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ONG AND THE CONCEPT OF ORALITY

Paula McDowell

It is a testimony to the influence of Walter J. Ong's work on orality and literacy that to look up the word "orality" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is now a defamiliarizing act.[1] Scholars working in fields addressing orality and literacy are often more familiar with Ong's coinages "primary orality," "residual orality," and "secondary orality" than they are with the etymology of the word "orality." In common parlance, "orality" is used loosely as a synonym for "oral communication" or (even more narrowly) "speech." But

Ong's usage of "orality," this essay will show, is not and never has been the only one available. The earliest use of "orality" listed in the *OED* dates to 1666, and it means neither primary orality in the Ongian sense (discussed below) nor simply "oral communication." In the spirit of Ong himself, who insisted on the value of diachronic or historical study, this essay will compare Ong's use of "orality" to the first recorded use, which appears, intriguingly enough, in a polemical work by English Catholic priest John Sergeant (1623–1710) titled *Sure-Footing in Christianity, Or, Rational Discourses On the Rule of Faith* (1665). As its title suggests, Sergeant's book-length tract is part of the centuries-old debate between the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches concerning Scripture vs. oral tradition as the "Rule of Faith." This war in the history of ideas intensified in England in the 1660s and again in the 1680s, when the Anglican Church was twice faced with the prospect of a Catholic king (Charles II, 1660–1685, and James II, 1685–1688). Throughout the eighteenth century, the dominant understanding of oral tradition remained theological, but by the 1760s, one begins to see "oral tradition" used in a new secular sense in early Homer scholarship, proto-ethnographic writings, and a wide range of literary and historical debates. Comparing Ong's use of "orality" to earlier historical uses sheds new light not only on the historical development of the concept but also, more surprisingly, on Ong himself. Walter J. Ong, S.J., was a practicing priest for nearly sixty years, and his scholarship is inseparable from his theology. Yet as this essay will show, the idea of oral tradition that Ong inherited from later eighteenth-century theorists in fact represented a dramatic *secularization* of the concept. In the long view, Ong's use (and popularization) of the term "orality" exemplifies a historical process of secularization of debates about oral tradition and orality that is not always recognized (or acknowledged) by scholars.

In approaching the concept of orality diachronically, let us begin at the beginning of *Orality and Literacy* (1982), with Ong's declaration of the value of diachronic study. Several key aspects of Ong's thinking about orality and literacy may be seen in the following statement, which will inform this essay on a number of counts:

> It is absolutely essential to approach them…diachronically or historically, by compar-
> ing successive periods with one another.…Diachronic study of orality and literacy
> and of the various stages in the evolution from one to the other sets up a frame of
> reference in which it is possible to understand better not only pristine oral culture
> and subsequent writing culture, but also the print culture that brings writing to a new
> peak and the electronic culture which builds on both writing and print. (2)

What Eric A. Havelock described as "the oral-literate equation," I have described elsewhere as a "heuristic." A heuristic is a framework, a tool

for understanding that itself has a history: orality and literacy are "not so much *things* as abstract concepts....They are aspects of a heuristic that we employ...in an attempt to organize and understand complex phenomena" (McDowell, "Mediating" 246).[2] In this essay, I approach the *concept*, rather than the phenomenon, of "orality" diachronically or historically, so as to shed light on the heuristic of orality and literacy.

Following Havelock, Ong understood orality as a mode of consciousness. He proposed that "primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing)" exhibit distinctive ways of acquiring, managing, and verbalizing knowledge and that the introduction of writing (or "literacy") brings with it major, irreversible shifts. He also coined the term "secondary orality" for "the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence" (*Orality* 1–3). As Havelock suggested, the "orality-literacy equation" posits (primary) orality and literacy as elements of an equilibrium: a homeostatic balance whereby more of one necessarily means less of the other. In Ong's model, once literacy is introduced, *primary* orality disappears. As Thomas Farrell has observed, "'orality' is not a univocal term in Ong's writings" (3). But neither is it a mere synonym for speech.

The *OED* defines orality in its most general sense as "the quality of being oral or orally communicated; preference for or tendency to use spoken forms of language." It offers a number of usage examples, such as this quotation from folksong collector A. L. Lloyd: "Orality is a most important characteristic, and we have every right to speak of the grandeurs of oral tradition." Two earlier examples, dating to 1666 and 1941, are less predictable. We will examine the 1666 example in a moment, but first let us consider the use of "orality" at a pivotal moment of the Second World War. This use appears in an article published in the *Journal of Politics* (May 1941) addressing the transformation of the German labor courts under the Nazi regime. Taylor Cole describes the procedure of these courts, citing as crucial "the principle of *orality*, according to which proceedings were conducted by word of mouth rather than by documentation." Associating "orality" with the undermining, rather than the protection, of civil liberty, he argues that one reason these courts were so readily adapted to the uses of the Third Reich was "because their emphasis upon speed, directness and *orality* fitted easily into Nazi first principles, which insist on the quick decision rather than on compromise and the delay necessary for the adequate protection of individual rights" (175, 197).

In 1666 the morality of orality was similarly under debate, but this time in a different context. As I have suggested, the question of the "orality of the rule of faith" was a key issue of doctrinal differentiation between the Catholic and Anglican Churches. In 1666, the official Roman position was

that truth lay in *both* Scripture and oral tradition as preserved by the Church. But in the heated environment of polemical debate, Catholic polemicists intensified their arguments for the stability of oral tradition as compared to the unreliability of textual transmission and interpretation. In voluminous works such as *Sure-Footing in Christianity, Or, Rational Discourses on the Rule of Faith* (1665), Sergeant responded to arguments made by Anglican divine Edward Stillingfleet in his *Origines Sacrae, Or A Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith* (1662) and *A Rational Account of the Grounds of the Protestant Religion* (1664/5). Sergeant argued that the unreliability of textual transmission meant that Christians must ultimately put their faith in "Orall Tradition," by which he meant "*the Living Voice and Practice of the Church as apt to signify the Sence of the Forefathers*" (*Letter* 37). The following year, John Tillotson (later Archbishop of Canterbury) replied to Sergeant in *The Rule of Faith: Or An Answer to the Treatise of Mr. J. S.* (1666), arguing that the Scriptures were the most reliable record of Christian doctrine. Sergeant responded with his ironically titled *Letter of Thanks from the Author of Sure-Footing to his Answerer Mr. J[ohn] T[illotson]* (1666). It was in this theological context that Sergeant praised "the *Orality* of the Rule of Faith, its *Uninterruptedness, and perpetuall Assistance of God's Spirit, and…imprinting it by the way of living Sense in men's hearts*" (108). For Sergeant, orality meant the "Living Voice" and "visible Actions" of the Catholic Church. It did not imply the absence of writing, and it certainly was not a general synonym for "speech." Sergeant's arguments for "the Orality of…Faith" were considered extreme even by some of his fellow Catholics, who joined his Anglican opponents in observing that his arguments went beyond the Council of Trent's dictate that Scripture and tradition be held in "equal pious affection and reverence" (Tillotson 280).

   The question of the "Orality of the Rule of Faith" was a doctrinal issue, but it was also a matter of urgent political importance that was debated widely by poets as well as priests. Shortly after Sergeant published *A Letter of Thanks*, John Milton published *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which he associated priestly appeals to "tradition" with superstition and corruption and represented teachers of such doctrine as "wolves" preying on their flocks (XII.508–14). Another Restoration poet, John Dryden, also wrote about oral tradition in the sense of the orality of the rule of faith, but in doing so he substantially changed his views. In *Religio Laici Or a Layman's Faith* (1682), written while he was Protestant, Dryden rejected arguments for oral tradition, demanding, "If *written words* from time are not secured, / How can we think have *oral Sounds* endured?" (ll. 270–271). After he converted to Catholicism, he argued with equal passion in *The Hind and the Panther* (1687) in *favor* of oral tradition as the rule of faith.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the dominant understanding of "oral tradition" remained theological, but by mid-century one begins to see the phrase "oral tradition" used in a new secular sense. The eighteenth century in Britain was a key period of transformation in understandings of oral tradition and oral societies. The later eighteenth century would see landmark arguments for oral tradition in the sense of complex works of art passed down over generations without the use of letters. Clergyman and ballad collector Thomas Percy represented the "Old Heroic Ballads" in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* as the "select remains" of "oral itinerant poet[s]" who "probably never committed [their rhymes] to writing" (7, 348, 340). In 1735, classicist Thomas Blackwell suggested that Homer was a "stroling indigent Bard" who had little learning: that is, "such Learning as we get from Books" (103, 101). In 1769, antiquarian Robert Wood pushed Blackwell's suggestion further, querying, "how far the use of Writing was known to Homer?" (248).[3] In 1760, Scottish Highlander James MacPherson controversially claimed that he had reconstructed the works of a great Highland bard, Ossian, passed down from the third century by word of mouth.

In Chapter 2 of *Orality and Literacy*, entitled "The Modern Discovery of Primary Oral Cultures," Ong briefly reviews eighteenth-century developments in Homeric criticism, mentioning scholars such as Wood and Friedrich August Wolf, whose *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) influenced classicist Milman Parry (1902–1935). Chapter 2 also notes the revaluing of oral tradition among ballad collectors and folklorists such as Percy, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Francis James Child, and Andrew Lang, who "worked over parts of oral or quasi-oral or near-oral tradition more or less directly, giving it new respectability" (16–17). Ong acknowledges Parry's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precursors and their interest in and ideas of oral tradition. Strikingly though, he does not connect these secular debates concerning oral tradition to their closely connected counterparts in the religious realm. The subject of *Orality and Literacy* is cognitive shifts rather than social, political, or religious history, and perhaps partly for this reason, Ong side-steps these sixteenth- through eighteenth-century theological and political debates concerning "the Orality of the Rule of Faith." But today, by attending more closely to the history of key concepts, we can see that the particular notions of oral tradition and orality that Ong inherited from later eighteenth-century theorists in fact represent a profound secularization of the earlier theological context of the debates.

Like Havelock, Ong was chiefly interested in Parry's insights into Homeric orality and the implications of those findings for the history of consciousness. By "The *Modern* Discovery of Primary Oral Cultures" (my emphasis), he

meant primarily insights stemming from Parry's "discovery" of Homer as an oral poet. For Ong, Parry was the breakthrough figure, "the prime mover in the orality-literacy universe" (Ong, "Writing" 24). Ong held that while "not every element in Parry's plenary vision was entirely new," his doctoral thesis *L'Epithète traditionelle dans Homère*, published in Paris in 1928, "fused all these insights…to provide a provable account of what Homeric poetry was" (20).[4] Parry's thesis began gaining notice in U.S. in the late 1940s and 1950s, when articles based on it were published in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*. Forty years later, Havelock remembered reading Parry's thesis in "the summer of 1943" (14). In *Preface to Plato* (1963), Havelock extended Parry's insights concerning Homer and oral-formulaic composition to all of the ancient Greek world. He argued that not only the transmission of oral poetry but "the entire oral noetic world of ancient Greece" relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought" (Ong, *Orality* 23).

Reading Parry led Havelock and Ong to posit a profound shift in human thought processes closely related to the introduction and spread of writing. In 1958, after studying with Marshall McLuhan at Saint Louis University and obtaining his PhD at Harvard in 1955, Ong published *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. In this study of Renaissance philosopher Peter Ramus, he argued that "the habits of organizing thought according to various spatial models…which Ramism encouraged [were] intimately as-sociated…with the use of letterpress printing." Deftly avoiding charges of technological determinism, he argued that *both* Ramism and printing were epiphenomena of "a major shift in consciousness marking the transit from the ancient and medieval world into the modern" (313, xv).

In his late-career paper on "The oral-literate equation," Havelock noted several publications of the early 1960s which "in retrospect, can be said to have made a joint announcement that orality (or oralism) had to be put on the map." These works, including Ong's books on Ramus, Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, and works by Marshall McLuhan, Jack Goody, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Albert Lord, "seem to mark a…dam starting to burst, releasing a flood of intellectual activity devoted to the explanation of…the oral-literate equa-tion" (12). Since these watershed publications, the orality-literacy heuristic has shaped research programs across the humanities and social sciences. Without question, Ong's work on Renaissance logic and rhetoric and its relationship to the technology of printing established him as "a leading figure in the oral-literate enterprise" (15). Aspects of Ong's more than 450 publications have been debated, refined, and sometimes rejected, but his oeuvre may be said to comprise a considerable part of the scaffolding on which the nexus of fields that comprises orality and literacy studies has since been built.

For Havelock, Ong, and other early theorists of orality and literacy, the spread of writing fundamentally alters human consciousness. Not surprisingly, then, a defining characteristic of early work on orality and literacy is its focus on differences and on change (rather than on similarities and continuities). Ong frequently begins his publications with an assertion of profound differences between "successive periods" or between "successive media." The first sentence of *Orality and Literacy* makes such an assertion: "in recent years certain basic differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures... and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing." Ong emphasizes that the subject of his book is not orality and literacy per se but "the *differences* between orality and literacy" (1, my emphasis). His eight-paragraph introduction mentions "differences" and "contrast(s)" nine times, and he reiterates this emphasis on differences (and the "recent[ness]" of their "discover[y]") in the first sentence of chapter one (and throughout). Ong was not alone in his emphasis on differences and contrast(s). McLuhan and Goody also began the books that made them famous with emphatic statements about profound differences and dramatic change. McLuhan opens *Gutenberg Galaxy* by modeling his study of "print culture" as "complementary" to Parry and Lord's work on the "*conflicting* forms of written and oral experience" (1, my emphasis). He states that he will extend their focus on difference, contrasting the "Gutenberg era" with other "stages" in the history of communication. Along similar lines, Goody defines his research project in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* as follows: "I have wanted for some time to pursue the *contrast* between literate and non-literate societies" (ix, my emphasis).

A second defining characteristic of early work on orality and literacy is evolutionary or developmental thinking: the premise that societies move *from* orality *to* literacy or from one media stage to another.[5] In *The Presence of the Word* (1967), Ong offered an evolutionary model of media shift with "three successive stages": "(1) oral or oral-aural (2) script, which reaches critical breakthroughs with the invention of the first alphabet and then later of alphabetic moveable type, and (3) electronic" (17). Interestingly, in 1967, Ong did not yet posit "print culture" as a distinct "stage" in his evolutionary model. His later separating of "print culture" as a stage, I have suggested elsewhere, was triggered by his reading of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as An Agent of Change* (1979) (McDowell, "Mediating" 231).

Ong sometimes rightly emphasizes the additive nature of media shift. A new media form adds to and alters its predecessor, not erases it: "When men learned to write, they continued to talk" ("Oral" 145). At other times, though, he slips into what I call a "displacement model" of media shift: a model that is typically accompanied by an elegiac tone or nostalgia for a

simpler, purer past. There is something of an elegiac tone in Ong's concept of "residual oral culture." Residue is something that is left behind, like detritus in a faster-moving stream. Although "residual orality" as Ong defined it in his now-classic essay "Oral Residue in Tudor Literature" is properly speaking a *textual* phenomenon rather than an oral one, the term "residual" paradoxically positions orality as a thing that is at once lasting *and* left behind.

Since the 1980s, the study of oralit*ies* and literac*ies* has undergone significant refinements. Scholars now caution against "orality and literacy" as a potentially reductive binary. They critique technological determinism, unexamined nostalgia for orality, and misplaced confidence in the consequences of literacy. Sociologists, anthropologists, educators and others debate whether or not the shift from orality to literacy (or from one media form to another) necessarily brings with it any particular cognitive, epistemological, or sociopolitical consequences. In 1977, Jack Goody's book *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* challenged what he nicknamed the "Great Divide" hypothesis: a variant of the evolutionary model of orality and literacy that posits "a single breaking point, a Great Divide" (3).[6] Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan concurred that the view of two fundamentally "different types of society, characterized by radically different communication media, just does not accord with the facts" (79). Scholars now stress the importance of detailed studies of the meanings, uses, and interrelationships of different media forms in different communities, places, and times. Exemplary historical scholarship, such as Adam Fox's *Oral and Literate Culture in Early Modern England*, emphasizes the "reciprocity," "interaction," "symbiosis," and "synergy" of media forms. In fact, there now appears to be so much consensus concerning the co-existence of media and the value of careful, focused studies that some scholars now feel the need to remind us of the value of identifying larger patterns. The editors of a recent volume addressing "the interfaces between orality and literacy and between the products of the pen and the press" in early modern England emphasize the "danger… of [over-] emphasising continuity.…It cannot be denied that dramatic as well as gradual shifts were taking place in the culture of communications in the four centuries under investigation" (Crick and Walsham 4, 20).

Not one, but two essay collections I have cited in this article are titled *Literacy and Orality*. By reversing the syntax of Ong's title *Orality and Literacy*, the editors of these collections emphasize that the idea of "orality" as a mode of consciousness could only come into existence *after* literacy (and was arguably invented as its foil). Yet in punning on Ong's title in order to engage with his ideas, these editors also acknowledge his formidable intellectual legacy. Finnegan repeatedly insists on the need for careful empirical

studies of literacy and orality, yet she also pays homage to Ong's powers of synthesis and enabling generalization when she acknowledges that "general questions are still worth asking." Distinguishing between general patterns and unvarying laws, she proposes that

> If there are no general and determining ideas about the development and implica-
> tions of information technologies as such, there are perhaps...patterns which in
> our human and historical experience seem likely to recur. These are to be found not
> primarily in the technologies themselves, but in the ways these technologies are...
> controlled and used. (7, 176)

In this essay, I have suggested that historical questions are also still worth asking—especially when these questions promise to illuminate key concepts that shape our field(s). Broader historical understanding sheds new light on Ong's distinctive use (and popularization) of the concept of orality. By extension, it sheds light on one of the most pervasive, yet under-examined concepts in media studies, a concept that is not just an umbrella term for speech.

NOTES

1. The concept of "literacy," by way of contrast, has been rigorously re-examined, com-
plicating easy assumptions about what "literacy" is. Valuable contributions are too many to
list, but for an example responding to Ong, see Keith Thomas, "The Meaning of Literacy
in Early Modern England."

2. See also 229–246. The "orality/literacy heuristic" is the subject of a June 2013 Faculty
Weekend Seminar at the Folger Shakespeare Library, co-directed by myself and Adam Fox.
For details, see www.folger.edu/institute.

3. For an overview of these developments see McDowell, "Art of Printing."

4. Similarly Havelock called Parry's thesis "the founding document of the modern
Homeric oralist theory of composition" (13).

5. The presence of this stadial thinking is often signaled by what I have nicknamed the
"from...to" clause, as in "the shift *from* orality *to* literacy" (*Orality and Literacy* 3, my emphasis).
In a current book project titled "Print Commerce and the Invention of the Oral in Eigh-
teenth-Century Britain," I trace these evolutionary models of media shift to the eighteenth
century, linking them to conjectural history and to stadial theory. Conjectural historians
developed a new model of history whereby societies progressed naturally through a series
of phases, each with its own characteristic institutions, economy, and social arrangements.
Around the 1790s, we begin to see the idea of communications technologies as part of this
unfolding sequence of human history.

6. Although Goody himself has been held up as a proponent of "great divide" theories,
one chapter of this book is titled "The Grand Dichotomy *reconsidered*" (my emphasis).

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