

## Nineteenth-Century Digital Worlds: Hilary Fraser Interviews Jerome McGann

Hilary Fraser and Jerome McGann



Nineteenth-Century Digital Worlds: Hilary Fraser Interviews Jerome McGann.  
[<https://vimeo.com/144862499>]

**Hilary Fraser:** Hello, my name is Hilary Fraser and I am Dean of Arts at Birkbeck, where I am also Professor of Nineteenth-Century Studies. It is in this capacity that I was the founding editor of our electronic journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, which was established ten years ago, so it's our tenth anniversary. We have just published the twentieth issue of the journal and we are celebrating our history, and so I'm delighted to be able to talk about the history of the journal and the field of digital humanities today with Professor Jerome McGann, from the University of Virginia, who is a leading light in this field, and in many other fields. He is a very distinguished scholarly editor, poet, and author of sixteen books, and many editions, and the winner of numerous awards over the years, including the James Russell Lowell Award from the MLA for his wonderful book *Radiant Textuality* [2001], the Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Award, and the first Richard W. Lyman Award for Distinguished Contributions to Humanities Computing. His online publications include the *Rossetti Archive* and *NINES*, a federated model for integrating digital scholarship.

I remember reading *The Romantic Ideology* [1983] and it absolutely changing the way Romantic scholarship happened. It is a marvellous,

marvellous book. Since then you have continued to write marvellous books and to do really paradigm-changing scholarship, and particularly in the fields, latterly, of digital humanities, which is what we are going to talk about today: the digital nineteenth century. So, welcome.

**Jerome McGann:** Thank you.

**Hilary Fraser:** You have been a huge supporter of *19* over the years, which was established on a wing and a prayer in 2005. It was the support and the belief of people like you in the enterprise that enabled it to happen: it was very important to us and it continues to be so.

**Jerome McGann:** *19* was really important because in those days, even before that, so much scholarship, often very good scholarship, was thrown up online, but without peer-reviewing purposes and intentions. NINES was begun because we wanted to create an environment where the importance of peer reviewing was understood from the beginning, so *RaVoN* [*Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*] was established as a peer-reviewing journal. But there were a lot of other enterprises, very interesting enterprises, which did not see that element of review as crucial. *19* was extremely important exactly because it understood that from the beginning. It has been brilliant: it is a wonderful journal.

### **Institutional and disciplinary challenges**

**Hilary Fraser:** It was hard to imagine ten years ago how the digital world would change in the meantime, but I am thinking back to some of the principles that drove me in wanting to set it up. First of all, there was the question of how we made the work that was going on in London, at the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, sustainable, and how we would archive it. We had regular, wonderful seminars that were curated by people who put a great deal of time and energy into putting together a marvellous day — and then it was gone, an ephemeral thing, and those who were unable to be in London could not benefit and I thought this was such a shame. It was quite difficult to get any conference proceedings published at that time in book form. Second, there was the question of widening access more generally, which is part of Birkbeck's mission as an institution, to make education as openly available as possible. Finally, there was a question of professional skills training for our postgraduate students in online editing. These were the three key things that

drove the setting up of the journal ten years ago, and it is interesting that these are still key issues today for digital humanities: the digital archive, the question of open access, the question of sustainability, future directions, of skills development for postgraduate students. All are still live issues.

**Jerome McGann:** They are very difficult issues, because the institutions remain. I began doing this in a sustained and intense way in 1992 and 1993, when the [Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities](#) was began at UVA. The whole point of that body was to try to investigate what you could do with this new digital technology, because no one fully understood its potential or how it might be realized. In an institutional setting over the years that has become a kind of mantra. In 1992 or 1993, the technical issues were often extremely difficult, and nobody *really* knew exactly how to move forwards. So that, to take an example from the *Rossetti Archive*, the computer science people I was working with at the time said, ‘Look, what you have to do is approach it as if all the software and the hardware are going to be changing every year and a half or two years, so how are you going to construct this thing so it is not going to become obsolete within six years?’. So we attended to the logical structure and I was really very narrowly focused on these kinds of technical issues for the initial seven, eight, or even ten years, and was oblivious to the institutional issues. But since the beginning of this new century, the institutional issues, and the underlying politics of these technologies, are clearly the most intransigent aspect we encounter. Funding is tied to institutional issues and programmes. You were talking about your students, we talk about our students too. Where do the students learn how to do this sort of work? They learn outside the programmes. Is that true here?

**Hilary Fraser:** Yes, more or less, other than we offer training to our interns. We have run short courses as well.

**Jerome McGann:** Most of this takes place outside the degree programmes and until that Rubicon is crossed difficult problems of sustainability will remain. You would think since 1992–93 at UVA that we would have programmes that work so that the graduate students are coming out with at least certificates in computing humanities. But they do not. And that is because there remains the inertia of the inherited procedures of the work that we do. I don’t say that to attack, nor am I suggesting this is wrong, because in many ways it makes perfect sense to continue to use the resources that are traditional in

publishing and so forth. On the other hand, anybody can see that if we could make the move into entirely digital communication within the disciplines, it would make all kinds of sense, financially and programmatically. But the institutional barriers remain very, very difficult to push against. Not just in the departments, but in the upper levels of institutions. You are a dean, so you know the kind of expectations that the administration tends to have in employing staff. It is the most frustrating part of it, because so many of the technical issues have been solved.

**Hilary Fraser:** We have been fortunate in that we have been able to employ two new members of staff to the English Department here, Martin Eve and Caroline Edwards, who are leading lights in the technology and publishing area. They have set up the Open Library of Humanities, of which Birkbeck and *19*, in particular, has become a part. It's been an exciting new move, but even so, the next task is how we integrate this work into the programmes. Intellectually it needs to be integrated; it's absolutely critical.

#### Digitizing the inherited paper archive

**Jerome McGann:** At UVA initiative has not developed out of the departments. It has developed out of the library, because the library is undergoing catastrophic change and it has understood that really since the 1980s — certainly at UVA, and now all libraries are the same. There is a whole other problem about trying to integrate the emerging digital archive with the inherited paper archive. We don't really know how to do that yet. But it is imperative — because libraries will be organized digitally. There is no doubt about that. And so how you bring along the inherited archive is very much a problem, especially for the nineteenth century, as the emerging print technologies that came into existence in the nineteenth century were very great: the nineteenth century saw an incredible explosion of print materials, but it took place with physical materials that were disastrous from our point of view. The paper was often terrible: how do we preserve that? In my experience in the university environment, rare manuscripts and books before 1800 are understood to be really important. Then comes the bourgeois nineteenth century, with all its popular culture and middle-class materials that seem so fragile and transient, without substance. The trashing of nineteenth-century material is immense and it continues to go on. That does not happen to eighteenth-century materials or seventeenth-century materials.

**Hilary Fraser:** Do you think that's why the nineteenth century has been so important in the development of the digital archive and in thinking about the experiments and possibilities of digital archives?

**Jerome McGann:** I would like to say yes, but no, I don't think so — even though people like Andy Stauffer and the younger people now do understand this and are fierce in their effort to protect nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century materials. But just speaking for myself, I got into it not because of any special nineteenth-century set of interests. I got into it because I was curious about how these new machines and technologies could advance certain kinds of problems in editing. It was as narrow as that. So Rossetti was what I undertook because Rossetti is a complex technical problem. He is a painter, he is a designer, he is a translator, he is a poet, he is a fiction writer, and he is at the centre of the Arts and Crafts Movement. So you approach editing in his case as almost an ethnographical or archaeological problem rather than in traditional terms, when you edit texts as linguistic objects. But in Rossetti's case, no, that will not give you a proper view of Rossetti. You will have to have an editorial approach that embraces the range, and so it seemed to me it might be possible actually, with these new technologies, to make a go at that. Not that you would solve the problem but you could try to design editorial environments that would be more comprehensive than traditional ones.

**Hilary Fraser:** From my perspective the *Rossetti Archive* does that absolutely brilliantly. Is it as you imagined it would turn out at the beginning of the project?

**Jerome McGann:** Not exactly. Probably the most illuminating thing that came out of it for me was my realization, after about seven or eight years, that I didn't really understand what books were. I began editing many years before with Byron and I certainly did not know anything about editing when I began that.

**Hilary Fraser:** Coming from you, that is very interesting.

**Jerome McGann:** I could tell amusing stories about the academy, about how a person who knew nothing about editing was asked to edit Byron, but I will leave that aside. Over those years from 1970 to 1992, however, I did learn about editing, and I thought I learned a lot about books and manuscript culture and so forth. But in

designing the *Rossetti Archive*, I realised that computers are so stupid that you have to tell them exactly what you want them to do. Then they will do it. But the downside of that is that they will then expose you by giving you back what you told them. And in my case I realized that that was not exactly what I wanted. I began to see how unclear I was in my own mind about what I wanted. It was illuminating, interesting, and chastening to see that. NINES was an upshot of all that, because we saw the kinds of institutional issues we had to address. The *Rossetti Archive* was invincibly ignorant about those kinds of problems. It was also invincibly ignorant about interface, in which, I am ashamed to say, I took little interest at the time. After six years Bethany Nowvieskie, a very, very skilled digital humanist — she was then a graduate student working with us — said one day: ‘We’ve got to start working on interface.’ I said, ‘Why, these thousands of files...?’ She said, ‘Jerry, nobody has ever seen it.’ It was all in digital space, but I had given it no thought. Anyway, the consequence for me was the exposure of the limitations of what we were doing, certainly what I was doing, and it has been very educational.

The other feature of those years is that we tackled some of the most tractable technical challenges — for example, trying to figure out TEI [Text Encoding Initiative] and other kinds of markup. I am sure as I’m sitting here now that OCR [Optical Character Recognition] will soon be reading with close to 100 per cent accuracy. What we most need is probably a much quicker way to produce digital transcriptions, a much cheaper way. The man-hours that are required to mark up texts are just too much. But I think very soon that will not be the case, so it will be much easier to do the digitizing if you can throw high-end OCR software at the material. It will be much more easily integrated, much easier, much cheaper.

**Hilary Fraser:** That will help the economics.

**Jerome McGann:** Yes, it will help the economics, but that does not answer the institutional question.

**Hilary Fraser:** No, that’s still to be addressed, very clearly. So would you say that some of the constraints that you have encountered and had to deal with have also been learning experiences, deriving from the failures and difficulties that you have had?

**Jerome McGann:** John Unsworth wrote a famous essay, ‘The Importance of Failure’, and it is really an essay worth reading again

and again. Nobody really knows how to use these technologies yet, and so it is all experimental, a set of moves that you do and in doing — as [Theodore] Roethke, the American poet would say — ‘You learn by going where you have to go.’ You learn by going and that usually means you learn that you took the wrong road and so you backtrack and revise and you change, and have to take account of the activities that have been going on around you. Who imagined in 1992 that Rossetti’s poetry would be valuable to large-scale commercial entities? But Cengage and other large and powerful corporations are attempting to gain control over our cultural memory and sell it to us. The interesting thing about that — and the horrible thing about that — is that we — I am talking about scholars and educators — we are the ones who shape it, and we then give it to them and they sell it back to us at very high rates. That is very bad.

**Hilary Fraser:** It certainly is, yes. And what about getting support for our programmes?

**Jerome McGann:** Well, that is also frustrating. All of these things are tied together in my view now. I go back a long way and I remember, as you do as well, when we worked very comfortably within a book and paper environment. That doesn’t mean just books. There is an entire infrastructure that is invisibly present and allows a book or a journal to be produced and to be disseminated. All you have to do is think very carefully about the thousands and thousands of entities, the agents that are involved in this, to understand that the same thing is happening within a digital frame of reference, which is why commercial entities are there because they have resources. We do not have a history of inventing those resources; what we have is a history of having inherited the resources that were handed on to us, maturing over centuries, which is why everything is so complicated, so difficult.

## Collaboration

**Hilary Fraser:** Is collaboration the answer?

**Jerome McGann:** Collaboration is, but it is like a mantra word. Collaboration is a good thing, of course, but it can also be a further hindrance. It was not possible at Virginia, for example, to collaborate. One of the most brilliant moves that John Unsworth did when he took over the Institute was to take it away and separate

it off from the departments. He would say, ‘Look, if we try to get involved with the departments and develop this, we are going to sink into the mud.’ And he was absolutely right. On the other hand, ten years later, in 2002 or 2003, it became obvious that actually, we were ready to move into the departments, but the departments were not always ready to move and collaborate with us, and that still remains in many cases. In so far as these things are successful, they are successful in small ways, like *19* or certain kinds of institutes like [MITH](#) [Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities], or the [Institute at Lincoln Nebraska](#) (which is very, very good), and now recently at [Northeastern](#), where a bunch of young people are operating in really collaborative and dynamic ways. Stanford too. But everything is still... We used to complain about silos: it is still silos.

### Library of libraries

**Jerome McGann:** There are things that are developing like [Europeana](#) or the [Digital Public Library of America](#) (DPLA) — and the library group that you are working with.

**Hilary Fraser:** Yes, the [Open Library of Humanities](#).

**Jerome McGann:** Probably the Open Library of Humanities will be integrated into Europeana. There’s inevitable coalescing of these entities — they want to work together, they want to talk. There is a desire now to integrate this global archive, library, a library of libraries, and it doesn’t matter if it is a Chinese library, or a Norwegian library, or an American library. Technically, they can talk to each other.

### Digital environments

**Hilary Fraser:** Can you speak about the role of digital environments such as NINES and what the impact of NINES has been from your perspective, whether it has measured up to what you imagined it was going to be when you first envisaged it?

**Jerome McGann:** It is such an interesting question. NINES has a funny name, ‘[The Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship](#)’. In the development of the projects at [IATH](#) [The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities] — in



particular the *Rossetti Archive*, but also the *Blake Archive*, the *Whitman Archive*, and the *Dickinson Archive* — all those now more or less, within an academic frame of reference, celebrated events were done without any kind of peer reviewing. The implicit peer-review mechanism that was in play there was: if you got funding, from NEH, or Mellon, or whatever other source. That funding was a kind of imprimatur that what we were doing was a good thing, but the traditional mechanism of peer reviewing did not exist. NINES was really begun in order to institute peer reviewing; that is why *19* is so important to me. You had to get the professoriat and the traditional mechanisms for credentialling what you were doing in play for the development of this kind of work. So peer reviewing was very important, and integrating different materials: that was the whole point of NINES. What was interesting about it was that we had very intense discussions in setting it up because my view at the time was that, like the communist state or something, it would wither away. As these larger entities emerged later — like Europeana and DPLA — the NINES model would be implemented on a much larger scale and so NINES would disappear. But we had fierce discussions about this and they were important because if it was going to — as I think it should — disappear, then the approach to sustainability was very different. To this moment it is still an undecided matter. An unforeseen difficulty was that NINES was founded in relation to some pretty adventurous and ambitious projects, like the *Whitman Archive*, the *Rossetti Archive*, the *Blake Archive*. They were the initial founding agents, as it were, within NINES. But we discovered as we moved along that it was difficult to find people who were able to get the funding to begin to develop similar kinds of things. So we shifted our view about what we were going to amalgamate. We began to amalgamate a lot of library records. We amalgamated, and tried to help promote, journals, so that we imagined NINES to be a kind of clearing house for nineteenth-century studies and we hoped that eventually this would be where people would come to do nineteenth-century studies. I am not sure — I should say, I am surprised — but it has not turned out to be so, for various reasons, some of which had to do with funding, some of it had to do with the recalcitrance of the profession to get into the digital. But the bright side of that is the emergence of things like Europeana and DPLA. I still think that NINES will wither away and that it will wither away in such a fashion that it will be integrated into a larger and more robust environment where you won't just have nineteenth-century British and American, you'll have nineteenth-century British, American, and German and French and Chinese, and also history, and also economics, and everything that we want. In the final year or two of my directorship of NINES we began to conceive

and pursue [ARC](#) [the Advanced Research Consortium], which was NINES on steroids, so to speak. It is currently being led and overseen by Laura Mandell at Texas A&M University. It is a consortium of NINES-like entities that include [18thConnect](#), [MESA](#) [Medieval Electronic Scholarly Alliance], and [SIRO](#) [Studies in Radicalism Online]. A Renaissance and a Modernist entity are in the works.

### Sustainability

**Hilary Fraser:** That is very interesting. NINES was very important to *19* in terms of giving us an imprimatur and also allowing us to be who we are within that larger entity, and that is one of the good things about our recent move into the Open Library of Humanities. One of the things we have been doing is talking about how we maintain our distinctiveness as a journal, and we are working out how to do that. We've been thinking about our future here and what will enable us to be sustainable as a journal.

**Jerome McGann:** *19* is going to continue. It has a wonderful history; there is no reason for it to cease unless the entities that are supporting you right now decided that they are not going to support you, and that would be, I think, a crazy decision: it is such a success. The other question from the beginning of NINES was: should NINES be a publisher? That was also left unresolved. We had very different opinions about it. We were an umbrella for *RaVoN* and *19*, yes, but we were not ourselves publishers, although we began to start to be publishers. There were some projects that were put up under the auspices of NINES and we acted as a kind of publisher, but we were never really able to solve that problem of how to be a publisher or whether to be a publisher, and what kind of a publisher. *19* is much better off in having seen itself in a very special way and gone forward with that.

**Hilary Fraser:** We are also very small. We rely on the energies of a few people, and a particular group of academics and students at a particular point; and I think that often it is individual energies that keep things going.

**Jerome McGann:** It is a very traditional thing. *RaVoN* is a very traditional institutional thing. We kept thinking at NINES that we might be a mechanism for other kinds of born-digital publications.

### Newborn digital adventures

**Jerome McGann:** *19* or *RaVoN* are basically text presentations with associated materials, but they are still very much in a traditional orbit. That is their great strength actually, because when you try to move into born-digital, more adventurous — or what you think of as more adventurous — kinds of publication, you often do not understand fully how to use and exploit these new tools. And we don't yet exploit them, at least I feel we don't. It is hard to get new kinds of projects going. There are signs now of innovative breakthroughs — with [Franco] [Moretti](#) in [distant reading](#), and so forth — but I have to say, these data mining projects, while all very promising, have yet to demonstrate the kinds of results traditional scholarship expects.

**Hilary Fraser:** Speaking of adventures, I wanted to ask whether there are any exciting new developments that you think have got some real and significant possibilities for the future where digital humanities is concerned.

**Jerome McGann:** Some of the most interesting have not been in the nineteenth century. They've been medieval and classical, including tremendous breakthroughs with medieval materials because of the nature of the materials themselves. They throw digital resources at palimpsests and other kinds of problematic documentary materials and begin to expose them in ways they have never been exposed before. Those are some quite remarkable adventures. Even in the nineteenth century, though, there were some experiments with manuscripts, trying to see through obliterated manuscripts, and we could not do that with traditional technology, but with digital technology, yes, you can actually see things. Andy Stauffer's [Book Traces](#) project is especially brilliant. Of the projects we developed out of NINES, I should say that the electronic collation tool [Juxta](#) has been the greatest success. And although we ran out of money in trying to develop [IVANHOE](#) — the collaborative game space for imaginative acts of interpretation — I still feel it was a successful proof-of-concept. So I keep hoping somebody else — somebodies else — might one day carry it forward.

**Hilary Fraser:** The [Digital Livingstone Project](#), which we were associated with in its early days, has exciting work going on.

### Poetic language and the digital world

**Hilary Fraser:** I would like to ask a slightly different kind of question to finish off with. You are a poet and you are...

**Jerome McGann:** Actually I am not, I write poetry.

**Hilary Fraser:** You write poetry: that makes you a poet.

**Jerome McGann:** No, it is different. I write poetry as a means to try to understand poetry. And that is not the same thing as being a poet. I still write, but most of the poems that I write now, which are not investigations of the nature of poetry, are doggerel poems that I write for my grandchildren, that's it.

**Hilary Fraser:** You are certainly a scholar of poetry?

**Jerome McGann:** Yes, I admit that.

**Hilary Fraser:** Do you think that has helped you, or helped lead you into the work of translating from textual format into digital format? Are there kinds of special skills and aptitudes that are common between the two?

**Jerome McGann:** Yes... I feel that when you undertake to write poetry, you move into a relation to language that is unusual. It is close to what Blake used to think about in saying that his poems were dictated. It is as if now language itself becomes the authority in charge, and that is not true when you write prose or fiction, or non-fictional prose. I have written very little prose fiction, so I am not sure about that. But I do know that when you start to write poetry, you are undertaking an obligation that you know you are not entirely in control of. There is a sense in which the language seems to know more than you know and that is very interesting to me. I sometimes say it is not possible to write a bad poem; some poems are better than other poems, obviously, but once you undertake to write a poem, you have changed your relationship to the language and you begin to see the language in a new way.

**Hilary Fraser:** That is a creative, imaginative note on which to end our conversation. Thanks very much for speaking to us today.

**Jerome McGann:** It's been a pleasure.