

From Homer to hip-hop: A tribute to Walter J. Ong

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The Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong (1912-2003), a pupil of Marshall McLuhan, studied the evolution of human consciousness via the history of communication. The following article reflects on the legacy of his explorations from the "purely oral" to the "multimedia carnival" of today.

Othello was no ordinary wife-killer.

Usually a murderous husband will slaughter his mate in a blind and inarticulate rage. Yet there is nothing inarticulate in that great and terrible scene in Shakespeare's play where Othello strangles his wife Desdemona after being wrongly convinced that she was unfaithful to him. To be sure, by this point in the play Othello's mind has already been warped and poisoned by the machinations of his underling Iago, yet even in his mental fog Othello remains supremely eloquent, a man who uses words to understand and shape experience.

As he enters Desdemona's chambers, where she lies sleeping, Othello sees a burning light. This sets him off on a beautiful soliloquy, full of tortured doubt, on the difference between blowing out a light (an act easy to reverse) and extinguishing a human soul (an irrevocable deed). When Desdemona awakens, husband and wife talk at length, although at cross-purposes, about guilt and judgment (both human and divine). Only after these agonizing moments of discourse and dialogue is Desdemona killed.

Living in a visual culture, we are struck by the fact that the death of Desdemona is very slow and talky. Any Hollywood hack could draft a scene that moves more quickly — perhaps with tight close-ups on Othello's hands and Desdemona's neck. Yet for Othello, no less than his creator Shakespeare, death without speechmaking is almost unthinkable.

As the literary critic Hugh Kenner once noted, Othello, like all of Shakespeare's heroes, was imbued with a gift highly prized by Renaissance gentlemen: copiousness, the ability to take command over language even in moments of crisis and pain. To be sure, most Shakespearean characters have the gift of speech, but the great heroes (notably Hamlet and Lear) are particularly distinguished by their powers of oratory. They are never at a loss for words and always find phrases to embody their perceptions and feelings.

Shakespeare lived in a deeply oral culture, although one in which print technology was encroaching. Of course he went to school where he learned to read, as well as picking up his little Latin and less Greek. "Shakespeare and his contemporaries were trained in writing" but what they wrote consisted largely if not indeed entirely of bits of pieces of things designed to be incorporated into orations," noted the late Walter Ong, who was among other achievements a great scholar of the Renaissance. "Humanists patterned even letters quite commonly on combative oratorical models. The universities remained even more oral, filled with disputation and declamation."

Shakespeare rarely spelled his name the same way twice, since letters were not yet firmly tied to words. And the world around him was a din of spoken words: from street-corner preachers to courtiers quick to flatter, everyone around Shakespeare was talking all the time. In this world, personal eloquence, possessing the "winged words" that Homer sang of, was a mark of distinction. For himself, Shakespeare rebuilt his family's dwindling fortune by becoming a lord of the living language.

We inhabit a very different world. Our leaders tend to halt and stammer unless they have a speechwriter's text (often on a teleprompter) in front of them. Humanity has gone through a long journey from the purely oral universe of Homer (who lived before the written word was invented)

to the mixed oral and print world of Shakespeare to the heavily textual environment of James Joyce to our own multimedia carnival.

To understand how we got from there to here, and what the journey has meant, the best guide is the work of Father Ong, the great Jesuit scholar who died in 2003 at age ninety. With remarkable erudition and sweeping scholarship, Ong illuminated not merely the history of communication but also what he called "the evolution of consciousness". Explicating everything from Renaissance textbooks to subway graffiti, sometime focusing tightly on a single poem while on other occasions briskly leaping through centuries, Ong was one of the great intellectuals of the last century. Much cherished by specialists, he deserves a larger audience among general readers.

Early years of study

Born to a devout Roman Catholic family in Kansas City in 1912, Ong spent his early youth working for newspapers and printers before joining the Society of Jesus in 1935. In 1938, while pursuing a master's degree in English at St. Louis University, Ong met Marshall McLuhan, a young professor from Canada who had converted to Catholicism the previous year. Meeting McLuhan was perhaps the single most important event in Ong's intellectual life.

McLuhan would later become famous as a media guru – widely celebrated and reviled in the 1960s as a prophet of the death of books and the rise of television. Yet this popular image does a great disservice to McLuhan, a complex thinker who fruitfully linked the study of technology with the humanist concerns of literary criticism and broad spiritual questions.

In his early years as a teacher, long before his rise to fame, McLuhan was supremely gifted as a mentor. He excited the imagination of bright young students like Ong by confidently linking together disparate phenomena, ranging from modernist art to neo-Thomist theology, into a single worldview. Around himself in these years McLuhan gathered a circle of fledgling scholars, largely but not exclusively Roman Catholics, who were eager to join in his quest to make sense of the modern techno-communication landscape (what we now, thanks in part to McLuhan, call "the media").

Aside from Ong, McLuhan's circle included Hugh Kenner, who would go on to become the most sure-footed explicator of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and literary modernism generally, and – from a slightly younger generation – Neil Postman, later to gain fame as a penetrating cultural critic. As it happened, Ong, Kenner, and Postman all died in the same year, marking the end of the first generation of McLuhan-influenced studies. In some ways, McLuhan's students outdid their master. The critic Guy Davenport once described McLuhan as a "half-made genius – one of those strange figures whose brilliance can be articulated by others though not by themselves." Davenport has a strong point, since the best evidence of McLuhan's intellectual merit can be found in books by Ong and Kenner, both superbly clear writers who made fruitful use of their mentor's ideas.

Looking back to his time as a student at St. Louis University in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ong recalled that one of the innovations McLuhan practiced as a teacher was his willingness to bring to the study of popular culture "the sophistication once reserved for the study of high culture". The techniques used by anthropologists in addressing so-called primitive peoples were being used to study the societies in which the anthropologists had grown up. Ong went on to argue that McLuhan's willingness to see culture as a whole derived from his Catholic faith: "He took for granted that everything in creation hangs together through all levels and that probing all connections is worthwhile." Ong followed McLuhan's lead and in the late 1940s wrote one of the earliest academic studies of comic books.

Ong's earliest essays on popular culture were harshly critical, as were similar essays in the same period by McLuhan and Kenner. In 1941, Ong claimed that Mickey Mouse ("Mr. Disney's West-Coast rodent") was an example of "a secularism which has eaten the marrow out of our national culture by isolating religious and moral consideration from everything except the most private

departments of each individual's life. And our being so taken with Mickey's vacuous existence is a tacit acknowledgement of our own weakness. In 1945, Ong argued that Superman and other superheroes appealed to fascistic power fantasies – an argument McLuhan would echo in his first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951).

Yet very quickly, the members of the McLuhan circle began to become more appreciative of their subject, finding possibilities for creativity and even liturgical beauty in a mass culture aimed at a broad audience. A decade after lambasting Mickey Mouse Ong celebrated Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, noting that the linguistic playfulness of the strip represented a popularization of the high modernism of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein.

Tradition vs. change

In their evolving attitudes toward popular culture, the McLuhan circle anticipated dramatic changes within Catholicism. The middle decades of the 20th century were an exciting time to be a Catholic intellectual – Vatican II was gestating, but there was great uncertainty as to how the church should deal with the modern world. Thoughtful Catholics felt the competing tug of tradition and change.

Some Catholics wanted their church to pull up the drawbridges and prepare for a long siege against a hostile world. Others pressed the church to embrace modernity indiscriminately. Perhaps the glory of McLuhan and his circle was that they avoided the temptations of these competing positions: they went in for neither the recriminatory nostalgia of the conservatives nor the faddish novelty-seeking of the progressives. Rather, they wrote as open-minded analysts, trying to figure out exactly why the modern world was changing and what could be held on to and even recovered in a turbulent era.

McLuhan, Ong, Kenner, and others in their circle worked in a wide variety of academic disciplines – before "interdisciplinary" became a trendy scholarly word, they knew that any understanding of the modern world would require a polymath's wide-ranging view. Ong, in particular, was learned in an impressive range of fields, including intellectual history, literary theory, psychology, and evolutionary biology.

But while their interests were enormously wide-ranging, Ong and McLuhan both focused on one area of human activity: communication. They hoped to map out the changing boundaries of human thought by tracing the shift from the world of oral communication (the songs of Homer and biblical proverbs meant to be stored in memory) to script (the world of ancient and medieval culture) to print (the Gutenberg revolution) to electronic information (television and computer).

Ong carried out his research in a series of books and countless essays. The single most accessible introduction to his work is his book *Orality and Literacy* (1982), a slim but idea-packed work which sums up a lifetime's reflection.¹ For Ong, human history has seen an evolution from primary orality (the initial stage which used to be known condescendingly as pre-literate) to the onset of literacy with chirography (script writing). The world of primary orality is holistic, while chirographic culture is more analytical but also more alienated. Oral culture places primary value on the sense of hearing while chirographic culture has a bias towards the visual.

Drawing on the work of the classicist Eric Havelock, Ong notes that "Plato's entire epistemology was unwittingly a programmed rejection of the old oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture (represented by the poets, whom he would not allow into his Republic). The Platonic ideas are voiceless, immobile, devoid of all warmth, not interactive but isolated, not part of the human lifeworld at all but utterly above and beyond it."

The effects of literacy were intensified with typography (print), while electronic technology brings about a new era of secondary orality: "This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. But it is essentially more deliberate and self-conscious,

based permanently on the use of writing and print.?

What is deeply impressive about Ong's account, aside from the vast buttress of learning that supports it, is the author's balance and measure in examining crucial and controversial changes in human history. Some romantics nostalgically long for the old oral culture, filled with noble savages living close to nature. Technophiles believe that any new development means human betterment. Ong transcended the oversimplifications of these starkly opposed positions.

In looking at the change from oral culture to the world of literacy, Ong achieves a beautiful equipoise. As Ong notes, those who live in oral cultures are deeply torn by the promise and peril of literacy. "This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world," Ong observes. "We have to die to continue living."

The essential Ong

This reflective and deeply fair-minded evaluation of loss and gain is characteristic of the essential Ong. One of his favorite words was "irenic". He frequently noted that the old oral world was polemical and agonistic (because it was based on face-to-face disputes), while print encourages us to be more "irenic" (since writing leads to interior reflection). I'm not convinced that writing absolutely makes people more irenic – certainly the world is still filled with shrill polemical writers. But Walter Ong was above all an irenic writer.

Within the secular academy, Ong earned a wary respect. Because of the solidity of his research and the sweep of his ideas, he was widely esteemed. He served as the President of the Modern Language Association, the world's largest body of scholars, in 1977. Yet Ong's faith made some nervous. The literary critic Thomas Edwards once anxiously joked that "Remembering the fate of Titus Oates, I stop short of charging that McLuhan is engaged with Father Ong [and] Hugh Kenner – in some sinister Popish Plot against secular consciousness."

Perhaps his faith contributed to his poise and good nature. He had a true Christian confidence in the goodness of creation, an unwavering conviction that anything made by God, including human consciousness, is worthy of careful and loving attention. Above all, his writing is powerfully suggestive. It has a way of setting off reverberations in your head, so that after reading him you look at everything – from the agonistic bravado of hip-hop to the high rhetoric of Shakespeare – with new eyes.

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Note

1 Another good starting-point is *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, ed. Paul A. Soukup and Thomas J. Farrell (Hampton Press, 2002).

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