The relevance of Walter Ong’s work encompasses the full range of the humanities and social sciences, and extend further to the so-called hard sciences that shape our technological world. Our colleagues in English departments rightly view him as an expert in Renaissance English literature and in the intellectual history of the Elizabethan period. Today he is to many of us known as one of the leading experts on comparative media studies or media ecology, as it is called today. His studies of the history of rhetoric and logic along the lines of a linguistic and technological evolution from primary orality through writing and print to the electronic culture have yielded what amounts to a phenomenology of communication, culture, and consciousness that productively connects with virtually every division of human learning. To those who knew him closely he showed himself to be a restlessly inquisitive and interdisciplinary mind who was in a category all by himself.

In view of the intellectual fecundity and wide-ranging applicability of Ong’s thought, it seems odd that his work has not -- with rare exceptions -- significantly influenced biblical scholarship, the very academic faculty which, next to philosophy/theology and classical philology, ranks among the oldest academic disciplines in the human sciences. He was by no means unaware of this situation. “The definitive breakthrough in scriptural studies, I believe, is yet to come,” he wrote in his Maranatha article. In private conversations he was more forthright on this matter. He once told me that “you biblical folks will be the last ones to catch on,” and then he added with a twinkle in his eyes, “because you are the most bookish people of all.” At the same time, he was convinced that “orality-literacy theorems challenge biblical study perhaps more than any other field of learning.” His concern was that the academic study of the Bible was dominated by an excessive confidence in words-in-space, and driven by a

sense of textual supremacy, while suffering from a concurrent lack of sensibility toward the oral-aural operation and apperception of words.

My encounter with the name and writings of Walter Ong dates back to a few years after I had graduated in 1970. As best as I can remember it, the work of Ong was never introduced to me in my fourteen years of graduate education at eight different institutions of higher learning in Europe, England and the United States. To the best of my knowledge, his books never showed up in any of the extensive bibliographies graduate students are habitually being confronted with. What this means is -- and this is the point I am trying to convey -- that my writings on the media culture of the ancient world, the Middle Ages and modernity did not grow out of the extensive humanistic education I have received, but originated and came to fruition entirely afterwards under the impact of Walter Ong, along with that of Parry, Lord, Eisenstein, Finnegang, Jousse, Foley, Havelock and others, all of whom I had the privilege of knowing personally, with the sole exception of Milman Parry.

When around 1980 I had completed the manuscript to *The Oral and the Written Gospel* I decided foolhardily to send it to Walter Ong with the question whether he might want to write a Foreword. Foolhardily, because I was an assistant professor with very few publications to my credit and a zero name recognition. Ong, however was a person of international distinction, author of his magnum opus, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*\(^3\) and honored by the French government dubbing him a knight, *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Palmes académiques* (1963). If you know anything about French culture, the enormous pride the French people take in their culture, and the extraordinary status the French ministry of culture enjoys in the governmental structure, you will realize that the honor bestowed by the French Republic upon a North American scholar for his contributions to French culture is nothing short of miraculous. Furthermore, in 1978 Ong had served as President of the MLA, the *Modern Language Association of America*. This was the man I asked for a Foreword to my manuscript. Within a period of about two weeks, Ong responded to my question. He had read the manuscript and he was going to write a Foreword.

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Over the last twenty years I have made it my habit to make an almost annual pilgrimage to Jesuit Hall, Saint Louis University, to visit with Walter Ong. After the first visit he provided with a stack of articles and numerous references to books and chapters in books, and I soon realized that he viewed this material as an assignment, and that he fully expected me to do my homework. Most subsequent visits turned into something of an oral exam, the kind of exam I used to give my own students. These visits soon took on the form of a ritual. Following the approximately two-hour exam he would take me to lunch and afterwards he usually showed me the rooftop garden of Jesuit Hall where he cultivated an assortment of exotic and some not so exotic plants, all the while lecturing me on them, and identifying them by their English and Latin names. Once, as a flock of birds was flying overhead, he proceeded to educate me on these birds, giving me their names both in English and Latin, describing their flight patterns and nesting habits, in other words, telling me more about these birds than I frankly cared to know.

Over the years the renowned Jesuit scholar and the liberal Protestant were developing a close intellectual relationship, and I don’t think Ong would have objected when I say that it turned into a personal friendship. When in 2003 I attended the Memorial Service in honor of Walter Ong at the Saint Francis Xavier College Church in Saint Louis, and listened to the eulogy delivered by Father John Padberg, I was sitting next to John Miles Foley, a prior recipient of the Walter J. Ong Award. I could not know then any more than he could that nine years later John would also be taken away from us, he at age 65.

In our days, the public reputation of Walter Ong is increasingly shaped by his Orality and Literacy book. Among a broad readership but also in academic circles his name is time and again closely tied to this book. Undoubtedly, there are very few people who will manage to synthesize a vast communications culture, its impact on social, cultural and political history, and the accompanying history of scholarship with as much clarity and incisiveness as Ong did in Orality and Literacy. But I regret the fact that Orality and Literacy is distracting attention away from the book about Pierre de la Ramée, the French educator, logician, and philosopher-theologian. To my way of thinking, Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue is as
foundational to understanding Ong’s work as is The Classical Trivium⁴ a prerequisite to entering into the world of Marshall McLuhan. Both are exceptionally demanding books that take their readers deep into the labyrinthian complexities of ancient, medieval, and pre-modern humanistic culture. But these two books demonstrate what, I sometimes fear, has almost been forgotten, namely that it was the history of rhetoric, grammar and dialectic or logic that furnished the intellectual matrix for Ong’s and McLuhan’s later work on media technologies. Let me put it differently: Ong understood premodernism and the rise of modernity as well as he did because he had acquired intimate knowledge of the ancient and medieval culture out of which the modern communications world had grown and developed.

Narrowly conceived, Ong’s Ramus book documents with scrupulous attention to detail the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries academic reform that had captured the French University system with the force of a revolution, and rapidly spread across Europe and large parts of the Western world. The centerpiece of the reform was the transformation of the rhetorical discipline in the interest of dialectic or logic. Ramus’ principal strategy was to dismantle the five-part structure of rhetoric, the core of the medieval educational project, displace and marginalize some parts, while disconnecting all parts from rhetoric, and in the process reorganize education, moving it from the oral-rhetorical to the dialectical, logical pole. Culturally, the result was an augmentation of systematic logic, -- “for the fact is that logic does have a history”⁵ -- a restructuring of the human sensorium from oral-aural sensibilities towards visual forms of knowledge, an increased use of spatial-pattern thinking in tidily drawn charts and tables – in short, a movement away from the vocal world of medieval disputations toward space-bound, silent words on paper.

It was through Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue, and not through The Presence of the Word⁶ or Orality and Literacy that my own thinking connected with and in turn was illuminated by the work of Walter Ong. Precisely, what was the point of connection, and

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what is the nature of my indebtedness to Ong’s work on *Ramism*? By way of comparison, listen to a sentence taken from Ong’s *Ramus* book and read it alongside one taken from my *Imprints, Voiceprints, and Footprints of Memory* book. This is how Ong describes *Ramism*:

> The attitude toward speech has changed. Speech is no longer a medium in which the human mind and sensibility lives. It is resented, rather, as an accretion to thought, hereupon imagined as ranging noiseless concepts or ‘ideas’ in a silent field of mental space. Here the perfect rhetoric would be to have no rhetoric at all.#{7}

And this is what Kelber writes about the historical-critical paradigm of biblical scholarship:

> the methods deployed in biblical studies have tended to instill in us the notion of autonomous, individually authored texts, which grew out of texts, linked up directly with other texts, and in turn generated new texts. We have grown accustomed to operating in a scholarly orbit, which, while uncannily depopulated and barren of emotive significance, is crowded with texts that seem to commune only with one another and in the absence of human matrix and mediation.#{8}

Even though Ong and Kelber discuss different subject matters (*Ramism* versus modern biblical scholarship), they appear to be describing certain cultural constellations in broadly complementary terms, Ong lamenting a culture falling silent, and Kelber depicting a disembodied scholarly tradition propelled by an “ideologically driven textual ecology.”#{9} This is the point where I connected with Ong’s work recognizing that his analysis of Ramism provided me with an explanatory framework and intellectual categories that were indispensable to understanding the organization and structure of my own discipline of biblical scholarship.

In broader historical terms, Ong’s *Ramus* book taught me that the French academic reform was a manifestation of massive cultural shifts moving Europe from an Aristotelian-Thomistic medievalism toward pre-modernism and a rising modernity. *Ramism*, as I came to understand it, this deliberate reorganization of ideas, values, and priorities, was merely a symptom of a deep-seated transformation, and the competitive and polemical disputes between rhetoric and dialectic at the Universities cannot be mistaken for pointless academic

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squabbles. The Ramist controversy, in other words, was not an isolated episode, but part of broad-based and deep-seated changes in the social, intellectual, and political history of 15th and 16th century Europe. The French educational reform, Renaissance humanism and rising Protestantism were partially interacting and partially coexisting developments, while linking all three movements and shaping them into what came to be pre-modernism was print technology. The confluence of these four cultural phenomena generated, sometimes subtly, sometimes forcefully, but with growing insistence, what amounted to a cataclysmic upheaval of all social, political, intellectual and religious walks of life: Ramism effected the educational reform; humanism transposed the ancient sources into the new typographic information network with far-reaching implications for our concept of antiquity; Protestantism, closely affiliated with the print medium and implemented a religious reform; and print technology set unprecedented standards of textual fixity, stability, finality even, while undermining a world of oral, scribal, memorial, performative values and sensibilities that had sustained millennia of Jewish and Christian civilization.

Out of this specifically Ramist, broadly humanistic, dominantly Protestant, and typographically mediated context a post-Gutenberg intellectualism emerged that was going to become the matrix of the modern conceptualization of the Bible, e.g., the print Bible. We need to pause and let this fact sink in: the modern construction of the Bible in its media profile and its textual, philological identity coincided with and was a child of the media revolution and the educational and religious revolution of the 15th and 16th centuries. Ong not only saw this clearly, but he was remarkably astute in recognizing that the media world in which the modern Bible was implemented and thriving had next to no communications analogy, and was frankly out of step with the media world it was describing and representing. More than that, the construction of the print Bible and the religious values surrounding it were marginalizing, or even undermining, many of the very values that in the past had nourished the biblical traditions. Hence Ong’s diagnosis that the historical, typographic conceptualization of the Bible was a bona fide child of Ramism, as he had come to define it. Moreover, he argued, that we had paid a forbiddingly high price for this modern accomplishment. We, children of the typographic age, are affected by a “cultural squint” because we have allowed “the
communications media of our own culture [to] impose themselves on us surreptitiously as absolutes with crippling effects.”

This “inability of literate thinkers” has blocked a fuller understanding of “the massive rhetorical tradition which underlies Western culture,” and “the same disability “has interfered with our understanding of the Bible, with its massive oral underpinnings.”

These are remarkably harsh words that have directly grown out of Ong’s keen understanding of the force of media. The *typographically mediated approach to and study of the Bible, the pride of Enlightenment’s intellectual ethos, Ong asserted, was not so much reproducing the ancient past, as historical criticism had proudly claimed, as it was in fact “interfering” with a genuine understanding of the biblical traditions.* The print Bible and a whole world of values, methods and sensibilities associated with it, he reminded his readers, was the product of the greatest media revolution in Western history prior to the digital revolution. Recognition of this media reality required recognition of its media bias that was an inescapable part of it.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Ong for having opened my eyes to the thoroughgoing Ramist structure, methods and implications of the historical-critical approach to the Bible. At a later point in my career I would coin the term “typographic captivity” to define the Ramism of the discipline. It was precisely on this issue of the Ramist, historical, typographic appropriation of the Bible that Ong proved to be a culture critic of distinction verifying his own prediction that media theories would “challenge biblical study perhaps more than any other field of learning.”

In view of Ong’s criticism of the post-Gutenberg intellectualism, we need to look more deeply at the pre-Gutenberg communications environment and determine how it compared to and differed from the post-Gutenberg world? As far as the world prior to Gutenberg was concerned, *ancient chirographs or handwritten scripts operated within an oral-scribal-memorial-performative biosphere* that was defined by dictators and lectors, scribes (*librarii, epistulares*), stenographers and note takers (*notarii*), persons assigned secretarial tasks (*amanuenses*), couriers and letter carriers (*tabelarii*), all dealing with handwritten materials.

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11 Ibid., 21.
12 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 173.
As a rule, ancient scripts were dictated and written down to be recited orally. Both in terms of production and consumption they were embedded in a predominantly oral contextuality. Recitation and interiorization, more than preservation, were important functions of ancient writing. *Intermediality*, the interfacing of oral, scribal and memorial features, was a distinguishing characteristic of the ancient communications culture. Last, but really first, memory (*Zakhor* in Hebrew, *mnemosyne* in Greek, and *memoria* in Latin), mother of the nine Muses and one of the canons of ancient rhetoric, was in central position of the whole ancient communications paradigm. Her role in antiquity was not merely one of psychodynamic mechanisms in terms of the creation of mental places, but as social force, as rediscovered in our time by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the German egyptologist Jan Assmann. Both have demonstrated that remembering does not straightforwardly reiterate the data of our experience, but that the remembering processes require the assistance of social frames, which Halbwachs called *les cadres sociaux*, Assmann called *Bezugsrahmen*, Milman Parry and Marcel Jousse called *formulism*. To all intents and purposes, *ancient communications culture was a mnemo-history, a memorially empowered history or an imitating, replaying, oral-scribal-performative ecology operating with remarkably fluid texts in the context of remarkably open borders*.¹³ For the modern solitary, silent reader of the print Bible, used to thinking in terms of verse and chapters, this would be a strange and foreign land, largely unknown and almost unknowable. Neither the rabbis nor Augustine, neither Maimonides nor Thomas Aquinas ever cited, appropriated and interpreted the Bible the way typographic folks do. Even a basic concept such as “word” calls for reconsideration because “words” in large parts of the ancient communications world were not lexical items determined by stable meanings and archived in dictionaries, but were rather behavioral, or to use Marcel Jousse’s term “verbomotoric,” tied in with rhythmic patterns and body language. The foreignness of ancient history brings to mind Peter Brown’s observation about the dilemma he

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¹³ Only minimally referenced by Ong is the work of the French anthropologist Marcel Jousse, S.J. In English, see especially *Memory, Memorization, and Memorizers*. *The Galilean Oral-Style Tradition and Its Traditionists*, ed. and transl. by Edgard Sienaert, with a Foreword by Werner H. Kelber (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018). Jousse has located *Memoria* in central position of his vast phenomenology of anthropology, tradition and communication. His work on memory is of a scope and nature the likes of which have not been seen in the post-Gutenberg history of the interpretation of the Bible.
faces as historian of late Antiquity: “Only in the last generation have we realized . . . that a canyon lies between us and a world we had previously tended to take for granted as directly available to our own categories of understanding.”

Compare the ancient communications model with the post-Gutenberg typographic network that is defined by individual authorship, printers and the printing press, designers and copy editors, publishing businesses, bookstores (until recently), fully identical printed copies, an array of publication facilities, a readership of vast proportions – and one recognizes the cultural canyon that separates the two communication orbits. Imagine further that the modern concept and study of the Bible is part and parcel of this typographic, post-Gutenberg network. Texts, and in fact printed texts, are the foundational objects of our historical work and of our mostly unexamined media assumptions. What Foley has called “the textual ideology,” and I have defined as the “typographic captivity” displays the following features: a scholarly focus on printed texts includes even the ancient sources both in their original and in translation; a historical imagination that often unwittingly reconstructs the past in the image of its own communications preferences; a construction of tradition chiefly in terms of texts, intertextuality and textual stratifications; an unprecedented historical procedure to replace the medieval plural senses with the one historical sense (sensus literalis sive historicus); reading the ancient texts with a view toward authorial intentionality; construction of a critical edition which is anachronistically labeled “the original text;” a tendency to imagine tradition, even oral tradition, on the model of linear sequentiality, and often along the lines of an evolutionary ascent from speech to script; and, perhaps importantly, the suppression of memory and the marginalization of the oral medium in favor of textuality.

A controlling rationale of the modern imagination of the Bible and of biblical traditions is originalism. It is a concept at home both in biblical scholarship and in jurisprudence, those disciplines that deal with the two sacred documents in North American history: the Bible and the Constitution. Modernity’s biblical scholarship is unthinkable without notions of the original

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text, the original saying, the original genre, and so forth. In jurisprudence, originalism advocates an understanding of the words of the Constitution “as they were understood at the time they were written.” Originalism epitomizes a thoroughgoing typographic rationality, fixed texts in a stable communications universe, and a sense of timelessness and singularity, resisting the very elements that were constitutive in the pre-Gutenberg communications world, namely temporality and plurality. Prior to Gutenberg, the communications culture was inclined to operate with a plurality of voices and scripts, operating in a heavily fluid state of word processing where the preferred script was not necessarily the first and oldest, but the most recent one.

In this Ramist, typographically dominated communications network Gutenberg’s print Bible, showpiece of the high tech of the fifteenth century, was towering above all other print materials. It had implemented “typographic space” in which technological control over language had reached a state of perfection never achieved before in scribal space. It represented the supreme triumph of logic in space. Each page was systematically formatted, meticulously linearized, with equidistant lines perfectly aligned along fully justified margins -- left and right, top and bottom. It set the highest standards of calligraphic virtuosity, projecting an image of flawless proportionality, of textual fixity, of finality, of permanence, of immortality even. Gutenberg’s spatialized, linearized, and meticulously systematized masterpiece which appeared to escape the ravages of time served as a catalyst in historical criticism’s illusion of objectivity.

The Bible’s fully rationalized typographic space projected an image of unearthly and other-worldly beauty. It has been pointed out that the aesthetics of the Gutenberg’s technology of construction and formatting fulfilled the Renaissance ideal of beauty: the complete correspondence and harmony of all individual component parts. Still, one should

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16 The statement is from the late US Supreme Court justice, Antonin Scalia.
18 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 128-32.
not lose sight of the fact that the Gutenberg Bible was a media novelty in the sense that everything about it was mechanically constructed. Close to 300 letter types were cast in different forms of metal. The printing press itself was a mechanical process. The printed language of the Bible, therefore was the result of thoroughly and efficiently mechanical techniques. Latin itself, the language of the Gutenberg Bible, was, in Ong’s words, a chirographically controlled, learned language that had lost its marketability. Whatever else the Gutenberg Bible was meant to be, it was not principally designed to generate faith among the masses. In all its aspects -- production, form and impact -- it was an abstraction isolated from the oral biosphere and disconnected from the world of scribal networking. Now we can see more clearly than ever why memory and oral tradition are being marginalized and suppressed in the modern paradigm of the Bible. The issue is technology. The typographic book was solely the product of mechanical processes. Oral and memorial sensibilities had lost their raison d’etre in the production process of printed books. The beauty of the Gutenberg Bible was truly one of an unearthly kind, something one had never seen before. It was a beauty that had materialized itself in total mechanization and abstraction: *ars artificialis scribendi*.

The benefits society received from the print medium and the print Bible have often been rehearsed and are beyond a shadow of a doubt. Literacy was raised to a level never experienced before. Print was rapidly becoming a tool of civilized life. Communication was steadily globalized, and critical, analytical and comparative thinking were enhanced.

And yet, *the Bible made print* was by no means the unmixed blessing that its inventor and many of its promoters had envisioned. And this is where the practitioners of our own social media ought to pay attention! The print Bible, this first mass-produced communications commodity in Western history became almost from its inception a pawn in the hands of the entrepreneurs. Capitalism took hold of the new medium with a vengeance. To come to terms with this unprecedented merger of the new medium with entrepreneurship, Benedict Anderson, author of the celebrated book *Imagined Communities*, coined the term *print capitalism*. Printers, intensely concerned with the pursuit of profit, were hasty and negligent

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in the practice of their trade. Once typographical, grammatical and substantive errors entered into the text, they were multiplied a hundredfold, a thousandfold as a result of print’s duplicating mechanism. Luther complained that the greater the quantity of printed texts, the poorer their quality: “I do not recognize my own books . . . here there is something left out, there something set incorrectly, there forged, there not proofread.”

From the outset, the new medium and the print Bible were accompanied by hopes of unification and globalization, concord and peace. Accelerated production, a steadily growing readership and never-before experienced accessibility were assumed to bring us all together. It was what five hundred years later was going to become Mark Zuckerberg’s dream! In the past, it did not quite turn out that way. A plurality of readers of the Bible resulted in a plurality of interpretations.

Every individual reader could now form his and her own opinion about biblical texts. Whereas in chirographic culture, doctrinal and hermeneutical controversies largely stayed within a limited circle of theological experts, in print culture disputes over interpretation went public across regional and national boundaries. Moreover, vernacular Bibles became the rallying points for national aspirations, drawing new lines of national and religious division, and steadily exacerbating Catholic-Protestant polemics and hostilities. What some welcomed as the rise of nation states, others lamented as the fragmentation of Europe. These national-religious enmities and estrangements eventually resulted in the Thirty Years War that brought a vast destruction to central Europe and left the continent with approximately eight million fatalities. In one of the most provocative sentences in her two-volumes set, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, Elizabeth Eisenstein asserted: “Gutenberg’s invention probably contributed more to destroying Christian concord and inflaming religious warfare than any of the so-called arts of war ever did.”

Media revolutions work ad bonam et ad malam partem, for better and for worse.

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