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Book Review: A Hundred Years of Walter Ong:  
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*Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J.  
Ong, S.J.*

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# A HUNDRED YEARS OF WALTER ONG

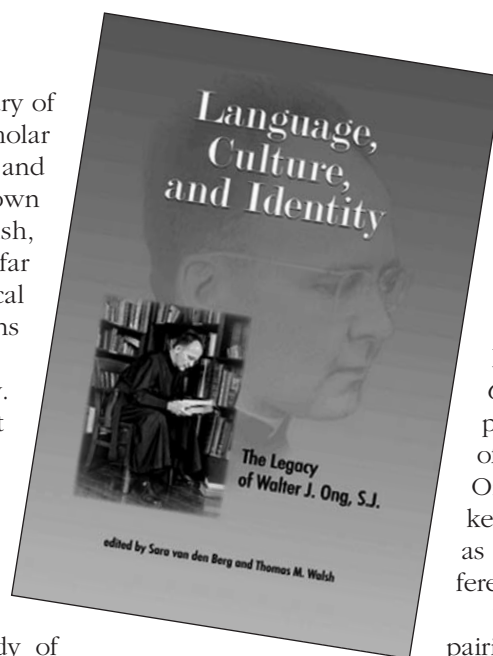
## Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (Eds.). *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*

Hampton Press, Inc., 2011. 266 p. \$65.00; (paper) \$27.95.

By Paul Soukup, S.J.

This year, 2012, marks the centenary of Fr. Walter J. Ong, S.J., a scholar whose work in literature, orality, and interiority helped to shape his own academic discipline of English, influenced other disciplines as far afield as psychiatry and biblical studies, and served as foundations for new approaches such as media ecology.

Ong spent his career at Saint Louis University. While studying philosophy there as a Jesuit scholastic from 1938 to 1941, he also completed an M.A. in English (on the sprung rhythm of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry), directed by a young Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan called Ong's attention to Perry Miller's work on Peter Ramus, the 16th century French educational reformer. Under Miller at Harvard, Ong took up the study of Ramus. In his dissertation (published as *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* by Harvard University Press in 1958), he demonstrates how Ramus' use of the newish printing press complemented Western thought's visual bias and shifted thought patterns away from the more oral dialogue of Greek rhetoric to the more visual method of Greek science. In a nice turn, McLuhan later made use of Ong's research to bolster his own media studies. As professor of English from 1954 to 1989, Ong himself continued to explore the interlocking roles of



orality and literacy in human thinking, with a trilogy of books on the role of the word in its spoken, written, and technologized forms.

The essays collected in *Language, Culture, and Identity* provide both a snapshot of and an introduction to Ong's thought through key themes of Ong's work as they find homes in different disciplines.

Thomas Zlatich uses the pairing of "in and out" to describe Ong's work—the interior and the surface, the sounding word and the printed page, the frontier, the interface. In trying to situate him, Zlatich provides this summary:

Walter J. Ong resists classification. He had been, of course, University Professor Emeritus of Humanities

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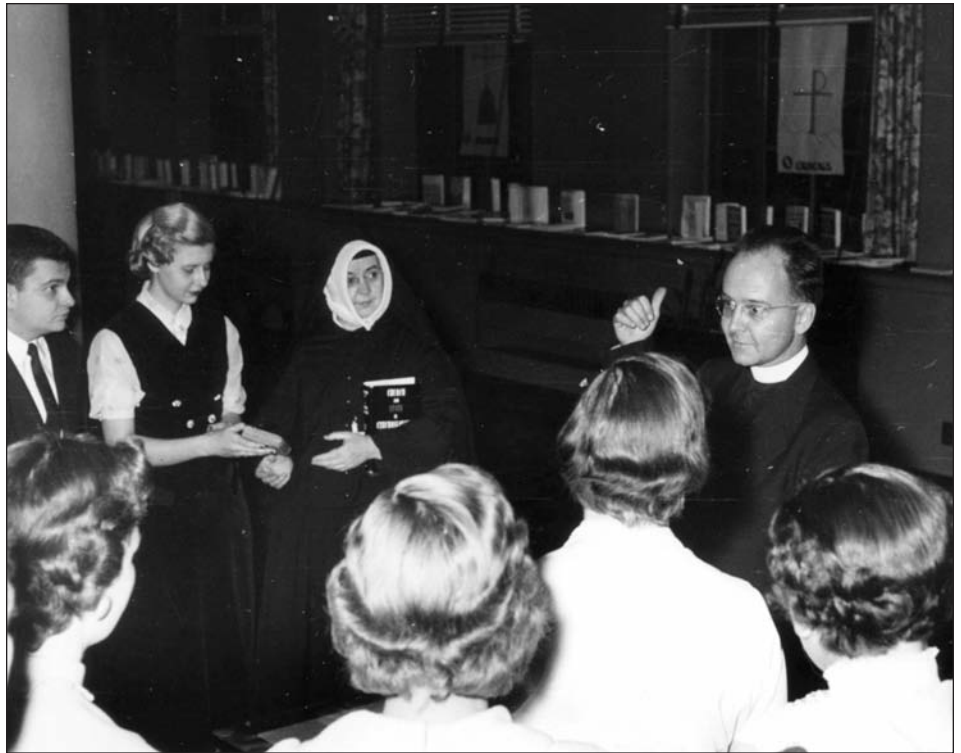
*Paul Soukup, S.J., is a professor of communications at Santa Clara University.*

and William E. Haren Professor Emeritus of English and Professor Emeritus of Humanities in Psychiatry at Saint Louis University, a Roman Catholic priest, a member of the Society of Jesus, and one of America's most informed spokespersons within the humanities and media studies. However, his twenty-two books and approximately 440 articles uniquely interweave, among other disciplines, literary analysis, linguistics, psychology and psychoanalysis, the history of ideas, composition studies, philosophy, phenomenology, theology, communications studies, cultural studies, noobiology, and media ecology ... (p. 7)

Zlatic highlights Ong's interest in human consciousness and interiority, in the sounding forth of language, and in the ways that humans have used tools to supplement their language.

Ong's recognition of the separation of the printed word from living speech led him to an exploration of hermeneutics: one does not require interpretation in a live dialogue. Hermeneutics requires distance just as distance requires hermeneutics. And so, hermeneutics begins in earnest with writing. C. Jan Swearingen traces the interplay between rhetoric, homiletics, and hermeneutics across the years between 1250 and 1750 (years to which Ong paid great attention in his history of the changing fortunes of rhetoric).

Hermeneutics played a role earlier as oral biblical performances received written form. Werner Kelber uses Ong's research on the relationship of orality and literacy in proposing approaches to understanding the Gospels. Here, Professor Kelber provides a clearly argued critique of the historical critical paradigm in biblical studies as well as



Walter Ong, S.J., with a group of students taking turns looking at books during an event for the Saint Louis University Classical Fraternity, 1955. (Photo courtesy of Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections).

of form criticism, based on more recent scholarship on orality. He notes of Ong's contribution:

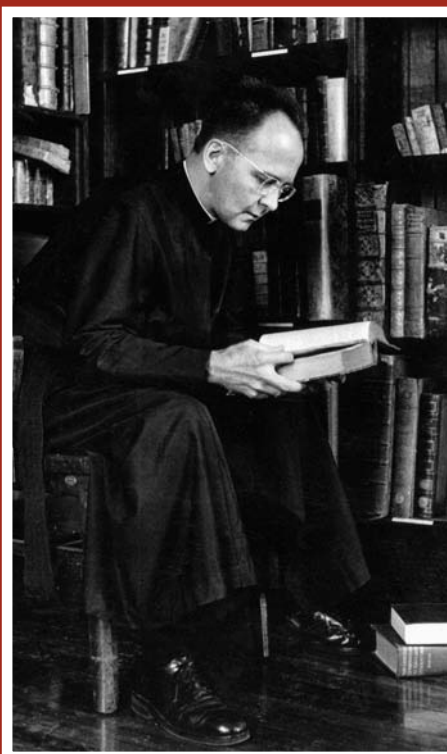
Ong himself ... was strictly speaking an expert in the literary and intellectual history of the Renaissance, and not a biblical scholar ... Yet his work is dotted with intriguing and often profound insights into the Bible both from the perspective of orality-literacy studies (aural assimilation, tribal memory, oral substratum, changing sensoria, rhetoric, interiority, corpuscular epistemology, Bible reading and divisiveness, textual criticism and philology, etc.) and of theology... Moreover, his intense concentration on the "word" as speech

event and his rethinking of textuality from the vantage point of orality has given us a theoretical framework that is highly suitable for a revitalization and revision of assumptions, methods and practices that govern current biblical scholarship.

Throughout the rest of his essay Professor Kelber demonstrates the importance of Ong's insights in ten key aspects of form criticism.

John Miles Foley, the late director of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, credits Ong's "emphasis on the nature and relationship of communication media" as central to noetics, or how people think. Foley's own work in oral performance in antiquity and in more recent oral cultures built on what

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Above, Walter J. Ong, S.J., perusing books in De Smet Hall, Saint Louis University, 1957. (Photo courtesy of Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections).

Ong began. Here Foley describes the Pathways Project ([www.pathwaysproject.org](http://www.pathwaysproject.org)), a multimedia suite of online resources to link oral performance with texts and to use information technology to shed light on how humans organize their knowledge orally.

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ther contributors to the collection use Ong's work in developing their own fields of endeavor, fields in which Ong had published. Catherine Snow looks at literacy in young children, in the light of governmental and educational policy initiatives. Roy Schafer takes the reader into the world of psychoanalytic insight, making links once again to the realm of hermeneutics. The distance the analyst seeks to bridge lies not in media, but in the interior self. Tod Chambers recalls Ong's essay, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," as he examines the challenge of bioethics. The ethicist writes for an audience—but just who makes up that audience? Walter Jost returns to language, poetry, commonplaces, and meaning, taking the reader from classical Roman tropes through the protomodernism of Emily Dickinson to the high modernism of Wallace Stevens. Stephen Casmier extends Ong's thoughts beyond the application of orality-lit-

eracy to African-American literature and the realm of what Ong called the "sensorium." "According to Ong, each sense perception brings the individual into contact with the world in a different way and thus has a different relationship to abstract principles and the conceptualization of time, space, and the organization of knowledge." In this place, Casmier locates a distinctive character of African-American literature.

Two essays situate Ong's thought about the media and (communication) technology. Lance Strate ranks Ong as "one of the three scholars who make up the core of media ecology," the study of media environments and their impact. Strate offers a kind of intellectual history of Ong's scholarship and role in media study from the perspective of media ecology. John J. Pauly attempts a different kind of intellectual history. "My goal is to open Ong's work to other kinds of scrutiny by placing him in different company—not necessarily the company in which he would have imagined himself or chosen to stand, but in relation to a wider range of twentieth-century thinkers on mass media." For Pauly these include technologists and historians of technology, literary historians, and linguists.

The book concludes with a 434-item bibliography of Ong's writings, compiled by the late Professor Thomas Walsh. The bibliography, drawing on the collected materials of the Ong Center archives at Saint Louis University forms a framework for ongoing work.

This collection offers a look at the range of Ong's work. Few will take to every path outlined in its chapters. But all should appreciate the exceedingly fertile harvest growing from Ong's initial ideas. Having so much in one volume makes the initial exploration a bit easier. ■