

The Living Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J., at Saint Louis University

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This essay describes activities at Saint Louis University to honor Walter J. Ong, S.J. The original “Ong Project” grew from a local event to a national conference held in 2005. Fr. Ong’s works have been archived at the Pius XII Library—the definitive bibliography of his works will soon be posted on-line. A mission statement and plan of activities have been drafted for the Walter J. Ong Center for Language, Culture, and Consciousness, which will be devoted to scholarship in the fields important to Fr. Ong. The Center will be one component of a proposed Walter J. Ong Center for Digital Media Research, which will include screening areas and facilities for designing, storing, and disseminating innovative works in digital media.

WALTER J. Ong, S.J., was one of the most important intellectuals of our time. Because his colleagues at Saint Louis University share his values, we are actively engaged in a project to keep his legacy of intellectual curiosity and speculative thought alive in our own work and in the work of others.

Fr. Ong was someone whose work I knew long before I came to Saint Louis in 2000 to chair the English Department. I am not an Ong specialist, but as a graduate student in Renaissance literature I read his Terry Lectures at Yale (published as *The Presence of the Word*—see Ong, 1967) and subsequently read *Orality and Literacy* (Ong, 1982b). I knew his work on Ramus, Milton, and Hopkins (Ong, 1958, 1982a, 1986), and years later, I benefited from his early essay on Elizabethan and Jacobean punctuation theory (Ong, 1944) when I wrote on Ben Jonson’s punctuation (van den Berg, 1995). To my delight, we became friends. I often had lunch with him in Jesuit Hall, where our conversation ranged from English Department matters to the media, politics, jazz, and his own current writing. He maintained an office in the English Department, attended English Department parties, and was always eager to find out what the graduate students were thinking about. He kept up a correspondence with friends and scholars throughout the world and often welcomed visitors. He was able to do all this because of the loving care he received at Jesuit Hall. He was persuaded to sleep in the retirement facility on the 8th floor, despite his resistance, but spent every day in his office, his old room on a lower floor. Without the staff’s attention to his rest and proper diet, and without the maintenance of his familiar workspace, I am sure he would not have been active so long. On August 12, 2003, Walter Ong died, rather unexpectedly, from pneumonia. His death was noted in the *London Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, to name a few. Jonathan Drury, a young admirer, established a website, “Remembering Walter Ong,” where former students, colleagues, and admirers posted memorial statements.

Professor John Shawcross, a distinguished Renaissance scholar, joined me (2004) in publishing this tribute to Walter Ong in *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association, which he had once served as President:

Walter J. Ong, S.J., whose immense curiosity was matched only by his learning, delighted in taking intellectual risks. At the age of 89 he was still writing prize-winning work in media ecology, and he celebrated his 90th birthday surrounded by the Mylar balloons of Andy Warhol's Silver Clouds and a crowd of colleagues, students and friends at Saint Louis University. He lectured throughout the world at major universities, but chose to spend his career at Saint Louis. His university honored him with an increasingly broad set of honors: William Herren Professor of English, Professor of Psychiatry and the Humanities, and University Professor. After establishing himself as a Renaissance scholar, he had become a Renaissance man, contributing to studies of language and memory, media consciousness, communication theory, print culture, and literary theory. His work on Petrus Ramus opened up the important difference between Aristotelian logic, oral rhetoric, and the arts of memory, and he showed how Ramistic thought and print culture absorbed memory into a new organization of knowledge. Ong argued that "writing restructures consciousness," but this statement merely marked the beginning of inquiry for him. Of his many books, perhaps the best known is *Orality and Literacy*, which has been translated into French, German, Japanese, Swedish and Turkish (among others). In this book, as in his subsequent work, he brought together ideas from many different disciplines, from literary theory to cultural anthropology, and he was among the first to treat so-called "primitive" societies as complex organizations with sophisticated oral modes of culture. He charted the role of language in oral, manuscript, and print culture, and formulated as the key trait of print and electronic culture a "secondary orality" or illusion of speech. He was a passionately engaged scholar, who argued that the frequent closing down of imagination and the increased standardization of expression (not just in literature and philosophy, but in government and science as well) marked a shift in culture from Revelation to Manifestation. From Milton to cyberculture, from African tribal communication to e-mail, his provocative ideas challenged and disturbed conventional modes of thought. He had a lasting impact on his students, and he once described education as the "yeast" that helps students rise. He was a man of ideas who welcomed visitors and correspondents from around the world, but he was also a priest who delighted in performing baptisms and weddings and who thought deeply about the changes and challenges facing his church. At his memorial service, the Jesuit community was joined by his former students, his colleagues, his family, and many of those he had counseled and served. I was privileged to give one of the scriptural readings, verses from Job 19 that were especially appropriate to this extraordinary man: "Oh, that my words were now written! Oh, that they were printed in a book!" We are fortunate that so many of his words *were* printed, and that his voice will live on in debate and inquiry. (pp. 156-157)

To keep his legacy alive, Saint Louis University has honored him, appropriately, by honoring other scholars. There is an endowed chair, the Walter J. Ong, S.J., Professorship

in the Humanities (currently held by Tom Shippey); the annual Walter J. Ong, S.J., Award for Distinguished Work in English, given each year to an outstanding graduate student; and the Walter J. Ong, S.J., Pre-Doctoral Teaching Fellowships, awarded to several doctoral candidates each year.

We have also been working in other ways to honor him: establishing a planning group, preserving his archives, preparing a definitive on-line bibliography of his publications, hosting a conference, and charting future activities of the Walter J. Ong Center for Language, Culture, and Consciousness. Together, these projects constitute his living legacy at Saint Louis University.

Advisory Board

IN 2002, a group of scholars at Saint Louis University established “The Ong Project” to seek ways to keep Fr. Ong’s legacy alive. The committee includes specialists in American literature and religion, Renaissance prose and poetry, jazz and African-American literature, rhetoric and composition, journalism, Anglo-Saxon literature, and media theory. We have been joined by a National Advisory Board—scholars from Fordham University, College of the Holy Cross, Santa Clara University, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Virginia, the University of Missouri, the University of Iowa, Texas A&M, and Rice University. The two groups met during the 2005 conference to draft a mission statement for the Walter J. Ong Center and to chart its future.

Archives

BECAUSE he wrote so much, published and unpublished, a group at the university met four years before his death to begin plans for his archives. As Chair of the English Department, I was invited to join this group, which included the University Librarian, the University Archivist, the Rector of the Jesuit community, and representatives of the Provost’s Office and Technological Services. We consulted Fr. Ong, who wanted his papers housed at the university where he had worked so long. He had meticulously organized his papers and correspondence. However, because he was a Jesuit he did not own anything, including his manuscripts and correspondence. The Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus was always the owner of his archive. The Jesuits were willing to donate the archives to the University Library if they would be properly catalogued and maintained. The only materials that would be retained by the Society of Jesus were documents related to Fr. Ong’s life as a Jesuit (e.g., correspondence with the Rector or Head of the Missouri Province). The University agreed to hire a professional cataloguer and a graduate assistant to process the archive, and after Fr. Ong’s death the materials were delivered to the Pius XII Library. These materials are now being catalogued, a project that should be complete within the year. John Walter, a doctoral candidate in English, is working with Dr. Christine Harper on this project. Selected items from the archives are now on display, and the library staff welcomes scholars who come to the Library or who ask questions by correspondence. John Walter has also posted an on-line diary of his work collating the files.

Online Bibliography

SEVERAL years ago, Professor Betty Youngkin at the University of Dayton compiled a bibliography of Fr. Ong's works. Fr. Ong himself kept meticulous, annotated files on cards in a wooden box in his room. At one point several years before his death, Fr. Ong permitted a secretary to compile a bibliography from those cards but the project was never completed. The box, moreover, seemed to have disappeared. Fortunately, it was found in a careful search of his rooms after Fr. Ong's death. By consolidating these annotated cards and the published bibliographies of Ong's work, and by adding new items, Professor Thomas M. Walsh has compiled a much larger bibliography of more than 450 items. Dr. Walsh is now working with Technological Services to post the bibliography at the Ong Center website, and it will be available within the coming year. It will be updated every year, using additions and corrections submitted by other scholars, so that this will remain the definitive bibliography of Fr. Ong's work.

Conference

OUR first major event was a conference, "Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter Ong, S.J.," held at Saint Louis University in April 2005. Faculty members and students from throughout the university joined those who had come to St. Louis from as far away as Denver, Texas, and California. Because language—spoken and written, personal and communal—is fundamental to the theory of so many disciplines, and because Fr. Ong's theories of language and culture have had such a wide influence, 15 different academic units eagerly co-sponsored the conference, including the School of Law, the School of Public Service, the Department of Psychiatry and the Center for Healthcare Ethics in the School of Medicine, the College of Arts and Sciences and the following units within this College: American Studies, Modern and Classical Languages, Psychology, Philosophy, Theology, Political Science, History, Communication, English, and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Additional financial support was provided by generous grants from the Commerce Bank and the ICF Foundation.

Because we live in a world of human language, where it is sometimes said that "everything is a text," Walter Ong's theories of oral, manuscript, typographic, and electronic language have had enormous impact in their own right and in stimulating debate and new work by others. Building on the early suggestions of Marshall McLuhan, his teacher at Saint Louis University, Ong developed his own original ideas about print culture and mass media that have grown in influence. However, because scholars generally work within the confines of a disciplinary academic structure, many of those who are debating the value of his work for their own fields have little or no contact with similar scholars in other fields. Because Fr. Ong's research crosses so many disciplinary boundaries, there was no single conference that could accommodate the full community of scholars who are interrogating his ideas or working in his areas of interest. It was the purpose of this conference to bring them together and take the measure of Ong's work for the future of research in the humanities and the social sciences. The disciplinary diversity of the scholars who participated in this conference gave vivid human form to the diversity of Walter Ong's work and thought. For one man, many.

Because we all originate from a state without language, or infancy, and move to orality, our first entrance into culture is an entrance into language. We need to know what it means for a child to become literate, and what kinds of barriers exist in families and in the public sphere that impede children's literacy. Dr. Catherine Snow, Shattuck Professor of Education at Harvard, was invited to address the conference on that topic. Her co-works include *Talking to Children* (Snow & Ferguson, 1977), *Language and Literacy Environments in Preschools* (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1999), and *Literacy and Motivation* (Snow & Verhoeven, 2001).

Society changes as handwriting enters culture, then print, then electronic media. The importance of Ong's ideas in the study of oral tradition is apparent in the work of John Miles Foley, who spoke about his current research. Professor Foley (2002) is perhaps best known for his theories of "how to read an oral poem." The work of Werner Kelber (1983, 1997) shows that the Bible, far from being an entirely written and stable "book," must be interpreted at the intersection of oral and literate cultures. Their work shows how identity can be culturally shaped, repressed, or liberated by a dominant technology.

Walter Ong's future influence may perhaps be greater in the field of media and technology studies. Ong studied the full range of cultural practices involved in the technologies of representation, mediation, and communication; he explored the meaning of everything from oral performance arts to the development of digital communication, establishing a fundamental paradigm for studying the impact of technology on our "cultural epistemology" or way of thinking. This was the subject of Lance Strate's (2005) paper on Ong and media ecology.

Issues that are important to historians of print are being revised and extended by critics who interpret electronic communication, and some of the liveliest panels and conversations centered on issues of contemporary cyberculture and electronic media. Like Lance Strate, C. Jan Swearingen and Kathleen Welch discuss orality in a postliterate age when oral language is resurgent but has gone oddly unremarked except for Walter Ong's theory of *secondary orality*. The quest for truth in such a world of language is the topic Swearingen (1991) addresses in the book, *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies*. Kathleen Welch (1999) is the author of *Electric Rhetoric*, which describes the tensions that result when language and electronic technology collide. It is commonly argued that the role of English composition is to "empower" the student through the development of a personal "voice" in language. This kind of secondary orality needs analysis, both as a goal and as a value, for it may be that what students and other writers need is a set of "voices" with which they can choose to act in language.

One of Walter Ong's most well-known essays was "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction" (Ong, 1975), a provocative title that was adapted by Tod Chambers, Professor of Medicine and Medical Humanities at Northwestern University. Dr. Chambers, a leading medical ethicist, surveyed several works of medical ethics to show how the authors choose or create different audiences for their work (different in age, gender, social status, and, therefore, different in their assumptions about disease and healthcare). He examined those elements that are generally ignored by readers even as they are manipulated into sharing the author's assumptions and values.

If the acquisition of language enables us to enter culture, the acquisition of language also enables us to acquire a sense of self. In Ong's (1982b) words, "Writing restructures consciousness" (p. 78). Roy Schafer, a distinguished psychoanalytic theorist, has

redefined psychoanalytic theory to describe the action and agency of the person in language, especially in the exchange of narratives that is the action of psychoanalysis. His major work, *A New Language for Psychoanalysis* (Schafer, 1976), critiques rigid theoretical language that fails to describe the complexities of psychological experience. In other books, such as *Language and Insight* (Schafer, 1978), *Narrative Actions in Psychoanalysis* (Schafer, 1981), *Re-telling a Life: Narration and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis* (Schafer, 1992), and *Insight and Interpretation* (Schafer, 2003), he examines the particularities of oral exchange in the psychoanalytic encounter and unfolds in written description the complexities of spoken language. The role of oral exchange in a literate culture, in which formulas or idioms from written works often enter into oral utterance, offers problematic instances of community that fosters or inhibits selfhood. This approach reverses the arrow of development, instancing the kind of recursive behavior that challenges our frequent presumption of linearity.

The relationship between selfhood and community is a major concern of Fr. Ong in such works as *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ong, 1977) and has been debated in the work of such major political philosophers as Charles Taylor, one of the most important political philosophers of our day. The conference concluded with a plenary lecture by Charles Taylor, who has mapped the idea of the modern self in *Sources of the Self* (Taylor, 1989) and other major works, and who now is a Professor of Law as well as Philosophy at Northwestern University. Professor Taylor focused on the “conversational turn” in Fr. Ong’s work, in a talk that dramatized the personal in the conversational. He extended into philosophy the “conversational turn” in Roy Schafer’s account of complex psychoanalytic narrative conversations.

The conference was designed to address critical issues of language, literacy, voice, and culture, probing relationships between personal language and cultural rhetorics. The tension between person and culture is variously experienced in each kind of culture: oral, manuscript, print, and electronic. The organizers believe that the study of language as a personal and a communal action has been fractured into different disciplines, and that the various practitioners have much to learn from each other. This conference was designed to make that kind of exchange possible in formal and informal settings, in plenary sessions and small seminars, with panel discussions designed to debate issues of language that were suggested in Walter Ong’s work.

In every area—media, consciousness studies, Renaissance literature, communication theory, philosophy of self, psychology, Biblical studies, the history of print culture, and cultural analysis—language is the crucial term. Whatever his particular project, Ong always took language as his starting point for inquiry, which was properly the focal point of this conference. Many of his ideas have been challenged by others; bringing those challenges to the fore should make it possible to consider his work and give impetus to new thinking. To name just a few: How might a sense of oral language influence our ideas about “textuality”? What are the links between print culture and cyberculture? What is the relationship between communal language and personal language? The organizers of the conference deliberately included panelists who were asked to survey the challenges that have been made. Some of these challenges result from a misreading or misinterpretation—for example, that Walter Ong was a “primitivist” or, on the contrary, that he posited a “great divide” between oral and print culture that left oral cultures

“behind.” Ong himself often differed from other scholars, notably Jacques Derrida, whose ideas of language and presence Ong dismissed as counter-intuitive.

One highlight of the conference was a panel of personal reminiscences by his students and colleagues. Fr. John Padberg, S.J., shared his reminiscences of Fr. Ong’s life in the Jesuit community, Professor Thomas Walsh recalled his experiences as his student, and Professor Vincent Casaregola expressed gratitude for the support he and his family received. People spoke from the floor as well, sharing their experience of Walter Ong’s care, his enthusiasm, and his demands for more and better thinking.

Professor James Scott, a Professor of English and Film Studies, filmed the conference for the archives. The DVD is complete except for the lecture by Dr. Tod Chambers, which unfortunately was scheduled in a different site on campus. A set of six DVDs is now available for purchase through the Saint Louis University Department of English. A book of conference proceedings, which will include Tod Chambers’ essay, is being prepared for publication by Hampton Press.

The Walter J. Ong, S.J., Center

WE are planning a Research Center to serve as the sponsor and locus of research and events. The center will honor Fr. Ong’s legacy in the capacious terms appropriate to his own wide-ranging ideas and interests. We do not envision a narrow application or clarification of his ideas. Rather, we will attempt to support creative, challenging scholarship in media theory, literature and language, psychology, social sciences, philosophy, theology, and other fields of interest to Fr. Ong and to contemporary scholars. We are interested in supporting their ideas and want to provide a place where significant debate, scholarship, and praxis can flourish.

We are currently raising funds for an annual Walter J. Ong Memorial Lecture, which will bring to campus a major scholar in a field important to Fr. Ong. We also plan to raise endowed funds to support release-time fellowships for Saint Louis University faculty members and graduate students. We look forward to hosting colloquia, receptions, and celebrations, including co-sponsoring events with the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Visual Culture Program, the Film Studies Program, and academic departments throughout Saint Louis University. The Director, local Advisory Council, and National Advisory Board will be joined by a community organization, Friends of the Walter Ong Center, to organize these events.

We hope to schedule a major conference every three years and have already begun planning a conference for spring 2008. This conference will examine “Languages Past and Future: Film-Fantasy-Technology” and will honor Dr. Tom Shippey, the Walter J. Ong, S.J., Professor of the Humanities, who is a prominent Tolkien scholar and who was a consultant to the recent film trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*. It is our hope to bring to campus other people associated with these films. We also hope to work with the Dean of Parks College of Engineering and Technology, the committee organizing the Walter J. Ong Digital Media Center at Saint Louis University, and faculty in visual studies and film studies in sponsoring this conference.

We also envision a conference on the language and rhetoric of the Renaissance, to be co-sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies as well as literature departments at Saint Louis University. In studying culture, Walter Ong began with the

language and rhetoric of the Renaissance. The panels and seminars in this conference concerned with literary study can be traced to Ong's work in Renaissance literature and culture: his magisterial book, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Ong, 1958), his essay on "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style" (Ong, 1965), and his impeccable scholarly edition of Milton's *Art of Logic* (Ong, 1982a). At the same time, of course, his study of literature ranged widely. Whether studying Renaissance structures of thought or Hopkins's theory of sprung rhythm in poetry, scholars still cite his work to debate the echo of oral language and the illusion of the spoken word in print and cyberspace, and ponder whether speech is the foundation or the goal of written language. Works of literary scholarship, including Paul Acker's (1998) *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse* and John Miles Foley's (2002) *How to Read an Oral Poem*, document different ways of negotiating the relationships between oral and written cultures.

Another future conference might compare what language acquisition means in oral, literate, and "postliterate" societies. We know that the existence of transnational, multilingual societies often place children in a situation of being versed in one language and ignorant of another, of being at once literate and illiterate. The consequence of these complex and conflicted literacies is a major concern of scholars who specialize in contemporary rhetoric and writing. In discussing these literacies, the power of print culture must be addressed. Although we live in an electronic era, the technology of the book still exerts enormous force. The book moved from luxury to necessity, from a tool of social change to a tool of established culture and access to authority, and is only now being modified or challenged by electronic cybertexts that are beyond authority or that may constitute a new kind of authority.

No one can duplicate Walter Ong, and he never wanted anyone to try. He did hope that others would develop theories to foster understanding of our culture and its languages. What he would have wanted for himself and for us is the opportunity to share and develop ideas, to debate common assumptions, to ask important questions. It is our hope that the Walter J. Ong Center will be a place where those conversations can occur.

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