

Walter J. Ong's *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Yale University Press, 1967)

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Review of Walter J. Ong's *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Yale University Press, 1967).

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My favorite scholar is the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University (SLU), the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri. Over the years, I took five courses in English from Father Ong at SLU.¹

Because Ong was a Jesuit priest, it is not surprising that religious themes are prominent in most of Ong's books (1957, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1986, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, and 1999), but not in all of his books (not in 1958a, 1958b, 1971, 1977, 1981, 1982, and 2002).

Now, by contrast with Ong's massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse [in Ancient and Medieval Western Manuscript Culture] to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason in Western Print Culture]*, Ong's admirably lucid seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University, is written for generalists who are interested in Western cultural history.² In it, he regularly uses generically masculine terms such as "man" and the like. In any event, it has been translated into Italian, French, and Korean.

Ong's most widely translated book is his 1982 streamlined book *Orality and Literacy: The technologizing of the Word*, which was published in the New Accents series in literary studies, has been translated into eleven other languages: Italian, Romanian, Spanish, German, Swedish, Japanese, Polish, Turkish, Korean, Greek, and Chinese. However, because Ong's seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word* includes discussion of religion, broadly conceived, it is far more comprehensive in scope than his streamlined 1982 book *Orality and Literacy* is.

In any event, Ong's seminal 1967 book is so comprehensive and so complex that it would be impossible for me to summarize adequately – that is, in a summary that does justice to its complexity and comprehensiveness and to the suppleness of Ong's mind. Consequently, I will settle here for simply highlighting it – while acknowledging that I am not aiming here to capture its comprehensiveness.

But first a word is in order about Ong's life and times. He entered the Jesuit novitiate in Florissant, Missouri, in the fall of 1935. On November 30, 1935, he turned 23. As part of his lengthy Jesuit formation, he earned graduate degrees in philosophy and in theology at Saint Louis University. At that time, and around the world at that time in Roman Catholic circles,

Thomism enjoyed the most extraordinary status in the Roman Catholic Church as a result of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) promoting the work of St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274). (The pope's 1879 encyclical in Latin is available in English and other languages at the Vatican's website.)

However, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church officially demoted Thomism a wee bit from the extraordinary status it had enjoyed in the twentieth century up to that time. For Ong's learned references to Aquinas in his seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word*, see the "Index" (p. 345); for Ong's references to the Second Vatican Council, see the "Index" (p. 358).³

Now, Ong's massively researched 1958 book *RMDD* is about the history of the verbal arts of logic (also known as dialectic) and rhetoric in Western culture up the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572). Ong's massively researched 1958 book *RMDD* is written for Renaissance specialists. It is Ong's pioneering study of the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged there in the mid-1450s.

In 2004, the University of Chicago Press re-issued Ong's massively researched 1958 book in a new paperback edition with a "Foreword" by Adrian Johns (pp. v-xiii). Now, in the early 1960s, three important books were published:

- (1) Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960), the book that launched a thousand studies of oral tradition in literary studies;
 - (2) Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), a pioneering study of the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged there in the mid-1450s;
 - (3) Eric A. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963), a book that Ong never tired of touting.
- Ong's reviews of these three important books are reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 301-306, 307-308, and 309-312, respectively).

Highlights of Ong's Seminal 1967 Book

Ong's seminal 1967 book unfolds in the following six chapters, each of which is subdivide into carefully designated subsections:

- Chapter 1: "The Word and the Sensorium" (pp. 1-16);
- Chapter 2: "Transformations of the Word" (pp. 17-110);
- Chapter 3: "Word as Sound" (pp. 111-175);
- Chapter 4: "The Word as History: Sacred and Profane" (pp. 176-191);
- Chapter 5: "The Word and the Quest for Peace" (pp. 192-286);
- Chapter 6: "Man's Word and God's Presence" (pp. 287-324).

In Ong's "Readings" (pp. 324-344), he says, "The list includes a few relevant works not referred to specifically in the text" (p. 326), and he also says, "Some items in these readings are briefly annotated when annotation is especially called for" (p. 326) – as, for example, in the case of works by the French Jesuit anthropologist Marcel Jousse (pp. 335-336). Ong's "Index" (pp. 345-360) is quite detailed and helpful.

I should call attention to the following three books by Marcel Jousse that are now available in English:

(1) *The Oral Style*, translated from the French by Edgard Sienaert and Richard Whitaker (1990);

(2) *In Search of Coherence: Introducing Marcel Jousse's Anthropology of Mimism*, editing, translations, and introductions by Edgard Sienaert (2016);

(3) *Memory, Memorization, and Memorizers: The Galilean Oral-Style Tradition and Its Traditions*, texts selected, edited, and translated by Edgard Sienaert (2018).

In any event, Ong subdivides each chapter into adroitly named subsections, which are identified in the table of "Contents" (pp. xiii-xiv) – and the subheadings are conveniently duplicated atop the pages of the chapter. At times, he even further subdivides certain subsections. I admire Ong's ability to subdivide and focus his thought in his various subsections. As expansive as his discussions are in the various subsections, he has admirably structured the presentation of his wide-ranging thought.

Now, in Ong's subsection titled "Attitudes toward Scripture and tradition" (pp. 265-277), he says that "the Middle Ages were themselves overwhelmed with orality. They did not advert to the problem of oral tradition largely because they never considered the possibility of anything other than a culture as oral as their own" (p. 268).

Subsequently, in the same subsection, Ong says, "The Catholic answer to the Protestant *sola scriptura* equally registers the new structures of the typographic age [that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged there in the mid-1450s]. The [Catholic] answer was basically the definition in the council of Trent [1545-1563] that divine truth and teaching is contained in the written books of the Bible and in 'unwritten traditions' (*sine scripto traditionibus* – Denziger 783). Since the relationship of the Scriptures and tradition has been further discussed in the Second Vatican Council, it has become commonplace knowledge today that, as Josef Rupert Geiselman had earlier shown, Trent had put aside the formula 'partly in the Scriptures and partly in tradition' in favor of the more simple statement 'in the Scriptures and in unwritten traditions. By doing so, it was made possible for Catholics to hold, as do Geiselman, Gerald Van Ackeren, and many others reported in Van Ackeren's study 'Is All Revelation in Scripture?' that all revelation is contained in each of the two, because the two are different modes of expression and communication. The partly . . . partly would have encouraged thinking of revelation as portioned out in two different places or depositories, conceived to be of more or less the same kind. In short, the partly . . . partly formulation would have encouraged thinking of tradition itself by analogy with writing, rather than as something of a different order. It would have encouraged thinking of tradition as a kind of second volume of the Bible which Catholics somehow kept hidden from their Protestant brethren" (pp. 275-276).

Ong also says, "Trent's actual formulation was less favorable to such thinking, but to no avail. For, by and large, post-Tridentine Catholic theologians, who were also post-Gutenberg men, conceived of tradition just this way: by analogy with a written text. Recent studies by Charles Baumgartner and Walter J. Burghardt have made it clear that post-Tridentine Catholic theologians experienced great difficulty in conceding of tradition as truly unwritten. The drive under which we still labor today to consider communication as ideally written was already making itself clearly felt" (pp. 276-277).

Ong's conclusion is sobering: "Thus, in a curious way, Catholic theologians registered the

impact of typography in their thinking quite as discernibly as did Protestants, but in a different fashion. If the Protestant insistence on the recorded word (the Bible) reflected the organization of the post-Gutenberg sensorium, the Catholic theologians' explanation of Trent's position reflected the same organization (which Trent's position had actually transcended). The word appeared to the [Gutenberg] age to be necessarily at its best when anchored in space" (p. 277; for specific page references to the key term sensorium, see the "Index" [p. 356]; figuratively speaking, the sensorium can perhaps be likened to an inner gyroscope; for Ong, shifts in the sensorium are accompanied by shifts in personality structures).

Subsequently, Ong says, "The current renewal in the Roman Catholic Church decreed by the Second Vatican Council in its Constitutions of the Liturgy and on the Church stresses the use of the spoken word as never before, in keeping with the spirit of the times" (p. 294).

For Vatican II's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy and its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, see the above-mentioned 2012 book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S.J. (pp. 29-78 and 100-188, respectively). For a study of the Council of Trent, see the late American Jesuit church historian John W. O'Malley's book *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (2013).

Words of Wisdom from Ong's Seminal 1967 Book

In Ong's 1957 book *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture*, he reflects at length of what maturity means in his lengthy essay "The Renaissance Myth and the American Catholic Mind" (pp. 52-85). He says, "However, despite this handicap, the fact is that the context in which literature is approached within the educational system in the United States as compared to that within the Renaissance milieu is a context of relative maturity, at least with regard to the students' mere numerical age. Now, it is a fact that, while education necessarily involves both indoctrination and the development of a mature and open mind, younger students require proportionately more indoctrination and older students more encouragement not simply to acquire facts but to see large problems in all their fullness, even when the best answers devisable are incomplete. Maturity is not achieved until a person has the ability to face with some equanimity into the unknown. . . . But what was lacking to the Renaissance, from the twentieth century point of view, was a sense of literature as exploratory, as facing into the unknown" (pp. 81-82).

Subsequently, Ong says that "it would be the height of folly to face into the future without knowing where one has come from out of the past. . . . there is no way to avoid facing into the future . . . a facing into the unknown . . . where the unknown is faced and decisions made and the work of the Incarnation and Redemption thus carried on" (p. 83).

For Ong, literature must be viewed "as an initiation to the twentieth century and to the past as present here and as facing into the future. . . . But the human race itself, in some mysterious way, matures by living its way through time, and our sense of history – which is a sense of maturity – has advanced beyond what it was [in the Renaissance]. . . . There can be no mature appreciation of any point in past artistic or literary achievement independent of an ability to identify and evaluate corresponding points in the present. . . . one's understanding of the present is proportionate to one's understanding of the past which is part of it" (p. 84).

Now, in Ong's seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, he reflects further on what maturity means. He says, "Both the psychosexual stages and the media stages are concerned with maturity. Which includes always some kind of accumulation. Maturity does not escape from its past but rather structures it. It is noteworthy that the present electronic age, with its massive modes of storage and retrieval of what is essentially past experience, exhibits a kind of maturity resembling the psychological maturity of the individual" (pp. 104-105; also see pp. 102, 295, and 303).

Ong also delineates (p. 105) both the eight stages of psychosexual development and the eight characteristic interior crises of each stage that Erik H. Erikson describes in his book *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed., 1963). Ong identifies stage eight with maturity, including its characteristic interior crises that Erikson frames as ego integrity versus despair.

Taking hints from Ong, I discuss Erikson's stage eight and related material in my 1991 essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991, pp. 194-209).

Now, in Ong's subsection "Communications Media and the Freudian Psychosexual Stages" (pp. 92-110), he also says, "The lack of exact correspondence between the verbal media stages and the psychosexual stages makes it clear that the two are not direct reflections of each other, although they have some things in common. Other correspondences could most probably be worked out in more detail. . . . There appears no particular reason why the psychological development of an individual human being should provide an exact model for describing the development of the communications media" (pp. 105 and 106).

In Ong's subsection "The Presence of Man and the Openness of the Word" (pp. 298-304), he says, "Today intimacy must co-exist with greater openness. It is distinctive of matured technological man that he must and can maintain a large number of contacts which are decently personal and yet relatively non-committal. One of the achievements of technological, urban society has been to develop personality structures capable of doing just this" (p. 303). Ong next turns to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). He then says that "love can and should be shown not only to those close to us but also to casual acquaintances and strangers, to those one merely stumbles upon" (p. 304).

In Ong's seminal 1967 book, he also enlightens us about conspiracy theories. In Ong's subsection "Second Stage: The Denatured Word – Alphabet and Print" (pp. 35-53), he says, "Often resort is had to a conspiratorial theory of intellectual history: until the mind was 'liberated,' certain persons or groups of persons – churchmen, most likely, and possibly schoolteachers, or just ignorant people in general – imposed the deductive and authoritarian attitudes [of pre-alphabetic oral-aural peoples] because this somehow or other served their purposes. We know that conspiratorial theories accounting for complex historical developments have their origin within the psyches of those who propose them rather than in verifiable fact" (p. 50).

In Ong's subsection "The Word in a State of Peace" (pp. 255-262), he says, "It is true, of course, that some old tendencies linger in technological cultures. Virtue-vice analyses of essentially non-moral forces, often in the form of conspiracy theories of history, crop out here and there even in 'developed' countries, particularly among groups composed of

psychologically disturbed individuals unable to adjust to technological culture” (p. 256). Also in Ong’s subsection “The Word in a State of Peace,” he says, “Virtue-vice polarized cultures, when they use electronic media, typically resort to the radio rather than television. Radio is cheaper and easier, but it also keeps the culture more totally in the world of sound. In the hands of Castro, the radio exploits to the maximum the old oral-aural structures, building up around the hearer the resonances, personalist loyalties, strong social or tribal feelings and responses, and special anxieties (including the beserker syndrome [see pp. 132 and 301]) characteristic of the old oral-aural world. Television tends to fragment the tribe into individuals, even though not very reflective ones” (pp. 257-258).

Now, in Ong’s subsection “Third Stage: Electronics” (pp. 87-92), he says, “Relying on the theorem that tribal life was basically oral-aural and thus rooted in constant interchange of communally possessed knowledge, and that writing and print isolate the individual or, if you prefer, liberate him from the tribe, Marshall McLuhan has described our present situation as that of a global village. And that it is. But a global village is not a tribal village.

“There is a vast difference between tribal existence and our own, for tribal man either did not yet know or at least had not yet fully assimilated writing and print. Present electronic culture, even with its activation of sound, relies necessarily on both. For the media in their succession do not cancel out one another but build on one another. When man began to write, he did not cease talking. Very likely, he talked more than ever; the most literate persons are often enough extraordinarily fluent oral verbalizer as well, although they speak somewhat differently from the way purely oral man does or did. When print was developed, man did not stop writing. Quite the contrary: only with print did it become imperative that everybody learn to write – universal literacy, knowledge of reading and writing, has never been the objective of manuscript cultures but only of print cultures. Now that we have electronic communication, we shall not cease to write and print. Technological society in the electronic stage cannot exist without vast quantities of writing and print. Despite its [i.e., electronic communication’s] activation of sound, it prints more than ever before. One of the troubles with electronic computers themselves is that often the printout is so vast that it is useless: there are not enough attendants to read more than a fraction of it” (pp. 88-89).

The early Jesuits were part of the drive for “universal literacy, knowledge of reading and writing” that emerged in print culture in Europe. See the late American Jesuit church historian John W. O’Malley’s book *The First Jesuits* (1993).

Now, in Ong’s subsection “God’s ‘Silence’ and the Media” (pp.) in chapter 6: “Man’s Word and God’s Presence,” he offers astute comments about Martin Buber’s profound 1952 book. Ong says, “As suggested in chapter 1 [pp. 1-16], the state of the media may lie back of this persuasion [that “today’s media distract from the word of God’] as well as back of the Nietzschean protest that God is dead. Others, such as the late Martin Buber, have spoken of our age as one in which God is ‘silent.’ In his *Eclipse of God* [1952], taking up a statement of Sartre and giving it a more profound meaning than Sartre had intended, Buber refers to Isaiah 45:15 to suggest that God is one who not only reveals himself but conceals himself as well. Without impugning the depth and truth of Buber’s insight, we might recall that concealment and silence, though alike, are not exactly the same thing. Communication by voice thrives on concealment, for voice emerges from the interior, which is essentially concealed. One might

ask whether a feeling that God is silent might not on the one hand mean that God is communicating to man very much today, since his word is also like our silence, as noted in chapter 3 [pp. 111-175], and on the other hand might not be intimately connected with the reorganization of the sensorium which technological man has undergone and which is signaled by the countless transformations to which the word has been subjected [and the further transformations of the word since Ong's book was published in 1967]. If God's presence is to be known, it must be found while man is living in a newly arranged constellation of sensory apprehensions [i.e., in a newly arranged sensorium]" (p. 288).

Subsequently, in the same subsection, Ong says, "The current renewal in the Roman Catholic Church decreed in its Constitutions of the Liturgy and on the Church stresses the use of the spoken word as never before, in keeping with the spirit of the times. But does this attention to the spoken word in any way counteract what has been called the silencing of God? In one sense of course it does not. It does not force God to manifest himself. If God's manifestation of himself is something real, a personal encounter, as Hebrew and Christian tradition has made it out to be, it is of course beyond the power of man, as one person to the encounter and the finite one at that, to dictate on what occasions God will conceal himself and on what occasions he will make his presence felt, whether to an individual person or to any group of persons. Encounter is an action a deux. Insofar as it is a giving of person to person, it is a free act. In this sense, attention to the spoken word, however intent, cannot bring God to manifest himself. But this results in no crisis particular to our age. It is totally foreign to the Hebreo-Christian tradition to think in any age man has been able to make God manifest himself. To attempt to do so would be to substitute magic for faith. The scriptural term for such an action is 'tempting God' – trying to work an experiment with him" (pp. 294-295). Amen.

Now, Ong's admirably lucid 1967 book was reprinted in 2000 by Global Publications with a "Preface" by Thomas J. Farrell (pp. viii-xxvi).⁴

Notes

¹ I survey Ong's life and eleven of his books and selected articles in my introductory-level book *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, 2nd ed. (2015; 1st ed., 2000). In my OEN article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020), I have explained his philosophical thought in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse [in Ancient and Medieval Western Culture] to the Art of Reason [in Prestigious Philosophical Works in the Age of Reason]*. But also see my more recent somewhat lengthy OEN article "Paul A. Soukup, S.J., on a Media Ecology of Christian Theology" (dated December 24, 2022).

² The theme of presence is also discussed in the five following books: (1) George Steiner's *Real Presence* (1989); (2) Robert Sokolowski's *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (1994); (3) Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, translated from the German by Edmund Jephcott (1994); (4) Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, translated from the French by Mark Sebanc (1995); (5) Robert A. Orsi's *History of Presence* (2016).

³ It fell to Pope Paul VI to officially promulgate the documents of Vatican II. Subsequently, on July 25, 1968, he officially issued the controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which he re-affirmed the church's already controversial official opposition to artificial contraception – a controversy that Ong does not discuss in any of his publications. (The pope's 1968 encyclical is available in English and other languages at the Vatican's website.) The controversy over

Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical continues to this day. See Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler's 2023 article "Conservative defense of *Humanae Vitae* is not just about contraception" in the *National Catholic Reporter* (dated February 6, 2023). For recent English translations of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council, see the book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S.J. (2012). For a careful study of Vatican II, see the late American Jesuit church historian John W. O'Malley's book *What Happened at Vatican II* (2008). But we should not forget that the 1960s also included the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Protests against the Vietnam War were so fierce that President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election in 1968. At the 1968 national convention of the Democratic Party in Chicago, the Chicago police carried out a police riot against anti-war demonstrators. In 1966-1967, Ong was a member of the 14-person White House Task Force on Education that reported to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967. For further discussion of the late 1960s, see Mark Kurlansky's 2004 book *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*. In 1968, Saint Louis University celebrated the Sesquicentennial of its founding in 1818. Ong was selected to edit and contribute to the 1968 Sesquicentennial book *Knowledge and the Future of Man: An International Symposium* – to which Ong contributed the essay "Knowledge in Time" (pp. 3-38). Ong also contributed the essay "Communications Media and the State of Theology" to the Sesquicentennial conference on Theology in the City of Man, held October 15-17, 1968, at Saint Louis University. Both Ong's essay "Knowledge in Time" and his essay "Communications Media and the State of Theology" are reprinted in volume one of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1992a, pp. 127-153 and 154-174, respectively).

⁴ For a briefly annotated listing of Ong's 400 or so distinct publications (not counting translations or reprinting as distinct publications), see Thomas M. Walsh's "Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A bibliography 1929-2006" in the 2011 anthology *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (pp. 185-245). For a guide to certain themes in Ong's publications, and to selected related works, see my 2017 online resource document "A Concise Guide to Five Themes in Walter J. Ong's Thought, and Selected Related Works" that is available through the University of Minnesota's digital conservancy.

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