



# A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction

By Jerome McGann

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A manifesto for the humanities in the digital age, *A New Republic of Letters* argues that the history of texts, together with the methods by which they are preserved and made available for interpretation, are the overriding subjects of humanist study in the twenty-first century. Theory and philosophy, which have grounded the humanities for decades, no longer suffice as an intellectual framework. Jerome McGann proposes we look instead to philology--a discipline which has been out of fashion for many decades but which models the concerns of digital humanities with surprising fidelity.

For centuries, books have been the best way to preserve and transmit knowledge. But as libraries and museums digitize their archives and readers abandon paperbacks for tablet computers, digital media are replacing books as the repository of cultural memory. While both the mission of the humanities and its traditional modes of scholarship and critical study are the same, the digital environment is driving disciplines to work with new tools that require major, and often very difficult, institutional changes. Now more than ever, scholars need to recover the theory and method of philological investigation if the humanities are to meet their perennial commitments. Textual and editorial scholarship, often marginalized as a narrowly technical domain, should be made a priority of humanists' attention.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

This is an awe-inspiring work, courageous, ambitious, startling, and full of learning, wit, and even fun. It will surely be regarded as the major realization of the several strands of **McGann's** distinguished career, and will be the single most significant contribution to the literature of memory and the archive in the early twenty-first century. (David Greetham, author of *The Pleasures of Contamination: Evidence, Text, and Voice in Textual Studies*)

In a very plain sense, this is the book **McGann** has been writing his entire career; a book whose force of vision and depth of learned commitment make many so-called debates in digital humanities seem small by reconnecting both our momentary enthusiasms and our presentist anxieties with at least two centuries of programmatic continuity?philology, yes, but also poetry. (Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, University of Maryland)

**McGann** critiques encoded writing and digital humanities and asks how electronic formats can handle diverse literature from a scholarly point of view. His style reveals a well-read thinker who examines the act of the reader on the page with asides and constant allusions to other writers such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Marianne Moore, and Friedrich Nietzsche. He approaches his thesis from the angle of philology, which he asserts remains the best position because it offers perspectives on human production and socially constructed artifacts of all types and allows for a culturally relativistic attitude of those objects. He fully acknowledges that research libraries and archives, globally, are reformatting their collections into digital and suggests that our limited electronic tools open new doors for the humanities because there are no coded structures that represent a work's historical 'facticities.' ...This book is for readers specifically attuned to the digital 'crisis' affecting humanities departments and related theoretical debates. (Jesse A. Lambertson *Library Journal* (starred review) 2014-04-01)

So far as such a term has traction and is not 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...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. (Martin Paul Eve *Alexandria* 2016-10-01)

#### About the Author

Jerome McGann is University Professor and John Stewart Bryan Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

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