

DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER—OR FORMAT

Jerome McGann. *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Pp. 258. \$55.00 hardcover.

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The introduction of the World Wide Web in 1993 had immediate impact in an array of scholarly disciplines, but technology has only recently begun to influence the arts and literature. Numerous scholars have expressed doubts about technology's ability to permanently alter textuality; yet, despite reservations about digitization in the humanities, many scholars have welcomed the union between two seemingly dissimilar fields. Particularly, Jerome McGann, in *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*, assuages fears that technology and the humanities are incompatible by arguing that digitized volumes represent the latest stage of a natural progression in both textual and literary studies.

To provide context on the cautionary side of the issue, one recalls that, in autumn 2000, Mark Y. Herring and Ron Chepesiuk of Winthrop University held a series of research forums to educate both humanities professionals and the general public on digital technology's impact on literature and literacy in the new millennium. Held throughout South Carolina, these forums focused on issues of censorship and First Amendment rights, electronic publishing and scholarship, copyright issues, and the impact of digital collections on the humanities. Although Herring does note some drawbacks to technological advancement (high cost of digitization, questions of ownership and fair use, how to protect children from age-inappropriate materials while also honoring first amendment rights), he ultimately forecasts a promising marriage of technology and the humanities in the digital age. For more information on Herring's research forums, please see his article, "Lost in Cyber Space: Libraries in the Cyber Age," available on the website of Clemson University's Center for Electronic and Digital Publishing at www.clemson.edu/ccah/cedp/Tech%20Colloquium%2001/herring.

Warwick Gould, in *Yeats Annual* No. 14 (2001), also cites faults in the digitization of literature. In his review of *The W. B. Yeats Collection* (ed. Richard J. Finneran [Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1998]), Gould highlights numerous editorial errors and omissions to illustrate the inadequacy of digitized collections. Both Herring and Gould recognize the near impossibility of creating a comprehensive digital collection; according to Herring, some texts, particularly old or otherwise rare texts, cannot be scanned without causing irreversible damage to the original document. Gould notes that canons are always growing and changing and, therefore, editors face great challenges to constantly update electronic collections. A demonstration of these challenges was given in a public lecture at Clemson in spring 2002, later published in *Literature and Digital Technologies* (Clemson University Digital Press, 2003).

Like Herring, Gould notes that high costs are a drawback to digitization, but, unlike Herring, who focuses on global "cyber issues," Gould focuses on editorial concerns. He compiles an extensive list of examples that further demonstrate the pitfalls of digitized



volumes. Gould observes that an increased margin of print error is a close second to high costs and explains that, to scholars, a simple editorial decision, such as to use standardized fonts throughout, damages or even destroys an author's voice, therefore compromising the authenticity of the digitized text. Variations in computers and monitors can also cause pagination issues that greatly affect digitized texts while keyword searches for specific passages within the digitized text often appear futile, unless the searcher luckily falls upon one of fourteen specific combinations of keywords per subject—the ones that will yield results.

Nevertheless, in *Radiant Textuality's* introductory chapter, "Beginning Again: Humanities and Digital Culture, 1993-2000," McGann establishes the necessity that ". . . our inherited archive or materials in libraries and museums will have to be re-edited with information technology (IT) tools" (2). After receiving a grant from IBM in 1993, University of Virginia humanities professors Ed Ayers and McGann founded the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, a pioneering organization that ultimately resulted in the creation of McGann's *The Rossetti Archive* (which was published online in 2000). A comprehensive digital collection designed to offer researchers access to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "original manuscripts, printed texts, drawings, designs, and paintings" (14), the archive "has exposed the gulf that stands between digital tools and new media, on the one hand, and the standard practices of traditional philosophy, "theory," hermeneutics, and arts/literary/cultural criticism, on the other" (17). After persuading one that *The Rossetti Archive* is an innovative contribution to textual studies, McGann uses examples from the archive to illustrate not only technology's relevance to the humanities but also its necessity to both archival and editorial aspects of humanities research.

In *Radiant Textuality*, Part 1, entitled "Hideous Progeny, Rough Beasts: 1993-1995" McGann explains *why* humanities scholars should utilize electronic tools, and he explores "the degree to which paper-based textual models inform their digital instantiations" while "promoting the view that digital forms were 'open and interactive' whereas traditional textual forms were 'static and linear'" (25). McGann pays homage to the traditional printed book but then quickly notes that the boundaries of a traditional book actually inhibit, rather than encourage, analysis and critical study. Conversely, an electronic text is not restricted by page count, and, also unlike its conventional predecessor, the e-book can be continuously revised and updated, therefore providing scholars and students with the most current research. This merit leads to yet another advantage over printed publications: according to McGann, electronic texts have a greater possibility of being comprehensive.

Unlike Herring, who maintains that electronic databases will never be all-inclusive due to the inability of fragile texts to be scanned, McGann believes that physical libraries are antecedent to electronic files. He reminds the reader that both libraries and electronic media function as archives and are organized for indefinite expansion. Both mediums are also "neutral with respect to user demands and navigation" (72). Therefore, for a progressive society, digitization is the next logical medium for housing an author's canon. He then points to his own *Rossetti Archive* as proof, explaining that in the electronic archive Rossetti's paintings and writings are made available in one document. Finally, an electronic document, McGann argues, and particularly a hypertext one, can always be edited should an author's unpublished or unknown works surface, concluding that an electronic archive can indeed be comprehensive.

With such an immense amount of data to be prepared for e-publication, it follows that humanities texts will require a new approach to editing. McGann concludes his book's first section by exploring the concept of hyperediting, or managing the "visible, additional, and intellectual" elements of a text (58). With the introduction of hypertext, editors must now consider how to best preserve a work's intended meaning when placing it in a new format. McGann acknowledges that many reservations about hyperediting, such as Gould's concerns over sacrificing authorial voice in digitization, have yet to be resolved. For example, Emily Dickinson

refused the "the auction" of print publication. All of her poetry—including those few things put into print during her lifetime without her permission—was produced as handicraft work. This means that her textual medium is treated in the writing process as an end in itself—ultimately, as part of the aesthetic field of the writing. (63)

However, as Dickinson's poems are digitized, their original layout and design is being abandoned, therefore altering one of the poems' integral elements. In response to such potential problems that may arise when translating text into digital formats, McGann argues that such editorial dilemmas result in an improved interaction with the text.

McGann then introduces "editing as a theoretical pursuit." Again using *The Rossetti Archive* as an example, he says that, whereas traditional texts use only documentary or critical approaches to editing, theoretical editing "undertake[s] as an essential part of its work a regular and disciplined analysis and critique of itself" (81). Then he recalls generating electronically altered images of a Rossetti painting:

Using the edging protocol to make arbitrary transformations of a number of Rossetti's pictures revealed, for example, that many of his pictures, and almost all of his famous portraits of women, are dominated by patterns of interlocking vortices and spirals. He plays numerous variations on these patterns, which are evidently the result of conscious purpose. This key structural feature of Rossetti's pictorial work has not been previously noticed or commented upon. It is a feature that leaps into prominence when these random deformations are passed through the pictures. (174)

With each new scanned image of a painting (or text), one discovers a new element and, therefore, a new interpretation of the work. This type of deeper exploration within artistic works leads to an intensified curiosity, inspiring scholars to discover new textual elements through the use of electronic media and demonstrating the advantages of theoretical editing.

In "Part II. Imagining What You Don't Know: 1995-1999," McGann continues to explore issues of interpretation by using samples of Dickinson's and Dante's poetry to illustrate that "language is an interactive medium" and that engaging with a text is a "performative event" (108). By employing deeper methods of interpretation, such as rearranging a poem's words or enhancing images in a painting, the reader will arrive at a greater understanding of the text. The process, known as *deformance*, shows that "the [text's]



intelligibility is not a function of the interpretation, but that all interpretation is a function of the [text's] systemic intelligibility" (120). This exploration of a work's intelligibility, enhanced by electronic resources such as a computer or an OCR scanner, the tool used to discover patterns in the Rossetti paintings, is followed by McGann's (re)examination of the meaning produced by all elements of a text: physical, intellectual, grammatical, and rhetorical. He explains that each electronically-aided critical approach "represents an arbitrary form," that "these forms are de-forms and [that] their usefulness for text analysis lies exactly in the set of differential possibilities they call to attention" (152), affirming that electronic tools are indeed necessary for today's humanities studies.

After dedicating most of the first two sections of *Radiant Textuality* to the advances of technology in relation to the humanities, McGann reiterates in "Part III. Quantum Poetics: 1999-2000" that he respects the conventional printed book and believes that it will never become obsolete, noting that, "[w]hatever new or electronic poetry or fiction gets produced, the literature we inherit (to this date) is and will always be bookish" (168). Still, printed texts are now neither the only nor the best medium by which one might study a literary text, a promise that remains crucial to McGann's argument. Reminiscent of his earlier treatment of libraries versus electronic databases, McGann's comparison between printed texts and computers reminds one that both books and computers are "medi[a] of data storage and transmission; and [are] engine[s] for constructing simulations" (170). He then resumes the discussion of deformation from Part II.

Acknowledging the pros and cons of both print and electronic documents, McGann challenges us to reconsider text itself: is it a series of divisions designed to produce meaning as suggested by Dante, or is it a series of signifiers and signifieds as proposed by Saussure? Yes, and yes; but text also exceeds the limitations of Dante's and Saussure's definitions: "We begin with an understanding that text is always the marked or materially distinguished text—the text as image and/or audition—and that the textual analysis is itself part of the marking process that governs the object of study" (McGann 206). This ambiguous definition of text and textual signifiers allows for an "indefinite range of significations" that will inevitably "introduce a 'deformance' of the work," through the ultimate technology-based humanities project: teaching a computer to read (206). For, if computers were taught to "develop an initial set of rules for bibliographical coding options and forms," then these rules will have to be expanded to "generate a more complex set of rules extending to higher orders of textual form," thus allowing for greater human comprehension of texts by human beings (207).

McGann concludes by again emphasizing that books are not becoming extinct; instead, "we are involved in the historical convergence of two great machineries of symbol production and hence of human consciousness. Like any serious human intercourse, this convergence brings enlightenment from engaged differences" (209). *Radiant Textuality* thoroughly illustrates the "enlightenment" that technology has brought to humanistic studies. However, in four years since its publication, this book has become slightly *passé* because the majority of American students and an increasing number of American scholars are using online databases for research purposes such as Expanded Academic or InfoTrac. Scanners, printers, digital cameras, software programs such as PhotoShop or Adobe Acrobat, and computer classrooms are also changing society's understanding of texts and textuality. McGann's readers no longer need to be convinced of the opportunities technol-



ogy offers the humanities: “The computerized edition can store vastly greater quantities of documentary materials, and it can be built to organize, access, and analyze those materials not only more quickly and easily, but at depths no paper-based edition could hope to achieve” (70). His latest work at the University of Virginia, aided by a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, is called *NINES: Networked Interface for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship*. Textual radiance and texts radiating, to be sure!