



The Point Is To Change It: Poetry and Criticism in the Continuing Present (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)

Professor Jerome McGann

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A preeminent critic maps the frontier of contemporary poetry.

In this book, Jerome McGann argues that contemporary language-oriented writing implies a marked change in the way we think about our poetic tradition on one hand and in the future of criticism on the other. He focuses on Walter Benjamin and Gertrude Stein as important intellectual resources because both see the history of poetry as a crisis of the present rather than as a legacy of the past. The crisis appears as a poetic deficit in contemporary culture, where values of politics and morality are judged *prima facie* more important than aesthetic values. McGann argues for the fundamental relevance of the aesthetic dimension and the contemporary relevance of cultural works of the past.

McGann moves through several broad categories in his examination of contemporary poetry, including the ways in which poetry must be abstract, change, and give pleasure. The author draws on sources ranging from the poetry of Bruce Andrews and Robert Duncan to Looney Tunes cartoons. The experimental move in contemporary poetry, McGann contends, is an emergency signal for readers and critics as much as it is for writers and poets, a signal that calls us to rethink the aesthetics of criticism. The interpretation of literary works has been dominated by enlightenment models—the expository essay and monograph—for almost two hundred years. With the emergence of new media, especially digital culture, the limitations of those models have grown increasingly apparent.

The Point Is To Change It explores alternative critical methods and provides a powerful call to reinvent our modes of investigation in order to escape the limitations of our inherited academic models. The goal of this process is to widen existing cracks or create new ones because, as McGann points out via the lyrics of Leonard Cohen, "That's how the light gets in."

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