of a living for a publisher. Fine printers like the Grabhorn Brothers soon found this out, when, misjudging the costs publishers had to bear, they foolhardily ventured into fine publishing themselves.

It is not surprising that as the Great Depression settled in, fine book publishing as defined by Benton collapsed. Yet, the effect of the preceding somewhat vulgar and pretentious period in the history of the book in the United States, was not entirely negative. It produced some of the most beautiful books of the century. The best designers found employment in the trade publishing industry and considerably improved the typographic quality of trade books. The Limited Edition Club, founded in 1929, managed to attract a subscriber list of 1,500. It has remained in business, under various managements, for more than six decades. It commissioned the best designers of the day, and produced books comparable in quality to the fine books of 1920-33.

Benton's monograph deals with an interesting period in the history of the American book. Unfortunately, there is a distressing number of factual and typographical errors in it. Some examples among the many: a whole paragraph of 18 lines from page 237 in the main text is repeated, almost *verbatim*, on page 290 as endnote number 37. Bruce Rogers, the great American book designer died in 1957, not in 1955. The Belgian artist who "produced books whose only texts were sequences of narrative woodcut images" was Frans Masereel, not Frank Masareel. Malahide Castle (in Ireland), where so many of Boswell's papers were found, was not his Scottish estate (that was called Auchinleck). Joseph Conrad's novel fragment is entitled *The Sisters*, not *The Sister*. Richard Aldington was the translator of *Fifty Romance Lyric Poems*, not its author. Carl Purlington Rollins, the fastidious production manager of the Yale University Press between 1920 and 1948, would not have been amused.

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James J. O'Donnell. *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. xii, 210 pp. \$29.95 US (hardcover). ISBN 0-674-05545-4.

This book belongs to a sub-genre that emerged in the 1990s: the discussions of digitized information technology within an historical

framework. Like others of this genre, O'Donnell's volume can be read forward or backward—as an attempt to understand the present in the light of the past, or the past in the light of the present. In either case, books of this sub-genre reflect the late 20th-century sense of being in an age of such profound—even revolutionary—upheaval that can be understood only within an historical perspective.

What makes this book different from many others is that O'Donnell possesses legitimate credentials as both an historian and an information specialist. Along with being Vice Provost for Information Systems and Computing at the University of Pennsylvania, he is also a Professor of Classical Studies. In addition, he publishes an online journal, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. In straddling the line between the humanities and information technology, he possesses qualifications not always shared by fellow authors of this genre.

Although he makes no pretense at writing a history of the written word, he does “attempt to think about how we rework some of the connections among speaking and writing and reading today.” Specifically, he has undertaken to provide insight “for people who read books and use computers and wonder what the two have to do with each other” (ix). Anyone looking for a narrative history will be disappointed, as there is “no single line of argument in advance.” Rather, “the book is structured as an increasingly focused series of meditations approaching the issues and experiences of our own time.” The first five chapters are historical “designed to suggest ways of thinking about our own time.” The last four “explore the state of learning and teaching today” (x). In other words, his concern is with the impact of contemporary information technology upon both teaching and knowledge/information systems. Not surprisingly, a website accompanies the book: <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/avatars>>. For the curious, “avatar” means epiphany or manifestation.

O'Donnell makes clear at several points his indebtedness to Jacques Derrida—most particularly in his intermingling of the past and present. This book's starting point is late Latin antiquity, 300-600 A. D., which “offers a distinct and useful vantage point from which to consider the development of our way of recording, using, and transmitting the written word” (x). Specifically, he concentrates upon two pivotal figures of the era: St. Augustine (354-430) and Cassiodorus (490-583)—the latter being a Christian writer and statesman who appears to have initiated the custom of monasteries copying texts, the former being the leading Christian philosopher of

the age. Both men lived in an age of monumental change: the decline and fall of the Roman empire, the barbarian invasions, the triumph of Christianity, the move from scroll to codex books, and the introduction of silent reading. O'Donnell, having written his doctoral dissertation and first book on Cassiodorus, feels real kinship with him. He confesses that having initially been "at some pains to demolish [him] I did not realize at the time that I had stumbled upon someone with eerie appositeness to the issues that I have been discussing" (86). In his conclusion, O'Donnell admits that:

It is an odd way in which I have come to be Cassiodorus ... He had his world shot out from under him ... He chose to build a library and copy books ... He used the instruments ... of the old roman culture ... to create a new kind of library. He is not the saviour of western civilization ... He was rather a single, responsible individual helping shape ... the cultural tools that his world needed ... That he succeeded ... so resourcefully to ... shape a future, are lessons that we can all take away with us. (195-6)

Concerning St. Augustine, O'Donnell's conclusions are less easily conveyed. In Chapter Six, "Augustine Today: Linear Narratives and Multiple Pathways," he argues against the "dignification of western civilization" brought about by print culture. Instead, he argues in favour of a more relaxed "play" time and "economy of amusement" (138-42). In support of this approach, he considers some of the leading biographical studies of Augustine that have appeared in recent years. As an antidote to their various limitations, he suggests that an online world would permit all of Augustine's "five million surviving words in Latin" (128) and secondary works to be placed in juxtaposition—as variorum editions. The resulting "public performance of scholarship" would permit a much more powerful and sympathetic understanding of Augustine—and other writers—to develop. In this way, the humanities would continue their traditional role of helping us understand the impact of the past upon the present and the present upon the past.

In a sense, the rest of the book is simply a series of essays on the need to adapt to changing information technology while holding onto the essence of the western cultural tradition. That said, some readers may be confused by the lack of a linear argument or chronological sequence. As the author chose consciously to present his text in this manner, the only way of proceeding is to read each chapter as a self-contained essay and appreciate the individual insights appearing on virtually every page.

Among the unusual features of the book are four "Hyperlink" sections following various chapters. Printed in sans-serif typeface, these sections contrast visually with the Venetian typeface used in the rest of the text. The hyperlinks serve as case studies dealing with topics such as the instability of text, nonlinear reading, ownership of ideas, and effective teaching. Each has a first-person singular quality and serves to exemplify the ideas found elsewhere in the text.

Contemporary readers will find much in this book to intrigue and possibly disturb them. Future readers will find ample evidence of late 20th-century uncertainty and intellectual experimentation concerning the impact of information technology. Book historians of any era will appreciate both sides of the coin. Except for a wonderful frontispiece reproduction of Massina's "Saint Jerome in His Study," there are no illustrations. A section on "Bibliographic Notes" suggests further readings and sources of O'Donnell's ideas. There is an index.

For readers wishing to investigate further this sub-genre combining contemporary information technology with historical studies, the following titles may prove helpful: William F. Birdsall's *The Myth of the Electronic Library: Librarianship and Social Change in America* (Westport: Greenwood, 1994), Michael Hobbart's *Information Ages: Literacy, Numeracy and the Computer Revolution*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), Dan Lacy's *From Grunts to Gigabytes: Communications and Society* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1996), Charles T. Meadow's *Ink into Bits: A Web of Converging Media*, (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1998), Geoffrey Nunberg's *The Future of the Book* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), Roger Penrose's *The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computers, Minds, and the Laws of Physics* (New York: Penguin, 1991), Theodore Roszak's *The Cult of Information : A Neo-Luddite Treatise on High Tech, Artificial Intelligence, and the True Art of Thinking*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), and William Wresch's *Disconnected: Haves and Have-Nots in the Information Age* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996).

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