

Literary History and Editorial Method. Poe and Antebellum America

Jerome McGann

An acute sense of what Marjorie Perloff (1981) named “the poetics of indeterminacy” has marked criticism and scholarship for at least thirty years. Synthetic narratives – historicist, dialectical, psychoanalytic – have seen their truth-values turn imaginary, becoming what Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* called “poetic tales”: arbitrary constructions, “fictions of lineage” (Richards 22) and order. With the space of knowledge grown so radically volatile and complex, even “contested”, the teacher’s watchword became “teach the conflicts”, the scholar’s, “explore the contradictions”. So David Reynolds dives “beneath the American Renaissance” (1988) to expose the fault lines of F. O. Matthiessen’s famous normative narrative, and Timothy Powell’s *Ruthless Democracy* (2000) makes a polemic on the issues:

“The real subject of *Ruthless Democracy* is. . .not simply a revision of the canon of American literature, but rather an argument for how engaging a multiplicity of cultural perspectives (both historical and literary) can lead to a greater understanding of the richly complicated, infinitely conflicted nature of ‘American’ identity” (19).

Although we have long questioned the literary history – even the *kind* of literary history -- laid out in Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, we have found trouble devising alternatives. New Historicism emerged as a corrective response to the market

collapse for normative, canonical, and synthetic histories. Its work came in two forms. On one hand new historicists devised collage or case history approaches, building presentations – more maps than narratives -- with deliberated “fissures” to provoke “reader response”. On the other they sponsored a valuable range of microhistorical investigations that could leave the rest, the synthesis, to silence.

Because of its extreme social and cultural volatility, antebellum America brings these issues of critical and scholarly method into sharp focus. Recent scholars push at the limits of new historicist strategies when they wonder, for instance, how to develop “a Poe biography with multiple endings” (Peeples 159); “a literary history of multiple narratives” (Richards 1); or a criticism focused on “forms of authorship” that are not “author-centered” (McGill 147) or even authoritative.

As it happens, we can actually do these things. Indeed, the tools and procedures for their implementation have been in place, have even been deployed, for quite some time. Because this work has developed in the marches of our literary and cultural centers – in bibliographical, editorial, and textual studies – it has, until recently, passed without much notice. The emergence of internet culture and, for humanist scholars, of online research and publication spaces, has begun to bring such work to greater attention. Before looking more closely in that direction, however, we should return to antebellum America and consider once again the vexed cultural status of Edgar Allan Poe. For scholars and educators interested in literary history, the problem of Poe runs out far and in deep.

## I. Whitman's Dream

Few literary commonplaces are more clear than the antithesis of Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe. Whitman's angel, Emerson, had little interest in Poe's work, and Poe, for his part, was contemptuous of Transcendentalist optimism, its belief in social and cultural progress, and – perhaps most of all – the dominance of its social and cultural authority. In this network of antagonisms Poe's importance in relation to the so-called American Renaissance has been greatly obscured, as we know. It has also been, until recently, misunderstood.

The nineteenth-century escape from this misunderstanding was through proto-Modernist aesthetic thought developed in England and France in the latter half of the period: that's to say, through Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne, on one hand, Baudelaire and Mallarmé on the other.<sup>1</sup> Profound as this way has been, there's another way, nativist and surprising, that we have forgotten. Through Whitman.

When the Poe Memorial was unveiled in Baltimore in November 1875, Whitman – remarkably -- made a special point to attend. Struck by the “*Conspicuous Absence of the Popular Poets*” at the ceremony, he used the situation to reflect on what he would later call “Edgar Poe's Significance” for American literature and culture. His initial comments came in the *Washington Star's* account, probably written by himself, of the memorial event, and they were elaborated several years later in a set of critical reflections that eventually found their way into *Specimen Days*.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Star* Whitman records a dramatic shift from his longstanding “distaste for Poe's writings. I wanted,” he said, “and still want for poetry, the clear sun shining, and

the fresh air blowing—the strength and power of health, not of delirium”. But “Poe’s genius”, “noncomplying with these requirements”, has forced Whitman “to fully admit” that it “has yet conquered a special recognition for itself. “

Whitman explains this newly realized appreciation of Poe and his work by recounting “a dream I once had” of “a vessel on the sea, at midnight, in a storm”. This was “no great full-rigg’d ship, nor majestic steamer, steering firmly through the gale”, but a “superb little schooner yacht” like those Whitman often observed in the waters around New York. But now it was not “lying achor’d, rocking. . . jauntily”, but was

flying uncontrol’d with torn sails and broken spars through the wild sleet and winds and waves of the night. On the deck was a slender, slight, beautiful figure, a dim man, apparently enjoying all the terror, the murk, and the dislocation of which he was the center and victim. (Carlson, *Recognition* 75)

“That figure of my lurid dream,” Whitman adds, “might stand for Edgar Poe, his spirit, his fortunes, and his poems—themselves all lurid dreams.”

Five years later, in a journal entry of 1 January 1880, Whitman elaborated his thought and dream and then published the entry in *Specimen Days*. The significance of Edgar Poe, Whitman says, is “in diagnosing this disease called humanity” (*Specimen Days* 156). Accustomed to reading Whitman out of his reiterated polemic for the ideal *litteratus* of an ideal America -- the bard of “a grand, secure, free sunny race” (*Specimen*

Days 294) -- we often forget the extreme darknesses that emerged as he peered through his *Democratic Vistas* (1871):

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. . . . [F]or all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screaming's . . . [t]he spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. . . . A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. . . . The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. . . . In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. . . . The best class we show, is but a mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians. True, indeed, behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discover'd, existing crudely and going on in the background, to advance and tell themselves in time. Yet the truths are none the less terrible. I say that our New World democracy . . . is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. (*Democratic Vistas* text in *Specimen Days* 210-11)

As the vocabulary of disease indicates, here is where “Edgar Poe’s Significance” begins to emerge, in this dark night of the American soul. Because, as Whitman says, “I wanted, and still want for poetry, the clear sun shining, and fresh air blowing”, Whitman has only a prose access to the nightmares of America.

Let's briefly explicate Whitman's text. What he sees in Poe is an imaginative exposure of "the age's matter and malady". In the intransigence of Poe's revelation lies its great "significance". Whitman's own imaginative vision, committed to "a perfect and noble life, morally without flaw", is a daytime vision, as Whitman knows and declares. Whitman's power is thus exemplary rather than diagnostic. He then proceeds to reflect on "another shape of . . . the artist sense . . . where the perfect character, the good, the heroic, although never attain'd, is never lost sight of, but through failure, sorrows, temporary downfalls is return'd to again and again." This is another exemplary way – a Romantic way, "dearer far to the artist-sense" of the nineteenth-century, Whitman says, than his own healthy and sunny way. This Romantic way, emblemized in the great popular poets of the time, "we see more or less in Burns, Byron, Schiller, and George Sand."

"But," Whitman then avers, "we do not see it in Edgar Poe". Poe's is instead a third way, different from both of these. It is to make himself and his work the unappalled "center and the victim" of the dislocated world, "apparently enjoying all the terror" of the maelstrom. In choosing this way Poe becomes that arresting dream-figure, what Whitman calls the "entire contrast and contradiction" both to Whitman's ideal of an American *litteratus* and to those Romantic poets who make a drama of their perpetual struggles toward "something evermore about to be".

The heart of Poe's greatness lies, paradoxically, in his imaginatively deliberated heartlessness, what Whitman calls "a strange spurning of, and reaction from" all customary forms of human commerce and sympathy. To gain access to the truth of America's nightmares demands giving up, in Jesus' words, "all that a man hath",

everything connecting him to daylight illusions: “the author's birth and antecedents, his childhood and youth, his physique, his so-call'd education, his studies and associates, the literary and social Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia and New York. . . .” Poe moves through these realms only to spurn them, and in that gesture he enters the land of transcendent darkness.

Almost without the first sign of moral principle, or of the concrete or its heroisms, or the simpler affections of the heart, Poe's verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page—and, by final judgment, probably belong among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat.

Every reading of that great passage known to me sees it as a dismissal of Poe. It is not. It is rather Whitman's effort to describe a poetic “genius” that is at once apparent and incomprehensible to him. The passage recalls (or forecasts) the famous moment in *The Education of Henry Adams* when Adams, introduced to Swinburne, acknowledges that he has encountered an imagination that has passed beyond his ken.

## II. The Interpretation of Lucid Dreams

What is the significance of “Edgar Poe’s Significance” – a text of barely two pages published in a book that runs to 374? It is significant because it shows Whitman trying to remedy a previous blindness with a new insight. Remarkably, his key descriptors set Whitman’s Poe close to Baudelaire’s and Mallarmé’s: Poe as happy terrorist and technician of the imagination, amoral, demoniac, heatless and heartless, abstract. And we know that Whitman read both Baudelaire and Mallarmé.

But there is a significant difference. To Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Poe’s heartless, abstract, and demoniac texts define their heroic character and their Modernity. To them Poe is an imaginative hero because he is master of the Modern imagination. So in his “Notes to the Poems of Poe”, Mallarmé accepts the account of Mrs. Suzanne Achards Wird that Poe wrote “The Philosophy of Composition” “under the heading of ingenious experiment. It had amused and surprised him to see it so promptly accepted as a *bona fide* declaration” (Mallarmé, “Notes to the Poems of Poe, in Alexander 217). Mallarmé takes the prose commentary as “a pure intellectual game” and thus entirely in keeping with Poe’s project toward “pure poetry”. For Mallarmé, Poe is a crucial intellectual force because he makes “the beauty of the word” a theatrical event.

And from this special point of view is there mystification? No. What is thought, *is*: and a prodigious idea escapes the pages which, written afterwards (and without foundation in fact – there it is) did not therefore become. . .less sincere. The idea is that all chance ought to be banished from the modern work, and if it is there, it must be feigned. The



eternal wing-thrust does not exclude a lucid gaze studying the space consumed by its flight. (Mallarmé, “Notes to the Poems of Poe, in Alexander 218)

That prodigious Poe is almost never proposed by Americans, enthusiasts or detractors. Indeed, in most American perspectives until recently Poe is a subaltern character -- diminutive, even infantilized, he and his readers alike. Not a “majestic” vessel – that would be Byron or Melville -- but a “little schooner yacht”. Whitman has in view a world different from tormented Modernity -- what he called, after Wagner, “the Future”. Because Whitman daydreams of a morally healthful world and the heroism of the democratic Individual, he is puzzled, perhaps even appalled, certainly disturbed, at precisely those features of Poe’s work that Baudelaire and Mallarmé celebrate.

But suppose the nightmare America is as true as Whitman’s daydream America? That possibility haunts Whitman’s text. His little commentary on Poe ends, after all, in a pair of unanswered questions:

The lush and the weird. . .what mean they? . . . abnormal beauty—the sickliness of all technical thought or refinement. . .what bearings have they on current pathological study?  
(*Specimen Days* 158)

Unlike Baudelaire and Mallarmé, who are confident in the Poe of their dreams, Whitman cannot answer those questions, which conclude his little essay. But that our American Lohengrin should have posed those questions is crucial.

History, like love, is its own avenger. Now that Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's dreams of Modernity have been played out, the deep truth of Whitman's dream and bafflement has emerged. It is written all over our recent academic commentaries on Poe and antebellum America: most notably in the work of Jonathan Elmer, Betsy Erkkila, J. Gerald Kennedy, Meredith McGill, Scott Peeples, Timothy Powell, Louis Renza, David Reynolds, Eliza Richards, John Carlos Rowe, Terence Whalen.<sup>3</sup> Each has been searching "beneath the American Renaissance" for a response to Whitman's questions and to the larger issues implied in those questions.

Whitman's arresting image of Poe as the "centre and victim" of a storm-tossed world appears recurrently in the work of these scholars. Perry Miller's 1956 study of Poe and Melville and their cultural context was prescient of much that would follow.

Consider Miller's description of Melville:

an artist can, once he has caught the ear of his people, abruptly discover himself cut off not because he thunders some clear sanity against their insanity, but because he participates completely in their befuddlement. He accepts as the terms of his problem precisely the terms they propound to him. . . ; then he finds himself, despite the power of genius, no more capable of resolving the antinomies, or of making good the pretensions, than they are. If at the end of his exertions, no matter how titanic, he confronts the blank emptiness of defeat. . . , the tragedy is not so much his overreaching as an inescapable collapse of the structures his society provided him – indeed, imposed upon him, with no allowance for alternatives (Miller 4).

There precisely is the artist as center and victim of a maelstrom -- what Modernism taught us to see as “the tragedy” of “the power of genius”. But suppose the scene were constructed closer to Whitman’s dream, as a dark comedy with the “slight figure” of a confidence-man as the *genius loci*? That would be the scene mapped by Jonathan Elmer’s “Cultural Logic of the Hoax”.

Matthiessen famously excluded Poe from his study of the *American Renaissance* not so much because Poe was “hostile to democracy” – Hawthorne and Melville took dim views as well, and Whitman was often mortally troubled, as we know. Poe is expelled because his skepticism lacked “the moral depth” of his contemporaries (Matthiessen ix). But since Matthiessen, many have learned to see how Poe’s mordant comic skepticisms reach a depth of insight unachieved elsewhere at the time. This comes because his works reflect so completely the contradictions – the “befuddlement” – of his age. Thus Terence Whalen’s study of *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999) usefully examines how “many of Poe’s overt political pronouncements – progressive and reactionary – were largely derived from the words of others, which indicates a negative political capability rather than a rigid ideological agenda” (Whalen 38). This is acute, though the Keatsian reference can easily distort Poe’s work with irrelevant Romantic categories. Poe does not so much sympathize with the contradictions of his age as exploit and theatricalize them. They emerge less through an affective engagement – in that respect his work *is* cold and abstract – as through his willing suspension of belief in them.

In this Poe assumes an aesthetic posture toward the contradictions of his antebellum world. From its every form of worship – the idols of cave and market, whether sublime (as in *Eureka*) or ridiculous (as in “The Case of M. Valdemar” or “Von Kempelen and his Discovery”) – he makes poetic tales. Or, as Eliot famously lamented, Poe merely “entertains” his ideas, he does not believe them. His negative capability is of the mind, not of the heart, as is quite clear from the poetic argument he develops in *Eureka*, where he distinguishes two kinds of “belief”: the one operating when we say “We believe in a God”, the other being what he calls “belief proper”, that is, the “mental conception” constitutive of “intellectual belief” (*Eureka* para. 36).

Poe’s work reflects the ideological conflicts of his time by participating in their expression, by conscious acts of identification, including conscious acts of false consciousness – what Miller called “befuddlement”.

Far from being removed from their world, Poe’s poems and tales may be the most powerful artistic representation we have of the traumatic psychic and cultural effects of the social crisis and political breakdown that marked the post-Enlightenment . . . in the United States.” (Erkkila 21)

Poe’s moral elusiveness – what Lowell famously saw as his fudge-factor,

There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,

Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge.

*A Fable for Critics* [1848]

sets him apart and supplies his moral depth. Reading Poe we realize how it is intellectually dangerous to take what one writes or reads too seriously. Or as Betsy Erkilli succinctly observes: “There is no such thing as a pure poem” (130 ). Thence comes the negative space, the dark matter of *Edgar Poe, a Kosmos*: to disturb and befuddle the Kosmos of the heroic artist by folding it back into its true source and end and test: the Man of the Crowd, aspiring, befuddled, self-deceived, ultimately tragicomic.

A Modernist orientation on Poe’s work, still common and useful, recognizes how it casts a cold and mocking eye on the *hypocrite lecteur*. Irony, satire, hoax, an amoral posture (“the heresy of the didactic”), cold ratiocination, theatricality, and “de la musique avant tout chose”: these are all the marks of that *Poetic* world. Another Modernist orientation, the obverse of Baudelaire’s – Henry James, Laura (Riding) Jackson, T. S. Eliot, and later Matthiessen and Bloom are its exemplary characters – reads those same signs as shallow, immature, and ultimately *unserious*.<sup>4</sup>

Inserting “mass culture” as a neglected category in these Modernist designs on Poe, Jonathan Elmer’s 1995 study decisively shifted the critical territory.

If [Poe] offers us a rich imagination of the mass culture of the day – a view of the democratic “mob,” a sampler of most of the popular and mass literary forms of antebellum magazine culture – he is also, and equally, imagined by mass culture: he is, in fact, its symptom. (Elmer 21)

Elmer’s work exposes the symmetry marking the two Modernist lines of critical reception, both of which assess Poe’s work as a function of his individual talent (or lack

of it). While different criteria for measuring this unique *Poetic* talent will yield diverse judgments, ultimately “the achievement of Edgar Allan Poe” is the issue.

But what if the personal achievement of Edgar Allan Poe can only be measured as a social function? More, what if the social context of an individual talent is mapped along volatile, discontinuous, and severely relativistic lines? Those two questions have shaped the orientation of the antebellum scholarship I have been referencing. Perhaps even more significantly, they indicate the need we have for what Eliza Richards calls “a model of literary history that. . .is intersubjective and interactive” (Richards 5).

Poe’s case is crucial because his work reveals the extreme dispersal of textual and literary authority.

Poe’s investments in genre, his adoption of the literary values of the miscellany, and his attempts to establish authorship by disrupting the process of reprinting are authorial strategies made possible by the heterogeneous and uncontrolled distribution of antebellum literature” (McGill 149).

Poe shamelessly echoes, mimics, plagiarizes, and refashions the work of others, as we have known for a long time. But in operating this way he becomes subject to other agents and social forces. “Poe’s career passes through nearly all of the important antebellum publishing centers,” Meredith McGill observes, “and his shifts between them chart a progress toward the embattled center of the struggle over a national literature” (McGill 151). This is the decentered “centre” that Poe explores in *Eureka*, the field of relations in “*which the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere*” (*Eureka* para.

39). As a consequence, Edgar Poe becomes what he beholds, a textual being to be echoed mimicked, plagiarized, and refashioned in his turn:

the crisis for Poe is not that he is forced to embrace literary nationalist ideals in order to advance his career. Rather, his autonomy is jeopardized when the literary nationalists embrace *his* principles, invoking him as an idealized figure of independent judgment within [the] discourse [of Lowell and Duyckinck]. Poe does not abandon his critical ideals so much as lose control over them as they are translated into the literary nationalist idiom” (McGill 191).

Here is Richards’ intersubjectivity and interactivity with a vengeance. Poe’s case ultimately shows that the autonomous author might be “victim” of other agents, confidence-man, “symptom” of seriously unstable social conditions, or even, perhaps, all three at once.

Scott Peeples drives straight to a heart of the matter when he reflects on *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*:

One could perhaps write a Poe biography with multiple endings, or in some other way foreground the unreliability of the evidence surrounding his death, highlighting the fact that we don’t know Poe so much as we know the documentary evidence related to his life. (Peeples 159)

The ambiguous death of Edgar Poe is a dramatic emblem of our difficulties with this period: we know the documents – at least the ones that survive – but we have come to know them only in their differences and unreliabilities. So scholars now dream toward a literary history of multiple narratives. a literary history in which “the poetics of creation

are inseparable from the poetics of reception” (Richards 1). And McGill gives the issue an explicit general form: ““An author-centered criticism necessarily collapses the range of obscured, withheld, projected, and disavowed forms of authorship” that “necessarily” characterize social and cultural life (McGill 147).

### III. A New Literary History

The first issue of *New Literary History* (1969) opened with “A Note on *New Literary History*” by the editor. His journal, he argued, would provide a forum for discussing the historical foundations and social function of literary studies. The forum was needed for two reasons. First, literary studies in society at large seemed to have turned marginal and inconsequential. Second, the discipline had grown uncertain of itself and its cultural mission. Cohen pivots his “Note” on “the feeling of uneasiness prevalent in our profession” and the related “feeling of inadequacy involved in the teaching of English studies” (5). For Cohen, both are a consequence “of the current rejection of history either as guide to or knowledge of the present” (6). Cohen does not mention the anti-historicism of the New Criticism as his critical point of departure. He does not have to.

Now, forty years on, Cohen’s message seems more pertinent than ever. The emergence of internet culture – what Siva Vaidhyanathan calls “the googlization of everything”<sup>4a</sup> – has exacerbated the crisis of the literary and historical imagination that Cohen addressed in 1969. But if literary culture seems still in peril, the antebellum American scholarship I’ve been examining tells us something important



about the legacy of *NLH*. History-oriented investigations of literature and culture are now impressively widespread, diverse, and learned, in no small part because of the example of *NLH*. Moreover – and here is the final theme of the present essay – these socio-historical approaches are peculiarly relevant to the problems humanist educators face because of the rise of internet culture.

A new literary history will direct – the process has already begun – the great obligation facing literary studies now: the re-editing, for online environments, the entirety of our cultural inheritance. The example of current antebellum American scholarship, and the problem of Poe in particular, has been important for exposing some of the basic philological issues that will have to be addressed if the task is to be successful.

Before the advent of hypermedia, virtual texts, and semantic webs, textual studies had begun to worry the limits of author-centered and text-delimited editions and editorial method. For Anglo-American scholarship this began in the 1980s with the publication of two books, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983) and *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986). Both argued the need to rethink the crucial distinction scholars traditionally make between a text and its context.

When Eliza Richards speaks about a “model of literary production that . . . is intersubjective and interactive” (Richards 5), we want to ask: what would such a model look like? “Intersubjective and interactive” is internet idiom summoning a world of wikis, blogs, and social software. But those media forms are nothing like the essays and monographs where Richards’ model, like an obscure object of desire, is called after.

The question can be sharply defined if we pose it with respect to the basic form that a “model of literary production” must be able to take. That form is the scholarly edition. The complete genetic information about any cultural work is coded in the double helix of its DNA, that is, in the codependent relation of its production history and its reception history. The idea of the scholarly edition, *Variorum* and fully critical, is to represent the textual DNA of the work(s) to be edited. While much more could and should be said about the structure of that codependent 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 its fullest theoretical articulation, the scholarly edition realizes that codependent relation: not just putting the relation on display as an historical record, but putting it in operation as a machine to be used for accessing, analyzing, and evaluating the record once again, a process that necessarily includes evaluating the edition’s own particular scholarly presentation of the record. All books are knowledge machines, but the scholarly edition is a specially sophisticated type. One doesn’t *read* a scholarly edition as one reads a narrative, fictive or historical, nor even as one reads markedly reflexive texts like *The Waste Land* or *Philosophical Investigations*. One *uses* a scholarly edition as one uses a cookbook or an encyclopedia. Philology -- what we today call literary and cultural studies – was acutely defined by a great nineteenth-century philologist as “the knowledge of what is known” (Boeckh 11). The critical/scholarly

edition is the summary form, quite literally the Alpha and the Omega, of the discipline of philology.

As the work of Richards and McGill explicitly indicates, the documents from the discursive field of antebellum America present a daunting critical/historical, and therefore editorial, challenge. In a companion piece to this essay, I analyze and explain the issues with respect to the problem of scholarly editing as that problem is exposed through Poe and his relation to antebellum America. That study is important for giving a clear view of the editorial demands *per se*. Here, however, I want to approach the matter as a general problem of historical method. We have learned about the Poetics of Indeterminacy. We need to know what constitutes the scholarship of indeterminacy.

A matrix for such a scholarship – “intersubjective and interactive” at all historical phases, including the present -- gradually took shape during the twentieth-century. Within humanist culture, its key theoretical agents included Mikail Bakhtin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, J. L. Austin, Herbert von Foerster, Jacques Derrida, and the collaborative work of Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela. The method can be prescribed in six foundational protocols defining the dynamic structure of social texts. Briefly these are:

1. The social text is a Bakhtinian space (heteroglossia)
2. For a social text,  $a = b$  if and only if  $b \neq a$
3. Textual fields arise codependently 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

As I have given these protocols a detailed analysis elsewhere, let me focus on the key topics of codependence and n-dimensionality, which are fundamental to the structure of social texts.<sup>5</sup> Both have been exhaustively analyzed at a general level by the celebrated mathematician René Thom. His discussion of the “elementary catastrophes” of dynamical systems develops a rich formal vocabulary for studying the transformations that define such systems.<sup>6</sup>

The following observation by Thom is especially useful for our purposes: “In quantum mechanics every system carries the record of every previous interaction it has experienced – in particular, that which created it -- and in general it is impossible to reveal or evaluate this record” (Thom 16). Remarkably, D. F. McKenzie’s proposals for a “sociology of texts” echo Thom’s very words.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a literary scholar would have no difficulty recasting Thom’s statement as follows. : “In textual fields every work carries the record of every previous interpretation it has experienced – in particular, that which created it -- and in general it is impossible to reveal or evaluate this record.” It is impossible because the record is indeterminate. Each move to reveal or evaluate the record changes what is being measured not just in a linear but in a recursive way, for the dimensions of the system – which is to say, its measured parts and forms – comprise the codependent relations of all elements in the dynamic field. Consequently, to speak of any interpretation as “partial” is misleading, for every interpretive move reconstructs *in toto* the object of attention. This reconstruction corresponds to what is termed in quantum mechanics the collapse of a wave-function into its eigenstate.<sup>8</sup>

Note that Thom refers to an interpretation “which created” the system in the first

place. But the work of Merleau-Ponty, Maturana, and von Foerster – to name just the most prominent instances – has shown that this creating interpretation is what a positivist view would see as a particular object – for instance, “the poem itself”. Of course for particular interpretive purposes we find it useful to think about a localized discursive element – say, the poetical work known as “Kubla Khan” -- as a specific object – say, as a poem created by S. T. Coleridge, or perhaps as a particular printed or manuscript state of that poem. But other ways of observing “Kubla Khan” are normal. Indeed, except as an indexing convenience, Coleridge’s authorship – its interpretive relevance -- is but a secondary factor in the work’s interpretations, and in many it scarcely figures at all. In a field of social relations, objects are not self-identical, they are emergent functions in an autopoietic field comprehending the interpretive agencies studying the field.

Since interpretive agency is a continuously evolving variable, and since the object of interpretation is a codependent function of that unfolding interpretive action, this field of textual relations must be understood as n-dimensional. Textuality is a dynamic space that can be organized in an indefinite number of perspectives. A particular “object of interpretation” comes forward as an object when it has been framed for interpretive attention. In that moment it collapses into an eigenstate – so-called because the thing being measured and the measuring parameters are “momentarily forced” into an equivalence. In this highly artificial and specialized interpretive moment, the object has been measured, defined, in a particular form or “state” of self-identity (*eigenstate*).

Although discursive fields, especially as they are aesthetically conceived, must be theorized as n-dimensional spaces, they always come to our attention in these particular forms. Quantum theorists call these forms “histories” – that is to say, the set of the

eigenstates which emerge through experimental investigations (the interpretations). In quantum mechanics these histories are probability functions and their textual equivalents appear as an array of interpretations that organize themselves in similar ways. Stanley Fish's concept of an interpretive community, for example, is a device for measuring the probability function of different interpretive acts. How those probabilities emerge – how certain acts of interpretation gain authority – is a problem to be addressed by studying the normative dimensions of the discursive field in question.

Conceived in this way, a discourse field – antebellum America for instance -- need be neither arbitrary nor shapeless. Though decentered, its forms of attention are a specifically philological set of relational variables. We study works with multiple authorities, publication venues, and textual versions, and with dates that can be figured in different ways. We take account of various agencies of production and reception – personal, social, institutional. Most important, we have institutional mechanisms for sharing work and modifying the perspective on the field or any part of it.

As such, they can be digitally modeled, as they have been heretofore modeled and implemented in paper-based environments. At NINES we spent four years – 2004-2008 – designing and building a text collation tool called JuXta.<sup>9</sup> This tool executes the most fundamental of all editorial operations: the critical comparison of the similarities and differences between all the witnesses, the textual versions, of a linguistic work. Unlike paper-based collation, JuXta is decentered and relational. Because the analytic point of view can pivot on any of the textual witnesses, the many different field relations of the textual witnesses – the specifically *linguistic*

field relations of course -- can be shifted and exposed. JuXta allows one to construct a field of textual objects whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

We are now called to design and build digital equivalents of such a machinery. These scholarly devices will have to comprehend works like *The Rossetti Archive*, which is a born-digital representation of non-digital work, as well as works like *From Lexia to Perplexia*, which is without explicit connections to non-digital materials.<sup>10</sup> Such machineries have at this point only the most primitive existence. A library that houses manuscripts, books, and digital works is precisely such a machine, storing these materials and providing access to them. But the interpretive functions of this machine are minimal since it is primarily designed only for storage and access. The machinery of our emerging digital environments is at this point primitive to a degree since we have yet to design and build them for advanced and integrated interpretive study. We don't have the knowledge of what we appear to know. If we did, we would have Philology in a New Key.

Traditional philology and textual criticism can help us to that goal. The first thing to learn is that the general conceptual character of the machinery we require can be theorized. We are looking to realize the system of philology as a digital emergence. Second, because the history of the emergence of scholarly editions represents the material history of pre-digital philology, we can be confident about realizing the theory of a new philology by building models of what we now think the theory must involve. *The Perseus Project*, *The Rossetti Archive*, and *The Canterbury Tales Project* are early attempts at building such models.<sup>11</sup> In the case of *The Rossetti Archive* -- about which I

can speak from an inner standing-point – building the model exposed the theoretical limitations of the model. That exposure led next to the undertaking of NINES (The Networked Infrastructure of Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship), which attempts a more comprehensive realization of the theory of the new philology.

As a philological endeavor, this machinery would have to meet the following functions/requirements. The first two reflect what traditional philology calls the Lower Criticism, the second two, the Higher Criticism.

1. The depository of artifacts must be comprehensive.

D. G. Rossetti's original works, *The Rossetti Archive*, and *From Lexia to Perplexia* all share the common space of an emergent cultural history. Although I've set aside all discussion of audio and visual materials (including film and television), I mention them here in passing to underscore the requirement that the archive be comprehensive.

2. Its different parts must be organized in a network of internal links and external connections that can be represented as conventions.

Fundamentally this is a process of identifying and classifying artifacts and their component parts. Any given artifact will have many identifiable parts and can be variously classified. Such and such an object is (for example) at once a poem, a printed page, a sonnet (of a certain kind), a proof sheet (corrected or uncorrected, authorial or non-authorial), a section of a larger poetical object, a translation, and so on and so on. Its parts are similarly multiple. Daniel Pitti likes to begin his XML classes by handing out a recipe printed on a single page and asking each member of the class to take five minutes



making a list of the object's formal features. The ensuing class discussion quickly reveals the range of possibilities.

For materially different types of artifacts – printed texts, maps, photographs – divisioning and classifying become yet more complicated when the ultimate purpose is to arrange them in a system that permits coherent analysis and study. The problem is greatly amplified when the manipulable physical properties scale to radically different measures, as is the case with a depository that includes paper-based objects and born-digital objects,

3. The total system must rest in a single perspective that reflects the conception of the system generally agreed upon by its users.

In terms of traditional philology, this rule explains the codependent relation that holds between the Lower and the Higher Criticism. That relationship reflects the social character of the system generally considered. In a non-historical system – Aristotle's for example – the parts and classifications are conceived a priori. That is the theory of the system. In philology, however, Aristotle's categories and topoi are understood as socially inflected and historically emergent.

Designing a system in the horizon of philology, then, requires building critical devices that require the system to be modifiable through use. If the system is not "open" in that way it is not, in the philological perspective, theoretically complete.

4. From that general conceptual vantage, the system must have the flexibility to license, and ultimately store, an indefinite number of particular views of its artifacts and their

relations, including different views of the system as a whole.

That set of functions reflects the fact that a philological system is fundamentally a system of social software. It may be modeled and then instantiated in the paper-based form that we have inherited and still use, or in the online network that continues to emerge today and acquire more precise definition. Realizing this important homology between bibliographical and digital networks is crucial as we try to design the latter to the needs of scholars and educators.

Thus, the initial design of the Collex software that powers the NINES initiative was conceived to allow users to

search, browse, annotate, and tag electronic objects and to repurpose them in illustrated, interlinked essays or exhibits. By saving information about user activity (including the construction of annotated collections and exhibits) as "remixable" metadata, the Collex system writes current practice into the scholarly record and permits knowledge discovery based not only on predefined characteristics or "facets" of digital objects, but also on the contexts in which they are placed by a community of scholars. (Nowvskie)

Developing a practical interface for realizing that general goal will only emerge from building, testing, and – necessarily -- modifying design models. The Collex design, released in beta in early 2007, was then tested and redesigned to improve its key access and usability functions. The new design was released in December 2008. As further functions for searching, integrating, and repurposing the NINES aggregations are developed – some planned, some as yet unforeseen – the NINES model will continue to

explore the shape of a new philology, bringing us back to the online future of literary history.

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<sup>1</sup> The influence of Poe on Baudelaire and Mallarmé is well known (see Alexander, Cambiaire, Lawler, Quinn). Rossetti discovered Poe in 1847 and immediately began responding to Poe's work with a series of remarkable illustrations (two for "The Raven", one for "Ulalume" and "The Sleepers") and with a number of poems and prose works that show Poe's clear influence. Swinburne regarded Poe as America's most important poet. He contributed to Sara Sigourney Rice's Poe Memorial volume and in fact was the person responsible for Mallarmé's contribution, his famous sonnet on Poe's tomb. See *The Rossetti Archive* (<http://rossettiarchive.org>) and Lang, *Swinburne Letters* III. 84-85).

<sup>2</sup> Whitman seems to have written a first version of the *Specimen Days* text for *The Critic* (3 June 1882): see Whiman, *Prose Works 1892. Specimen Days*, 230-233. The text of the *Star's* report is printed, along with the relevant section from *Specimen Days*, in Carlson, *Recognition*, 73-76.

<sup>3</sup> Important foundations were laid down earlier by Miller, Michaels, and Pease.

<sup>4</sup> For James and Wilson see Carlson, *Critical Essays*; T. S. Eliot, *From Poe to Valéry*; Laura Riding, *Anarchism* 16, and *Contemporaries and Snobs* 201-55.

<sup>4a</sup> See <http://www.googlizationofeverything.com>

<sup>5</sup> 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," in *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): [www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2006/v/n41-42/013153ar.html](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'Keefe, and Unsworth (MLA: New York, 2006): 53-73



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<sup>6</sup> If one could construct for textual works a digital environment that can implement such a vocabulary and thus display those transformations, one will have demonstrated the viability of an interpretive method that could function at a quantum order.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, “What’s Past is Prologue”, in *Making Meaning* 259.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of quantum histories see Omnés.

<sup>9</sup> For NINES and accounts of its software development work see:  
<http://www.nines.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Hayles uses *From Lexia to Perplexia* as a salient example in her *Writing Machines*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Rossetti Archive* (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org>); *The Perseus Project* (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>); *The Canterbury Tales Project* (<http://www.canterburytalesproject.org/index.html>).