

# FROM TEXTUAL SCHOLARSHIP TO THE STUDY OF TRADITION. THE VISION OF JEROME MCGANN

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Translation : Sophie Burm

When we use books to study books, or hard copy texts to analyze other hard copy texts, the scale of the tools seriously limits the possible results. In studying the physical world, for example, it makes a great difference if the level of the analysis is experiential (direct) or mathematical (abstract). In a similar way, 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.

Jerome McGann [1]

### The virtual library of the *Passagen-Werk*

*Habent sua fata libelli*: each book has its (own) destiny. Where this quote comes from, is not important at this moment. [2] I first came across it in this unidentified form in Walter Benjamin's 'Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus', the essay published in the July 1931 issue of *Die literarische Welt* in which the author of the later *Passagen-Werk* talks about the books he passionately collects and sends around the world in moving boxes, from one city, where he lives or accidentally resides for a longer period of time, to the other. [3] The number of books that travelled with Benjamin accumulated, from Berlin where he was born in 1892, via the cities where he studied (Freiburg, Bern, München and Frankfurt), to places outside of the German-speaking world where his life would later bring him (Paris, Moscow, Marseille, Bergen, Ibiza). Benjamin's books defined his life, as is often the case with intellectuals. He thought of them as materialised thoughts he needed to master, in the very literal sense of the word, like a bookkeeper. But to Benjamin there is more. As he writes at the end of his text, the collector has a relationship with his books which can best be described as physical. They do not live in him, but rather the other way around. He lives in *them* – between all those moving boxes, the books are his only home possible. [4]

Each time Benjamin traded one residence for the other, he probably must have repeated the same ritual, where books are taken from the shelves and put into boxes. Their future was that of a new home in a new city. But as the collection expanded, it became more and more impossible to move it in its entirety. Aside from the books that would be unpacked in the new residence, there were unavoidably also the books that would never be *packed*. Due to circumstances more and more books were left behind, as orphans. The question of which books to bring and which ones not must have often been an unbearable choice, although the thought that his travels to yet another new city contained the promise of visiting unexplored bookshops must have comforted Benjamin at such moments. After all, with this prospect came the certainty of other new books. Some of which would be moved again and others left behind.

The end of Benjamin's life was a tragic one. In the night of September 25-26, 1940 he allegedly committed suicide in a hotel room in the Catalan village of Portbou, where he had arrived that

same day after an excruciating hiking trip through the Pyrenees. [5] The journey would eventually bring Benjamin to the United States where he had hoped to be relieved of the war threat, which he had personally experienced the previous year. Since 1933 Benjamin had been living in exile in Paris. When France and England declared war against Hitler in the fall of 1939, all German immigrants were detained, whether they were friends of fascism or not. [6] End November 1939 Benjamin was released with the help of a number of French acquaintances from the concentration camp of Vernuche near Nevers where he had spent almost three months of his life. On his return to Paris he was quite determined to leave Europe.

When Benjamin arrived in Portbou, he already had a temporary American passport, which had been issued in Marseille. His good friend Max Horkheimer, who at that time already lived in the US, had assisted with these documents. In order to travel legally to Lisbon – from where he would travel to America by ship – Benjamin would also require a French exit visa. Lacking those documents, Benjamin was denied access to Spain by the Spanish customs officers. The next day he was to return to France. But due to his extremely exhausted appearance, the customs officers granted Benjamin permission to stay the night in a hotel in Portbou. That is where – at some time in the night of September 25-26, 1940 – he most likely took his own life.

On his last journey Benjamin, for obvious reasons, carried no books. Momme Brodersen's biography describes his legacy of that day: a black leather satchel, a watch, a pipe, six photographs, a pair of glasses, a number of letters, a few magazines, money and some paperwork. [7] The collection of books of which Benjamin so fondly spoke in 1931 in his essay on his library had slowly diminished in the course of that ominous century. The hundreds of illustrated children's books, which had become a remarkable collection on its own, were given to his ex-wife after their divorce. The long search for a suitable place to stay in Paris had also influenced Benjamin's book collection. In 1934 he had a large number of books shipped to Denmark where his friend Bertolt Brecht was staying at the time. [8] In 1938 when he eventually found a residence in Paris, the books only partially returned.

During his Parisian years Benjamin seemed to have given up the dream of a new book collection. Or as Jennifer Allen puts it in her brief history of Benjamin's book collection, he had redefined that dream. [9] Besides the worries about his near future, the years in Paris had also been dominated by his almost obsessive work on the *Passagen-Werk*, which had in time become a sort of virtual library, a book containing passages of books. For this work, Benjamin meticulously assembled his material in the Bibliothèque Nationale, mainly between 1934 and the beginning of 1940. When he finally left the French capital, the work was far from completed. The manuscript was entrusted to his good friend Georges Bataille who worked in the Bibliothèque and hid the *Passagen-Werk* in the pantheon of books where Benjamin had worked all those years on his text. After Benjamin's death the manuscript came into the hands of Adorno, one of the driving forces behind the exceptional posthumous acknowledgement of the text.

The *Passagen-Werk* is not an unpacked but a packed library. With his *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin wanted to write an alternative history of the nineteenth century. One of its central elements are the typical Parisian covered shopping arcades ('les passages'), in his view the most remarkable products of the burgeoning bourgeois culture of his time. I do not wish to elaborate on the content of the *Passagen-Werk* and the historiographical premises on which it is based: enough has already been written about that. [10]. What I am particularly interested in is the form of the work, as we know it from the Rolf Tiedemann 1982 edition, in the fifth part of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*. The work contains an enormous collection of text fragments, which can generally speaking be divided into two categories. On the one hand, the quotes which Benjamin copied from the 850 books of the Bibliothèque Nationale on which he based his research. [11] On the other hand, the self composed texts in which he comments on these quotes or constructs his own methodological reflection. The composition is based on the principles of montage: the pieces of text are deliberately presented as juxtaposing fragments, whereby Benjamin leaves it to the reader to uncover the underlying connections that might put these nuclei of meaning and the *petites histoires*, which they seem to contain at first sight, on a higher level.

The macrostructure of the texts is organized thematically: the whole work is divided into 36 folders ('Konvoluten'), which Benjamin uses to arrange his text fragments. Each of these folders bears a letter of the alphabet as well as the theme that the fragments relate to. Thus Konvolut B is dedicated to 'Mode', H to 'der Sammler', P to 'die Strassen von Paris' and Y to 'die Photographie'. However, the classification, which seems rather strict at first sight, is relative. Along the peripheries of the folders there are plenty of interrelations. A fragment from one folder can simultaneously evoke a number of fragments from another. In Tiedemann's paper edition the perception of these mutual references strongly depends on the individual reader. In the edition itself there are no indications of potential cross-references. The idea that an electronic edition can open new reading perspectives can be found, among others, in Robin Michals' *e-Arcades*, an experiment inspired by the structure of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*. The project consists of a website where the maker presents a collection of quotes (in this case, in relation to technology) that are connected to each other through all kinds of hyperlinks and between which the reader can (depending on which links he decides to activate) look for connections. [12] *E-arcades* is a hypertext in which, according to George Landow's description of the phenomenon,

[e]lectronic links connect lexias 'external' to a work – say, commentary on it by another author or parallel or contrasting texts – as well as within it and thereby create text that is experienced as nonlinear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential. Although conventional reading habits apply within each lexia, once one leaves the shadowy bounds of any text unit, new rules and new experience apply. [13]

### **The computer and the book: the return to the text**

Due to his untimely death Benjamin hasn't been able to experience of the digital revolution which, according to most observers, has fundamentally changed the way we look at books and texts. However, opinions tend to differ on the effects of this development (negative or positive). While some believe the arrival of the computer and other new media will inevitably result in the end of the book and with it also the disappearance of all values connected to that cultural product, others point out that the emergence of new technologies will in fact lead to significant new insights into the way texts work. Benjamin's fascination with 'technical reproduction' processes makes us wonder what he would have thought of this revolution. The *Passagen-Werk* gives us good reason to believe that he probably would have converted to the second group. Admittedly, the long and problematic genesis of the *Passagen-Werk* is a typical product of an age before the word processor was invented: with a well equipped laptop, containing a word processing programme, a database application and an internet connection, Benjamin would have progressed much further in the same amount of writing time. However, the *Passagen-Werk* would not have necessarily been fundamentally different. As pointed out in the example of Robin Michals' *e-Arcades*, the deliberate fragmentary character of the text is extremely suitable for an electronic existence. In an alternative, electronic version a number of the special qualities of the text, which are nevertheless less visible in a paper edition, become much more noticeable. Indicative thereof is another experiment inspired by the *Passagen-Werk* by British academic Giles Peaker: in a contribution to the e-magazine *Other Voices* Peaker has rearranged a number of fragments of Benjamin's text, which not only allows the text to develop new meanings, but even takes Benjamin's system a step further. [14]

Along with Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, the experiments of Michals and Peaker confirm Jerome McGann's idea that it is rather unproductive for the development of our textual culture – and for the development of our *understanding* of that culture – if we remain to think of books and computers as 'textual machines' with an oppositional logic. 'We have to break away from questions like "will the computer replace the book?"', writes McGann in the introduction to his *Radiant Textuality*. [15] In the debate on digital revolution McGann takes up an interesting middle position. He obviously doesn't agree with those, who in the footsteps of Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), have a rather pessimistic view on the future of the traditional book and believe that the technological revolution of the past few decades will not only destroy the book, but also the century-old humanistic idea of close and reflective reading. [16] In the ideal reading

process, as Birkerts imagines it, with the book in hand, the reader relates to the world of the text he is reading in an utterly individual and solitary way. It is his book and his imagination that enter into a relationship with each other and cause the reader to connect with himself by being freed from himself (in an alienating act of identification with the book and the characters that populate the world of the book). Reading is an act of self-fulfilment, of the development and realization of the self. Birkerts is not so much concerned with the disappearance of the book as a material entity (as an object to be cherished, that you can take in your hand, where you can thumb and turn the pages, one by one), but that the act of reading which assumes its most natural form in the tangible format of a book will sooner or later perish under influence of new technologies.

According to Birkerts, readers growing up in the 'electronic millennium' are likely to become readers who are deprived of their individuality and imagination, because they will also lose their sensitivity towards lingual subtleties. On the internet and in other computer-generated forms of communication (*chatrooms*, mobile phones, ...) language has lost its elasticity and eloquence, due to the fact that it has been forced to become more and more economical in order to simultaneously address as large an audience as possible. According to Birkerts, the language of the future (materialised in the fleeting textual products of the computer that can disappear with a simple click on the mouse and instantaneously be recalled) is a language that should express as little as possible for as many speakers as possible as concisely as possible. The language of the past (the language of the humanistic book, *the* icon of the printed and thus the permanent word) is completely opposite. '[L]anguage is the soul's ozone layer', concludes Birkerts in a pivotal chapter in his book, 'and we thin it at our own peril.' [17]

However, McGann neither belongs to the group of radical supporters of the technological revolution, such as J.D. Bolter, George Landow and R.A. Lanham, who believe that physical books are definitely 'a thing of the past' and that e-books and other hypertextual constructions are by definition a better alternative. [18] According to Bolter, Landow and Lanham, in the future, our reading will be done on-screen, making us not only other but also better readers, as we will become more creative. [19] Contrary to Birkerts, they believe that the format of the traditional book limits the possibilities of human imagination. In the literal sense of the word, it is a restricted format: the page borders not only fixate the words (secured) on the paper, they also limit the mind of the reader who can only see what is there and cannot imagine what is not there. A paper book allows the reader to view only one page at a time while reading; with an e-book this is different. Browsing and leafing through an electronic book is not only faster, it also appeals to a different way of reading where cross-references between remote text passages are made much more quickly and more actively.

I do not wish to elaborate on the pros and cons of Birkerts' arguments on the one hand, and those of Bolter, Landow and Lanham, on the other. Much more important is the fact that both teams in this debate make a rather oppositional divide between the book and the computer, between page and screen. According to McGann, this is where the difficulty lies. He feels that this opposition stands in the way of a productive cross-interaction between the two media. McGann is very much convinced that the digital revolution can distinctly increase our knowledge of the way texts and books work. His middle position in the above-mentioned debate can be summarized in the witticism that the computer does not lead us further away from the book but deeper into it. He believes that new technologies enable us to discover textual mechanisms that we never suspected to exist or in some cases even consider possible. [20] In this sense, he feels that the technological revolution is a crucial step forward in literary studies as well as in the history of the book, which ironically also allows us to look back and deepen our understanding not only of what texts are and can be, but also what they have been all along.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that when studying the impact of digital media on our textual culture the comparison is often made between the invention of printing and the rise of the world wide web. A recent example can be found in the book with the revealing title *From Gutenberg to Google* by the British Professor of Textual Studies Peter Shillingsburg. 'The future of electronic editing', writes Shillingsburg in the introduction to his book, 'dawns as clearly bright to us now as the future of printing must have appeared in the first decades following 1452 to the scribes

employed on the new medium of print.’ [21] McGann also points out the synergy between these two historic projects. Since the arrival of the world wide web, says McGann, we have been living in extremely challenging times characterised by a ‘historical convergence of two great machineries of symbol production and hence of human consciousness’, the book and the computer. [22] Critics such as Shillingsburg and McGann believe that this synergy undeniably provides us with a great challenge: the countless new opportunities created by digital media enable us to think differently, not only about the functioning of texts, but also about what texts really are. ‘We all know too much about texts and textuality’, says McGann. ‘We need to think about them in different ways.’ [23]

‘[I]f electronic representations alter the conditions of textuality’, writes Shillingsburg following McGann, ‘a fuller understanding of textual dynamics is necessary.’ [24] With these dynamics McGann and Shillingsburg not only intend the dynamic interrelations between the different structural components of the text (think of what I said before about the electronic ‘versions’ of Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*), but also the fact that electronic editions increase the dynamics between text and reader and conceptualize it in a different way. Having an impact on our way of reading, they shed new light on the creative processes that underlie the mental and imaginary activities associated with them. In order to fully develop these new insights, as McGann emphasizes in a number of chapters in *Radiant Textuality*, we will have to distance ourselves from some of our most fundamental assumptions about textuality and reading – assumptions that have been consolidated by the fact that for centuries we have considered books to be the most ‘natural’ form of textuality. The new medium of the computer might be able to assist us here.

The most obvious of these assumptions is the idea that a text – and certainly a literary text – is a relatively fixed, complete and harmonious textual product, a ‘verbal icon’ in the metaphor of the American New Critics, whereby the reader, while reading, intends to find the consistency expressed by the ideal meaning of the text. For the New Critics this ideal meaning was like the text itself: relatively fixed, complete and harmonious, the result of self-contained and self-referential formal structures. [25] McGann belongs to a generation of American literary scholars who were confronted during their studies over and over again with the theories of New Criticism, which were widely accepted in the United States universities at least until the end of the sixties. Many of his contemporaries considered the poststructuralist language philosophy of Jacques Derrida to be the perfect incentive to question the premises of New Criticism. Although Derrida’s ideas also appealed to McGann, [26] it cannot be denied that the technological developments, that we have been discussing here, also play an equally important part in his theoretical reflections: according to McGann, the fact that a text can no longer be seen as a self-involved formal phenomenon is also the result of the fact that a computer makes it almost impossible to represent things in such a way. [27] ‘A page of printed or scripted text should thus be understood as a certain kind of graphic interface’, writes McGann. [28] A poem printed on a piece of paper is not what it appears to be at first sight, i.e. an isolated and self-contained finite textual structure. On the contrary, it is a textual surface that opens up its own latent variants and through these variants, the worlds outside the poem.

In *Radiant Textuality* McGann systematically encourages the reader to view a printed text as a kind of computer screen. What he implies is exactly the opposite of what used to be the concern of quite a few early electronic reproductions and editions of printed texts. Not the representation of the poem *wie es gewesen*, in its most finalised form (which is still the standard in the German tradition of the *Editionswissenschaft*), but rather the opposite. The use of new media and technologies should generate new meanings and new versions of the text that we have been unable to see due to our ‘book blindness’.

The ultimate similarity between the book and the computer is fairly obvious according to McGann: ‘Like computerized information tools, the book performs two basic functions: It is a medium of data storage and transmission; and it is an engine for constructing simulations. That first is an informational, the second an aesthetic function.’ [29]. The first point hardly requires any further explanation: a book contains information which is shaped in order to transmit and process this information. The second point of comparison seems at first a bit more mysterious, especially

when we ask ourselves how we should perceive books as simulation engines. It is important to understand that McGann in first instance is referring to literary texts, to aesthetic artefacts and to fictional textual products, to texts that rise from the imagination of an author and intend to transmit this process of imagination onto a reader who in turn reads the texts as such – not only for the mere understanding of the states of affairs of reality, but for the aesthetic pleasure and the enjoyment of the imagination.

### **The literary text as an ‘autopoietic’ system (Jerome McGann)**

In McGann’s line of thought, as I have pointed out in chapter six of this book, the particular quality of literary texts is much more important than deemed at first sight. ‘[P]oetical works’, he writes in a crucial passage that I have also cited before,

insofar as they *are* poetical, are not expository or informational. Because works of imagination are built as complex nets of repetition and variation, they are rich in what informational models of textuality label ‘noise’. No poem can exist without systems of ‘overlapping structure’, and the more developed the poetical text, the more complex are those systems of recursion. So it is that in a poetic field no unit can be assumed to be self-identical. The logic of the poem is only frameable in some kind of paradoxical articulation such as: ‘a equals a if and only if a does not equal a’. [30]

Essential to literary texts is the principle of the non-identical identity. According to McGann both the macrostructural and the microstructural components of the literary text field display a semantic instability (their different meanings are structurally inherent), which inevitably leads to diverse (and often also divergent) reading responses. This last thought is easier to grasp in electronic editions than in paper editions and according to McGann that is why it should be used as a fundamental principle in these kind of editions. The examples of the two virtual Benjamin editions I was talking about before have already indicated this in a simple (yet extreme) way. Each text fragment contains (through a series of hyperlinks) other fragments with which it coincides in a non-identical way. It is a relationship of referral, albeit in the case of Michals’ website in a very complex way: a fragment does not simply refer to a specific other one, but to a series of others, although it is not guaranteed that the reference is serial. During one reading session the reader might arrive at fragment y by clicking on fragment x and another time at fragment q. Besides, the references aren’t always reversible: the return from fragment y to fragment x is not necessarily guaranteed. [31]

I can’t go further into the broader implications of such a dynamic textual concept for literary criticism and textual scholarship. Though I would briefly like to consider two of McGann’s own examples: Dante’s *Vita nuova* (the cycle of poems accompanied by prosaic commentaries which the later author of the *Divina Commedia* wrote between 1292 and 1294) and Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés n’abolira jamais le hasard* (a poem published in 1897 in which Mallarmé tries to express his lifelong dream of the ultimate book in the form a typographic experiment). I’ll begin with McGann’s analysis of this last text since his description of Mallarmé’s poetical project incorporates methodological self-reflection. McGann considers Mallarmé’s text to be a ‘prophetic revelation of the culture of the book’, [32] as the almost algorithmic compositional principles of the poem are a premonition of the type of ideas and principles that hypertext theoreticians will begin to oversee a hundred years later. Already for this reason alone, he believes that the poem reveals what texts might be capable of once we have understood the essence of this poetic system. What follows is the central paragraph in McGann’s description of the project.

We mislead our imaginations when we think of the book as a carrier of information, according to Mallarmé. The key move in shattering that positivist illusion is the typographical move – the decision to expose the soul that lives in the physique of the text. The Mallarméan book comes forth as a set of figurations behaving like sentient and purposive creatures, constituting and calling forth their world(s), which include all of the books readers, living and dead, actual, possible, imaginary. Texts as a musical score to be played in a space populated – defined – by all ‘the noble

living and the noble dead'; text as a type of self-engendering creature/creation. Text passed forward to be played again. [33]

Especially the third sentence in this analysis reminds us of Maturana's and Varela's concept of 'autopoiesis': Mallarmé's text presents itself as a field of figurative textual elements that draw the reader into the imaginary world and explicitly invites him to play and activate this field. The metaphor of the text as a musical score to be played is also used by more hermeneutically oriented literary scholars (such as Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta* and the work of Wolfgang Iser [34]), but McGann takes it a step further. To him the work that is played is not the product of the reader's imagination, but rather the other way around: 'the reader must execute the score that is at once the book and the reader's world called into being (action) by that very score.' [35]

Dante's *Vita nuova*, just like Mallarmé's poem, is a literary text that explores the borders of textuality and thus gives us a clearer understanding of what McGann describes as 'neglected formalities of textual documents'. [36] Again the suggestion is very clear: according to McGann, in the prevailing approaches of the previous decades, the challenge of textual formalities had considerably been neglected. It is even all the more ironical, when you consider the fact that quite a number of the approaches which McGann dismisses displayed explicit formalistic ambitions, although they purely thought of these formalities as textinternal features. In his analysis of Dante's *Vita nuova* McGann is mainly concerned with the hybrid nature of the text, part poetry part prose. In between the poems Dante weaves his commentaries and by doing so informs the reader how to read the poems. Using the principle of the 'divisio', the author marks the divisions in the text in order to, as he himself explains, 'open up' the meaning of his texts. What specifically interests McGann is the relatively arbitrary nature of these *divisiones*, which often also go against the logical grammatical division of the verses. The most specific example according to McGann is the 'prose division' in the famous 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'Amore', chapter 19 of the cycle and therefore 'the *Vita Nuova*'s central text', as McGann explains. [37]. This division is not only more elaborate and more refined ('più artificiosamente') than in the other texts, it also gives a concise description of what McGann considers to be the essence of how literary texts function. This functioning is shown par excellence in the idea of the 'divisio' which delineates a place in the text where the poet sets a distinctive sign on the basis of which meaning is created. [38] 'Dante's divisions', writes McGann, 'do little more than mark off places in the poems, as if each were a field or area to be mapped rather than a complex linguistic event to be paraphrased or "invented" in the manner of the *Convivio* or of the "readings" we have cultivated in our twentieth-century exegetical traditions.' [39]

The image of the text as a space also plays an important part in his analysis. In a few of his more theoretical reflections McGann describes this space as 'n-dimensional', [40] which immediately clarifies the interaction between this textual approach and the practice of electronic hypertext editing. After all, the clicking opportunities within a given textual unit in this type of publication enable the reader to shift to another part of the textual space in such a way that is impossible in the traditional (two-dimensional) book. The examples of the two hypertextual experiments with Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* have demonstrated this before: this approach not only introduces a new way of reading, it also provides a new performative textual structure. What McGann writes about the *Vita nuova* points in the same direction: the 'divisiones' inserted by the poet do not necessarily force the only true intention of the author upon the reader, but rather actively encourage the reader to look for endlessly new possibilities of reconfiguration. [41]

### Digital publications and the 'projective' past (Homi Bhabha)

'Electronic texts', writes David Scott Kastan, with J.D. Bolter's analysis of the hypertext in mind, 'work differently, both technologically and ontologically; their elements of meaning are "fundamentally unstable".' [42] It is this instability of the electronic word (and the fleetingness and the erasability often associated with it) that makes critics such as Sven Birkerts shudder at the idea of having to read a non-printed book. But as Scott Kastan also points out, the opposition created in this train of thought is a false one. The idea that books show us texts as they truly are, whereas computers merely present us with virtual versions of these texts, is based on a logical error, says Scott Kastan. 'Over the last 500 years', he writes, 'the technology of the book has

become so seemingly inevitable that we fail to see it as a mediation. (...) What is perhaps most unnerving about electronic texts, is not merely that they are virtual but that they are no more virtual than any other text we read.' [43]

It is this same line of thought (writers don't write books, they write texts and these texts are eventually presented to the reader in a mediated form, whether printed or electronic) that supports McGann's opinion that the digital revolution can deepen our understanding of how texts work. McGann certainly wasn't the only literary scholar during the past decade to argue in favour of the digital revolution within his discipline. However, in his argument for a serious consideration of new media, his demonstration of how this revolution can enrich our understanding of textuality is the most convincing. In my opinion, what makes his work all the more interesting is the fact that he combines his analysis with a vision on the study of historic literature that outlines an particularly challenging future for this field of study. Of course there is the material attractiveness of the electronic publication, which through its newness alone can revive as it were by itself an old and practically extinct text. But there is more: McGann's analysis of the text as an autopoietic system (as a machine that not only generates its own reading process, but is also permanently reconfigured and thus regenerated ('reanimated') during that same process) inherently underwrites a literary-historical approach that activates and modernises tradition. The textual field contains its own processes of reading and thus contributes to the continuously developing tradition. As McGann writes in his analysis of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, texts become 'memory simulations' in the type of reading processes he imagines: 'Every text, having thus been played, is henceforth riven with ancient memory, which we may hear, if we try, in a new way.' [44]

Also in his fascination for the modernisation of tradition and for what Benjamin calls 'the renewal of existence' in his essay about his library, [45] McGann appears to be a fellow spirit of the author of the *Passagen-Werk* with whom I started out in this chapter. In the twentieth century, Benjamin was one of the first to question the conventional ideas of the historical approach. He did not wish to put the question of the *wie es gewesen* of the past an sich first, but rather the question of the conditions of possibility of our historical knowledge, whereby Benjamin firmly believed that the knowledge of the past is by definition constructed in the present. In one of the methodological fragments from the *Passagen-Werk* he describes it as follows: 'Die wahre Methode, die Dinge sich gegenwärtig zu machen, ist, sie in unserem Raum (nicht uns in ihrem) vorzustellen. (...) Nicht wir versetzen uns in sie, sie treten in unser Leben.' [46] In essence, McGann supports the premise of Benjamin's historicism (the past obtains meaning in the present), but the way he represents things is different. To him it is not the reader who allows the (historical) text to enter his life, but quite the opposite: when reading, the reader enters the autopoietic system that the text has developed here and now.

In an essay in which he uses 'Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus' as a starting point for his observation on the functioning of books in 'the global village', Homi Bhabha praises Benjamin for showing us like no other 'the kind of conditional, chaotic, historical "living" provided by the many interesting books that we collect nowadays'. [47] I strongly believe that these adjectives also apply to the kind of publications that McGann envisions. Their conditionality is sealed within the textual interpretation that is compatible with the reflection on autopoietic systems: in such an interpretation textual fields are by definition conditional, incomplete, permanently in development. To a certain degree, they are consequently chaotic, in the positive sense of the word: that which is ordered is fixed (as is the case in traditional publications) and confines the reader to a state of living that is characterised as an incredibly isolated activity. The 'historical' living which Bhabha and Benjamin refer to belongs to a completely different order, be it only because they fundamentally dismiss the idea of a fixed and enclosed space. The house in which we live 'historically' not only contains a lot of rooms, it is also in a permanent state of construction and deconstruction, causing the inhabitant to constantly move. The ideal of the packed library, as I imagine the electronic publications about which McGann fantasizes, turns readers into inhabitants continually on the move and in contact with other new 'roommates'. Their descent is not only geographically but also historically unlimited. Not only in spatial but also in chronological terms this kind of publication is hybrid: the time in which it is realised and permanently develops itself is what Homi Bhabha calls the 'projective past' or also the 'the past-present', a very



benjamin-esque concept that serves the purpose of the ‘renewal of existence’: ‘it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living.’ [48] Again, the connection with McGann’s theory is striking: a publication that highlights the ‘autopoietic’ quality of a text does exactly what Bhabha describes here. Textual scholarship thus becomes a part of what one could call the study of tradition, a line of thinking that proposes the realization and reformation of our yet significant heritage.

[1] Jerome McGann, ‘The Rationale of Hypertext’, in: id., *Radiant Textuality. Literature after the World Wide Web*, New York/Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001, 55.

[2] The Latin proverb is attributed to Terentianus Maurus. The words are part of verse 1286 of his educational poem ‘De litteris, de syllabis, de metris’.

[3] Walter Benjamin, ‘Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus. Eine Rede über das Sammeln’, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann & Herman Schweppenhäuser (Hrsg.), IV, 1, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972, 388-396.

[4] Benjamin, ‘Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus’, 396.

[5] Benjamin’s final days are elaborately described in many books. I have based myself on Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin. A Biography*, London/New York: Verso, 1996.

[6] Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin*, 244.

[7] Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin*, 260. An eye-witness report on Benjamin’s trip through the Pyrenees can be found in Lisa Fittko’s account of that day, written in English in 1980 and published in Tiedemann’s edition of the *Passagen-Werk*: Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 2, 1184-1194. The text is also published in the English edition of Benjamin’s maximum opus: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1999, 946-954.

[8] For a brief history of Benjamin’s book collection see the outstanding foreword by Jennifer Allen about Walter Benjamin, *Je déballe ma bibliothèque. Une pratique de la collection*, Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2000, 7-38, especially 11 and next.

[9] Jennifer Allen, ‘Préface’, 12.

[10] For example in Norbert Bolz & Bernd Witte (Hrsg.), *Passagen. Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1989

[11] The list is published in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 2, 1277-1323.

[12] The homepage of the website reads: ‘Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, e-Arcades is an excursion of association among quotations concerning technology. Borrowing Benjamin’s methodology of juxtaposing quotes, e-Arcades grasps at an understanding of the effect of our technologies on how we think as well as live.’ ([www.e-arcades.com](http://www.e-arcades.com))

[13] George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0. Critical Theory in an Era of Globalization*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006 (3d revised edition), 3.

[14] Giles Peaker, ‘Fragments of the *Passagenwerk*: A Meander Through the Arcades Project of Walter Benjamin’, in: *OtherVoices* 1, 1, 1997. Peaker’s contribution starts as follows: ‘The Arcades project went through many kinds of existence between 1927 and 1939. It never achieved a completed form. What remains are vast quantities of notes, images, quotes and citations; capable of being ordered and reordered in endlessly different constellations. This site is the beginning of an ongoing experiment in just such a reordering, its increasingly multiple links between material bringing elements into new juxtapositions and hopefully generating new meanings out of the debris of the era of high capitalism.’ (<http://www.othervoices.org/gpeaker/Passagenwerk.html>)

[15] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, xii.

[16] Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies. The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, London: Faber and Faber, 1994. See also Wen Stephenson, 'The Message is the Medium. A Reply to Sven Birkerts and *The Gutenberg Elegies*', *Chicago Review* Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 1995-96) 116-130, also online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/aandc/gutenbrg/wschirev.htm>, including Birkerts' response and Stephenson's reply.

[17] Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, 133.

[18] J.D. Bolter, *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, London & Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001 (2d ed., originally 1992); George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; R.A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word. Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

[19] In this context see also the introduction to *The Literary Text in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1996), where editor Richard J. Finneran writes: 'We live (...) in the twilight of the Age of the Printed Book. It is at least arguable that many of today's children, and most if not all of their children, will come to think of the printed book as a quaint device from another era – useful in many ways, to be sure, and no doubt never to altogether disappear; but fixed, linear, noninteractive, and, most restrictive of all, essentially confined to a single medium. Indeed, many of those aspects of the printed book responsible for its hegemony over the last centuries are precisely those that are now seen as crucial shortcomings (...)' (ix-x).

[20] In the words of McGann: '[T]he general field of humanities education and scholarship will not take the use of digital technology seriously until one demonstrates how its tools improve the ways we explore and explain aesthetic works – until, that is, they expand our interpretational procedures.' (*Radiant Textuality*, xii, original italics)

[21] Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google. Electronic Representations of Literary Texts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 1. The cover of McGann's book includes an 'endorsement' by Charles Bernstein in which the same comparison is made: 'We are midway through a digital revolution that is transforming our culture in ways as profound as the Gutenberg revolution 500 years ago.'

[22] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 209.

[23] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 193.

[24] Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google*, 3.

[25] The stability of the text (especially in its final authorised form) also seems to be the central premise of the German tradition of the 'historical-critical edition' as it is propagated in the Netherlands by Marita Mathijssen, Gillis Dorleijn and Wiljan Van den Akker, among others.

[26] In the introduction to his earlier work, *Social Values and Poetic Acts*, it appears that the impact of Paul de Man on McGann is fairly large. Jerome McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts. The Historical Judgment of Literary Work*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1988, 1.

[27] For a good overview of the convergence between poststructuralist thought and new media, see among others Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*. For an overview of the impact of recent theories on textual scholarship, see D.C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[28] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 199.

[29] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 170

[30] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 175.

[31] 'Aesthetic space is organized like quantum space, where the 'identity' of the elements making up the space are perceived to shift and change, even reverse themselves, when measures of attention move across different quantum levels.' (*Radiant Textuality*, 182)

[32] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 210

[33] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 210.

[34] See for example Umberto Eco, *L'oeuvre ouverte*, Paris: Seuil, 1965, 15-40 and Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', in: *New Literary History*, 3, 1972, 279-299.

[35] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 211.

[36] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 194.

[37] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 196

[38] Compare this to the first sentences of Maturana and Varela's thoughts on 'autopoiesis': 'A universe comes into being when a space is severed into two. A unity is defined.' (*Autopoiesis and Cognition. The Realization of the Living*, Dordrecht, Boston: Reidel, 1980 (oorspr. 1972), 73)

[39] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 197.

[40] For example in the chapter 'Visible and invisible books in n-dimensional space' (*Radiant Textuality*, 167-186) and at the end of the chapter 'Visible language, interface, IVANHOE' in Jerome McGann, *The Scholar's Art. Literary Studies in a Managed World*, Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 2006, 170-171.

[41] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 196-197.

[42] David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 114.

[43] Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book*, 115-116.

[44] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 211.

[45] Benjamin, 'Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus', 390.

[46] Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, 273. Another well-known passage is the one in which Benjamin describes the double index of the historical 'image': 'Der historische Index der Bilder sagt nämlich nicht nur, dass sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, dass sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen.' (*Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, 577)

[47] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Mijn bibliotheek uitpakken... nog maar eens', in: Yang, 36, 1, 2000, 125. Original version ('Unpacking My Library Again') in *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 28, 1, 1995, 5-18.

[48] Bhabha, 'Mijn bibliotheek uitpakken... nog maar eens', 126. Also see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 7.