Internet, E-Learning and Critical Distance

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1. *Premise*

This is an old story, since on the web things keep changing quickly and three years make an age, and yet I believe something can still be learned from it. Warning: here the concept of e-learning is used in a very loose way, so that those interested in the e-learning practice could well turn to another web page …

…When I first started thinking over this subject I first decided to act empirically, that is in a proper internet surfing style, which was then unfamiliar to my mind, and therefore I had just a quick look at a few putatively congenial web sites, through that most miraculous of web engines, Google. And Google searches, being devised according to statistic feed-back criteria, yield not only specific information but also interesting social sights on a given topic. Thus I typed in a couple of magic tags like 'distance-learning' and 'e-learning', each of them of course producing somewhat different suggestions. In these first simple steps I took, however, one might already detect some of the power and the limits of WEB engines as both conditions and extensions of our present knowledge and behaviour. After surfing a while in alternating moods of satisfaction and frustration, I decided to compare a few North-American and European web sites, regarding the subject that I wanted to deal with: i.e. *e-learning*, conceived both in the specific sense of an electronic learning model designed to convey a given content, and in the wider sense of the transmission of knowledge in our digital world and in a technological all-encompassing environment. In between these two extremes, one can easily situate all those impressive digital research and/or didactic archives in the humanities, like those edited, for instance, by G. P. Landow as regards <u>Victorian culture</u> and the <u>postcolonial literatures</u>, or by J. McGann as regards <u>D.G. Rossetti</u>[1]. E-learning at large covers in my view all sorts of teaching-learning relationships nowadays, including traditional face to face teaching, where we have at any rate to deal with young people with perceptual, imaginative

and cognitive attitudes which have been widely influenced by high or low-tech media: from radio, records, TV, clips, and movies, to the most recent digital hypermedia. Although we have all been living for centuries in a technologically-shaped nature, I would surmise that our perceptive, memorial and imaginative habits have been powerfully changed through the late 20th century digital 're-mediation'[2], and that our younger generations have gone through a veritable anthropological mutation of sorts. Although I do not wish here to push these considerations too far, it seems clear by now that our students possess remarkably decreased skills and interest in writing and reading a linear paper-text, and have instead developed new forms of speech and new performing styles, which prove to be most effective in communication, not only among themselves, but also with us, their teachers. Their practice and their self-awareness have indeed been undergoing a brand new word-processing, both in the narrow sense of the word-for-windows tool and in the wider one of a rewording of their whole world environment, through which their selves (memory, imagination, attitudes, etc.) are being reshaped. In the classroom we now have to face creatures of a new kind – let one consider them either as re-turned illiterates or as Nietzschean super-men of a sort – in front of whom we feel in any case a wide cultural divide. That is why I believe that, from a pedagogical point of view, we ought to consider a unique range of distance-learning practices, with face-to-face traditional teaching in the classroom at one extreme and proper e-learning at the other. And we need to tackle the epistemological, social and pedagogical problems brought about by the impact of technology on the humanities, first in a holistic way, and only secondly deal with specific problems or situations. Therefore, by 'critical distance', in the title of this paper, I mean both the distance from the event required by the spectator in order to exercise his intellectual faculty and to produce a fairly detached judgement, and the distance necessary to perceive a given phenomenon at all, that is a precondition of experience. Distance, however, be it temporal, spatial or metaphorical, is never to be thought of as an abstract linear measure, but rather it is to be conceived as a form of material, cultural and ideal mediation, a deflected and thwarted track whose issue is a complex cognitive, emotional and behavioural imprint (a mark, token and symptom of a given culture). We might even write it down as 'd-i(n)stance', thus suggesting the dramatic change of distance, position and perspective on the world brought about by the new media on our whole living

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[1] For Landow, see http://www.victorianweb.org/; http://www.postcolonialweb.org/. For McGann, see http://jefferson.village.edu./rossetti/. March 19th, 2005.

individual and collective bodies. Critical distance has therefore something to do with temporal distance, as a constitutive part of meaning in a hermeneutic perspective[3], with historical dialectics and with the phenomenology of perception. For those with a philosophical disposition, I would suggest therefore that the topic is dealt with in Hegel's, Gadamer's or Merleau Ponty's styles of enquiry.

But let us quickly go back to the internet. While browsing through some US websites on the e-learning subject, I suppose one should not be surprised to find a quite different picture emerge from that which one can get from the surfing of European sites. On the whole the North-American scene appears much more mature, pragmatic, and market-oriented while the European one is much younger, pedagogically minded and politically-oriented. This depends of course on the different social, cultural and geopolitical predicaments of these two areas: the European Union being in fact a process still in the making, and having both a much older culture and a stronger concern for the welfare of its citizens as groups. All these factors together certainly contribute to a considerable emphasis being put on cultural and pedagogical issues in most European projects and research on e-learning. For reasons of space and opportunity I shall leave out in this paper all evidence and comments regarding this US/EU confrontation, and simply direct you to the perusal of two <u>sample</u> <u>websites</u> chosen for comparison[4].

2. *Speculations*

My interest in *e-learning* is in fact mainly speculative. Let us firstly take the concept of e-learning in the wide sense of understanding and learning in a technologically mediated environment, and have a look at the other word of my title: the *internet*, conceived both as an instrument of communication and as a model of the world. More than a medium, in fact, the internet constitutes a media environment, a technological habitat which is the result of tendencies already present in the whole of literary civilization and the modern age of science, but which nonetheless transports us beyond their boundaries, producing ways of behaviour and styles of discourse which, by and large, we can call 'post-modern'. The combined use of the PC and of the internet have already dramatically modified literary production and consumption.

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[2] In the sense suggested by Bolter (1999).
[3] Gadamer (2004).
[4] <u>http://www.education-courses.com/</u>; <u>http://www.elearningeuropa.info/</u>. March 19th, 2005.

The new hyper-medial environment is in fact 're-mediating' our whole literary tradition, and our idea of *literacy* as such.

It has been rightly observed that "the Internet is not just a new technological innovation; it is a new *type* of technological innovation; one that brings out the very essence of technology."[5] It could even be maintained that the internet reveals and fulfils the true essence of technology as the destiny of the West.[6] Destiny, though, has always been understood as a plot ordained by some inscrutable power, be it heaven or hell, the will of a god or the drive of the unconscious. But in the pervasive *net* image the design of destiny, the narrative plot (or *mythos*) contained in each individual adventure tends to branch out, and in the *inter*, the relations involved in such a path tend to dissolve thanks to their sheer number. The Internet experience then marks a stage of transparency of all relations between different subjects in a given environment, the stage of accomplishment, both the perfection and the end of the mythologizing process of our collective consciousness, which, issuing in a set of options and prohibitions, make up the outline of a period of history.

But since single elements in any field of interaction can be identified only through their reciprocal relations, one can say that with the advent of the Internet the whole context of each experience becomes retrievable in a virtual form. The Internet thus shows the form of human destiny (that the Greeks figured in the net of *Ananke*) in an ideal initial state of in-difference, in-effectuality and in-accessibility to the individual character. Ontologically, all internet transaction (including the learning process) is the place where the defining virtue of character, its capacity for choice and coherence in action, may on principle be nullified by a fluid environment, involving immediate universal connection, absence of effort, reversibility of choice and manipulability of any field of experience, at least in an incipient purely simulative stage. Disciplinary canons, both of a cognitive and an ethical kind, tend thus to be dissolved and resolved in the pure connectedness and usability of the hypermedia, or call it the *inter* and the *hyper* of optional world versions[7]. All this implies an intrinsic tendency in our present cyberculture, not only towards the experience of displacement[8], but more so towards the eclipse of the norm, the eschewing of responsibility, and the sheer pragmatism that characterize in fact our life in the global

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[5] Dreyfus (2001: 1).
[6] Heidegger (1977), Galimberti (1999).
[7] For the notion of 'world versions', from a logical point of view, see Goodmann (1978).
[8] See Mejerovitz (1985).

village-market. All of these features have important consequences on the production and circulation of knowledge, and therefore also on pedagogy.

Connectedness, accessibility and usability are the main assets, and constitute both the merits and the limitations of the Web as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge and/or wisdom. First of all there is the huge problem of selection for the web surfer, who is always at risk of losing his way in the immense and amorphous sea of virtually retrievable data. But the problem of finding the relevant information, or that of making the information found relevant to some purpose, shall be eventually solved, and are in part already being solved by 'intelligent' search engines such as GOOGLE that are overcoming their difficulty in understanding the precise semantics of a query through methods of sampling and statistic evaluation of the visits to the sites. The problem of finding relevant, if not meaningful, information can be faced in many ways in the man-machine interaction. These ways will constitute an important part of the agenda not only of information technology but also of pedagogy in the near future. Using an analogy from physics, we might say that (after its Big Bang, a few decades ago) the Internet has already developed some areas of local order in a sea of chaos and dispersion. On one hand, with the addition of one million web pages every day, entropy increases, but, on the other, islands of order grow up in this primordial broth (to which one could perhaps apply the physics theories of unstable systems, of the kind elaborated by Prigogine, or also mathematical topology, to produce/identify contiguous areas of dis-order). The situation of this technological 'multiverse' is not, from the point of view of the interplay of order and chaos, very different from that of the biological and physical universe. It is around the polarities, and the degrees, of order and chaos, of hierarchy and anarchy (or syntax and parataxis) that the horizons of on-line learning may take shape. And it is these that we need to reason further on.

Reason, however, is in itself a problematic term to be used in a field of experience, that of the hypertext on the W3, which is not by any means organized according to a hierarchy of classes or the logic of non-contradiction, but rather according to the dominant principle of *analogy*. The web is neither a logical nor an illogical universe; rather it is essentially analogical. Analogy, as a universal constructive and hermeneutical principle, is its pervasive characteristic. Here, however, it is not just a question of reasoning by analogy, but rather of finding and inventing new forms of analogy in the course of action. The nature of this analogy, that is, is distinctively performative. This can be clearly seen in the construction of links, which are tools that reach at the heart of the web hypertexts. In creating or

using a link, a performative analogy is in fact put into being. Thus, the *link* is the characteristic ontological trait of the web, and the *performative analogy* is its distinctive epistemological-practical trait, which produces consequences of a pedagogical, moral and political nature.

We have only to think to this purpose, for example, of how the various recipients-vehicles, the *archives*, of the transmission of knowledge have changed in the hypermedia era. The old paper library was thoroughly organized according to a hierarchic order and the principle of classification by genres and kinds[9]. A digital database may partly be organized in the same way, but the web as a whole is certainly not. An electronic database is in any case easier to access, explore and use than a paper library. An old library (take the old British Library, for example) was in a specific place, static, and isolated in space from the world outside: it had, as it were, an aura of its own hovering on it, and it was almost a place of worship, a temple of culture. An on-line library is ubiquitous, dynamic, hyper-connected, subject to continuous negotiations of roles and transactions of all sorts: it is a theatre and a market of culture[10].

The World Wide Web by mere dint of its im-material hypertextual structure redesigns the whole scene of our knowledge and its transmission, moving the temple towards the theatre and the market, or the cultural industry, and it thus completes the specific progressive drive of modernity at large, bringing the possibility of technical reproduction of artefacts to the point where it reaches the level of symbols[11]. The advent of the internet thus brings to a radical accomplishment the whole process of secularization of our culture that began in the Renaissance and has been shaping the modern age as a whole, but eventually it also brings it to a full stop. In other words, the internet puts an end to *modernity* as such and to modernization as a psychic and cultural attitude, and inaugurates a post-modern, post-literary and multimedia civilization. To this state of affairs, induced by the combined work of science and of technology, which has resulted in an extensive inhuman colonization of the natural world and of the psychic unconscious by multinational capitalism and its powerful

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[9] See Dreyfus (2001: 11). Think for example of the old Dewey classification, which is still updated by the Library of Congress, but is no longer employed to classify the books it possesses.

[10] Elsewhere I have discussed the import of the metaphors of temple, theatre and market, as they come together in the present multimedia hypertexts. See Martella (2004).

[11] Benjamin (1999), on the technological impact on aesthetics; Blumemberg (1983), on the relationship of modernity and secularization.

advertising tools[12] (both words and weapons), intellectuals of all nations ought to respond with a radical and global political-pedagogical project.

This project has firstly to address the intrinsic tendency of a digital culture towards the de-humanization and insignificance of all the data of experience (that are instantly transformed into bits of information), and in general the sense of disembodiment that can be produced by the sheer practice of web surfing. In fact, our living body is used to work as a reserve of data, and as a material precondition for our knowledge and our actions. Therefore, we certainly receive a strong attitudinal impact from the experience of online surfing, where the usual synesthetic tissue of knowledge does not hold and the habitual forms of learning are no longer viable, while new ones are instead presumably being created.

Let us then return to the concept of critical distance that I introduced at the beginning, both in the sense of the aesthetic threshold (*aisthesis* properly means 'perception') and as the prerequisite of judgment. What e-learning lacks is precisely the experience of a face-to-face, or rather body-to-body, relationship which has both erotic and polemic implications, important for the full impact of any new idea or attitude on the disciple. We ought thus to hypothesize, in the case of e-learning, a kind of modified form of *apperception*, that is a space-time context which from the outset is conceived as a fictional compensatory interface for a subject who is, so-to-speak, disincarnated. But, as we know, in ordinary interaction there is an optimal distance between subject and object and around it a whole range of psychosomatic distances that can be considered acceptable. Beyond a certain threshold, the perception of the object becomes blurred and all learning is as a result impaired or even prevented. The very terms of 'taking consciousness', 'apprehension' and 'comprehension' do in fact indicate the involvement of the whole body (and of the sense of touch in particular) as the terrain of any cognitive operation and of its attitudinal consequences. The main difficulty of distance-learning (both in a narrow and a wide sense) is precisely that of recreating the distance, the perspective, and the emotional chiaroscuro of this relation, the absence of which makes its formative adequacy problematic, even in the ideal case of a perfect transfer of informational content. This is because aesthetic distance is a prerequisite of critical distance. It is therefore preferable, I believe, to think of forms of integration of distant and body-to-body learning, rather than bet everything on the engineering of economically rewarding e-learning projects.

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[12] Jameson (1984).

In conclusion, we have to face what I have called the problem of critical distance in the processes of memory, ideation, and learning, because we now find ourselves confronted with new fields of hyper-mediated experience, with their own modalities for the transfer of cognition and emotions. Critical distance is first and foremost the distance beyond which the sensory or imaginative event does not take place at all: it is an ontological condition. But secondly it is the minimum distance from the event for the subject to be able to pronounce any judgment: it is also an epistemological condition. Thirdly, it is the necessary distance for any subject to figure himself as a participant in, and as responsible for, a given event: it is therefore an ethical-political condition. It is clear that these three senses of critical distance need not necessarily coincide, and can even at times be antithetical. In any case, we can imagine some limits of emotional involvement before or beyond which the learning of a certain 'lesson' of life does not take place at all. And we know that any technical invention of a certain import, in particular that of a new medium of communication, deeply modifies the critical attitude of a cultural community as a whole and the relations among its members. We could even venture to say that it changes the ways of perception of its subjects, their sense of place and mutual belonging. This is even more so with the advent of the internet, which rather than a simple medium represents a new multimedia environment or context, an interactive network that is, virtually, as big as the world itself. A true second world (*deuteron cosmos*) of techno-logical imagination, of which we have not yet learned to conceive the opportunities and risks, let alone a careful calculation of means and ends.

3. Intermedial rhetoric

For example, with the micro-publishing made possible by the spread of PCs (of scanners, laser printers and increasingly sophisticated software), we readers are being transformed into spectators/editors of the screen-event that appears at the touch of a mouse on a magic icon, the symbol of a possible operation. To put it another way, when one writes electronically there is a new kind of interaction between the letter and the figure of the discourse, both on the screen and in the human mind. One might say that our thought-language (*logos*), and before that the narration of our consciousness (the *mythopoeia* of our identity) are configured in a new way. In fact, the possibility of accessing en bloc and immediately diverse writing/reading, audio and visual, environments means that the individual is in continual movement, and involves the acquisition of new habits on the part of the writer-editor and likewise of

a whole *new tropology* of social and cultural interaction. The use of the PC, like that of any influential instrument, in fact entails the acquisition of new models of the world. In our case, "thanks to the computer, micro-publishing becomes at once a model of the production of speed and a sign of the reconciliation between alphabet and electricity on one hand and image and letter on the other." As a consequence of this, "the characteristic of sacrality of a book is disappearing. They no longer say 'publish or die' in North American universities. It is all too easy to publish. […] What is now *chic* is to be quoted, more or less […] It is not the number of articles or books that counts, but their effect. And now this effect can be measured." Above all what is about to disappear is "the sacrality of the book as the depository of lasting truth, of time-resisting quality, of the measured, matured word, of invention, the effect of which ends up by becoming banal because it is always late" compared to flows of information in real time[13].

In fact, digitalization places text and image on the same level: it makes them interchangeable, equifunctional and interactive, both on the PC screen and in the user's mind. Using the word and layout processing of Microsoft or other suppliers, each one of us, more or less consciously, confuses and constantly interchanges the regime of icons with that of symbols, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic dimensions of texts, sequentiality with equivalence; we thus become accustomed to revolutionizing all the basic operations of text semiotics and descriptive logic. These operations have therefore to be radically revisited. The aesthetics of the image and the logic of discourse enter into a new regime of fluid, impermanent, retroactive interaction that comes under the general principle of an always-possible *revision*. Technical reproducibility, which in digital texts has reached the level of the symbolic, implies permanent narrative and discursive revisionism, as essential traits of art, ethics and politics, that is, of the contemporary episteme as a whole.

What has not yet been fully grasped, in its epistemological and pedagogical implications, is that this radical revisionism is not a fad or a degeneration of contemporary historiography (and of mass media news reports), but is a structural characteristic of communication in the era of electronic media and as such is a long-lasting phenomenon which will have profound consequences on the forms of society and culture. The first of these is a crisis in the idea of history as the account of a series of ascertained events through the examination of sources and testimonies, the overall meaning of which can ideally be conserved by means of a coherent and

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[13] De Kerckhove (1995: 173, 175, 177). My translations from the Italian text.

complete description[14]. More specifically, it involves a crisis of the idea of the history of literature, both as a sector of general history and as its founding synecdoche. This is in fact the history of that special practice (communication using the printed page) that permits the reconstruction of the memory of the past, through the study and collation of documents kept in material archives and thus in principle always 'consultable', and then its transmission to posterity according to the same documentary regime. When, with the advent of electronic archives that can be overwritten, this condition of 'scientific control' becomes unreliable, the whole idea of objective history is eclipsed. And this at the same time marks the end of the idea of truth as the controllable correspondence between the account of past events and the 'facts' as they supposedly happened. The crisis of the idea of historical *emplotment* goes hand in hand, in our contemporary world, with that of verification and both depend on the modification of the material substrate of signs and meanings in all cultural exchange. Within the present enlarged and virtual horizon of experience, the idea of the history of culture as a whole (and of each single discipline within it) as a linear, objective sequence of events and the idea of the transmission of culture in the guise of history, and the pedagogies dependent on such ideas, are simply no longer viable. We probably need to think therefore in terms of a new *cognitive cartography* capable of orienting us in the multidimensional tensory space of information fluxes, in which every significant new element, every deviation from current statistical telecommunication norms is immediately recorded, transmitted, repeated and amplified, and thus its very novelty is trivialized and neutralized by the inter-medial recycling. The transgressive potential of the individual message or event with respect to the norm, and thus also its significance and impact on users, are immediately re-absorbed and *re-mediated* by the circuit of the media.

From a logical point of view, one could say that in our postmodern, post literary world characterized by virtual experience in real time, the material and the strict logical implication have become practically equivalent for an operator that is permanently involved and immerged in the flow of events. Therefore, not only the idea of reason intended as relation or proportion (*ratio*) between several distinct terms but also rationality as the trust in the distinctions and connections of elements in a field of discourse, and reasonableness as regards the value of individual choices, all enter a critical process which there and then seems uncontrollable. At the moment it does not seem possible to maintain a stable explicative and normative framework

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[14] On history as a narrative construction, see White (1973; 1978).

of the world, based on the traditional oppositions between theory and practice on one hand, and between precept and concept (norm and form) on the other. The dynamic cultural framework that is likely to take its place might have something to do with the dislocation of the canons and centers of power (Ngugi), with the poetics of world-chaos (Glissant), and with the construction of imaginary homelands (Rushdie), which are spoken of by the postcolonial intellectuals[15], who, by dint of their position as outcasts and migrants, can see (or rather taste, touch and smell) better than others the itineraries and crossroads of a changing world, as well as the paths and meanderings of a nomadic, hybrid and dislocated individual, who having no country of his own has to re-imagine one.

4. *Digital hermeneutics*

The digital mutation of our culture should lead us to look again and with fresh insight at literary tradition in order to derive from it the tools of a new multi-medial or *sin-medial aesthetic*: a new kind of technological synesthesia. But the textual codes we have been accustomed to so far are of a phonological, morph syntactic and rhetorical nature. Probably, therefore, we need above all to think in terms of a whole reconfiguration of these categories when reading the new hypertexts on the web.

In a valuable study of his, J. McGann warns us against the risk of a narrow and solely instrumental vision of digital technology (be it for research, teaching or data storage) in the field of the human sciences.[16] This seems in fact the way in which humanists, even in the progressive US, have prevalently made use of the internet in recent years, and the same is now happening in Europe, in particular as regards the implementation of digital archives and of e-learning projects. My discussion intends, among other things, to be a critique of this prevailingly instrumental conception of the hypermedia, which ignores the ways in which they shape the knowledge and the intellectual development of young people. In fact, it is precisely these epistemological and hermeneutic valences of the hypermedia, their ability to expand 'our interpretational procedures', that I wanted to foreground from the beginning in using the concept of e-learning in a wide sense. With 'e-learning' I mean every sort of teaching-learning situation and, in general, of intermediation in a telematic society, and I wish to pose the question of the general redefinition of *critical d-i(n)stance*, as the crux of the constitution of the individual stance in a new inter-medial environment.

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[15] Ngugi (1993); Glissant (1996); Rushdie (1991).
[16] McGann (2001: XI-XII)

What most seems of interest to me in the transmission of culture today, and in the processes of learning and formation, is in fact the possibility of using various alternative codes in any given meaningful exchange. The use of language in situation was traditionally the object of study of classical rhetoric, to which therefore we need first to turn in order to consider the possibility of a reconfiguration of the whole field of discourse under the impact of the new media. But being-in-situation is an existential as well as a rhetorical feature of the living-speaking individual and we have therefore to consider the relationship of the so-called ontology of finitude with the development of technology at large[17]. To this purpose, philosophers have usually tended to consider technology as a single undifferentiated block working on a psychosocial individual who, in contrast, has been studied in all his differences, determinations and faculties. There has therefore been an evident disparity of treatment of the two terms at issue. But the technical-scientific evolution, despite the fact of it being of a systemic order or precisely because of this, has become manifest in the course of history according to certain *dominants* of place and time. In this respect, the system of technology does not differ from any other system, and in particular, for example, from that of literature, whose evolution can be understood as an internal dialectic of genres, forms and texts, and as a succession of dominant traits relating to each respective order[18]. In ways similar to those of literature and of culture in general, technology becomes manifest, in the course of its historical development, through some branches and features which become prominent in a certain period. The succession in time of these commanding branches of technology can become the object of study of cultural anthropology and can open up interesting issues and perspectives. However, for what now concerns us, it is sufficient to observe that the techno-logical dominant of our age has taken the form of the multimedia hypertext on the web: that is, of the W3. Today the web holds that position of *radical metaphor* of our culture which once belonged to the book: the function that the book-of-the-world and the world-of-the-book, both in a religious and a secular perspective, from the Bible to Galileo and beyond, occupied as a metaphorical nucleus of irradiation, the generative figure underlying the whole text of European culture. It seems obvious that this epoch-making change will bring about important consequences for all of man's thought and behavior, but these consequences are now largely unforeseeable, because what is at stake is a general, dialectic adjustment of the human

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[17] As it has been discussed by Heidegger (1977), Galimberti (1999), and others.
[18] See Tynjanov (1971).

ethos as a whole, and not the question of whether books will or will not survive the advent of the computer, which is totally insignificant. It is precisely an awareness of the necessity to pose the problem in its entirety, considering the consequences of the digital mutation for all our attitudes and choices in the pedagogical field, that has induced me to start out from a consideration of e-learning in a wide and figurative sense as "the transmission of culture in a digital hypermedia environment". I have done this in order to stress the need to envisage a new *existential rhetoric* that takes on board, in its definition of the figures of discourse, the changes that have come about in our common cultural fabric and the marks that these have left and will leave on our horizon of thought-language: the horizon on which the forms of critical d-i(n)stance, the constitutive crux of individual and environment, will be declined in the world of the future.

In noting the change in the praxis of cultural archiving brought about by digital instruments, McGann, in the guise of the expert and in an empirical way, tells us of the need for an adequate change in our critical and imaginative approaches, in poetics and hermeneutics. This epochal change in fact "exposes our need for critical tools of the same material and formal order that can execute our other permanent scholarly function: to imagine what we don't know in a disciplined and deliberated fashion."[19] By and large we can agree that to any given change in cultural memory there must correspond an adequate change in project and in the imagination; in other words, that the digital archive must also function as an experimental laboratory for new forms of invention, new cognitive and ethical behavior. Then, however, McGann adds somewhat pragmatically that "this is not a question to be addressed in speculative or conceptual terms"[20], because these terms, in his opinion, are still deeply rooted in and heavily dependent on paper formats in their figuring forth and developing of any issue: in short, they are the children of a literary civilization. It would therefore seem desirable instead to develop a conceptuality inherent in digital format. I can agree with this opening only up to a certain point, because I believe that this new conceptuality and the rhetoric underlying it can only be born of an overall reconfiguration of the field of discourse that we have inherited. The discipline of imagination may be conquered only through the use of tradition, and is none other than a tropology inherited and screened by consciousness. Our psyche, the form of all forms, in imagining the unknown, has to feed on the tension between

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[19] McGann (2001: 18).
[20] ibid.

desire and memory, on the difference between the opposite pulls of the two horses of the soul, in the well known Platonic image (*Symposium*); or rather it *is* that difference, that interval between two antithetical impulses, that limited degree of freedom that the coacher enjoys occasionally, that precise remedy for the instinctual deficiency of man.

In discussing the act of interpretation in the new light it can receive from hypertextual writing, *editing* and reading, McGann rightly insists on the performative, or let us call it 'hyper-poietic', turn which interpretation, criticism and conceptuality in general must undergo in a hypermedia environment.[21] He then recalls Emily Dickinson's suggestion to read poetry backwards so as to highlight the alternatives of meaning on the elementary level of diction (*Dichtung*, 'poetry', in German also means 'indication, vocal gesture'), that is, starting from sensation as the fundamental condition of comprehension, and he gives this suggestion as a probative example of what he calls 'de-formative criticism'. He insists that the sort of estrangement brought about by reading backwards, unlike that put forward for example by most Modernist critics from the Russian Formalists onwards, is of a performative and not conceptual nature.[22] One ought to notice, however, that the whole of Western conceptuality is permeated with this 'priority' of praxis from its beginnings, from the Platonic-Aristotelian formulation of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the highest and most comprehensive form of reason, all through the primacy attributed by Kant to practical reason (and to the judgment of taste) in his redefinition of the limits of pure reason, to finish with the attention given by Heidegger to poetizing thought and to the equation between *dichten* and *denken*, which is in fact inherent in the very concept of *Dichtung* (poetry) as scansion, the rhythmic and deictic presentation of a world which is prior to the imaginative and conceptual one. *Dichten*, Latin *dicere*, from the Indo-European root 'teg', means in fact 'to indicate', but also 'to generate' (from which the Greek *deiknymi* = to show, make known; and *ticto* = to generate, to procreate).[23]

However, McGann proposes this reading backwards not only as the paradigmatic example of his de-formative criticism but also as that which can have the much more important effect of triggering a sort of stochastic (rather than causal or argumentative) process which, by making manifest the typo-graphical patterns of de-construction underlying the syntactic and semantic ones, can lead us to surprising

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[21] McGann (2001: 106); see Landow (1992).
[22] McGann (2001: 109, 116).

imaginative and critical results.[24] It can reconfigure in fact the relation between text and reader[25], and redefine the whole act of reading, holding in abeyance acquired critical norms and habits and highlighting the decisive impact of *each* new act of reading (or rather rewriting) on the meaning of the text as a result of the displacement of its space-time layout. In McGann's perspective, reading backwards becomes the paper simulacrum of a non-linear and 'digressive' sort of reading which becomes really effective only in digital hypertexts. But this practice of reading backwards, this exercise in critical de-formation (or *deformance*), performed by McGann on some poems by Wallace Stevens which, with their perverse syntax, lend themselves well to proving the proposition, is the equivalent of the test of irony (of the other possible reading), which once used to be an asset of the old New Critics, and now is applied at the level of the form of expression, of the page layout and of the material signifier. It opens up new perspectives on the structure of poetry starting out from a series of dislocations – of the order of words and of the graphic space – which are suggested by the use of *word* and *layout processing* in writing on the computer, and result in the technical manipulation of the text, which in fact can only be successfully performed with the help of the new digital equipment. The *deformance* that McGann speaks of is a sort of test of irony applied at the level of production and perception (*poiesis and aisthesis*) of the graphics of the text, and is dependent for its efficacious actuation on the layout processing made available by digital technology. From his experiment, McGann concludes that the status of interpretation is subordinate to that of the perception of the artefact, and that "interpreting a poem after it has been deformed clarifies the secondary status of interpretation."[26] This is indeed undisputable, being as much as to say that all textual meaning depends on a previous perception of its material signifier.

Despite all the objections one can raise, however, the exercise of critical *deformance* promoted by McGann, and in fact long since practiced by poets, nevertheless is an interesting symptom of the change in critical d-i(n)stance and the modulation of thought, which are today in progress as a result of the use of digital technology. It can represent a crucial experiment (or *instance*) aimed at throwing light on the general modification of the writing-text-reading relationship in a cultural

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[23] Thanks to my son Vincenzo for suggesting to me this ethymological chain.
[24] McGann (2001: 116).
[25] See Landow (1992).
[26] McGann (2001: 120).

context marked by the impact of digital hypertexts and the W3.[27]   Criticism as a whole can thus be conceived as an almost material de-formation of the object of study precisely because understanding and learning are today inter-medial and infinitely re-mediable.

I finally believe that cultural transfer at large can profit today by the adoption of crucial experiments of the kind proposed by McGann, because they are able to release shocks in the habits of material consumption of information and thus, to go back to the case of e-learning, for instance, also to simulate the sense of obstacle and the emotional plus cognitive tension of face-to-face interaction, which are necessary for the lasting apprehension of certain theoretical notions and/or practical attitudes, and eventually for the setting up of a pedagogic method that may be adapted to each individual occasion. We could call it the *editorial way* to interpretation and teaching, and it might well become *the* way or method (*methodos* in Greek meaning precisely 'way') of our whole cultural tradition in the forthcoming age of the technical reproduction of its symbolic order. So good luck to you, young students and teachers, and fare forward!

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[27] See McGann (2001: 127, 254n).

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