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By Katherine Bode

Fearsomely erudite and fearlessly ambitious, *A New Republic of Letters* unites the various strands of McGann’s career – as textual scholar, digital humanist, literary critic and poet – to produce a manifesto for the future of the humanities. In articulating an approach focused on archival, curatorial and editorial work, McGann provides a framework for solving some of the major challenges facing the humanities today: how to remediate our cultural inheritance in digital form; how to stabilise and integrate that record with the existing archive; and how to work, communicate and collaborate in this mixed depository. However, the humanities McGann describes barely resembles the one we have, and while he provides impressive theoretical justifications for and practical demonstrations of his method, he provides no framework for enacting this new paradigm.

Early chapters revisit and extend an argument McGann has often made: that the splitting of Higher and Lower Criticism at the turn of the twentieth century left the former – literary criticism and theory – without a philological ‘conscience’: an awareness that all works ‘carry the evidence of “the history of their own making”’ (4) and a dedication to preserving, organising, monitoring and augmenting that history. In its place, interpretation became the activity of individual readers in relation to abstract ‘texts’. The digital age exposes the limitations of this approach, which provides no basis for conceptualising an historical record comprised of ‘a vast set of specific material objects that have been created and passed along through an even more vast’, and continually changing, ‘network of agents and agencies’ (22).

In outlining a model of cultural interpretation adequate to understanding and remediating this historical record, McGann proposes a double helix encoded in every cultural work. Comprised of the codependent relationship between the histories of production and reception, each strand of this double helix is produced by multiple agents. Every person, discursive field, and system a work (even a document) comes into contact with – including those relating to the immediate interpreting agent – becomes part of the history of, and changes, that work. Not only is there no possibility of discovering *the* meaning of a work, but the interpreting agent can only be partially aware of the complex system of influences she is exploring, contributing to and altering. Scholarship – rendered both performative and indeterminate – involves accumulating as much information as possible about the object of study, while acknowledging this process can never be complete.

Far from viewing digital humanities as a ‘set of replacement protocols’ (4) for humanities, McGann is critical not only of traditional hermeneutics, which abstracts the object of study – as ‘text’ – and places it outside the act of critical reflection, but of digital projects and techniques – including his own *Rossetti Archive* – that inherit and perpetuate this approach by failing to engage adequately with the sociology of the textual condition. Characterising the problem with much existing digital scholarship as institutional rather than algorithmic, McGann insightfully analyses the lack of correspondence between internet sociologies and those that underpin print culture.
Despite past failings, McGann identifies online ecologies as having greater potential than paper-based instruments to encode the way all cultural objects ‘evolve and mutate in their use’ (123).

McGann rounds out his argument for philology in a ‘new key’ with practical examples: digital projects, such as NINES, that manifest the sociologies of the internet; and two ‘philological investigations’ – of Edgar Allen Poe and The Pioneers – that impressively demonstrate the potential of McGann’s method, particularly by challenging prevailing author-centred approaches to literary interpretation. Less impressive is McGann’s application of a philological approach to textual analysis. His six readings – or sequential deformations – of the poem ‘The Innocence’ suggest an unpacked close reading rather than a new interpretive model. In concluding with a critique of Pascale Casanova’s The World Republic of Letters, McGann foregrounds the important political dimension of his book. Where the lack of material and sociohistorical grounding in Pascale’s work marginalises non-western cultures, philology holds all languages, works and documents equally worthy of attention.

While I endorse this philological approach and its political underpinnings, McGann provides no indication of how to embed it institutionally. With the current emphasis in higher education on progressive achievement and definitive research findings, it is barely possible to assert the value of a humanities that promises the meaning of texts, let alone one grounded in the impossibility of ever telling the truth about a document. In this respect, missing from McGann’s analysis of the demise of philology is acknowledgement of how the ascendency of Higher Criticism was necessitated – as well as enabled – by a mandated research culture that continues today. While this inattention to institutional socialities is jarring in a book so attuned to those of works, and of print and internet cultures, McGann clearly demonstrates how, far from diminishing, the digital age emphasises, the importance of the particular and the material, and the value of rigor and scholarly method.