

# Scholarship as Testimony: Jerome McGann's Keynote Address for the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Craft Critique Culture Conference, 2016

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Jerome McGann's<sup>1</sup> talk "Exceptional Measures" was in itself "exceptional" in a number of ways. Delivered in the context of a conference with heavy emphasis on digital humanities and subtitled "The Human Sciences in STEM Worlds," McGann's keynote surprisingly bracketed off both of these fields—DH and modern science—to instead go back to the basics and make a passionate claim for reassessing the values that underlie the humanities as such. While McGann has been deeply engaged with bibliographic scholarship for most of his career, it was the highly focused nature necessitated by DH scholarship that, he claims, led him to realize he "didn't know what books were" in the first place. The abstracting and operationalizing of literary objects into the digital sphere made the co-founder of the University of Virginia's groundbreaking "Research in Patacriticism"<sup>2</sup> lab understand that he wanted to pursue a more humble approach to scholarship: instead of data-mining, digital editions, and textual mapping, McGann is now interested in "Truth."

McGann's conscious embrace of such a transcendental signifier was as much programmatic as polemic. The argument of "Exceptional Measures" was not merely "post theory" but explicitly anti theory—with de Man's deconstruction serving as the prototype of a "misguided" model of scholarship. Describing the literary theory of the latter twentieth century as disclosing a "Cheneyan concept of knowledge" (in allusion to the lies and half-truths that lead to the second Iraq War), McGann pleaded for a renewed separation between "perceived fact" and "opinion"—which, he claimed, are utterly confused in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and like concepts. Against theory, McGann proposed a skeptical empiricism. While this notion has a prehistory in Socrates and Plato, the focus of McGann's talk was with

the New England transcendentalists—Emerson and Thoreau—and their ongoing legacy in more recent environmental writings (especially Barry Lopez’s 1986 *Arctic Dreams*). McGann’s vision of the scientific process (hinted at in his talk’s title) is then not so much a (post)modern one—based largely in falsification, not positive proof—but one that understands itself as performing a “pastoral office;” thorough and careful practice dedicated to the accurate report of a historical Truth writ large is its method and end goal. McGann, then, ultimately pleads for slow, historicist scholarship that avoids the “propaganda and confusion” perpetuated by theory. To tell “the truth and nothing but the truth” ought to be the scholar’s commitment, according to McGann. While he stops short of adding “so help me God,” McGann’s claim was then based certainly as much in the long history of scriptural exegesis as it is in the more secular, literary trajectory laid out by “Exceptional Measures.”

Still, polemics aside, McGann’s talk did not promote a mere ‘turning back of the clock’ on academic method and self-understanding: some of the theoretical advances of the past have clearly made their way into his current project. While McGann, consciously contrarian, defends the concept of a transcendental “truth as such,” he nonetheless understands it as an “impossible truth” at heart. To strive for knowledge becomes an almost Sisyphean performance of incremental progress that can still never quite reach its goal. The Real that is McGann’s “Truth” has to remain hidden from its pursuers—but instead of celebrating or decrying the bottomless gulf between the object of one’s study and the semiotic tools needed for representing and analyzing it, McGann proposes an experimental outlook on knowledge production. “Pledging” oneself to an abstract, overarching Truth—though unattainable—enables the scholar to nonetheless produce the most accurate approximations of it possible to him or her. To McGann, to pursue “Truth” is hence a question not of epistemology, but one of ethics: the moral impetus of speaking truth in an atmosphere of political dishonesty ultimately overrides the inherent limitations—psychological, ideological, or linguistic—that attach to all attempts at knowing anything.

In the end, McGann’s talk was not as much a thorough, analytical treatise of concepts like “knowledge,” “truth,” or “literature,” but a call to action. At times seemingly anticipating more recent debates over the neoliberal undercurrents of digital tools, the keynote called attention to the dangers of academic labor detached from an ethical outlook. Sketching a counter-history to this trend in transcendentalist pursuits of knowledge—as problematically white and male such monastic vision of academia might be—ought then not serve as a model, but as a critical counterpoint from which to address and reassess current trends in the humanities. To “know so much and yet so little,” as McGann summarized his life as an academic, is a critical outlook he believes to be in danger of being lost in a world of totalitarian knowledge-claims and generalizing theories that seem to disavow the minute miracles of scholarly discovery. While many in his audience might have differed with McGann on his understanding of “theory,” it was his ethical argument that seemed to speak to a majority of the future, current, and past scholars that listened to his eloquent talk in the packed Gerber Lounge of Iowa’s English Philosophy

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Jerome McGann (born 1937) is the John Stewart Bryan University Professor at the University of Virginia and a major voice in textual scholarship and the digital humanities. He is the founder and former director of NINES (Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship), the co-founder of SPECLAB (Speculative Computing Laboratory), and edited the Rossetti Archive. McGann has received a number of awards and fellowships, including a Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Award (2002) and, most recently, the James W. Gargano Award by the Poe Society as well as the Richard J. Finneran Award by the Society for Textual Scholarship. In 2009, McGann was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Athens.

<sup>2</sup> The Applied Research in Patacriticism (ARP) digital laboratory is a Mellon-funded project at the University of Virginia, founded in 2003 by McGann and Johanna Drucker. ARP has developed a number of academic open source software such as Juxta Commons and Collex.