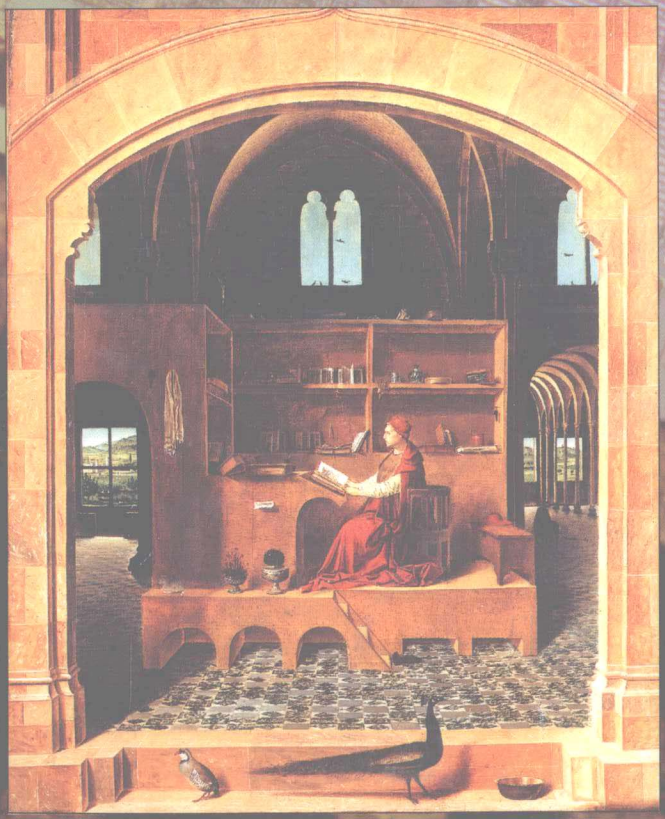
AVATARS OF THE WORD

FROM PAPYRUS TO CYBERSPACE



JAMES J. O'DONNELL

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

Printed in the United States of America
Fourth printing, 2000

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2000

The illustration on p. xiv is a detail from *Saint Jerome in His Study* by Antonello da Messina. Courtesy of National Gallery, London.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Donnell, James Joseph, 1950–
Avatars of the word : from papyrus to cyberspace /
James J. O'Donnell.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-05545-4 (cloth)
ISBN 0-674-00194-X (pbk.)
1. Communication and technology—History.
2. Written communication—History.
3. Cyberspace.
I. Title.
P96.T42036 1998
302.23'09—dc21 97-32256

PREFACE

This book is for people who read books and use computers and wonder what the two have to do with each other. We may sometimes think we are back at that moment in Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* when a character brandishes a new-fangled printed book in his hand against the backdrop of the cathedral and exclaims "This will kill that!" For us, the question is whether the computer will put the book out of business. And if so, what becomes of us readers?

Of course, if you turn from this book to a person sitting near you and ask this question you will in a way be answering it. The spoken word has been not supplanted by the written or the printed word, but supplemented. Each new generation of technological advance adds to the possibilities and makes the interplay among different media more complex. We lose and we gain at the same time.

This book is an attempt to think about how we rework some of the connections among speaking and writing and reading today. It offers a historical perspective based in western cultures from Greco-Roman antiquity to the present, but it is not a history. Histories of the written word may be found elsewhere and I have not tried to duplicate them. Rather, this book is an exploration of what those histories have to say about us, the pasts we receive, and the futures we shape.

The first five chapters offer meditations on historical situations designed to suggest ways of thinking about our own times, and the last four explore the state of learning and teaching today. These chapters run in roughly chronological order from ancient to contemporary times; but they take up issues that have significance over wide spans of time, and so each discussion of ancient, medieval, and early modern events leads to different contemporary implications. Perhaps most unusual, there is regular recourse throughout the book to a point of view based in an unfamiliar neighborhood: Latin late antiquity.

I assume here that Latin late antiquity, the world from roughly 300 C.E. to 600 C.E., offers a distinct and useful vantage point from which to consider the development of our ways of recording, using, and transmitting the written word. To an extent blurred by conventional narratives of ancient, medieval, and modern times, late antiquity was a point of departure for a wide range of institutions still in current use. Churches, law courts, schoolrooms, and libraries reflect the innovations of that age, while Europe's boundaries still eerily reflect the map of the later Roman empire. My references to the shaping writers and practices of that time offer a vantage point that, to be sure, reflects my own professional competence as a scholar, and I will not claim that it is the best choice simply because it is mine. Let the reader judge how useful it is.

The style of these chapters is deliberately associative and informal. While no single line of argument is advanced, the book is structured as an increasingly focused series of meditations approaching the issues and experiences of our own time. Some shorter discussions, which I call "hyperlinks," appear between chapters, interrupting the main line of discussion to expand on some points of interest.

That this book is exceedingly personal, even familiar, is by design. Whatever abstract ideas we have about what the past means to us and

how it works in our culture, we will understand its real value best if we attend to how that past works in individual present lives. What is it that our past does for us? Or rather, what is it that the common construction of the past does for us?

The question is as apposite of remote antiquity as it is of the small child on a public conveyance I heard not long ago, repeatedly trying to break into her parents' conversation until she got a chance to remind them of the last time they had been to this touristy place—and then got, at precocious age, a wistful faraway sound in her voice when she remembered a detail of that event that had so far escaped her. Why did she need to remember that and talk about it? Where did she learn that wistfulness? Public history and private history can be powerful beyond all reasonable measure.

For now, I tell my own story to make a first effort at that kind of specificity. The reader of this book will no doubt have similar autobiographical reflections, not always as sober and respectable as we would like them to be. Our culture's heritage is the cumulative total of what that heritage means to all the individuals in it, not a cerebral abstraction of what it ought to be like or could be like. But, as I will show, that vision of ought and could is itself an influential factor in shaping people's expectations of themselves, and shaping their allegiances and their rebellions as well.

Finally, though this is a traditional book in hard covers, it is not without its own electronic avatar,* a homepage all its own, to which I refer the reader for materials, especially illustrations, that supplement the printed book in numerous ways. There will be World Wide Web addresses scattered throughout the book to point to specific items, but

*I take "avatar" throughout in the sense of "manifestation"—the form in which some abstract and powerful force takes palpable shape for human perception.

if the curious reader should venture to *http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/avatars,* an organized approach to all the materials collected there for this book is available.

Those who have heard me speak or rummaged in my web site will have seen this book looming into view for some years now. The dedication expresses my deepest indebtedness, but apart from that I must limit myself to a generic expression of gratitude to all those who have invited me to join their conversations during these exciting years, even if I have done so only briefly and from the fortified position of a lecture hall podium.

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Introduction

THE SCHOLAR IN HIS STUDY

The fifteenth-century portrait of St. Jerome facing this page famously embodies a familiar image: the saint with his lion in a spacious study, poring over his books.* To a certain taste, the appeal of this scene is an irresistible model of the scholarly life: well-chosen books, seemly surroundings, dignity, and tranquility. When a classically trained scholar looks at this image, it can be hard to suppress the temptation to see oneself in Jerome's robes. Our domestic architecture, habitual apparel, and choice of companions may differ from his, but our powers of self-aggrandizement let us indulge for a moment the fantasy. The historical Jerome, irascible and charming by turns, settled in Bethlehem in the last years of the fourth century C.E. and devoted himself to translating scripture from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, while carrying on a self-advertising correspon-

*The theme continues, perhaps unconsciously: "A work in progress quickly becomes feral . . . it is a lion you cage in your study. As the work grows it gets harder to control . . . You must visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it. If you skip a day, you are, quite rightly, afraid to open the door to its room. You enter with bravura, holding a chair at the thing and shouting, 'Simba!' " (Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* [New York, 1989] 52).

dence with social and literary eminences across the Roman world. By the time of the Renaissance he had become an object of veneration and a model to imitate, and had been reshaped in the process; the image and some traces of the veneration still resonate in us.

When we indulge the fantasy of identification with Jerome, we engage in an old exercise. There is evidence to suggest that the moment of first unveiling of this very painting was meant to encourage exactly such a collapsing of present and past. Though the image is clearly intended to be "Jerome," the details of his clothing have attracted attention. At the time of this painting, only two men were entitled to wear this costume of papal legate and thus were possible models for the portrait. One was an elderly man of no standing whatever, and the other was the polymath diplomat Nicholas of Cusa, whose works inspire to this day a learned society and a cottage industry of study.

Such an intermingling of present and past was very much in the air in the Renaissance and remains a familiar habit of mind today. Erasmus, for example, created and shaped his public image in the early decades of the sixteenth century by modeling it expressly on that of the church fathers of a thousand years before. He used the technology of print to make his own scholarly practice seem old and authoritative, though he was a man modern down to his toes and an adventurous entrepreneur of the lately invented printed book. One of Erasmus' achievements as a scholar was a biography of Jerome based for the first time not on hagiographic tradition but on a chronologically assessed and digested reading of Jerome's letters. When we look at the immense modern edition of Erasmus' letters in that light, we are unconsciously letting him teach us how to read them just as he would have us read Jerome, as transparent historical evidence that will lead us to the judgment of him that he wanted us to make. Ironically, another recent study shows

how Jerome himself created the literary and public role he took in the late antique world by conscious imitation of the third-century Christian philologist Origen. Erasmus and Jerome were their own first image managers.

Such exercises in authorizing the present out of the past can be quite effective. Erasmus was a mildly renegade monk of no social standing, a pious Christian of deep if mildly idiosyncratic views, and a man who spent a great deal of time and effort in evading the polemic that shattered the religious unity of Europe in his time (while getting in a few shots of his own). But he succeeded beyond even surely his own dreams in creating an image of the warm, friendly, accessible, humane, and reasonable scholar that has found favor far beyond the circles his professed ideas about God and man could reasonably have been expected to penetrate. His friend and contemporary Thomas More had a long run as a nearly equally successful purveyor of an image of himself as benevolent humanist, but his most recent biographer has finally succumbed to the twentieth century's drive to debunk. The glowing portrait from *A Man for All Seasons* is now shadowed by the image of heretic-hunter. But Erasmus survives because he succeeded in substituting the image for the man. The rebarbativeness of some of his opinions disappears behind that image.

To rehearse the principled objections that can be raised against this kind of costume party self-presentation will do no more than highlight some of the effects of a practice widely employed in every age. Success breeds imitation, and ambition accordingly refines the art. I will single out only a few implications of this way that scholars in particular have of seeing themselves in a tradition.

Sitting at a keyboard before a computer screen, surrounded by mass-

produced printed books, proud holder of a library card that provides me access to millions of books any day I like, and author of several published books of my own that are stored in that same repository, I am in many respects a very different person from an Erasmus or a Nicholas of Cusa. Erasmus knew the printed book and scrambled to take advantage of it, and Nicholas's secretary was one of the first entrepreneurs of printing in Italy decades before Erasmus, but neither of them could properly imagine a world so awash in books as ours is. For them any book was still a precious thing, and learning of any kind a struggle against the outright disappearance or inaccessibility of the words of the past and present day. (In Erasmus' time, people would still make handwritten copies of printed books, just to have a copy.)

A Renaissance painter constructing an image of Jerome was equally anachronistic, for Jerome lived again in very different conditions, in a world where the codex book was a relative novelty, and where the Christianity he fought for was just barely learning how to manage a library that contained more than scripture. Even scripture was only patchily available in translations of indifferent quality, and Jerome's own greatest achievement would be to put into circulation a better and more consistent Latin version of the Bible for his time. By the fifteenth century, the question was how to try to distribute universally the thing that Jerome had labored to make possible at all.

These inscriptions of ourselves into the past, these revivals of the past in ourselves, are distinctly ahistorical in many ways, but particularly in the way they blur together conditions of learning and language that are radically different. Jerome once ran across a Greek word in a text, and wrote to a friend that he remembered seeing that word only twice elsewhere, once in scripture, once in an apocryphal religious work. As it happens, he was correct: the three passages he knew are

the only places (still) where we know that word to have been used in the written legacy of Greek literature. Hearing that story, I marvel at the powers of Jerome's memory, knowing that as a modern scholar with some similar interests in scripture and translation, I would never dare to say such a thing. I attribute this to the distractedness of my education, as well as my inability to read and retain everything that I would like to, but, at bottom, I have a suspicion that in those days people trained their memories to be better than ours are and that weakling reliance on the printed word has sapped our powers of memory.

Another way of looking at it is to say that Jerome's advantage over me lies in the emptiness of his textual memory, not its fullness. He did not have whole ranges of synapses cluttered with lyrics from popular songs of thirty years ago, and other ranges filled with the commands needed to use word processing software already a decade old and obsolete, nor yet again banks of memory taken up with a flood of paperback fiction and nonfiction read on trains, in bed, and on idle Sunday afternoons. If you have read many fewer words in your life, and perhaps read those fewer words over and over again, surely it is easier to remember more of them.

Again, it bears mention that in Jerome's environment comparative philological study had to be done relying chiefly on the memory. Lexica, indices, and encyclopedias were not at hand. This lack increased both the anxiety and the attentiveness with which he would read—once read, those words would disappear and be inaccessible except for what he remembered. How unlike ourselves, idly turning to the index at the back of the book to find something we read twenty minutes ago. Further, he needed fear no competition from more efficient technologies. Even if I thought that I knew the facts of usage of a rare

word, I would never dare speak them out as he did, for I would be quite sure that some person with a far less retentive memory than I would loom up moments later, brandishing a dictionary or running a word-search on a computer, with a loud "Aha!" to show me that the word was used not three times but five or nine and in some really unexpected ways.

Other remarks on memory and its history will follow, but even to tell this small story about Jerome's memory is to engage in just the ahistorical juxtaposition that I have been identifying. We tell such stories in order to compare ourselves implicitly to Jerome, ignoring most of the differences and distances that separate us. If we could ever juxtapose the Jerome who wrote the letter identifying those three occurrences of a word with ourselves in any comprehensive way, we would be overwhelmed by the alienness of the man and never manage to see him as our rival or colleague. The portrait at the beginning of this introduction is already a thousand years anachronistic and idealized, while the fiercely ascetic Jerome of his Bethlehem hovel—it seems more familiar to call it a monastery, but what Jerome lived in was far poorer, shabbier, and smaller than the word "monastery" lets us imagine—would cut a most unattractive figure. (His famously complex relations with women remind us that his image is very much that of the scholar in *his* study. Not least of the effects of these historical reinscriptions is to reinforce expectations about all manner of social roles.)

One move that we could make in the name of history would be to jettison the past as irretrievable and irrelevant. When we complain that our contemporaries (it is always younger contemporaries we blame for this sort of sin) dismiss the past as irrelevant and betray an appalling—to older eyes—ignorance of history, it must be borne in mind that they thus have a defense firmly grounded in history itself. But we do

not yet live wholly in a postmodern, posthistorical world, and I do not believe that we will ever quite jettison even the remote past. Too many of its physical remains are with us, and even as accurate knowledge of history is dismissed or neglected, our historical tourism and fetishization of monuments continues apace. We cannot recover our past or live it again, nor should we desire to do so; but we can learn from it, if we are cautious and patient and meticulous. For me the fruits of history are twofold. First, the pleasure of the act of "doing history" itself is considerable, enticement enough to pursue the pastime but not perhaps justification enough for the time passed on it. And second, the usefulness of history lies in the sharpening of sight, the heightened awareness of difference, the respect for nuance, and the sense of the possibilities of change.

To be sure, from Herodotus to our own day, the majority view of history is that it sets up models of virtue for emulation. Critical scholarship runs into a hail of rhetorical bullets when it tries to adjust the idealized past to conform to the actual surviving evidence. The most visible and influential professor of history in the United States in 1997, Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, chooses to take the easier route of idealization, at the expense of facts, in televised history lectures. My own allegiance to the harder-eyed school of professional history is based in part on my assessment of my own character. In history as in my own life, negative models ("I'll never treat people the way *he* does") are far more potent and durable forces in shaping my conduct for the good than paragons are, and less vulnerable to deflation.

What follow in the chapters of this book, therefore, are historical meditations that take as their point of departure the specific issue of how past western cultures have used the spoken and the written word as

bearers of culture and as shapers of the world that human beings think they live in—what Rilke called "die gedeutete Welt," the interpreted world. They are studies of the various incarnate manifestations of that fundamental but slippery unit of discourse, the word. A word is a polymorphous thing, after all. I may think of it as a few sound waves echoing in an empty room as I muse aloud to myself, but it is almost certain that no one could think of a word as a discrete entity without the external visualization of writing to separate it from other entities like it. Words stand for things, but words are known to us only as signs for the things they thus create, or at least differentiate, by representing.

A word may indeed be a series of graphic symbols transmitted in any of a hundred ways (carved in stone, written with pen on paper, photocopied onto paper, or dancing on a screen in pixels), and those symbols may be alphabetic or pictographic (where the same image may find itself able to associate with several very different pronunciations). The function of such a graphic artifact is usually intermediary and always artificial, and in the study of that artificiality the best minds of every culture are driven near to distraction. Augustine spoke of words as "choice and precious vessels" for meaning, but immediately went on to rebuke the "wine of error" that they too often carry—as though words are merely instrumental. A modern sensibility will be more cautious about granting immunity to words, which can hold in themselves quite inextricably the failings of judgment and principle that beget them in specific forms.

For us, alive now in the last years of the twentieth century, no human culture is imaginable without words. We think of ourselves as language-making and language-using creatures, and we still take some pride in the distinction. But is this pride destined to be everlasting? Chia-Wei Woo, a distinguished physicist and president of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, lately mused aloud of a time

when language itself may seem to be an anachronism—when some postlinguistic means of communication renders the culture of the word obsolete. It is impossible to deny such a possibility, though it goes against current linguistic orthodoxy, but we should linger over the question whether any form of unmediated communication will ever be possible: After language, what? A metalanguage—that is to say, a system of surrogates for thought and reality that are more sophisticated, more supple, more effective than those we use as words?

We live in a historical moment when the media on which the word relies are changing their nature and extending their range to an extent not seen since the invention of movable type. The changes have been building through the twentieth century, as the spoken word reanimated communication over telephone and radio, and as the moving image on film and television supplemented the "mere" word. The invention and dissemination of the personal computer and now the explosive growth in links between those computers on the worldwide networks of the internet create a genuinely new and transformative environment. Zealots foolishly proclaim that the book is dead, and utopians and dystopians croon and keen over the futures their fantasies allow them. My own view is that we can expect no simple changes, that all changes will bring both costs and benefits, loss and gain, and that those of us fortunate enough to live in such exciting times will be put on our mettle to find ways to adapt technologies to our lives and our lives to technologies.

My purpose in writing this book has been to make it clearer what is happening or what might happen by thinking about similar transformations in the past, watching people's reactions to them, and then cautiously, thinking about the present and the future. The esthetic of closure and fixity that we now cherish may very well turn out to be one taste among many, and the possibility now coming into view of a