REVIEW–DISCUSSION

James J. O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. xii+210. ISBN 0-674-05545-4.

It would not be immediately apparent that the discipline of classics (in many people's minds, I suspect, the province of conservative, myopic, and non-progressive minds), should be in the vanguard of academic innovations in cyberspace. Yet such is the case. In recent years our discipline has seen the computer revolution in pedagogy and research. Witness databases (e.g., TLG-Greek and PHI-Latin CD-ROMs; DCB) that have helped to democratize scholarly work at the highest levels for those of us who teach at the small American liberal arts colleges, often in remote locations, as opposed to the high-powered research universities with comprehensive library holdings; the Perseus interdigital library for Hellenic studies (with a Roman Perseus on the way); the long-awaited Classical Atlas Project (to be released this year), which eventually will be completely digitized; ASGLE, an organization whose purpose is to promote the study of Greek and Latin epigraphy and to make inscriptions available electronically; state of the art web-sites, such as Maria Pantelia's *Electronic Resources for Classicists* and *Diotima*, a site devoted to gender studies of classical antiquity; and several excellent on-line journals, such as the present one, which allow for nearly instantaneous interchange among scholars from around the globe and reviews that are nearly simultaneous to a book's release. James O'Donnell, co-founder of the renowned *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* and Vice Provost for Information Systems and Computing at the University of Pennsylvania, has been a pioneer in blazing the classical trail into cyberspace, and he now offers his thoughts on the exhilarating opportunities and potential dangers of the new technologies for the future life of the mind, in academia and in society at large.[1]

O'Donnell presents these chapters as eclectic meditations (discussing figures as diverse as St. Augustine, Sting, Marshall McLuhan, Newt Gingrich, Boethius, and Babe Ruth) on the implications of an unfinished, and certain to remain unfinished, story. It is the whirling technological change at a disorienting, Tofflerian pace that largely makes the dawn of the cybernetic age in which we live so exciting, and disconcerting. O'Donnell is a well-qualified commentator, and prophet, of what the future in cyberspace may hold. One central idea for O'Donnell, whose optimism for new media far outweighs his

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[1] For the electronic counterpart, see http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/avatars.

reservations, is the increased capabilities for collective scholarly advance as collaborative, cumulative dialectic, as work-in-progress susceptible of ongoing sophistication and improvement. He argues that with this will come the end of the fixity of the monologic, authoritative published word (p. 41: '[T]he notion that discourse must be fixed to be valid will fade'), and perhaps also of the book and the author as we know them. In the spirit of O'Donnell's call for the sort of timely dialectic and debate which the electronic medium affords, I shall outline the structure of the book and what I find to be its most interesting observations, proceeding to meditations of my own in response to some of the author's prognostications.

O'Donnell begins with the image of Antonello da Messina's fifteenth-century painting of St. Jerome in his study. For men such as Jerome, Erasmus, and Nicholas of Cusa, the book was a far different, and more precious, thing than it is for us, and 'learning [was] for them a struggle against the outright disappearance or inaccessibility of the words of the past and present day' (p. 4). This, eerily, may well prove to be a recurring anxiety arising from the information revolution we are witnessing (cf. the admission on p. 48: 'Give us another generation of proliferation and surely vast quantities of information will slip away from us… We will no longer be able to depend on survival of information through benign neglect. There are medieval manuscript books that may have lain unread for hundreds of years, but offered their treasures to the first reader who found and tried them. An electronic text subjected to the same degree of neglect is unlikely to survive five years').

Chapters One ('Phaedrus: Hearing Socrates, Reading Plato', pp. 14-28) and Two ('From the Alexandrian Library to the Virtual Library and Beyond', pp. 29-43) point to continuities and ruptures between classical antiquity and postmodern times. According to O'Donnell, mythic-historical figures such as Jesus, Socrates, Confucius, and Buddha in a sense represented a retrograde resistance to historical processes of change (literacy, cities). Socrates expressed a deep skepticism for the written word, as it cannot engage in dialectic (which cyberspace, O'Donnell underscores, makes possible); words for Socrates, by their mute fixity, can lead to misunderstandings to which the spoken word does not.[2] This aspect of Socrates seems somewhat strange to the modern reader, but not so the project of the great library at Alexandria. Here we are on familiar ground. Indeed, O'Donnell argues that the idea of the 'virtual library' is some fifteen hun-

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[2] O'Donnell (20-1) notes the irony that we learn of Socrates' suspicions of the written word through Plato's written dialogues, citing *Phaed.* 277d; *Seventh Letter* 344c-d, but strangely omitting any discussion of the earlier *locus classicus*, Hom. *Il.* 6.168. I miss a reference in the bibliographical notes for this chapter to W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1989). The perceptive reader will not miss another irony—the fact that (s)he is reading about the demise of the book between hard covers.

dred years old (p. 42).[3] Chapter Three ('From Codex Page to Homepage', pp. 50-63) again plays on the themes of continuity and break with the past. There are real parallels between the appearance of the codex form and computerized forms of literary texts, but cyberspace goes far beyond the codex in allowing for non-linear (not to mention interactive) reading of texts (see the supplementary 'Hyperlink' on non-linear reading at pp. 64-70).

Chapter Four ('The Persistence of the Old and the Pragmatics of the New', pp. 71-91), ranging from Johannes Trithemius to Marshall McLuhan to Cassiodorus, focuses on the forces of resistance and acceptance of new technologies (Trithemius' objections to the printed book were mainly aesthetic; he later converted). Here O'Donnell argues that, like his hero Cassiodorus, who in the sixth century attempted to use the codex book to display contemporary texts in his Calabrian 'Christian university', we need to try to become masters of the 'pragmatics of the new' (p. 88). Chapter Five ('The Ancients and the Moderns: The Classics and Western Civilization', pp. 99-123) opens out onto a broad vista: the enshrinement of classical antiquity in the western tradition. O'Donnell, with a focus on the 'Battle of the Books' in eighteenth-century England and France and indebted, I suspect, to recent work on invented traditions and imagined communities, argues that 'classical antiquity was created in the eighteenth century and is one of the most impressive creations of that age' (p. 113).[4]

The final four chapters increasingly concern the contemporary academic predicament and cyberspace. In reading Chapter Six ('Augustine Today: Linear Narratives and Multiple Pathways', pp. 124-43), one cannot help but be dazzled by the exhilarating prospects for reading texts in new ways as a result of new technologies.[5] Chapter Seven ('The New Liberal Arts: Teaching in a Postmodern World', pp. 144-62) once again excites in pointing out some of the new possibilities technology offers, such as MOO online conferencing software, and the immense promise of resource-based learning.

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[3] The bibliographical notes for this chapter should include the monumental three-volume study, P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford, 1972), an invaluable source for the political and intellectual milieu of the great library.

[4] Mercifully, O'Donnell touches upon but does not linger over the infamous Black Athena debates. From a voluminous literature on the invention of history, I single out E. J. Hobsbawm's introductory essay to *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983) 1-14; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, rev. ed. 1991). For a fascinating study of classicism in the modern German academy, see S. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1950* (Princeton, 1996).

[5] E.g., the electronic corpus of Catullus, with morphological analysis of every word in every line of every poem!: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/text?lookup=catul.+init.&vers=latin.

Chapter Eight ('What Becomes of Universities? [For Professors Only]', pp. 167-89) offers some creative solutions for problems confronting today's academy, such as multiplying opportunities for study and revamping and marketing credentials-giving (p. 182). In Chapter Nine ('Cassiodorus: Or, The Life of the Mind in Cyberspace', pp. 190-6), O'Donnell returns to the figure of Cassiodorus (his dissertation topic), who for him represents a scholar who made use of new technological possibilities. Here O'Donnell allows himself the conceit of an analogy between the late antique Bruttian monk and himself (p. 195). There is a great deal of optimism in these chapters, but O'Donnell does not hesitate to address the tough questions as well. He forces us to confront the current debates on tenure (cf. the infamous case of the University of Minnesota), the sociological academic phenomenon of the adjunct, 'gypsy' professor, and the unsettling slide of the university towards a corporate mentality. These problems will not simply go away; there are no easy solutions.[6] O'Donnell punctuates his chapters with a series of 'Hyperlinks', expanding particular topics.

My own reflections, I'm afraid, are on the whole less optimistic than O'Donnell's, plagued as they are by more reservations. I must preface them with a statement of my familiarity with technology as a teaching tool, lest I appear to be a technophobic Luddite. I maintain a classical studies web page for the institution where I currently teach; I have created electronic syllabi posted on the web for most of my courses; I use Perseus extensively in my Greek history survey; and I am in the process of converting all lectures in Greek and Roman history to the Power Point format. These labors have paid rich dividends and ultimately have made my teaching a more rewarding, and effective, endeavor.

Yet I worry about the sheer volume of increasing information at our disposal in cyberspace. Who could hope to master it? The time investment in making the attempt simply to navigate one's way through it, it seems to me, is a serious consideration, in light of our dual roles as teachers and scholars. What is the effect on scholarly productivity when one begins increasingly to invest time in technological applications? Will the professor of the future be more technocrat than teacher/scholar? Here I can relay some personal experiences in order to illustrate the tensions. I was happily constructing Power Point presentations, linking them to my electronic syllabi, calling them up from the web page in the 'smart' lecture hall on campus where I

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[6] Cf. p. 173: '[T]he most familiar, traditional and central parts of the university have the fewest opportunities for entrepreneurship. How do we get the business school to care about (and pay for) the department of Egyptology? If we don't succeed in that, do we do without Egyptology?' These words are particularly salient for me, as I teach in an institution that recently saw fit to eliminate its Classics department.

teach my history surveys, and there presenting them. That was when the college's preferred browser was Netscape 3.0. Of course we have subsequently upgraded, but the new version no longer has the necessary plug-in to read Power Point. So now we must use Internet Explorer, less familiar to many of our students. It seems as if we sometimes take one step forward and two backwards. As another example, I learned to compose web pages with the web-authoring software Adobe Page Mill, now an antiquated relic rapidly going the way of the dodo. I can now learn to use much sleeker, more sophisticated, and more efficient authoring software, but that takes time. I'd rather be reading Greek and Latin and thinking about historical/historiographical problems.

O'Donnell acknowledges the impossibility of mastering the information highway, suggesting the art of selective screening and an increasing reliance on a crucial figure in this information revolution, the librarian, as a guide through the electronic maze. But where will we find this 21st-century librarian who will be 'something between Natty Bumppo and the Jedi knight' (p. 43)? My reservations only increase as we turn to the student, as many of us have frequently labored through appalling papers written by credulous students for whom any information obtained from the web is authoritative. And what about the drawbacks to autonomous, resource-based learning? Will there be less interpersonal, face-to-face contact between professor and student as a result (this sort of contact, in my view, is the sole advantage the American liberal arts college has over the large universities)? O'Donnell concedes that this likely will prove to be the case: 'One discernible and consistent impact of technology on social organizations is the attenuation of social linkages. Inch by inch, the network of face-to-face contacts of the primordial village has been thinned out and dissolved as more and more rarified threads link us to people farther and farther away' (pp. 175-6).

Turning to the question of scholarship and publication, my reservations increase even more. I am frankly uncomfortable about the possibility (albeit remote, as I'll presently argue) of the disappearance of books and the author category as we know them. In a famous essay, Michel Foucault forecast the death of the author; this, in his view, was desirable, as the author category was an impediment to analyses of the workings of discourse.[7] Moreover, Foucault argued, the author category was a fairly recent invention, anyway; we could afford to dispose of it. Of course in general terms he was wrong, as the ancient Greeks felt the need to attribute their cycles of epic and wisdom

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[7] M. Foucault, 'What Is An Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977) 113-38.

poetry to alleged historical figures, Homer and Hesiod, fabricating fictitious biographies in service of that project.[8]

But what is the horror of the individual author giving way to the collaborative, non-linear discourse O'Donnell envisions? It is simply this: as I believe anyone who has had much experience with committee work will readily agree, the inspiration of genius and the product of collaborative team effort do not often coincide. Could we possibly imagine Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Syme's *Roman Revolution*, or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for that matter, as the result of collaborative effort? And when we are writing so furiously and rapidly, taking full advantage of the new, instantaneous dialectical possibilities the electronic medium affords, is there a danger of writing before thinking? Isn't there virtue in the *labor limae*, wherein the scholar has allowed the time for ideas to mature and take coherent shape (of course going against the grain of the way things work in the postmodern world in the process) before presenting them to the world?

All of these reservations, in one way or another, have the question of quality at their base. In this connection I believe that we should be wary of discarding the present configurations of publication, the major university presses and particular scholarly journals, before we can be assured that whatever we are to put in their place will not compromise the integrity of professional classical scholarship. Why do classicists want to publish books with Cambridge, Clarendon, or California; why do we aspire to publish articles in *JHS*, *TAPhA*, or *Chiron*? I believe there is more to the answer than the elitism or snobbism of the professional classicist. We want to publish in these places because of their track records, their sustained high standards of excellence. History has proved that works published in these places have a fairly good chance of being essential, or at least worthwhile, reading 25 or 50 years hence. Will the same sort of quality control exist in cyberspace?

A realistic pessimism lays one of these fears to rest, paradoxically allowing me to end on a somewhat optimistic note. Given the cult of the individual in our times, I have confidence that we shall not see the end of the individual, monologic author. At the dawn of the 21st century, the death of the author would seem to be especially unlikely in the United States, a country whose mytho-history, as Frederick Jackson Turner so famously articulated, is predicated upon the frontier mentality of the rugged, self-sufficient individual; a country that to this day subscribes to the Horatio Alger myth of individual entrepreneurship; a country that takes the untrammeled rights of the individual to such absurdist proportions that it allows its citizens to possess firearms with relative ease. This is a gloomy, and perhaps overstated, characterization. But that same cult of the individual, I believe, will ensure

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[8] See M. R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore, 1981).

the linear, monologic author a continued existence, even in cyberspace. And for me that is some compensation. I'll welcome the exciting, non-linear types of intellectual activity provided by the hyperlink; but I'll also accept the continued linearity of the traditional author, as I thereby may continue to hope to be awed by the occasional work of individual genius.

O'Donnell provides a searching and stimulating discussion of an historical development that is rapidly changing the lives of us all. We may not agree with all that he says, but we must respect it, as he speaks with the credentials of a cybernetic pioneer. Throughout he notes that people in the midst of technological change historically have tended to view new technologies in terms of the old. Many here may think of Thomas Kuhn's famous account of paradigmatic shifts in the sciences. We are experiencing a breathtaking revolution in the ways we receive and process information. We can expect the ride to be a bumpy one in terms of the ways we perceive these seismic transformations. O'Donnell's book will serve to smooth the path, awakening the general reader from the slumber of the old and providing a beacon for us to begin finding our way into the new.

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