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Kip Strasma
Nova Southeastern University

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Walter J. Ong: A Memoir

by Kip Strasma

Return to Class After 20 Years

Three years after the passing of the monumental Walter J. Ong in 2004, following the opening of his manuscript collection in 2007, I returned to my alma mater and began a search for my memory of the past on a sunny summer afternoon in St. Louis. In the rooms behind the stacks at the Walter J. Ong Manuscript Collection at Pius XII Memorial Library (see figure 1), I sought to revisit the artifacts of a class I took two decades ago with Father Ong and an experience that has been central to my career as a writing teacher interested in media, communication, and technologies. While others have written in detail about their intimate introductions to Ong (see, for instance, John Walter's blog, Machina Memorialis), mine was limited to experiences in his class and his prolific writings in books and articles. I never met Ong outside of class, and I do not recall any conversations with him beyond Tuesday/Thursday meetings.

Walter Ong was at the time of my undergraduate class an accomplished rhetorician, and he was so decades before I joined his undergraduate course at Saint Louis University in 1986. I remember arriving to class on the first day after a visit to the university bookstore to get my books.

Figure 1 - Screen image of Walter J. Ong Manuscript Collection at Pius XII Memorial Library
On my desk was the required *Linguistics and the Novel* by Roger Fowler—but in my book bag were others that I quickly discovered were recommended but not required: *Literacy and Orality, Interfaces of the Word,* and *Rhetoric, Romans and Technology.* I had apparently not interpreted the reading list announcement (see figure 2) at the bookstore correctly, confirming the necessity of Professor Ong's course in my undergraduate and graduate lives!

**I Came to Know of Father Ong**

I was in the course at the recommendation of Sister Regina, a counselor and advisor at Saint Lazare where I was studying to be a Roman Catholic priest in the Midwest Province of the Vincentians.

"You *have* to take this class with Father Ong," she prompted with enthusiasm. "He's getting up there in age, and this may be your only chance before graduating."

Sister Regina was a bright soul. I trusted her not just because she was so positive, but because, whether evident or not, she prompted the best in me. An earlier part of our conversation between us resulted in a statement I've remembered for almost two decades.

"What do you think I should study besides philosophy," I asked. Philosophy and Letters was the required degree of all Vincentian men in "formation," the Catholic term applied to those making progress toward the Master's of Divinity and ordination.

"English—and you should continue your study. I think you are more than capable of getting your PhD."

"Really?"

"Yes. Here, let me get the Saint Louis U catalog."
And so on September 4th, 1986, I sat in the second row of Walter J. Ong’s "Practice in Interpreting Prose." I know this because he kept meticulous records that are now archived and available for public review (see figure 3).

"Practice in Interpreting Prose" in 1986 was a course that Professor Ong had taught many times. Cross-listed as English 152-481 and identified earlier as 191, 180, and 401, the class was taught as many as a dozen times during his tenure. The original notes for the course date back to Ong’s study of "Rhetoric and Interpretation" in 1939 with Marshall McLuhan, then a visiting instructor at Saint Louis University; for example, on January 30, 1939, student Ong scribed in T-note, two-column notes, "man naturally a social animal > speech. Man not tied to the present as are other
animals > Writing Precision, stability, economy of expression ) (see figure 4). To thought words add precision, stability, economy of effort. Oral term: The oral expression of the concept; or arbitrary sounds standing for the concept."

Here, as with the entire course, the rich influence of McLuhan resonates. The course description submitted to Academic Advising, for example, notes how readings "run from descriptive writing through narrative and persuasive materials, including some commercial and other advertising, on to complex and poetic prose forms." The study and effects of media anchored Ong's preparation for and presentation of the course material, from the examples used for demonstration in class to the assigned writings and papers.

I remember frequently in class that Father Ong would hold up printed advertisements for soap and liquor from Readers Digest or LIFE magazine and ask students to interpret intertextually. On one example he might have used in class (it is one of the dozens of advertisements archived with the course materials for "Practice in Interpreting Prose"), Ong annotated a reminder: "These passages not always written with equally fresh imagination." His view was intensely historical, and he wanted us to see through current prose to its origins and heritage. "Note resemblance of style here and that of Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess, 1963." Ong wrote on another sample. Our class meetings were filled with these examples that, at the time, I thought were designed to keep us interested. But Ong wanted us to see more than the present; he wanted us to see the links between Cicero and the telephone, St. Augustine and the typewriter, Francis Bacon and the television—each new technology stressing and reinforcing dependence on former, historical technologies.

Figure 5 - "Practice in Interpreting Prose"
Course Description
While I can't begin to reconstruct the class or share a thick description of its archived contents, I can describe the dominant influence that it left upon me as an undergraduate student, graduate student, and now -Associate Professor at Nova Southeastern University. For the purposes of this memoir, I'll sample several of his works and illustrate their resilience and current applicability.

"The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction"

Professor Ong's desire was for integrity, an understanding that we write through the prose of others; he was frequently frustrated by and criticized writers who could not move beyond their reliance upon the past, which included an appreciation for technology and media as intricate parts of the writing and communication processes. One insight of Ong's that I've found particularly moving is the omnipresence of technology: Humans have surrounded themselves
with technology so much so that it seems natural. In "Ideas of Technology," Ong writes in 1962, "I think the opposition commonly assumed between technology and humans is false…. The first assembly line was the printing press. When [humans] began mass production [they] didn't make shoes, or clothes, or knives but dealt with [their] own thoughts" ("Ideas" 450). I think about this observation often when in a computer classroom that has individual computers that are networked and supported by complex, digital software for each student. I think about this on the train in Miami because the technological systems in place make fast, convenient transportation possible. And I think about this especially when flying; the technological systems within systems support an industry for fast, safe, and convenient (mostly) travel.

Many in South Florida and the US may recall the demise just after takeoff of ValuJet Flight 592 in the Everglades. The memorial for the disaster is located west of Miami on Route 41 near Shark Valley National Park. In a cogent analysis, William Langewiesche identifies the primary cause of the accident as what he calls a "systematic" failure—different from the two other possibilities: a "procedural" one involving human error, or an "engineered" one involving mechanical defects. In other words, the cause was not simply the fault of a single human on the plane or at the control tower; nor was it design or assembly defects of the DC-9. Rather, the real cause emerged "in-between" humans and technology systems. There was no resistance to assigning blame: ValuJet blamed the supplier, the FAA blamed ValuJet, and stricken families blamed US leaders. But blame is different from causality. Ong writes that technology "does not have only one face; it is a Janus figure" ("Ideas" 462). At times there is bright optimism and, at others, terrible horrors.

Technology is and, historically, has been a large part of who we are, and each day we interact with new, more complex systems for services and safety. We innovate with technology and it, in turn, changes us. I have long been an advocate of technology in my scholarship and teaching. It wasn't until I was in graduate school at Illinois State University two years later that I fully understood the impact of Father Ong on my thinking and the field. Dr. Douglas Hesse introduced me to the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition in a required course for my Master's Degree. We were assigned "A Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" that I had read in Dr. Ong's class and written about for the final exam. Is the audience for writing real? Can we know readers beyond the conventions and expectations established by language, genre, and discipline? Who exactly do we have in mind with pen or keyboard at hand? I wrote about these and other questions in my final research assignment for Dr. Hesse, and this work solidified the connection between my undergraduate and graduate experiences. The problem of audience follows from that of immediacy, the epistemology of readers actual and realized. Of this idea in "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," Ong wrote that the "writer's audience is always a fiction, and you have no way of fictionalizing your audience unless you know what some of the options for imagining audiences are—how audiences have been fictionalized" (3). This would be my first piece of advice for students of writing: Know the strategies for imagining audiences. Learning these comes about through reading multiple and diverse texts; it also comes from practicing at writing many different strategies and genres of public and academic discourse. I've written about this in the past and provided an outline of an assignment that typically informs my transfer-level writing courses (see "Assignments by Design" in Teaching English in the Two-Year College).
A second piece of advice for writing students stems from a comment Ong makes in the same article. He observes, "Everyone who teaches writing knows the common symptoms of the problems [resulting from a person moving into the world of writing]: students make assertions which are totally unsupported by reasons, or they make a series of statements which lack connections" ("Literacy" 3). Unlike interpersonal conversations that take place on a telephone or at the same location (face-to-face), writing requires us to fill in the gaps for readers. Supporting general observations with support and using repetition to link ideas together are two of the easiest ways to help readers understand. Indeed, I am not attempting to oversimplify writing or the research published since Ong's statement in 1978; rather, Ong's insight is the key to paragraphing, mapping, and revising works-in-progress, and I invite students into conversations about unity, coherence, and expectations.

Looking over the typescript work available at the archives, it is hard to imagine that Ong had a lot of experience with word processing via computers. His typescript pages are filled with editing scribbles, altered words, and marginal notes. What if he had used a computer to write? Another way of asking this is: what kinds of advantages would it have supported? As my final piece of advice for writing students, I am going to speculate based upon my influences from Ong and the "spirit" of his scholarship.

- Use spell, grammar, and format checkers in addition to your own editing, handbook and any institutional academic services. It is less important to resist new technologies than to ponder their rhetorical and effective uses.
- Use search engines and dictionaries to fill in the gaps in what you know. As knowledge grows increasingly digital, learners can access information quickly and easily through networks and collective intelligence.
- Construct a management system for file storage and indexing. Another way of saying this is like this: A key aspect to knowledge in the 21st Century is not just that you know but how you came about your information. I always ask students to develop a nomenclature system, for example, that they can use for naming files and easy retrieval. Another example: When searching for articles on the Internet or a proprietary database, terminology is crucial for an effective, narrow review of literature.
- Draft often, revise more often, and post once. The gap between writing and publishing has decreased or disappeared almost entirely, which makes it important to draft-and-save, then send later.
- Find samples of work (similar to what you want to write) that you admire; imitate and then transform their style by experimenting, elaborating, and/or extending. The reminder here is to borrow with integrity through reference and citations. An infinity of texts is available because of the ubiquity of digital information, which makes plagiarism "closer at hand."

**Technology's "Noetic" Effect**

In a later publication, Ong makes an important point about how technology affects us, asserting that "technology exercises its most significant effects and its most real presence not in the external world but within the mind, within consciousness. The external product designed by consciousness somehow reenters consciousness, to affect the way we think, to make possible new kinds of noetic [the interactions among communication, mind, and technology] processes….” ("Technology" 102). Noetic connections are not just the "in-between" but in our
very mental framework. I won't attempt here a long summary of Ong's speculation into the ways that technology restructures the human mind (scholar and archivist John Walter explores this extensive work in his blog, Machina Memorialis), but I'd like to focus on the computer specifically. Later in the same piece, Ong writes that the "computer has made it possible to assemble almost instantaneously details which in the past would have taken thousands of years to work up and thousands of years to work through. As a result, in high-technology cultures, problems—not just answers, but problems—of a sort entirely unthinkable without a computer have become commonplace in [human's] intellectual [noetic] word" ("Technology" 111).

Problems? What are these problems?

The key problem for Ong is freedom—the making of choices. Due to the vast amounts of information now available to humans, it is paradoxically more difficult to make an informed choice; that is, there is so much information that the process of making a good decision becomes clouded. Take Google, for example, or the databases available at a typical library that someone might bring to bear on the question of whether to sign the organ donor statement on a driver's license. Should I do it? While this is a personal choice, the problem of making an informed, free election becomes so much more difficult once one begins searching for guidance. There are about 486,000 results for the search terms "driver's license donor" and over fifty different research databases at a typical college library. How do I decide what to read? How do I know what's important? How do I know when I have enough?

Figure 8 - Screen Image from The Institute for Global Ethics website, www.globalethics.org

In an effort to address these questions personally and with students, I have sometimes turned to the research of Rushworth Kidder on ethics. His book, How Good People Make Tough Choices, and the Institute for Global Ethics provide a framework for dealing with free, ethical choices. From his research, Kidder concludes that many problems like becoming an organ donor fall into one of four paradigms: "justice versus mercy, short-term versus long-term, individual versus community, and truth versus loyalty" (113). These, he asserts, are linked to key concepts like fairness, equality, responsibilities, goals, promises, interest, commitment, and integrity—all values that humans across different cultures and nationalities share. But what makes his methodology work for establishing personal freedom in the face of vast quantities of information
is the notion of a dilemma, namely, that many problems like those cited by Ong present themselves as choices between two apparently good choices.

For example, it is good to preserve my own organs for my own use in an emergency situation (in case I can later be saved by a new technological innovation), and it is good to share my organs with other humans in need of transplants made possible by these same technological innovations. But which choice is better and how can I make it freely? Kidder's methodology has individuals think through resolution principles: ends-based thinking, rule-based thinking, and care-based thinking (154-60). In other words, a free choice might consider the decisions made by other people and how they have made sense of utility (the greatest good), principles (that cannot be broken), and people involved (rehumanizing the anonymous). These decisions are the key and form a possible "research filter" for narrowing the search for freedom: What have others in the same or similar situations decided and why? The practice of making free, ethical decisions results in the process of reading the stories of others, including those who have donated, their families, their doctors, etc. Individual stories can be elevated the status of policy with more time, research, and authority.

The Mobility of the Self and "Secondary Orality"

The telephone and television brought us to the threshold of print culture and a new orality; and now a new threshold involving digitization and the separation of communication storage and delivery has arrived. This is one contribution that Walter Ong has left to his students and colleagues. He defined and framed the concepts and boundaries of our discussions. His formulations of primary orality, secondary orality, oral residue, and media were built in the class I took with him. And I did not realize until much later that his scholastic world view sensitized me to our indebtedness to mediation in all communication processes, processes that Ong so expertly crafts into stages or phases of development. "A good deal of talk about the successive stages in history of communications media," reflects Ong, "suggests that each new stage wipes out preceding ones. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, a new stage often reinforces preceding ones at the very time it changes their significance by interacting with them" ("Voice" 81). Ong provides many examples from early history and writing development, but I'm now mostly interested in looking at how current forms of communications media are reinforcing previous forms.

Figure 9 - Screen Image from Youtube video, "Wireless Revolution"
As an example, I pose the question of how the contemporary, networked, mobile device (still called a cell phone) serves as a portal to the "mobilized self" that reinforces all of the previous cultural stages of human communication. Think for a moment of the television commercial featuring Dan Hesse, CEO of Sprint, promising his company's networked "revolution." In this commercial and others in the same campaign, Hesse promises that the convergence of technologies can be supported by his company and placed into the palm of any consumer's hand. "How's that for a wireless revolution?" he concludes. This series of advertisements for Sprint highlights several features consumers may find compelling: network speed, cost, customer services, etc. It is interesting for the promise that networked, mobile devices bring together many earlier forms of media and their cultures: text(ing), telephone, pictures, video, and the Internet. These are all reinforced by more powerful devices.

Imagine, Hesse, might ponder: You are returning from a visit to your family during the holidays. While in the airport with your Sprint-networked mobile device, you witness and record a horrible accident. After it is over, you call your family to let them know you are OK, text a few words to friends, and update your Facebook with pictures and a short recording that includes sounds from voices near you in the airport; a friend of yours sees it and uploads the recording and your description that you keyed along with it to Youtube; a journalist at the Chicago Tribune discovers it, shares it with her editor, and—later—online viewers/readers. Finally, pictures and your words appear on the front page of the printed newspaper the next day. "How's that for a revolution?" Hesse might ask. Indeed, what just happened here? Ong's answer would be "secondary visualism," a concept that he defined late in his scholarship as a desire for spontaneity, immediacy, and transparency. In his unpublished lecture available at the archives, he writes: "One of the unwitting effects of the distancing effected increasingly by writing, print, electronics: today's obsession (all through society) with achieving immediacy. Obsession with achieving immediacy, bragging about it when seemingly achieved. 'Familiarity' a great obsession of our age (a relatively new word in English)" ("Secondary" 4). The convergence of media in digital mobile devices alerts us to the possibilities of near immediate representation (especially of the self) across vast distances to audiences we both know and have no possible way of imagining. Again, invoking the influences of Father Ong, I believe these devices remediate our technological desire:

- We have a renewed desire for speech and the telephone, a technology that has been with us since the 19th century.
- We have a renewed desire for text and the QWERTY keyboard, technologies that emerged in the 15th (i.e. the printing press) and late-19th centuries, respectively.
- We have a renewed desire for pictures, cinema, television, and video, technologies that have been with us since the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, respectively.
- We have a renewed desire for the storage and delivery of musical recordings, a technology that emerged in the 19th century.

The cultures of orality, textuality, secondary orality, and secondary visualism are converging in hand-held mobile devices that call on us to share ourselves with others and communicate digitally. But, ironically, as vast quantities of digital media are amassed in data centers around
the word, the need for communication to and with others survives this convergence—or, rather, this new convergence reinforces the primacy of human communication.

Father Ong, were he still alive, would be delighted with all of these new developments.