
James J. O'Donnell
Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace
London/Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, 216 pp. (with preface & index), $24.95/£16.50; ISBN 0-674-05545-4 (hbk).

J. J. O'Donnell is one those scholars whose learning is *assumed* rather than displayed. As a result, his brief approach to the long-terms effects of the computer revolution on reading and higher education feels like a bracing, sophisticated exchange of ideas. Like conversation, O'Donnell's thesis is not terribly unified or orderly. He often makes sidetracks from his focus on high technology and literacy into explaining such interesting things as how we choose our cultural ancestry instead of merely evolving out of it, the errors of current education, and perhaps more than you ever wanted to know about other avatars of the word such as St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and Cassiodorus. Great cover too.

O'Donnell is uniquely suited to write such a book and to indulge in such digressions. He is Professor of Classical Studies but also Vice Provost for Information Systems and Computing at the University of Pennsylvania. His purpose is to compare the transformation already begun within the electronic medium to earlier transformations such as those from oral to written culture in ancient Greece, the papyrus scroll to the codex manuscript, and the codex to the printed book.

Which side is he on? Does he see the high technology transformation as a good thing or a bad thing for our culture and consciousness? O'Donnell, scholar that he is, proclaims his ambivalence both at the beginning and near the end of his book: 'Every technology of the word from the invention of writing to the invention of the Internet has given those who use it new range and power and intimacy of one kind, but dissolved a little further the physical bonds of face-to-face community. There is a similar loss and gain ahead, no question' (pp. 157-8).

The impression left on this reader, however, is of someone deeply excited by the changes occurring and enthused at the possibilities inherent in the new medium. In fact, his whole book is an attempt to set a postmodern example through included 'hyperlinks' with the Web — his main link being the website: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/avatars/index.html> In this sense, his book has neither boundaries nor an ending since points of interest can be pursued nearly *ad infinitum*.

Further evidence of his optimistic pragmatism is his chapter arguing that there is no need to defend the book, except as an artifact. O'Donnell proclaims that interactive 'hypertext' was the original form of written communication. In fact, the book as a form of authorized mass communication has allowed individual and community freedoms to

dissolve and centralized authority to legitimize itself. ‘Control over texts had brought control over people’ (p. 37). Books will never disappear entirely, he prophesies, because of the public’s love for a good, self-contained, often fictional narrative. Scholarly tomes, however, will lose their influence and the libraries which contain them will have to radically adapt: ‘In a world in which the library will cease to be a warehouse and become instead a software system, the value of the institution will lie in the sophistication, versatility, and power of its indexing and searching capacities’ (p. 61).

The greatest change in store, then, will be in the manner in which scholarly research is undertaken and written up. ‘The traditional monograph, with its sustained linear argument, its extraordinarily high costs of publication and distribution, and its numerous inefficiencies of access, is beginning to look more and more like a great lumbering dinosaur’ (p. 58). No single point of view will do in our electronic postmodern utopia. The author must die and so must the enclosure of singular line of argument and conclusions declared by one mind to which all the world is expected to accede. ‘Instead of publication that says “This is how it is,” we have a form of public performance of scholarship that *asks* “What if it were this way?” Publication of this sort becomes a form of continuing seminar, and the performance is interactive, dialogic, and self-correcting’ (p. 136).

Certainly, reading the response articles in *JCS* and following the arguments on JCS-Online is enough to convince anyone everybody is speaking but few are listening! On the other hand, O’Donnell’s call for interdisciplinary research (which, he assures us, the internet will at last make possible) is well exemplified by the truly interdisciplinary nature of this journal. The next generation of scholars — who will have learned ‘disorientation’ of their assumptions, according to O’Donnell — may be the ones to actually listen to and learn from each other.

The question of consciousness is only hinted at but O’Donnell’s stance here falls somewhat short of postmodern. Though he understands the way we remember is largely determined by our culture and communication system, he still accepts human nature, that is, human consciousness, as essentially stable and guided by the simple — and singular — motivations which drove our ancestors: ‘Technology will do what it always does: provide tools. Those tools may eventually shape their owners, but they are always assuredly instruments with which their owners may pursue their own aims’ (p. 148). It may be that in an electronically communal, de-authored culture, individual memory will lose its egocentric center (which others have understood as the postmodern condition). In this scenario, individual identity may either become fragmented or become, as Ricoeur suggested, mutualized as ‘oneself as another’. If this is the case, then writing, codices, books, and the computer may do more than act as tools. They may instead have altered and be continuing to alter the nature of our self-awareness — human consciousness itself.

Greg Nixon Prescott College