaped by antebellum print culture; second, on the title page of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* as an exemplary challenge to a thorough-going interpretive method.

**3.** **Your illustrative** reading of Robert Creeley’s “The Innocence” calls attention to the whole thought process on which interpretive practice rests, not strictly to method nor history. In “Marking Texts in Many Dimensions”, the central chapter in Part II of *A New Republic of Letters*, which was republished in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (2016), it

seems that there is an effort to retroactively apply to writing some textual features that were not as common in codex culture but now feel native to electronic word processing. They are feasible in book-form, but not common. We also notice, or imagine, that there are several different implications in the choice of speaking of *dimensions/dementians* rather than of *codes*. *Why* these choices, and *why* this writing?

At a pivotal late moment in Ciro Guarra's recent, arresting film *El Abraço de la Serpiente*, Karamakate asks the eager but naïve American anthropologist Evan "How many sides does the river have?", and Evan says "Two", Karamakate tells him he's completely wrong, that it has dozens, thousands, and endless number of sides. Karamakate is expressing in a far more simple and direct way what Benoit Mandelbrot argued in his celebrated 1967 paper "How Long is the Coast of Britain: Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension." So do we say that poems have any number of "meanings" and lend themselves to n-number of readings. That's the general framework of the essay I wrote.

But its particular focus had to do with building a digital machine that would enhance our understanding of how fractional dimensions emerge, on one hand, and how their production can be enhanced, on the other. There is a problem here because the technologies of the codex and the computer are asymmetrical—the codex operating in a system that itself generates redundancies and "overlapping structure", the computer operating a system that forbids them. So the essay laid out a theoretical design—an "N-Dimensional" Markup system—that would exploit the asymmetry by performative demonstration. The sequence of looped "readings" of Creeley's poem expose how, no matter what the operating system, the act of interpretation generates itself by feeding off its own limitations. The process is ultimately "Autopoietical".

As to the word play of dimensions/dementians, that came about through conversations I was having at the time with Johanna Drucker. When I was describing my theoretical machine and its structure of dimensionalities, we argued about how many dimensions should be initially posited. I said six, she said seven. (I now believe that in a fundamental sense, the basic set doesn't much matter—but that's another story.) In any case, because we were having a lot of fun with our pedantic quibbles, she said "Clearly these aren't dimensions at all,—they're demented, they're demonic ... they're *Dementians!*" And so they were. For after all, the whole game is fundamentally ludic. *Homo Ludens*.

**4** • **It is not** easy to say if its contribution as an epistemological frame has increased since its first appearance in *Radiant Textuality* (2001), but the presence of 'pataphysics and jarryan *topoi* in your writings, or 'patacriticism, surely grew over time. 'Pataphysics is a *figure* of your commitment to an epistemology that goes against the more general and lingering assumptions of literary theory—namely, the abstract, identifiable and (more

or less debatable) universal qualities we could ascribe to literary phenomena. Since these are, however, the very assumptions that made possible such a thing as literary *theory*, this epistemological criticism turns out to be anti-theoretical to its core.

Yes, I suppose my work is in important respects “anti-theoretical to its core”. It moves that way because actual experience is so vital and complex that we are always trying to gain some control over our relation to it—to understand it theoretically. William Blake called that “systematic reasoning”, or the impulse to “hold a candle in sunshine”. He is one of our quintessential anti-theoreticians, as he made unmistakably clear when he wrote: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro the narrow chinks of his cavern” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

When I read I encounter the world at second hand, the world in a mirror—“the world” itself being an experiential vastness overwhelming in the wonder of what Blake called its “Minute Particulars”. Our literary archives are memory banks that give us some measure of critical reflection on our day-to-day lives. They enable this exactly because they are, unlike living experience, finished and in a sense dead—the living dead, so to say, or what Bernard Stiegler called “the inorganic organization of memory”. These inorganic legacies possess the great virtue of their manifest limitations. They take the measure of our faustian thoughts and judgments, they (literally) put us in our place. They make subjectivity possible.

The problem with theory is its formal relation to generalization and law. But—to cite Blake again—anti-theory runs this counter-claim: “To generalize is to be an idiot”.

Or in a more contemporary idiom: “The imposed view, however innocent, always obscures” (Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*).

Or (again) Byron: “When a man talks to me of his “system”, his case is hopeless”.

**5 Or: “with** respect to truth, experience always outruns conception” (McGann). This is a concealed aesthetics in your writings, both in the sense of a specific disposition toward the cultural objects with which you engage and of some prior assumptions governing your more mediated, conceptual interventions. Another formulation: “[T]he elementary law is not the law of identity but the law of non-identity.” As this goes far beyond simple academic discourse, could you elaborate more on the relation between subjective experience, truth and history? In the sense of a *Republic*, is there more to humanist culture than its day-to-day usefulness?

Identity is a law, non-identity is primary experience. (We “derive” the law of  $A=A$  from our experience of the fertile chaos of experience, from our need to exercise control, *whatever the cost*.) Both can be and have been called “truth”, but “truth”, as Democritus said, lies at the bottom of a well. It dances around the corners of our awareness, taking elusive form in the ludic play



human beings engage with those two truth claims. The truth is a devotion we make to something we will never have and never know. It is memorably enshrined in the touching and ludic oath one takes in court, to speak “the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”.

“Is there something more to humanist culture than its day-to-day usefulness?” I *truly* think you know the answer, your answer, to that question. Posing it, you remind me of the climactic moment in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, when Asia interrogates Demogorgon about the ultimate source of power in the tormented world. She demands the name of this power so that it can be overthrown. Demogorgon gives no name but simply avers: “He reigns.” When Asia desperately asks in return, “Who reigns?”, Demogorgon replies “Each to himself must be the oracle.”

**6** • **Your views** on experience and method are drawn from a distinction between the imaginative activity and the limits imposed by conceptual definitions, and in this sense your aesthetic *parti pris* is also part of an epistemology, a theory of knowledge. To what extent has this epistemology motivated your criticism on the several concepts of *text*, as well as the defense, development and implementation of the *social text*? You have been doing it for almost four decades (1983–).

Four decades! That does tell one something about our—or at least my—“limits”. The *social text* that I pledge allegiance to often reappears to me in my educational life, and specifically in classrooms, seminars, and fascinating conversations with colleagues and fellow students. I rarely see myself as a “teacher”, it seems to me I’m constantly a student. “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” That’s Whitman in one of his wisest moments. We all have that “teacher” in ourselves and s/he needs to be severely disciplined—sent to sit on a stool in the corner, wearing a dunce cap, and perhaps learning, by shutting up, how to pay attention.

**7** • **Yours is** a very specific theory of text, one which tries to explore dimensions not accounted for either by old school textual criticism or (post-)structuralist theories and its computational derivative. Pettit once spoke about a “post-McGannian [*critical*] edition”, described as “more populous, vocally, and thus livelier” than its counterpart. With the shift to electronic media, *i.e.*, from your experience with the edition of Byron’s works to the experience with *The Rossetti Archive*, you elaborated your (and McKen-zie’s) idea of the *social text* into some seven, then six protocols. Could you explain how have your experiences with the book and the digital edition related to each other in the shaping of these ideas? Would you say they have attained their final form?

Surely it’s clear that the idea of “final form” is for me what the poet called “something longed for, never seen”. As to the editorial machines I’ve been involved with thinking about and trying to imagine (and build), they seem to me part of what the same poet called “effort, and expectation, and desire,/ And something ever more about to be”. For me, the relation of the



bibliographical edition and the digital edition is a differential relation that, seriously engaged, can improve our understanding of textualities of every kind. Nothing is a greater help toward that end than making a practical move to engage those differences, by actually trying to build an edition. It is a humbling intellectual experience.

**8** **Your resistance** to some assumptions associated with the Textual Encoding Initiative is closely related to this epistemological issue—whether “minute particulars” can be perceived, experienced or marked through an unambiguously structured code. Thus the *dementianal method* as a (paradoxical) method for calling forth the uncodifiable. It is also possible to understand those protocols as a somewhat direct confrontation with TEP’s 1990s *text*. How do you feel about the future of these ideas and the conceptual and actual tools they motivated, such as IVANHOE and Drucker’s and Nowviskie’s *Time Modeling*?

IVANHOE and *Time Modeling*—and even more, the never realized but ever-glorious *Patacritical Demon*—were practical thought experiments in how one might exercise free thought—thinking that could keep turning over on itself. “Unambiguously structured code”—code written under the law of  $A=A$ —is remarkably useful for the ambiguously (asymmetrically redundant) structured codes that enable living and living thought. “Unambiguously structured code” is exactly the means for “calling forth the uncodifiable”, i.e., calling forth the action and reaction of human agents. Nothing can live under the law of  $A=A$ , which we invent so that we can actually “imagine what we know” (that’s Shelley) and go on to “imagine what we *don’t know*” (that our contemporary poet Lisa Samuels).

**9** **Even if** a bit faint, there is an ongoing dispute in “post-theory” Humanities. Digital Humanities play a pivotal role here. On the one hand, there is the feeling that Humanities cannot but cooperate with its institutional demands, as a means without an end of its own and hence subject to alien criteria. On the other hand, there is the urge for scholars to refer to Humanities specific qualities, no matter how pointless these might seem at first when confronted with those criteria. How do you imagine a “New Republic of Letters”, to recall a previous publication, “in a Managed World” (2006)?

I imagine it operating as the original Enlightenment “Republic of Letters” tried to operate in *its* “managed world” of thrones, principalities, powers, and dominions. I imagine it as the ghost within the ghost in the machine, the Lucretian swerve from the fatal rain of the fatal atoms ( $A=A$ ). So today I imagine the necessity of returning to a study of bibliographical technologies as they are retreating from dominance in the institutions of education and knowledge.

Koestler saw the atavistic ghost as a destructive inertia, Freud’s “death drive”. Which it is. But there is a ghost within the ghost. William Blake named it “Energy” and, as he went on to say, “it is the only Life, and is from

the Body". We are "fastened to a dying animal" and the poet who saw this—and who loved Blake—ought not to have lamented it (as Blake did not), though in doing so he *did* make a convincing—a decidedly *Romantic*—case for its truth. There is Blake at the dying of the light of Enlightenment, the cusp of Romanticism and the threshold of a new management (the British imperial order), bringing a great, late Enlightenment claim. It astonishes us—it opens our doors of perception—because it is simultaneously a religious and a secular claim—from an Enlightenment point of view, a contradiction in terms. It is an unmanageable claim.

What has that to do with your question about the relation of digital to traditional humanities? Let me put it in practical terms (I've said this often over the past 25 years). For the humanities, the coming of digital technology means that the entirety of our cultural archive has to be preserved as such *and* digitally remediated (manifestly a contradictory demand). To do that we have to re-curate and re-edit it in a digital horizon. In my judgment, we won't do that well if we don't make a serious reflection on bibliographical technology a practical feature of our work building the digital network. I am far from alone, it seems to me, in recognizing this, so I am full of "effort and expectation and desire". I think we'll muddle through.

**10.** **One** of the ways in which your concern with the aesthetic as a mode of experiencing the world comes up in your work is through a reflexive engagement with the forms of writing. The single unified authorial voice is sometimes displaced by dramatic dialogue, poetic reflection, and textual collage—for instance, in *Radiant Textuality* (2001), *The Point is to Change It* (2007), or *Are the Humanities Inconsequent?* (2009). These discursive operations run counter conventional modes of knowledge validation, which depend upon strict (and often unacknowledged) rules for framing objects through the uses of language. In your essays, voices and characters (such as Student, Professor, Angel, Printer's Devil, or Footnote) embody particular viewpoints in the game of interpretation—appropriating the tradition of the platonic dialogue—but they also call attention to the regulatory function of scholarly literary practices in the production of disciplinary (i.e., disciplined) discourses. How important is this self-awareness of one's (your, my, our, their) own language game for philological investigations? In the age of bibliometrics, what use is there for any scholar who becomes the ethnographer of his/her own discourse? And is this even possible?

I began resorting to those kinds of rhetorical and stylistic moves in my 1972 book *Swinburne. An Experiment in Criticism*, which is a series of dialogues of the dead about Swinburne's work conducted by a group of his contemporaries. In the mid- and late 1980s, when I was making some serious studies of contemporary American *avant-garde* poetry, I returned to the dialogue form, and used it from time to time in the next few years, for instance in *Black Riders* (1993) and *The Textual Condition* (1991). I didn't take Plato's dialogues

as my model, however, but rather had in mind Lucian, Schlegel, and Wilde. That's to say, I found dialogues that foregrounded their lack of closure much more useful, particularly dialogues that turned ludic, as if their interlocutors could see and acknowledge, as the conversations progressed, the untruths and limited range of what they were thinking and arguing. Working with the dialogue form led to the happy discovery—"happy" in my view—that when I was writing expository prose I could allow other voices and views that were, so-to-say, hanging around in my head to step out and steer the writing into directions "I" hadn't originally intended.

The IVANHOE Game, which Johanna Drucker and I invented in the early 2000s, came directly out of that way of thinking about how a scholar ought to go about the interpretation of culture and its works. For Johanna, who is an artist, such a mindset was fundamental to her work. But for scholars and critics, a ludic orientation can seem a betrayal of one's primary obligation to try to tell the truth about cultural works—even, perhaps, to tell people what they mean. But the deeper truth of scholarship, it seems to me, is that it is always executed from what Dante Gabriel Rossetti called "an inner standing point", and is therefore—indeed, must be—a "subjective" truth, a certain perspective on the truth. That is why the "truths" that scholars cherish are primarily qualities of address: thoroughness, candor, accuracy—as much of each as one can manage. I think Shelley was right: "The deep truth is imageless", and can only be expressed in discounted terms—certainly by scholars, and probably as well by poets.

Everyone should aspire to become "his or her own ethnographer". That's Modernity's way of pledging allegiance to the ancient call to "Know Thyself". It's an impossible demand but not for that reason any less imperative. Because the scholar's work is public education, scholarship does well when it consciously lays its own investigations open to critical inspection. Laura Riding once wisely said that poetry should make it clear that "failure stalks in every word". It seems a proverb for scholars as well.

And as for bibliometrics, data mining, distant reading. These statistical methodologies have long been used both for scholarly and for critical investigations, and in our current IT horizon, they are drawing a lot of new attention from humanists. They're obviously useful for laying out categorical and abstract proposals and drawing interpretive generalizations from their data. But in those respects we also see their inconsequence, as Blake aggressively pointed out with his famous aphorism: "To generalize is to be an idiot". General ideas are unhelpful—they can be far worse—when you engage with art, human individuals, or specific events. We may recall that data mining evidence underwrote the decision to invade Iraq.

May I quote myself? "Out of scholarship comes the advancement of learning, out of criticism, its arrest. Of course scholarship would be worthless if it had no critical conscience, and criticism without what Emily Dickinson called 'the scholar's art' would be empty" (McGann, 2007: xv). The scholar's

longing for enlightenment is at once splendid and absurd. Or so it seems to me—perhaps because I have been led to think this way by the iconography of my namesake. Jerome in his great study, with a lion sleeping at his feet; Jerome in the wilderness, emaciated, contemplating a crucifix.

It's not healthy to take one's self or one's work too seriously.

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