Saggi

LA REPUBBLICA DELLE LETTERE DI JEROME McGANN*

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The end(s) of reading from Nietzsche to McGann

The very last sentence of Jerome McGann's new book provides an all-too-common example of one of the central issues addressed in *A New Republic of Letters*. In a report from the current "battle of the books," McGann notes that an earlier version of chapter 7 («What Do Scholars Want?») of *A New Republic* first appeared in a publication from Rice University Press, a press that has since gone out of business, with the essay now available only online. This situation exemplifies by force majeur the subtitle of McGann's book, *Scholarship in the age of digital reproduction*, a transitional state that is nicely caught by Harvard's dust jacket, with the title of the book, in an old style fount, complete with a swash italic initial for the "A", set within in the screen of a digital tablet.

So this book sets out to discover what changes in the practice of scholarship, particularly in the field of *philology* (McGann's preferred term) can we expect when these changes are already under way but not yet complete? And how will these shifts affect the configuration, identity, and responsibilities of scholar-critics in a "new" republic, one that like the predecessor seventeenth/eighteenth-century republic of letters, will attempt a cross-disciplinary and multi-genre recognition of what

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McGann has for some time been referring to as the "textual condition"? This aim is not of course a new challenge, and there have been several recent attempts to straddle the divide of old and new bibliography, editing, and textual study, the most successful of which has been Matthew G. Kirschenbaum's *Mechanisms*, in which some of the basic methods of print analytical bibliography (from Greg and Bowers) are brought to bear on "born digital" texts. Kirschenbaum's success is in large part dependent on his convincing expertise in both "old" bibliography and new, electronic media. And we might expect a similar, encompassing view from Jerome McGann, given both his impressive production of the print Oxford Byron edition and his advocacy of multi-media presentation of decentered text and image in the *Rossetti Archive*. His proselytising of on-line "play" through the IVANHOE game is another important aspect of his contributions to contemporary textual study, as is his involvement with the Virginia NINES project, together with his conviction that the social and physical environments of text are as significant to meaning as the "linguistic codes" of the actual words. And all of these interests are further embodied in *New Republic*.

If the seventeenth/eighteenth century "old" republic is to be seen as contributing to the French revolution, the Age of Reason, and the Enlightenment (a relation by no means universally accepted), we might expect that a "new" republic would be grounded in the twenty-first century equivalents of the *philosophes*, those contemporary intellectuals in history and philosophy who would now inherit the mantles of Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Gibbon. But McGann is not looking to history and philosophy as the presiding disciplines of our day, but rather to the practitioners of philology, those editors, textual critics, and scholarly dryasdusts whose texts are not the epistolary, rhetorical, theological, or pedagogical treatises of the earlier republic, but rather the coded archives of a present (and future) electronic culture, whose philological guardians function like the *archons* of Deridda's *Mal d'Archive* (rendered as "archive fever"). This different focus on the meaning of a contemporary "enlightenment" and thus a "republic of letters" means that we should not look for, say, Rorty, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Searle, Nussbaum, Austin, Kripke, Rawls, or Quine in McGann's book; and while there are brief sallies into Habermas, Derrida, Heidegger, Lyotard, and Ricoeur (usually just a single citation), the post-Enlightenment figure who is the largest presence in McGann's latterday pantheon is Nietzsche, although McGann recasts him as a philologist rather than a philosopher. He cites Nietzsche's claim that «[p]hilology is now more desir-

able than ever ... philology teaches us how to read *well*: i.e., slowly, profoundly, attentively» (*Dawn of Day* 8-9, cited McGann 54). And the archive produced by the actions of cultural memory can be enormous, without boundaries: «In truth, everything of the old is worth holding on to» (42), though McGann immediately recognizes that «most of it will be lost» (42), thereby making the responsibilities of the philologist the more critical and potentially contentious.

Given this reorientation, we might expect that, in place of the contemporary *philosophes*, we might encounter those philologists who figure most prominently in current debate about text, document, archive, and editing. But here again, McGann is after different prey. There is, for example, no sustained attention to the burgeoning movements of *l'histoire du livre/critique géneétique* of Franco-German, Dutch, and Scandinavian textual study (well documented in the pages of *Variants*, the journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship), movements that focus more on the *process* of textual generation than on a single, unitary product. The genetic presentation of a wide array of texts, from medieval to (post)modern, can be seen as a perhaps inevitable philological development of the *annaliste* approach to historical study (Braudel, Bloch), in which the previous "great figure" diplomatic and military histories of kings and generals had been superseded by local, cumulative, economic, and, yes, social histories. McGann does see the *l'histoire des mentalités* as «the long afterlife» of the Nietzsche-Wilamowitz controversy (p. 61). The *annaliste* method was, like the geneticism it produced, discursive and multivocalic rather than "authorial" and "intentionalist" and might therefore seem compatible with McGann's "social" textuality. But again, McGann is after different game, different allies, although he does note (114) that the J.C.C. Mays's edition/presentation of the multiple states of the poetry of Coleridge, of which much is made in *New Republic*, shows the influence of European genetic editorial methods. Indeed, the presence of the Mays text(s) of Coleridge, and whether they can cumulatively be seen as embodying a fully achieved social condition (thereby fulfilling McGann's arguments from the 1980s), are touchstones throughout *New Republic*. It is surely a bonus confluence of editorial history that Mays's Coleridge was available to sustain and provoke A *New Republic*.

But while Mays's work may be a convenience to McGann at this stage of his career, the multi-volume and multi-text Coleridge does not in itself mark a paradigm shift to set against the productivity of, say, Fredson Bowers, eclecticist-in-chief, who would frequently (and proudly)

point to his having edited texts from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, Marlowe to Nabokov, via Fielding and Crane.

Thus, while the New Republic continues to mark a break from old intentionalism and singular intentionality, it does not rest on a confrontation with or confutation with its predecessors, as has been a typical element in McGann's oeuvre since the 1983 *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*. There is, for example, a single reference to (and very brief discussion of) G. Thomas Tanselle, McGann's principle *adversarius* in textual debate, along with T.H. Howard-Hill. Discussing the case for a "social text" laid out in D.F. McKenzie's 1985 *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, McGann takes up the naysayers' objection that «while McKenzie's ideas had a certain theoretical appeal, they could not be practically implemented» (121). The demurrals raised by such commentators (that McGann's theory of social textual criticism is incapable of producing an edited text to set beside the enormous productivity of mid-twentieth century "eclectic" editors) are dismissed in the *New Republic* by celebrating, at some length, the achievement of Mays in his multi-volume representation of the poetic texts of Coleridge.

Of course, it is not productivity that is at stake here but the means by which that product is created and the medium of its creation. And it is no accident that, along with a number of other theorists of digital storage, communication, and dissemination, McGann has long preferred the term *archive* to *edition*. What might in earlier days have been described as "editions" of Blake, Whitman, Petrarch, *Piers Plowman*, and Dickinson are all now referred to in their electronic manifestations as "archives": open-access, cumulative digital databases of documents that can be searched, re-ordered, even digitally morphed but not systematically "edited," in the sense of the production of a single, authoritative, and uniform text. And note that with the exception of the two "medieval" archives in the list (Petrarch and *Piers*), all appear in the text of *New Republic* to high praise.

McGann's hostility to "critical editing" and to editorial "eclecticism" of Greg, Bowers, and Tanselle (and his embrace of linked facsimiles of texts, paintings, and even related music) is shown throughout his career, from the *Critique* to his "edited" collection *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation* (1985), including especially Derek Pearsall's scathing essay on the dangers of critical editing of Middle English, to *The Textual Condition* (1991), and reaches its polemical high-water mark in McGann's seminal essay «What Is Critical Editing?» (*Text*, 5 [1991], pp. 15-30, a blistering attack on the "eclectic" method of Bowers and

Tanselle). In *A New Republic* the animosity becomes almost moral and apocalyptic, with scattered allusions throughout the book to Sauron, the "dark lord" of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as the presiding deity/idol for the uniformity of enforced eclecticism: «the idea that there is one ring to rule all the documents will only bind us in their darkness» (57). This almost apocalyptic characterization of a scholarly debate may seem overwrought, except that one of the major objections to Bowers's and Tanselle's agenda is that, through exporting Greg's pragmatic and limited copy-text proposal into other periods and other genres (dance, painting), they had made a one-size fits all, universal theory under which *all* texts could be accommodated.

So, if the philosophical descendants of the "old" republic are no longer seen as sufficiently authoritative (or menacing) to figure as the *archons* of the twenty-first century, where are we to look for this missing authority? McGann's answer throughout *New Republic* is to place the burden on "new" philology, on those textual scholars who are data mining to construct the new artifacts of cultural memory, the *archives* that become sufficiently externally comprehensive and internally complex to make conventional editing, critical or otherwise, irrelevant or dishonest. One ploy that can allow philosophers entry into the New Republic is to recast their allegiances and competencies. Thus, Nietzsche is admitted partly because of his role in the debate with Wilamowitz over the function of philology and partly because *malgré lui*, McGann declares that he «seems a better philologist than a philosopher» (60). A similar strategy is used for Ricouer in the account of "memory".

In these rhetorical swerves, McGann specifically seeks to readjust our scholarly priorities by recognizing the major intellectual challenges of philology rather than traditional history and philosophy as more pertinent to scholarly life in the twenty-first century. This shift is in large part the result of the enormous changes in our epistemological environment under way since the last decades of the previous century: analogue to digital, graphemic to pixelated, linear to radial (or as McGann would probably prefer, "radiant"). In other words, the way we perceive ourselves and our relation to the physical, posthuman world has changed so fundamentally that we cannot simply cast off the digital lendings and return to an Edenic "old" philological dispensation. Now, this might make McGann seem like another of those "liberation technologists" as described by Paul Duguid in «Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book» (*The Future of the Book*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 63-101), those who have tended to

see the apocalypse in every pixel. Admittedly, one of McGann's favorite tropes has for some time been to see text/book/edition as "machine," a rhetorical mode that he takes to what must surely be its limit in *New Republic* by claiming that religion is «the most powerful of Memory Machines» (67).

But despite this fascination with machine as textual figure for the operations of philology, he is no machine maker or machine breaker. He has done his hard grunt work in philology, on, for example, the multi-volume Byron edition (the principles of which he has since largely rejected, though Byron is still a major presence in *New Republic*) and on the *Rossetti Archive* (note, *not* edition) a multi-media, multi-discursive digital project that could not be imagined or *performed* in a linear, analogue context. And the other aspect of his revisioning of the *textuality* of books, paintings, poetry, utterances of all sorts, has been his insistence that all creative works of mind occur within a social context, and that the "originary" moment of composition is not only irrecoverable but just one of multiple stitches in the tapestry that is a *text*. This insistence, which appears throughout the current book, but especially in the chapter on «Digital Tools and the Emergence of the Social Text», has earned him a good deal of sometimes virulent hostility, as if he were endorsing a Barthesian "death of the author" instead of inscribing that *auteur* into a complex mode of literary *production*. And he, along with his New Zealand/British counterpart, D.F. McKenzie, has been dismissed as a Marxist, a Bakhtinian, a nihilist, and a deconstructor.

I have long held that the "social" turn in McGann's textual theory, from his 1983 *Critique* to the 2014 *New Republic*, has to be adjudicated within wider intellectual and cultural contexts: McGann's slim but revolutionary *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* was published in 1983 (repr. 1992), and McKenzie's equally slim and equally revolutionary *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* in 1985. At almost the same time, the former phenomenologist, former structuralist and former post-structuralist, J. Hillis Miller, gave his 1986 MLA Presidential Address, and plangently declared that «literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base». Of course, Miller's "line in the sand" was only temporary. But the point for a consideration of McGann's current book (for example, his chapter on the social text «Digital Tools and the Emergence of the Social Text»), and how it fits not only into his career but into the wider

intellectual and cultural movements of the last few decades, is that Miller was lamenting the invasion of "the social context" at the same time that McGann was celebrating it.

As already noted, McGann devotes considerable space in *A New Republic* to explicating, defending, and promoting his fellow Romanticist J.C.C. Mays and his "social" edition of Coleridge's poetry. As McGann concedes, this determination is in part a proxy war against those, like T.H. Howard-Hill and G. Thomas Tanselle, for whom "social" textual criticism «had a certain theoretical appeal» but «could not be practically implemented» (121). Mays's success in producing a practical edition of the poetry of a major Romanticist according to the principles of social textual criticism has given McGann the cover he needed (in *A New Republic* and other recent works) to cite a fulfilled edition that responded to his own critical language in a way that his early edition of Byron (and even the *Rossetti Archive*, which he now acknowledges as "obsolete") did not.

It would be tempting to think of *New Republic* as a sort of *summa*, a final account of wars long won and thus the capstone of a long and distinguished career as critic, philologist, and, yes, editor. And that sense of a "final" and "summary" "textual condition" can be observed in following through McGann's various repeated attempts to schematize the progress from author to the social embodiments of texts. As long ago as his essay «Interpretation, Meaning, and Textual Criticism: A Homily» (*Text*, 3 [1987], pp. 55-62, in a response to John McClelland's call for a «pragmatics of meaning» that would show «the total sensory experience» involved in producing texts), McGann laid out this schema:

> *A. The Originary Textual Moment*: 1. Author. 2. Other persons or groups involved in the initial process or production (e.g., collaborators, persons who commissioned the work, editors or amanuenses, etc.). 3. Phases or stages in the initial productive process (e.g., distinct personal, textual or social states along with their defining causes, functions, and characteristics). 4. Materials, means, and modes of the initial productive process (physical, psychological, ideological). *B. Secondary Moments of Textual Production and Reproduction (Individual and Related Sequences)* 1, 2, 3, 4 as above ranged under two subsets: a. Before the author's death b. After the author's death. *C. The Immediate Moment of Textual Criticism*: 1, 2, 3, 4 as above, with "author" now replaced by "critic" (58-60)

This arrangement from 1986 appears only slightly modified in *A New Republic* in an analysis of a «theoretically finished sociohistorical program» (83). In the *New Republic* version, we have a «originary discursive moment» (including, as in 1986, author, other persons and groups

«invested in the initial process of cultural production»), followed by «Secondary Moments of Discursive Production» and then the «Immediate Moment of Interpretation». Laid out in this way we might argue that either (or both) McGann repeats himself or that he is remarkably consistent throughout his career, down to specific critical formulations. In this sense, perhaps *New Republic* is, after all, a *summa* or a fulfillment of the scriptures.

Of course, we should not expect a critic as inventive as McGann to be content with forceful reaffirmations, and there are several other tabulations that show him moving into new intellectual territories (for example, a six-part table of «Control Dimensions for a 'Patacriticsm' of Textualties». These tabulations, along with such devices as six *consecutive* readings of the Donald Allen poem *The Innocence* (104-107) demonstrate in a local, close-reading mode, how «[T]he sequence of readings... consciously assumes a set of previous readings whereby certain elementary forms of order – by no means insignificant forms – have been integrated into the respective dementians» (104). Again, the work, and the critique of the work, set in a temporal development.

But if McGann's criticism has maintained a consistency, this does not mean that the cultural context has remained static. As in all intellectual conflicts, the ground is never permanently secure. In just the last couple of years, there has been evidence of stirrings *after* the McGann revolution. In his 2012 Presidential Address for the Society for Textual Scholarship, Peter Shillingsburg counter attacked what McGann had stood for, declaring that «an editor ... cannot apply the principles of sociology to editing»; and in the lead essay, «Mind and Textual Matter», for the most recent *Studies in Bibliography*, Richard Bucci dismissed McGann (and many contemporary textual critics, including the present writer) for displaying «a pervasive misunderstanding about textual criticism». So, if McGann's *New Republic* is comprehensive, challenging, and necessary reading for all who deal with texts and philology, there can be no last word in textual debates and there will be yet "newer" (or disguised "older" and reinvigorated) republics of letters still to be accounted for. As McGann himself puts it in an early section of his book: «We are living in the Last Days of book culture; that is clear. Of course, this doesn't mean we are living the Last Days of reading culture, least of all of our textual condition» (10).