

Walter Jackson Ong, S.J.: A Biographical Portrait

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I'm interested in language because it's the meeting ground of . . . process and structure. . . . People in English label me philosophical. The people in philosophy seem to feel I'm philosophical but I think some of them tend to resent me because I don't do it the way some of them do. I'm constantly being misclassified. Or I'm asked to classify myself and I don't know how. Some people think I'm an anthropologist or a sociologist or a philosopher or a theologian. Occasionally a professor of French. In principle, I'm a professor of English, but in my own way. I don't particularly see why a person has to first classify himself and then do something. I've been told I teach and practice English. (From *The New Jesuits*, by George Riemer)

Studies in oral tradition, converging on insights from contemporary anthropology and other fields, are making evident the profound relationships between the personal and public aspects of our lives as human beings. The ways we are shaped by home and hearth as well as by more formal training significantly pattern the ways we perceive and interact with the world in which we live.

A survey of Walter Ong's personal and professional history seems to provide retrospectively a concrete and fitting example of what Ong himself has styled a "relationist" approach in scholarly work. Such relationist thinking is of course one of the hallmarks of his professional life, and one could conjecture that the familial and educational traditions to which he is heir have deeply grounded the sorts of perceptions of interconnectedness for which he is so well known. In some ways they mark him as both a distinctively American and yet uniquely cosmopolitan thinker and scholar.

Ong is an English name. The family of his father, Walter Jackson Ong, Sr., dates its American branch to the early



Walter Jackson Ong, S.J.
(photo by Daniel T. Magidson)

settlement of New England with the arrival in 1631 of Francis Ong in the Massachusetts Bay Colony on the same ship with Roger Williams. Grandfather Richard Marshall Ong was born in Ohio. After the Civil War, in which he had a brother in the Union Army and another in the Confederate, Richard moved to New Orleans, where he worked in business. Walter Ong senior was born there.

Ong's paternal grandmother, Mary Virginia (Jackson) Ong, born in New Orleans, came from Tennessee Scotch-Irish stock. She was the daughter of a physician and reared Ong's father in the Episcopalian tradition rather than in her husband's Methodism. Walter Sr. followed in his father's footsteps as a businessman. He was received into the Roman Catholic church toward the end of his life.

Ong's mother, Blanche Eugenia (Mense) Ong, born in Kansas City, Missouri, came from an entirely German Catholic background. Her mother, Sophia (Timmermann) Mense, was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Matthias Mense, was born in Germany and emigrated in his late teens to Washington, Missouri, where he co-founded an English-language newspaper, *The Franklin County Observer*, with his brother Ben. He later moved to Kansas City, Missouri, and founded a paving contracting business there. Ong's uncle Eugene Mense was for a short time a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*, and his younger brother, Richard Mense Ong, has spent his life in the printing and publishing business.

Walter Ong was born November 30, 1912, in Kansas City, Missouri, and he has characterized his family setting as filled with vitality, congeniality, and security coupled with a deeply religious spirit. His father's Southern heritage encouraged a focus on human relations, and Ong recalls comfortable associations with friends that were well-to-do and with poorer persons who were esteemed "both as poor and as persons." Intellectual and artistic pursuits were encouraged, yet, in Ong's words, "what our father and mother principally gave us two boys was the unselfish love they had for each other and for us. They would support us in our interests even though they didn't particularly share or even understand them."

Though he began in public school, Ong's formal education was in Catholic schools from fourth grade until his doctoral studies at Harvard. He edited the student newspapers at Rockhurst High School and Rockhurst College in Kansas City, Missouri. On

graduation from high school at the age of sixteen, he wrote a lengthy series of features for the metropolitan daily, the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, on his group's experiences in Europe at the 1929 worldwide Boy Scout Jamboree. While in college, he founded and edited a tabloid newspaper for his home parish. As a young boy, he had briefly attended the Kansas City Art Institute, and he did a good bit of art work later, including advertising posters. He also studied piano and organ. During college he worked in the summers as a lifeguard at a lake in Kansas City's Swope Park.

After graduation from college in 1933, in the midst of the depression, Ong took a job with the Southwest News Company, a branch of the American News Company which distributed magazines to most of the newstands nationwide. Later he joined the Quigley Lithographing Company, which operated one of the last stone lithograph presses in the country. When the company failed, he worked briefly for another publishing firm.

Ong entered the Society of Jesus on September 1, 1935 at the Missouri Province novitiate, St. Stanislaus Seminary, in Florissant, Missouri, near St. Louis. After the usual two years as a novice which culminated in his vows in the Society of Jesus, he proceeded to the "juniorate" for studies in the humanities (chiefly Latin, Greek, English, and history). As was common for those who had already finished college, this phase was reduced in his case from two years to one. Likewise, because his college work had included a considerable amount of philosophy, his study at the Jesuit philosophate at St. Louis University (1938-40) was also shortened to two years instead of the usual three. He received a licentiate in philosophy (1940) and an M.A. in English (1941) from that university. Ong's master's thesis on Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was directed by the late Marshall McLuhan, who taught at St. Louis University from 1937 to 1944. While studying there, Ong also taught part-time religion classes regularly to Black inner-city students and to young boys in a city correctional institution.

The Jesuit course of training normally included a few years of full-time teaching experience before theological studies began. From 1941-43 Ong taught English and French at Regis College in Denver. He then began four years of theology at St. Mary's College, St. Mary's, Kansas, the then displaced St. Louis University School of Divinity (the Jesuit Missouri Province theologate). He was listed at the time as an assistant in the St. Louis University

English department in order to teach English to foreign Jesuits in studies at St. Mary's. He also learned Spanish from Mexican Jesuits in the group.

Ong was ordained to the priesthood at St. Mary's on June 16, 1946. After another year of theology, he taught ethics in summer school at Rockhurst College and immediately afterwards began "tertianship," the year of prayer and directly spiritual ministry concluding the Jesuit priest's training, completing this year at the new tertianship building, the remodeled St. Joseph's Hall in Decatur, Illinois. He received the licentiate in theology (S.T.L.) from St. Louis University in 1948. The summer of the same year Ong taught moral theology at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa.

In autumn 1948 Ong began doctoral studies in English at Harvard, completing his oral comprehensives December 8, 1949. In spring 1950 he went to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship (he received a second Guggenheim for 1952-53) to research what became his doctoral dissertation on Peter Ramus, the sixteenth-century French philosopher and educational reformer, and Ramus' associate Omer Talon. The result was a 1700-page manuscript interpreting Ramus' significance and widespread influence, published in 1958 in two volumes by Harvard as *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue and Ramus and Talon Inventory*. The former, a classic in Renaissance studies, has been continuously in publication since 1958 and was in 1983 issued by Harvard University Press in paperback.

Ong spent the first part of his European sojourn in England. In November 1950 he moved to the Jesuit house of *Etudes* in Paris, where he lived across the hall from Père Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and read his works for the first time. In late November 1953, Ong returned to Harvard, completed his dissertation, and began teaching English in the autumn of 1954 at St. Louis University.

In 1959 Ong became Professor of English at St. Louis University and in 1970 Professor of Humanities in Psychiatry (co-directing a joint program for M.D.'s who were residents in Psychiatry and for invited Ph.D. students in English which he co-founded with the psychiatrist, the late Dr. Charles Hofling). In 1981 Ong was appointed University Professor of Humanities.

In addition to his academic work, Ong has devoted much time to direct priestly ministry at St. Louis University, regularly celebrating and preaching at masses in St. Francis Xavier (College)

Church, hearing confessions there and elsewhere, conducting a great many retreats based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola for students and others, and assisting in tutoring in inner-city University programs.

Outside St. Louis University, he has held a number of fellowships and visiting professorships, including the following: Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut (1961-62); visiting professor in English at the University of California-Santa Barbara (1960); and visiting lecturer at the University of Poitiers (1962).

Ong delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University (1963-64) which were published as *The Presence of the Word* (1967). He is a fellow of the Indiana University School of Letters (1965), was Berg Professor of English at New York University (1966-67), McDonald Lecturer at McGill University in Montreal (1967-68), Willett Visiting Professor in Humanities at the University of Chicago (1968-69), National Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa (1969-70), and visiting professor of Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis (1983-84). He was a resident fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Stanford, California (1973-74), gave the Messenger Lectures on the Evolution of Civilization at Cornell University (1979, published in 1981 as *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*) and the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto (1981, published in 1986 as *Hopkins, the Self and God*). He also delivered a series of twenty-six lectures, seminars, and videotapes in Zaïre, Cameroun, and Sénégal (in French) and in Nigeria (in English) on a tour sponsored by the United States Board of Foreign Scholarships (April-May 1974) to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fulbright academic foreign exchange program.

Ong has served in many learned societies and other educational bodies including: the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (advisory board); the National Humanities Faculty (chairman of the board and president); the Renaissance Society of America (advisory council); the Modern Language Association (president, 1978); the Modern Humanities Research Association; the National Council of Teachers of English; the Cambridge Bibliographical Society (England); the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (executive committee); the Milton Society of America (president, 1967); the

American Council of Learned Societies (regional associate); the National Fulbright Selection Committee for France (chairman, 1958); the White House Task Force on Education (1966-67); and the National Council on the Humanities (vice-chairman, 1971-74). He was made a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques by the government of France and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The editorial boards on which he has served include those of *Studies in English Literature, Philosophy and Rhetoric, Abstracts of English Studies, The English Literary Renaissance, Manuscripta, Thought, Oral Tradition*, and other learned journals.