

Review of *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Martin Paul Eve
Professor of Literature, Technology and Publishing
Birkbeck, University of London

The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in: Martin Paul Eve, 2016, 'Book review: A new republic of letters: Memory and scholarship in the age of digital reproduction', *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues*, 26:1, 61-64, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/ALX.0039>. Published by SAGE.

A speculation: one of the many challenges that must have faced Jerome McGann in writing his *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* was resisting the urge to title the book “The Philological Investigations”, with its resonant Wittgensteinian pun. While this latter phrase is instead used to head a two-part exemplar demonstration of the theoretical challenges that run throughout the volume, to speculate on the internal history of the book's title in this way is not mere flippancy. For one rationale that will also serve to give a flavour of the work: McGann himself shows a philological attentiveness to titles and title-pages in this book. Indeed, he dedicates almost a whole chapter to a close reading of the first-edition title page of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, demonstrating the ways in which even the most seemingly mundane artefacts of textual practice are pre-marked, autopoietic and situated within dynamic social networks. McGann is nothing if not aware of the scope for interpretation and uncertainty in just the five words of his own title. In this light, McGann's final choice of title – framed on the cover page by the outline of an iPad-like tablet device in my edition – aptly privileges the network connotations of the “republic of letters” and Walter Benjamin's mechanical reproduction over those of analytic philosophy; the work is concerned in part with the shuttering of scholarly production within the old technologies of print. In another sense, though, McGann's final choice of title is curious; a focus on philology lies at the absolute core of this book. Indeed, the largest part of McGann's work here is concerned with the impossibility of recovering, but consistent gesturing towards recovery of, the cultural past; of philology's need to understand the complex loops within which its task unfolds; and to consider the implications of new digital techniques in this sphere.

In some ways, however, such playful speculation on alternative titles is also appropriate for a work that is so clearly a hybrid. So far as such a term has traction and isn't rejected by the author himself, this is a “digital humanities” book from an eminent figure at the forefront of digitization movements. The work, however, nonetheless (but unsurprisingly) espouses a return to a consideration of materiality; it juxtaposes romantic poetry with XML markup; it aligns histories of the material book with Nietzsche; it notes that in the world of digitization, the book and the codex remain. The text also swerves in its futurology, with McGann at times optimistic and perhaps even radical. “Nearly everyone”, he writes, re-paraphrasing the sentiment at more than one point in the book, “now sees that scholarly communications will soon be largely organized in digital venues”, bridged by a period of a “half-world” between print and digital, contradicting some of the worse spats about open access and accreditation in which I have had the misfortune to be involved in recent years (1, 4, 14, 20, 132). By contrast, though, McGann is also conservative, if only in the sense of an impulse towards universal cultural conservation: “though much [cultural heritage] is always forgotten, refused, and deleted, we should”, writes McGann, “resist all such moves” (8). Perhaps as a result of the fact that the book is born from a series of articles (all but two chapters have previously appeared elsewhere in different forms and the author suggests in the preface that “a seriatim reading may not be best for every reader”), *A New Republic of Letters* is theoretically and thematically hybrid.

Structurally, *A New Republic of Letters* is neatly divided into three parts (framed by an introduction and conclusion), each contributing towards a triangulation: “From History to Method” is followed by “From Theory to Method”, both synthesized in “From Method to Practice”. These sections are designed to take up, “in a more traditional form”, the objects and projects of the past twenty years of McGann’s work, including IATH, NINES, *The Rossetti Archive*, *IVANHOE* and *Juxta* (1). As noted above, McGann’s primary concern is the reintroduction of philology as an important scholarly activity, especially at a time of digital mutation. This is not, as he is at pains to clarify, to focus on the “New Philology” that appeared in medieval studies in the 1990s (Nichols 1990), but is rather more akin to Edward Said’s framing of philology as a “patient scrutiny of, and lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings in history” (2). The “love of the word” (*philo-logy*) must, for McGann, though, emphasize the “sociohistorical conditions of [the record’s] creation and emergence”, it must be, in the words of August Boeckh, “the knowledge of what is and what has been known [*Die Erkenntnis des Erkannten*]” (4). To this end, the first part of the book argues that it is in method that studies of philology should begin, not in theory. The second continues this theme, mapping traditional philological functions onto the digital space. The final part takes a more practical course, charting the question of “what is to be done”, in the author’s own Leninist-inflected phrasing.

The first re-situation of philology in method, rather than in philosophy or theory, comes by asking why textual scholarship matters. Opposing the privileging turn towards hermeneutics in literary studies with philology, McGann claims that, “to the philologist, all possible meanings are a function of their historical emergence as material artifacts” (19) with “the complete genetic information about any cultural work” being encoded in a “double helix of its DNA, which defines the codependent relation of its production history and reception history” (23). The key facet of this codependence is that each strand of “DNA” here is produced by the dynamic interaction of multiple actors, a point that McGann underscores by reference to J.C. Mays’s recent critical edition of Coleridge’s poetical works. This critical edition, notes McGann, is peppered with notes that feature abbreviations of documentary witnesses (“C’s predilection for TP’s bower”). Such references then function, for McGann, as “hyperlinks to the received sociohistorical network of materials with which the author’s work is meshed and implicated”. “They are”, he claims, “the elementary signs that Coleridge’s works are social texts” (25). McGann uses this logic to formulate a fourfold set of precepts for a digital replication of such critical machinery, namely that: “the depository of artifacts must be comprehensive”; “its different parts must be organized in a network of internal links and external connections that can be represented as conventions”; “the total system must rest in a single perspective that reflects the conception of the system generally agreed upon by its users” (a system that is “modifiable through use”); “the system must have the flexibility to license, and ultimately store, an indefinite number of particular views of its artifacts and their relations, including different views of the system as a whole” (28). No small ask, this is McGann’s philological universal Turing machine.

The second of McGann’s provocations towards theory combines a whirlwind reading of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* with Stanley Fish’s critique of the 2012 MLA conference, in which Fish remarked upon the move towards new “hot topics”, with digital humanities often bearing the brunt of such an assault (Fish 2011). Noting that, for Lyotard, “postmodern science” is a practice that pursues the generation of new, unexpected statements (a Poundist, Modernist sentiment), McGann co-situates Fish’s critique here: that of a “presentist, just-in-time horizon” for humanities study. For McGann, “a philological conscience presses against such habits”, providing an imperative “to preserve, monitor, investigate and augment our cultural inheritance”, even when that drive is facilitated by new, ‘hot’ technologies (36-37). Philology then becomes, in this mode, the “science of human memory”, a type of buffering against the short-term memory and poor value-forecasting practices of the present (47).

Throughout, McGann works to historically situate his remarks, even when pressing against the history/theory divide; the final chapter in his first section, for example, is devoted to the debate between Wilamowitz and Nietzsche. Here, McGann instructively centres the problematically gendered nature of Nietzsche's thought as an aspect also reflected in the latter's thinking on philology, which is represented by Nietzsche as a field that encourages “reflecting on the reflections of life”, not the life itself (50). The more important part of the debate for McGann, though, is the historiographical suppositions underlying the two positions; “Nietzsche's fact deficient history is the reflex of Wilamowitz's fact-sufficient history” (59); “all history comes to us in few and fractured forms” (56) and thus the “historicist method of German scholarship [...] was internally unstable” (61). Indeed, for McGann, “interpretation is a social act”, one that cannot be divorced from its contexts, an aspect that runs throughout this book (78).

The final section of McGann's book moves away from the theoretical and historical into the realm of practice. Describing McGann's own projects, such as the Rossetti Archive, NINES and ARC – as well as the pragmatic challenges of implementation – this portion will feel the most familiar to digital humanities readers. That's not to say that this section of the book suddenly becomes a-critical and pragmatic/descriptive; McGann's style remains critically engaged until the end, where he closes with some remarks on the admittedly Occidentally-biased nature of the work.

“The primary focus of this book”, writes McGann, “is the need to rethink and reorganize humanities research and education” (210). A task of epic proportions, it is nonetheless one that *A New Republic of Letters* approaches with admirable composure. The style throughout is humanistic and critical, not techno-fetishistic. While this approach and especially the focus on the histories of philology perhaps dilute the direct digital imperative, compared to, say, the work of Kathleen Fitzpatrick, McGann's book should become crucial reading for anyone who wishes to see what our electronic future needs to look like, if we are to have a past.

Fish, S., 2011. The Old Order Changeth. *New York Times*. Available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/the-old-order-changeth/> [Accessed April 9, 2015].

McGann, J., 2014. *A New Republic of Letters*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nichols, S.G., 1990. Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture. *Speculum*, 65(01), pp.1–10.