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Jerome McGann. The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World

Katherine D. Harris

Jerome McGann. *The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xii, 239 pp. Illus. Paper, \$22.00 (ISBN 978-0-226-50085-0).

Jerome McGann, John Stuart Bryan Professor at the University of Virginia, has published more than thirty works on various nineteenth-century and Modernist authors. In the last decade, he has explored hypertext as a viable "new" scholarly apparatus, primarily using the Rossetti Hypermedia Archive as the foundation for facilitating a collaborative scholarly community. The resulting Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship (NINES) has already begun the work of amassing hypertextual projects and creating a peer-review system. With *The Scholar's Art*, McGann returns to conversations begun in *The Romantic Ideology and The Poetics of Sensibility*, but these conversations also incorporate his theories on reorganizing scholarly models very similar to the hyperspace community proposed with NINES. The title suggests that this work will be another lamentation on the corporatization of Humanities education. Instead, this series of chapters, loosely grouped under thematic section titles, sets off on a self-proclaimed dramatic monologue specifically aimed at scholars--with no apologies for excluding the "passive consumers of Survivor, Grand Theft Auto or Left Behind" (xi). McGann uses poetry to highlight that literary scholarship is not self-important but is intrinsically really important. As with much recent writing about the revision of Humanities, McGann ministers that to break free of the stereotypes against scholarship and poetic language, we must engage at a distance as well as dis-engage with the rhetoric that we have created.

The scholar, for Jerome McGann, is an artist--not an observer of art, but a participant in the continual creation of knowledge. Using his foundational work on Romantic poetry and textual studies, McGann encourages us to cease the defense of poetry as the language of an elite and to recuperate it as part of a scholarly artistry:

Every scholar's art ceases with the presumption of knowledge, when
method itself has become an archaeology of knowledge. For the
scholar that is only the knowing search and the knowledge, if such
it is, that the game is endless and unwinnable, redeemed only by
the scholar's commitment to thoroughness, precision and candor.
(215)

This call to action demands a change in philosophy, almost a recuperation of poetry and cultural authority. Each chapter does not force a conclusion; more often than not, it concludes with a literary quote instead of McGann's words--almost as if he acquiesces the last word to these authors and their cultural authority. This style, very unlike a traditional textual scholar, always leaves McGann's works open to sequels, and he has already produced the continuation to *The Scholar's Art* with the publication of *The Point Is to Change It.* Poetry and Criticism in the Continuing Present, a series of essays about escaping "the limitations of our inherited academic models [and widening] existing cracks or [creating] new ones ..." (Publisher's Description). McGann produces these collections of essays to upset his own authority and avoid being "right," which he believes is a deplorable position (Soderholm). True to his original New Critical methodology, in *The Scholar's Art* McGann focuses on stylistics to discuss the historical and continued relevance of authors from Shakespeare to Stoppard. For McGann, reading these authors' works provides "another definition of the human: 'Man,' a new Aristotle might say, 'is a languaged animal'" (Soderholm 48).

The first part, "Not My Literary History!" includes three chapters, the first of which focuses on traditional Romantic definitions of beauty and sublime. Beginning with William Blake, he reminds us of the differences among Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron with a peppering of transatlantic and European authors. The evolution of "Beauty" is a historical phenomenon, traced through its "crisis and apparent 'decay,'" and "the legacy of a culture committed to choosing forms of worship over poetic tales. Worse still, turning poetic tales into forms of worship" (33). (These arguments have been rehearsed in his other works and bear mention only as they relate to the larger project of creating a new scholarly model.)

The second chapter loosely continues the conversation about Beauty but under the guise of defining cultural authority in post-Romanticism. This chapter also props up poetry and the "Poet" as the purveyor of this authority (38). The third chapter concluding this part, discusses Modernism's cultural authority and the move away from Wordsworth's affected ideology that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" (39). The chapter opens with McGann's personal reading experience of Paul Dugan's poetry, an author whose work divulges "the cultural authority of Poets" (38):

[U]ntil I had read him I hadn't realized that either cruelty or ugliness could be deliberate features of poetry. Baudelaire, like Byron, wrote the romance of evil. Indeed, both just went to prove what I had been taught: that poetry, as another poet said, turns all things to loveliness. According to Matthew Arnold, that was one of its chief functions for the modern world. Dugan's poetry, however, didn't appear to work that way. (52-53)

McGann uses Dugan to discuss the ugliness of the poetry from the previous two chapters--a reading or looking backwards of sorts that shifts the investigative model for literary studies and turns the critical eye towards the contract between poet and reader.

The chapter moves into Modernism's self-critique as seen through, Laura Riding, a respondent and defender of Gertrude Stein's work against T.S. Eliot's damning review. McGann observes that "Riding's early [1927] essay [shows] that the perplexity or dismay over Stein's work reflects a critical inadequacy in her readers, not a failure of her work" (55). McGann proposes not a re-evaluation of Stein's work, but a shift in the critical study of Modernism. For McGann, Riding's essay signals the emergence of four distinct postmodernisms (56) all tied together in an "imagination of disaster" (58) and begin with Riding's *The Life of the Dead* (1933), the title of this chapter.

Part Two consists of four chapters framed loosely under the title, "Philological Investigations." Using his own re-readings of Modernism as a critical model, in this section McGann returns to the nineteenth century to discuss the novel and, more specifically, to excavate Sir Walter Scott from underneath Lukas. Working through Scott's canon and both James' and Lukas reflections on fiction and Scott's work, McGann finally contemplates *Ivanhoe*, Scott's novel that has been reenvisioned as a role-playing game. For McGann, Scott possesses a particular postmodernity, different from Riding but based on the Modernist experiments: "the ironic awareness with which he constructs and pursues his Romantic quest, the awareness that forbids him from turning his poetic tale into a form of worship," much unlike the contemporary culture that McGann critiques earlier (87).

Keeping with this theme of reviewing the postmodernity of nineteenth-century poets and authors, McGann next turns to Tennyson in Chapter Five. He sees Tennyson as a poet who embraced the era in which he was writing and consequently was condemned to remain mired in its political and social strife. McGann finally settles on the fact that "the poet is ... an unreliable citizen. Poets will betray the palace secrets that they know because their whole vocation is endless imitation. Some of the worst traitors--some of the greatest poets--are the most patriotic. Like Tennyson" (103). In Chapter Six, McGann offers a user's manual for interpreting not "Beauty," really, but investigating the imperatives of textual constructions--basically, he returns to D.F. McKenzie's "sociology of the text" with this call to action: "few scholars of textual objects regularly engage the question of meaning at the most primitive textual levels--that is, in the foul rag and bone shops where type meets ink and kisses paper and where paper gets gathered and bound for glory" (104). McGann offers this chapter as a corrective to the overused focus on theory or "the material and performative character of textual works of imagination" (105). Textual scholarship has come far in the last twenty years; however, McGann believes that those same scholars have forgotten about the act of creation, not by authors or readers, but by the laborers who fashion the objects. Using Herbert Home's *Diversi Colores* as an example of a moment where bibliographical aesthetics (or bibliographic codes) resonate in the poetry itself, McGann flexes his textual scholar muscles with discussion of the book's design and signifying performance. In the end, it is this combination that creates Beauty, making Horne's Renaissance "poems' words flesh" that look forward to e.e. cummings, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound (120).

The final chapter in these investigations focuses on questions that combine textuality, symbolic form and meaning of a text "to recover certain pre-Enlightenment and even pre-Socratic views about the work of poesis" (121). Henry James' textually problematic novel, *The Ambassador*, serves as the exemplar for a return to McGann's earlier work on the textual condition: "The inquiry is grounded in the thought that texts represent--are in themselves--certain kinds of human acts" (Textual 3). For McGann, the textual condition requires that scholars, critics and authors cherish the instability of the textual condition and our eternal, but always unsatisfied, desire to master it.

In the third part, "Interpretation in a New Key," Chapter Eight establishes a new model, this new key for interpretation founded on McKenzie's sociology of the text. However, a new new element needs to be added to McKenzie's social structure--the interpretive action needs to be incorporated into that sociology, not as a part of reception theory. The literary critic, the scholar, then become part of the "versions" of a text rather than existing outside the text. With this being said, McGann offers his *Ivanhoe* project in Chapter Nine as an example of re-negotiating that set of social acts imposed upon a text. This chapter rehearses what McGann and Johanna Drucker have said elsewhere about this role-playing game and n-dimensional space. Yet, McGann comes to some final conclusions about *Ivanhoe*'s participants:

"The World" of *Ivanhoe* emerges through an intervention in an already given, quantized, and interpreted world. *Ivanhoe* permits no

illusion of an ex nihilo moment of creation: you don't invent objects or rules, you choose to move and define meanings in certain ways within a field already prepared--by being understood--as n-dimensional. (171)

McGann's comments on this interaction among, text, user/reader/participant and historically located literature steps into recent works on gaming and textuality, namely recent work by Steven Jones.

The final part, "Humanism for the Twenty-First Century," continues the conversation McGann began with his article, "Information Technology and the Troubled Humanities." As is the style with this particular work, McGann looks backward before he moves forward with discussions about literary imagination, fiction and John Cowper Powys. This new Humanism does not forget or murder Beauty. Instead, it is recovered in Poe's macabre lovers and Stevens' intonations of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." McGann ends his revolutionary call to action with an emphatic embrace of recitation--a creative act that he encourages in our classrooms as well as our scholarship (11) and a topic that is addressed in the "Preface: Recitation Considered as a Fine Art."

As a textual scholar, I cannot help but notice the textual choices that McGann (or his editor and publisher) made in terms of this work's physical presence: References to the role-playing game, *Ivanhoe*, are offset not by italics, but by small capital letters. I see this as McGann's attempt to offer a bibliographic and visual difference from accepted forms of literary texts. In this same vein, the book lacks endnote numbers in the main text. Instead, it relies upon few notes (only four pages) and lists them by chapter and page number without any indication in the main text. With this textual choice, the reader is not tempted to perform radial reading, a performance of reading that takes into consideration the non-linearity of reading (Textual). By reading endnotes or footnotes while reading the primary text, we interrupt ourselves and our reading experiences. Here, McGann forces his readers to march through the narrative and connect chapters for themselves. His style is to loosely connect these chapters with mentions and hints but never to create a strictly linear progression. Indeed, he refrains from defining "the scholar's art" until the concluding Coda. The Index is comprehensive, especially considering the historical gymnastics throughout each chapter. The Works Cited does not claim to be comprehensive in any of the methodological or theoretical fields covered. However, it builds on earlier bibliographies in McGann's other significant works. The entire work seems to be a continuation of conversations begun earlier in his career. However, they are not necessarily finalized or concluded by any means. Indeed, it seems that McGann, in his indefatigable way, promises to continue this conversation about scholarly art at the next conference, lecture or even arm-chair discussion over coffee.

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