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ORAL TRADITION

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Introduction

John Miles Foley

When a literary scholar thinks of the contribution of Walter J. Ong, S.J. to the academic community, and beyond that to the generations of students and readers who have learned from his lectures and writings, one tends naturally to recall landmark books like *The Presence of the Word*, *Interfaces of the Word*, *Orality and Literacy*, and *Hopkins, the Self, and God*. His close relation, the scholar of oral traditions, will think of these same works and others, though probably from a slightly different perspective; for Walter Ong has in many ways liberated us from the cultural myopia he terms "chirographic bias," made it possible for us to understand the world of orality from the inside and to "see" how that world is in part still with us.

Readers of *Oral Tradition* will need no introduction to these aspects of Father Ong's achievement, but they may be surprised, as I was, to learn that his writings have permanently affected numerous other major constituencies in the arts and sciences. As the present collection bears out, Ong is in dialogue not only with colleagues throughout the vast and expanding world of orality-literacy studies, but also with scholars in the areas of Biblical studies, linguistics, religion, theology, philosophy, sociology, pedagogical theory, popular culture, and English, French, Spanish, Italian, American, and comparative literature. In fact, depending on a reader's training and *métier*, one or another section of this Festschrift will undoubtedly open up an entirely new vista on the honoree's life's work.

To Randolph F. Lummpp goes the *kvdos* for originally organizing the group of papers which appear herein. His insistence on providing an interdisciplinary testimony to Father Ong made for an immediate education of all those involved and, it is hoped, a continuing education for those who use this volume. Thomas J.

Farrell and Joseph Cirincione conceived the notion of having the Festschrift papers presented orally at a symposium, *Questions of Orality and Literacy: A Tribute to Walter J. Ong, S.J.* (July 29-August 1, 1985), which coincided with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of Rockhurst College, Ong's undergraduate alma mater. All who attended that memorable event can vouch for its intensity and spirit of exchange, and are much in the debt of its organizers. It should also be noted that Tom Farrell has been of great assistance to many of the authors in discussing their papers, not to mention to the editors in formulating the volume.

This Festschrift, then, presents revised versions of papers selected from those solicited by Randolph Lumpp and offered at the symposium at Rockhurst College. Since all contributions given at the symposium were refereed according to the review policy of *Oral Tradition*, many have been substantially recast and a few have been omitted.

The first section of the Festschrift, "The Word in Oral Tradition," includes articles by Eric Havelock and Albert Lord, two of the founding fathers of orality-literacy studies. Havelock looks at the ancient Greek accounts of the Olympian gods and cosmic architecture, pointing out that, even where we might most readily expect abstractions, we find action-oriented patterns typical of oral thought and expression. The major concern of Lord's contribution is to compare Father Ong's principles of orality with the real-life situation of oral epic tradition as he experienced it in Yugoslavia. In this same section Bruce Rosenberg surveys some of the recurrent problems in the study of oral traditions, stressing their inherent variety, and John Foley considers the role of oral epic in the ancient Greek and South Slavic traditions as an "encyclopedia" of accumulated knowledge about psychic development.

The title given part II, "The Written Oral Word," is meant to reflect the apparently oxymoronic nature of many works which combine textualization with undeniable oral roots. It is precisely in this area, of course, that Walter Ong has taught us so much. Werner Kelber's essay on the Gospel of John studies the nature of the Logos as the sayings of Jesus Christ take on narrative and textual form; of interest to many will be his coming to terms with Jacques Derrida's concept of *arché*-writing. Thomas Farrell probes the oral structure of early Christian creeds, offering an explanation of their content and evolution against the background of

orality-literacy studies. In a much different milieu, Dennis Seniff argues suggestively for a composite view of medieval Castilian prose that recognizes both its written and its oral modes.

From this point the volume moves, in Ongian fashion, to its third section, "The Oral Word in Print." Since Father Ong's initial work treated the philosophical thought and cognitive categories of the sixteenth-century figure Peter Ramus, it is only appropriate that two of the essays touch on Ramist analysis and inquiry. Peter Sharritt links the analytic and educational methods of Ramus and Ong and goes on to explain how an understanding of these methods can serve the contemporary teacher of the humanities. Likewise, John Rechten explicates the Ramist structure underlying the sermons of John Udall, showing how Udall transformed the Puritan sermon into a "popularized academic lecture."

Other contributions to part III include essays by Ruth El Saffar and Elias Rivers that to various degrees engage the works of Miguel de Cervantes and his contemporaries. El Saffar demonstrates the immense transition that took place between the novels *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Don Quixote*, a shift she characterizes as a discernible stage in the evolution of consciousness. Rivers' concern lies with the combination of monoglossia and heteroglossia within any one linguistic community, as illustrated in part by reference to Cervantes and Lope de Vega. Taking another approach, William J. Kennedy reviews the status of "voice" and "address" in the history of rhetoric, with special reference to modern critical reinterpretations, while Robert Kellogg writes persuasively of the "harmony of time" in the special mythic history of *Paradise Lost*, a characteristic he understands as Milton's remarkable latter-day conjuring of the oral epic mythos. Another instance of "oral residue" is the subject of Thomas Steele's study of Benjamin Franklin's use of proverbs in *Poor Richard's Almanach*.

Part IV, "Orality and Literacy," opens with Paolo Valesio's essay on silence and listening, which applies insights drawn from *The Presence of the Word* and elsewhere to a Pirandello short story. The next three papers treat different aspects of religious studies and theology. Harold Stahmer investigates the oral hermeneutic in the writings, especially the "speech-letters," of the late philosopher Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy; Frans Jozef van Beeck studies the technical and popular concepts of religious terms from

an Ongian perspective; and Randolph Lumpp explores the common ground shared by literacy, catholicity, and commerce. This section closes with James Curtis' analysis of the role of the electronic modern media, associated by Ong and McLuhan with secondary orality, in the rash of assassination attempts on public figures over the last two decades.

Since Walter Ong has always argued for the continuance of dialogue as the natural condition of learning, it is perhaps fitting that his *Festschrift* should not end without his own response—which will in turn engender many more responses. In this essay, "Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race," he reviews many of his major theorems and adds depth to cultural understanding by advocating recognition of our common roots in the evolution of orality and literacy and their ever-evolving interaction. Like so much of his earlier and ongoing work, this paper reveals, in addition to an encyclopedic awareness of pertinent issues and theories, an earnestness and devotion to task that have conferred an extra value on his brilliant writings.

In offering a closing remark before the dialogue of this volume begins for another participant, I am tempted to invoke Chaucer's famous description of his Clerk—"And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche"—for Walter Ong has been both a learner and a teacher all his life, and we are certainly much the richer for his gifts. There is, however, a problem with this allusion. The simple beauty of that line out of context is qualified by Chaucer in its attribution to a man who lives in the proverbial "Ivory tower," who has been so intent on his studies that he has not bothered to consider life on any but his own terms. For Walter Ong, on the other hand, learning and teaching do not stop at the library or classroom door, nor are proper subjects for inquiry chosen only from the list bequeathed and sanctioned by academia. His thinking, as this volume indicates by example, has spilled out of the customary disciplinary containers, challenging both himself and us to re-conceive the form and content of our research and scholarship, of our educational policies, even of our understanding of modern media and spectator sports. Unlike the Clerk, then, with the "Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed, / Of Aristotle and his philosophie" at his bed's head, Ong has brought his learning and teaching to all who wish to take part, and both he and his partners in dialogue have been irrevocably changed in the process.

Perhaps Father Ong would not mind my offering one brief illustration of his devotion to intellectual community. Just after Christmas, on our way back from the meetings of the Modern Language Association, it happened that he and I were passengers on the same plane from New York to St. Louis. I had heard him give a stunning paper at the conference a few days earlier, and had a chance to chat about some mutual interests before the flight was called. Although our seating assignments prevented us from continuing that discussion, I was close enough to see that he had engaged a fellow traveler in conversation about orality and literacy, and further to notice that this man was genuinely excited by what he found himself (quite unexpectedly) talking about. It is only tangentially pertinent to observe that Father Ong's fellow traveler was not another academic journeying back from the ritual wars of the Modern Language Association, but rather a businessman whose formal training had doubtless not included a heavy dose of orality-literacy studies. Training or not, however, he was engaged—just as we have been.