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The Foundational Work of Digital Humanities

—A Review of Jerome McGann’s *Radiant Textuality*

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Abstract: This article explores Jerome McGann’s outstanding contributions to the fields of literary theory and digital humanities. McGann is a highly regarded literary theorist and poet from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, whose scholarly achievements span Romantic literary criticism, textual editing theory, and digital humanities. This paper focuses on reviewing and analyzing the concept of “radiant textuality” proposed in his 2001 book *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*. This concept foresaw the profound impact of information technology on literary studies and textual editing methods, demonstrating McGann’s exceptional insight as a pioneer in digital humanities.

Keywords: Jerome McGann; digital humanities; *Radiant Textuality*

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题目: 数字人文的奠基之作——评杰罗姆·麦克甘的《辐射的文本性》

摘要: 本文探讨了杰罗姆·麦克甘在文学理论和数字人文研究领域的杰出贡献。麦克甘是20世纪后期至21世纪初享有盛誉的文学理论家和诗人，其学术成就广泛涉及浪漫主义文学批评、文本编辑理论以及数字人文等领域。本文重点分析了他在2001年出版的《辐

射的文本性》一书中提出的“辐射文本性”概念，该概念预示了信息技术对文学研究及文本编辑方法产生的深远影响，体现了麦克甘作为数字人文先驱者的卓越洞见。

关键词：杰罗姆·麦克甘；数字人文；《辐射的文本性》

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Introduction

In 2008, Jerome McGann published the article “The Future is Digital” in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, in which he predicted that “our research and scholarly intercourse will soon be carried out primarily in digital media” (2010, p. 80). This prediction is particularly resounding today amid the flourishing development of artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT and Deepseek.

McGann was born in 1940 and has taught successively at top institutions such as Yale, Cornell, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. His early research mainly focused on Romantic poetry, with representative works including *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (1968) and *The Romantic Ideology* (1983). The 1983 publication *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* directly inspired his subsequent “Rossetti Archive” project. In recent years, he has successively published *The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World* (2006), *Are the Humanities Inconsequent?* (2009), *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (2014), and other works.

McGann's most prominent contribution lies in the field of digital humanities. The application of information technology in the humanities can be traced back to the late 1940s, when Father Roberto Busa SJ conducted research on Thomas Aquinas. However, at that time, New Criticism dominated, and this approach did not attract much attention. McGann began to focus on how digital technology could transform literary studies from the late 20th century onward, with initial discussions already appearing in his 1991 book *The Textual Condition*.

In 1996, McGann first proposed the concept of “radiant textuality.” In his 2001 book *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (Palgrave, 2001), he further pointed out that digitization “was both the medium and the message concealed in the crisis that had been developing in literary and cultural studies since the mid-1960s” (2001, p. 169). The emergence of the World Wide Web “proved a revolutionary textual event” (2002, p. 9). As a pioneer in digital humanities, he emphasized that “electronic tools in literary studies don't simply provide a new point of view on the materials, they lift one's general level of attention to a higher order” (1996, p. 12). This book received the 2002 James Russell Lowell Prize for the Best Book in Criticism of the Year from the Modern Language Association (MLA) of America for its foundational role in digital humanities research.

1. Review of *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*

Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web offers a forward-looking analysis of digital humanities developments from 1993 to 2000 and proposes a series of influential theoretical models.

“Radiant textuality” emphasizes that text is not a static, singular entity but a dynamic and constantly evolving one. McGann argues that with the development of the Internet and digital technologies, the methods and tools of literary studies require fundamental renewal, but the premise is that “one demonstrates how its tools improve the ways we explore and explain aesthetic works” (2001, xii).

McGann believes that digital technology provides new ways of understanding and interpreting texts that can better capture the complexity and polysemy of texts. He examines the impact of the digital age on literary studies and creation, including how methods such as text analysis software and digital text modeling transform the representation of texts, literary reading, and interpretation. He argues that digital texts are not merely simple reproductions of traditional texts but new forms of text with their own characteristics. Their editability, interactivity, and multimedia features have changed how people understand and use texts. In addition, the book discusses the impact of digital technology on academic publishing, libraries, and archive management. The whole book is divided into an introduction, three parts, and a conclusion, with each part exploring different impacts of the digital age on literature and literary theory.

The introduction “Beginning Again: Humanities and Digital Culture, 1993–2000” introduces the transformation of the humanities in the wave of digitization. McGann proposes two important aspects of humanities computing: understanding digital space requires mastery of information technology, and digital technology is primarily used for book management and archive preservation. He reviews major events from Father Busa’s research in the late 1940s to IBM’s funding support for humanities computing at the University of Virginia, and recounts the process of advancing humanities computing research through the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, particularly the establishment of the Rossetti Archive project.

The first part, “Hideous Progeny, Rough Beasts: 1993-1995,” explores the nature and characteristics of digital texts and discusses concepts such as virtual reality, hypertext, and textual editing. The first chapter “The Alice Fallacy; or, Only God Can Make a Tree”, proposes the “Alice Fallacy” concept, critiquing the view that treats digital editing as a simple process and emphasizing the need for a deep understanding of the physical and sensory properties of texts. The second chapter, “The Rationale of Hypertext,” elaborates on the theoretical foundations of hypertext, pointing out that hypertext systems offer new ways of organizing and accessing information. The third chapter, “Editing as a Theoretical Pursuit,” stresses the theoretical and creative nature of editing work and argues that editing should be regarded as a creative practice.

The second part, “Imagining What You Don’t Know: 1995-1999,” focuses on new approaches to textual interpretation and understanding. The fourth chapter, “Deformance and Interpretation,” introduces the concept of “deformance,” which refers to deviations from a text’s conventional form during interpretation in order to explore new dimensions by altering its presentation. The fifth chapter, “Rethinking Textuality,” examines how digital technology alters our understanding of text and the fluidity and variability of texts in digital environments.

The third part, “Quantum Poetics: 1999-2000,” introduces concepts from quantum mechanics into literary studies to explore the multidimensional and nonlinear features of texts. The sixth chapter, “Visible

and Invisible Books in N-Dimensional Space,” discusses the dual nature of books and proposes a multidimensional text model. The seventh chapter, “Dialogue and Interpretation at the Interface of Man and Machine,” focuses on the influence of human-machine interaction on literary interpretation and emphasizes that computers can serve as tools to extend cognitive and analytical capabilities. McGann argues that “quantum and topological models of analysis are applicable to imaginative writing tout court, that these models are more adequate, more comprehensive, and more enlightening than the traditional models we inherit from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Marx” (2001, p. xv).

The conclusion, “Beginning Again and Again: The Ivanhoe Game,” summarizes and reflects upon the book’s main arguments. It creatively proposes a critical method modeled on the “Ivanhoe Game,” applying game models to literary criticism and textual interpretation, encouraging participants to explore texts in a self-reflexive and interactive manner. The author calls for greater attention in the humanities to the application of digital technology in literary interpretation, while stressing that digital technology should be viewed as a tool to expand and enhance critical thinking rather than a replacement for traditional humanities methods.

2. Academic Value and Influence

Radiant Textuality offers important insights for understanding the nature of literature in the digital age and the future direction of literary studies. First, it demonstrates the innovations and challenges that the digital age brings to literature, helping people re-examine the impact of digital technology on literature and expanding our understanding and methodologies in literary studies. Second, the case studies presented in the book provide concrete examples for the development of digital humanities. Finally, the theories and methods proposed by McGann offer new perspectives and directions for the field of literary studies.

McGann employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary criticism, digital technology, and humanities theory, broadening the research vision in digital humanities. He emphasizes the importance of digital technology for textual editing and interpretation and explores the diversity and malleability of texts in the digital age. Through projects such as the “Rossetti Archive,” he has digitized literary works and made them accessible online.

McGann has also undertaken specific digital humanities practices, such as NINES, the IVANHOE interactive platform, and TEI, providing concrete frameworks and platforms for scholars in the humanities. His work has exerted significant influence on textual editing and digitization. His research on hypertext and virtual reality has provided a theoretical foundation for hypermedia studies in digital humanities. Through these studies and practices, McGann has laid the theoretical and developmental foundation for digital humanities, expanded the boundaries of literary research methods and theories, and promoted interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration.

The foundational role of *Radiant Textuality* in digital humanities research has received widespread recognition. Major recent works in digital humanities over the past five years, such as *Doing More Digital Humanities* (2020), the *Routledge International Handbook of Research Methods in Digital Humanities*

(2021), *Literary Simulation and the Digital Humanities* (2022), and *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities* (2023), all include substantial sections introducing and interpreting McGann's research and *Radiant Textuality*. The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press of China will also introduce this book in the near future.

Conclusion

McGann's research methods and theories have established the theoretical foundation and methodology for the development of digital humanities and provided new research perspectives and approaches. By integrating digital technology with literary studies, he has pioneered new research fields and methods, making major contributions to our understanding of the nature of literature in the digital age and the future direction of literary research. *Radiant Textuality* not only reveals new possibilities for literary studies in the digital era but also challenges traditional academic practices, encouraging innovative ways of understanding and interpreting texts. McGann once warned that "digital illiteracy puts most humanists on the margin of conversations and actions that affect the centre of our cultural interests (as citizens) and our professional interests (as scholars and educators)" (2010, p. 80), a warning that resonates even more powerfully today as large language models sweep across the globe.

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