

## Electronic Archives and Critical Editing

Abstract: Developments in traditional editorial theory and method that came into prominence 25 years ago have converged with more recent online IT resources to establish important, perhaps even breakthrough, approaches to the ways we pursue the scholarly investigation of cultural materials. Various online projects illustrate the widespread effort to create digital tools and environments for studying cultural materials at remarkable levels of complexity. Scholarly ‘editing’ no longer confines itself to a focus on textual documents alone, but now pursues investigations into the entire social context that comprises the cultural work. Moving from a brief look at the theoretical foundations of these developments, this essay sketches the shape of this scholarly work and supplies a few examples of what it entails.

In the 1980s, editorial theory and method made a significant move into what became known as a ‘social theory of text’. For Anglo-American scholarship, two books defined this turn: *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* [\(1983\)](#) and *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* [\(1986\)](#). The move entailed rethinking a crucial distinction we traditionally make: the distinction between a text and its context. For the past 25 years, many scholars have been exploring the fault lines of that distinction. Recent work in antebellum American literature – for instance, studies by [J. Gerald Kennedy](#), [Jonathan Elmer](#), [Terence Whalen](#), [Eliza Richards](#), and [Meredith McGill](#)– have been especially interesting for me, as I shall explain in a moment. At the outset of her study of ‘the Poe

Circle’, [Eliza Richards](#) gives an admirable summary of a social text approach to literary study: ‘the poetics of creation are inseparable from the poetics of reception’ (1).

The complete genetic information about any cultural work is coded in the double helix of its DNA, that is, in the co-dependent relation of its production history and its reception history. While much more could and should be said about the structure of that co-dependent relation, the essential point to realize is that each strand of this double helix is produced by the collaboration of multiple agents. The terms ‘the poet’ and ‘the reader’ are high-level generalized descriptors of a dialectical process of various persons and institutions.

In that frame of reference, one can lay out a complete matrix for a socio-historical interpretive method. The method is prescribed by six foundational protocols defining the mechanics of a social text. Briefly these are:

- 1

The social text is a Bakhtinian space (heteroglossia).

- 2

For a social text, ‘a’ equals ‘a’ if and only if ‘a’ does not equal ‘a’.

- 3

Textual fields arise co-dependently with interpretative action.

- 4

Interpretive action is always performative/deformative.

- 5

Interpretation of a social text proceeds at an inner standing point.

- 6

Textual fields are n-dimensional.

These protocols locate the act of interpretation within a broadly dispersed field of space and time where many agents and interpretable phenomena are continually passing through revisionary engagements. They come to assert a very old idea that the interpretation of human phenomena is necessarily an ongoing process. But specifying them in these particular ways is important if one means to define a generalized model that might be implemented in a digital environment.

Here, I must leave aside a detailed explanation of those protocols and how they function to focus on a key practical question. (Interested readers can find them examined at length in a series of readily available essays and papers.)<sup>1</sup> In different ways, all of the antebellum scholars who were my point of departure are either explicitly or implicitly calling for a ‘model of literary production that...is inter-subjective and interactive’ ([Richards 5](#)). What would such a model look like? The question can be sharply defined if we pose it with respect to the essential philological form that any ‘model of literary production’ must be able to take. That basic form is the scholarly edition.

The quest for Richards’ model has been pursued with greatest rigor in the tight little island of textual theory and editorial method. D. F. McKenzie became ‘The Hero of Our Own Time’ not because he discovered the sociology of the text – we’ve known about that for a long time. He became The Hero because he knew that the idea of the social text had to be realized as a scholarly edition.

Such an edition would be addressing and answering some key – basically philological – questions. Could one develop a model for editing books and material objects rather than just the linguistic phenomena we call texts? To pose that question, as he did, was to lay

open the true dimensions of what he was after: a model for editing texts in their contexts. So the initial question is a palimpsest concealing other salient questions. Could one develop a model for exposing and comparing relationships between phenomena that are radically discontinuous: different authors and their authorized texts, say, as well as the relations between various agents – individual as well as institutional – in an eventual field disposing more than just textual or bibliographical things? Could the model expose and examine relationships between phenomena – various works and their various agents – located in fields that are discontinuous in social time and space? Finally, could such machines be designed and actually built, the way the critical editions we inherit were designed and built?

For myself, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* ([1983](#)) launched a series of theoretical and literary-historical writings that led to *The Rossetti Archive* (1993–2008). The *Archive* was a laboratory for investigating how to design and build scholarly tools, interpretive as well as editorial, for online research and publication. On the editorial side, we were able to prove that traditional text-centered editorial models could be surpassed in a digital medium. Specifically, we set out to show that a hypermedia scholarly ‘edition’ could be built for texts (linguistic objects), books (bibliographical objects), and pictorial or audial objects. Integrating the protocols for facsimile, diplomatic, critical, and variorum editorial models, the design realized, if only in principle, McKenzie’s dream of a socialized edition.

But the greatest success of the undertaking was its failure – i.e., its exposure of the limits of the original design. The failure came in two ways. First, *The Rossetti Archive* was not, is not, ‘interactive’. It gives a single representation of a complex field; and while it can of

course be visited and used and even augmented, its fundamental perspective cannot be reconstructed or reconfigured. This limitation marks all the now well-known scholarly projects that fed off the model of *The Rossetti Archive*: *The William Blake Archive*, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, and so forth. Second, although complex and, in a documentary sense, comprehensive, the field relations of *The Rossetti Archive*— the relations specified in the Archive’s ontological schema – are all given as self-identical because all the field elements are identified as if they were known quantities, rather than as what they must be: questionable and interpretable.

The NINES project was begun in 2003 (the [Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship](http://www.nines.org): <<http://www.nines.org>>) to address these basic limitations. NINES establishes an aggregation of online materials from the British and American nineteenth-century. These are widely dispersed across many servers and include free-culture as well as commercially produced resources. All are linked together for integrated search and critical repurposing. While the functional design of NINES does not allow alterations to any particular aggregated resource, it permits and encourages users to feed back into the NINES network different interpretive views of NINES materials.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘social text’ is implemented in NINES at the top level, that is, at the level of its general access structure. And while the NINES social software does not affect the logical design of the individual resources, its social approach has been important. This is where the case of Poe and his world becomes pertinent. They supply a dramatic instance of the general character, the true complexity, of any discursive or textual condition. Editing Poe requires less a centrally focused edition or archive than a decentered discursive field.<sup>3</sup>

The field's objects and relations need to be specified as a set of variable philological quantities. These are always relational. They organize the study of works with variable dates, uncertain attributions, as well as multiple authorities, publication venues, and textual versions. They account for various agencies of production and reception, personal as well as social. Most important, the perspective on the field, or any part of it, needs to be manipulable to the scholar's needs and interests.

The general scholarly importance of this kind of investigation can be seen in three editorial projects that have been started recently. Each with historical ties to NINES, these projects are exploring logical designs for discourse fields that are relatively local in scope but that implement flexible and multi-dimensional views of the materials.

Timothy Powell's *Gibagadinamaagoom: An Ojibwe Digital Archive*

(<<http://gibagadinamaagoom.info/cosmology.html>>) is an effort to construct an online design for a set of cultural materials that do not map to Western Enlightenment design models. Ojibwe 'history' is conceived and organized along a 'sacred landscape' that includes both living and dead witnesses who are at the same time, in each case, active agents, as well as non-textual objects that possess contemporary authority and power. In these circumstances, Ojibwe identities – objects, agents, actions, and locations – are radically discontinuous from the cultural formations that shape the logic of our Western databases and metadata ontologies. The structural and interpretive demands, and consequences, of this situation are significant.

The metadata schema and the database structure we have created thus inscribes a sacred landscape which allows *animikii* and other *oshkaabewisag* ('messengers') to move freely between the realm of the ancestors and this world. In doing so, we offer a spatio-temporal

paradigm that, if acknowledged by Americanists, would perhaps allow us to free ourselves of the deeply problematic concept of periodization and our seemingly endless obsession with nationalism, postnationalism, transnationalism.... It is sacred landscape that is distinctly Ojibwe, yet still part of American literary history.

Kenneth Price and his colleagues at University of Nebraska have begun to develop a *Civil War Washington* project (<<http://cdrh.unl.edu/civilwardc/>>), which is building a model to represent a complex contextual environment that can be critically engaged by interactive scholarly use.

At the heart of the project is a richly layered, interactive base map plotting both geographic and temporal data that clarify the transformation of Washington, DC. We populate this map with information drawn from an SQL database. Increasingly as our work progresses, this data will make it possible to analyze change over time as both physical structures grew and the population developed a new ethnic and racial mix. Our project will demonstrate the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach to studying such a transformation—localized in space, concentrated in time, and profound in its implications—using relational databases, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and Geography Markup Language (GML). We believe that by providing a detailed backdrop of census, health, and hospital records; theater schedules; horsecar routes; and other factual data, we will deepen our understanding of the transformation of the nation and its capital, and the limits and possibilities offered to those like Whitman and Lincoln who were key to that transformation. (‘Methodology’:

<<http://cdrh.unl.edu/civilwardc/method.html>>)

Like Powell's Ojibwe project, the difficulty here is how to design the internal logic of the system so as to expose the rich contextual relationships that are in play. Initial documentation will be given to hospitals, fortifications, government buildings, census records, churches, transportation routes, theaters, publishing houses, and newspaper offices, along with the various agents involved.

David Radcliffe has begun to build a complex network of interpersonal relationships that comprise the literary history of *Lord Byron: His Life and Times*. The initial work has focused on three texts, Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* (<<http://198.82.142.160/Hunt/HuntLB.php?select=preface>>); Thomas Moore's two volume *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (<<http://198.82.142.160/Hunt/MooreLBContents.php>>); and Robert Charles Dallas's *Recollections of the Life of Lord Byron*. From these, Radcliffe is constructing a massive index of names and works that would be the basis for a template of basic metadata for linking equivalent information in multiple documents.

The problem addressed in each of these cases is how to integrate information that is disparately coded in traditional source documents. It is a problem with two faces. The first is theoretical and conceptual: what kind of schema might be devised. The second, practical aspect of the problem is more difficult and has various facets: who should devise such a schema; where should it be tested for implementation; what and where are the individual and institutional resources for executing the hands-on work.

One might conclude from such difficulties that these kinds of projects are too problematic to command the effort and time they require. This view gains support from the advances in semantic web technology that have emerged in recent years – for instance the search



and content organizing software iGlue now in beta-testing mode

([<http://www.in4.hu/eng/iglue.html>](http://www.in4.hu/eng/iglue.html)). The history of software development strongly suggests that this kind of technology will be available in the near future, even for scholars and students in the humanities. Nevertheless, projects like the three just cited are important for the clarity they bring to the critical frames of reference – the ontologies – that organize how we investigate our cultural inheritance.

The history of the development of TEI, eloquent in this regard, should never be forgotten. Conceived as an implementation of the OHCO thesis about the character of texts and textuality, [TEI's](#) emergence exposed the deep flaw in the TEI representation of texts.<sup>4</sup> A text is not an Ordered Hierarchy of Content Objects; it is a manifold of an indeterminate number of possible ordered hierarchies. Every text, every element of every text, is n-dimensional, depending on what you choose to regard as contextually relevant. This basic truth about representational media of all kinds, not just 'texts', did not become so graphically apparent to scholars until the TEI consortium set out to implement its alternative conceptual design. The failure of the OHCO thesis proved to be the TEI's greatest contribution to textual and media studies, and to the further development of the TEI itself.

And one final note that cannot be too strongly emphasized. We need this kind of scholarly environment, as I remarked at the outset, for one simple but commanding reason: because in the coming decades – the process is already underway – the entirety of our cultural inheritance will have to be digitally reconceived and re-edited. Shelley's famous thought – that 'We must imagine what we know' – gets explained in relation to

undertakings such as Powell's, Price's, and Radcliffe's – and the TEI's. Without those moves, we cannot imagine what we don't know.

#### Footnotes

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- 1

See my 'Texts in N-Dimensions and Interpretation in a New Key', *Text Technology* 12.2 (2003): <[http://texttechnology.mcmaster.ca/about\\_tt.html](http://texttechnology.mcmaster.ca/about_tt.html)>; 'Marking Texts in Many Dimensions,' *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, eds. Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth (Blackwell: Oxford, 2004): 198–217 (<[http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405103213\\_chunk\\_g978140510321319](http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405103213_chunk_g978140510321319)>); 'From Text to Work: Digital Tools and the Emergence of the Social Text,' *Romanticism on the Net* 41–42 (2006): <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2006/v/n41-42/013153ar.html>>. See also Dino Buzzetti, 'Digital Representation and the Text Model,' *New Literary History* 33.1 (2002): 61–88; and Buzzetti and McGann, 'Critical Editing in a Digital Horizon,' *Electronic Textual Editing*, eds. Burnard, O'Keeffe, and Unsworth (MLA: New York, 2006): 53–73.

- 2

The original design structure of NINES is explicated in several papers by McGann and Bethany Nowviskie available from the NINES website):

<<http://nines.org/scholarship/readings.html>>. See also the site for information about updated features and functions.

- 3

These matters are explained in much greater detail in an essay written as a companion to this essay: ‘Literary History and Editorial Method. Poe and Antebellum America’ (forthcoming in *New Literary History*).

- 4

The flaw in the OHCO thesis is now well understood. See McGann, ‘What is Text?’, *Marking the Text. The Presentation of Meaning on the Digital Page*. Ed. Joe Bray, Miriam Handley, and Anne C. Henry (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000), 329–334, and Buzzetti and McGann, op. cit. footnote 1.

### **Short Biography**

Jerome McGann is the John Stewart Bryan University Professor, University of Virginia. He is a co-founder of Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) and of Speculative Computing Laboratory (Speclab), and was the founding director of Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship (NINES). His book *Radiant Textuality. Literature after the Worldwide Web* was awarded the MLA’s 2002 James Russell Lowell Prize for the year’s best book in criticism. His most recent book is *Are the Humanities Inconsequent? An Interpretation of Marx’s Riddle of the Dog* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

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