

## Reviews

Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Hardback ISBN 9780521864985. 45 GBP; paperback ISBN 9780521683470. 16.99 GBP.

A backwards look over twenty-five years of the Society of Textual Scholarship since 1980, and its journal *Text*, might suggest that three scholars — all America-based, all men — have dominated its proceedings: Jerome McGann, David Greetham, Peter Shillingsburg. But “dominated” is the wrong word: it suggests that other opinions have been crowded out, whereas the most striking impression made by even the briefest encounter with any of these three is their freedom from dogma, their openness to others’ opinions, their readiness to contemplate the possibility of their own error, and to follow new ideas wherever they might lead, regardless of where those ideas came from. If they have appeared to dominate, it is because their force of argument and example has become the measure of the rest of us, and not because they have an agenda to force on us.

All three came into textual scholarship at around the same time, through the sixties and seventies, and grew into authority (though all would deny authority in themselves) in the eighties and nineties. In the last few years, all three have issued books which, in their very different ways, draw together their different pre-occupations, while mapping out where others might go. Thus Greetham’s *Theories of the Text*; McGann’s *Radiant Textuality* and (now) Peter Shillingsburg’s *From Gutenberg to Google*. Some scholar of the future, trying to understand the currents of textual scholarship around the bend of the millennium, would do well to begin with these three books.

Shillingsburg has always been an eloquent advocate of the importance of context in literary and textual studies: as he often puts it, the importance of knowing “the things that go without saying” (for example,

p. 31). So his book is significant not just in what it says explicitly, but in its relation to what is said in these other two books — just as his life in scholarship, and indeed that of all three, has been nourished by fruitful oppositions with Greetham, McGann and many other textual scholars. More widely still, the significance of the book lies in its echoes of many other scholars, many other books, many other ideas. So behind this book — the “things which go without saying” — are the tectonic shifts hinted at in the title. Most obvious of these is the bracketing of Gutenberg and Google, suggesting the massive move from print to digital which is re-shaping our scholarly lives.

Shillingsburg has always been a percipient and sceptical commentator on the impact of digital methods on textual scholarship. “Percipient” and “sceptical”: we need two words because, as so often with Peter Shillingsburg, his thinking is complex, fuelled by a collision of contradictory attitudes where there is no fusion, no resolution, but continuing interchange as every perception questions its opposite. His first book on textual scholarship, the influential *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age*, rang the notes which have continued to sound as he has returned, again and again over the decades, to the possibilities and dangers of the digital world. He has the imagination, and the impatience with the laziness of the conventionally known, to see the extraordinary knowledges which digital methods may enable (for example, the passage on the beauty of complexity, p. 23). Thus, much of the book goes beyond even McGann in its hymns to the possibilities of what Shillingsburg calls “knowledge sites”: a nirvana of scholarship, where all that can be known is available to the reader, with an effortless convenience which itself brings connections alive in every direction. But Shillingsburg has too strong a sense of the illuminatory power of actual good scholarship, and is too shrewd an observer, to fail to see how far digital methods have fallen short of this ideal realization. He has seen how fascination with technical novelty (“the new whoop-te-do”, p. 11) can become an end in itself, so that even good scholars can be misled into thinking that mere solution of a technical difficulty represents some kind of fundamental advance (footnote 10, p. 90, for example). He has seen too that the first effect of digital methods has been to create more and more bad texts (the telling