

The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality¹

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ABSTRACT *This article offers an intellectual history and critique of the concept of orality as developed by writers of the Toronto School, focusing especially on the work of Walter Ong and, to a lesser extent, Marshall McLuhan. It argues that common scholarly uses of orality, especially as a theory of acoustic or sound-based culture, are derived from the spirit-letter distinction in Christian spiritualism and a misreading of Hebraic philology by mid-twentieth-century theologians. It argues for a new history of early media and for a new global anthropology of communication that does not operate under the sign of orality. We can thereby honour the curiosity of scholars such as Harold Innis and Edmund Carpenter without taking their findings as timeless truths.*

KEYWORDS *Anthropology; History; Literacy; Modernity; Orality/Oral culture; Phenomenology; Toronto School/Transformation theory*

RÉSUMÉ *Cet article offre une histoire intellectuelle et critique du concept d'oralité tel que développé par des auteurs de l'École de Toronto, en portant une attention particulière à l'œuvre de Walter Ong et, dans une moindre mesure, Marshall McLuhan. Il soutient que les applications académiques les plus communes de l'oralité, notamment en tant que théorie d'une culture acoustique ou sonore, se fondent sur la distinction esprit/lettre du spiritualisme chrétien et une lecture erronée de la philologie hébraïque par des théologiens du milieu du vingtième siècle. Cet article propose une nouvelle histoire des médias originels et une nouvelle anthropologie mondiale de la communication qui dépasseraient les conceptions conventionnelles de ce qu'est l'oralité. Nous pourrions ainsi honorer la curiosité de chercheurs comme Harold Innis et Edmund Carpenter sans devoir accepter leurs conclusions comme si elles étaient des vérités intemporelles.*

MOTS CLÉS *Alphabétisme; Anthropologie; École de Toronto/Théorie de la transformation; Histoire; Modernité; Oralité/Culture orale; Phénoménologie*

[Philosophy] always pursues the same task, Iconology, and adapts it to the speculative need of Christianity (the infinitely small and the infinitely large). Always the selection among pretenders, the exclusion of the eccentric and the divergent, in the name of a superior finality, an essential reality, or even a meaning of history.

—Gilles Deleuze (1990, p. 260)

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Much of the history of communication is still written in the shadow of an aging fable. Even as other grand narratives have faced elision or revision, this fable has endured as a stated and unstated backdrop for accounts of the long-term flow of communication history. The story of communication is staged as a play in three acts: orality, literacy, and electronic consciousness. To offer a gross summary: oral culture is a kind of auditory culture, structured by the impossibility of writing anything down. It is ruled by tradition and collectivity, and it dwells in an enduring present where the past is maintained by feats of memory and memorization alone. Literate culture is visual culture, structured by the dominance of visual epistemologies such as the split between subject and object and the ability to externalize memory and institutional form through the power of writing and eventually print. It allows for greater bureaucratic control and consolidation and for highly orchestrated enterprises, such as science, that transcend time and space. Electronic culture depends on the powers of externalization first developed in literature culture, but it returns to a kind of oral mindset of an expansive present and universal interconnectedness.

The oral-literate-electronic schema has been widely attributed to the work of writers in the so-called Toronto School (sometimes referred to as “the Canadian School” outside of Canada) and figures such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Eric Havelock, as well as Jack Goody and Walter Ong. Depending on which authors are privileged in a given intellectual history, different accounts of the origins and significance of the schema emerge.

In this article, I offer a reading of Walter Ong’s works to advance a genealogy of the concept of orality as rooted in the Christian spiritualist tradition. Ong is not generally celebrated as a central figure in the Toronto tradition. Perhaps because he was a student of McLuhan’s and because he was not Canadian, Ong is still often read as derivative and less innovative. Yet Ong’s coinage of “secondary orality” became an important means for characterizing electronic communication, and along with Jack Goody, Ong probably has the most elaborately worked out theory of orality in the tradition. He is also currently the most globally influential writer on orality. Ong’s book *Orality and Literacy* (1982) is likely the most widely read, cited, and translated conceptualization of orality over the last 30 years. Because he offers a detailed and intellectually developed theory of sound as presence, Ong is an essential figure in twentieth-century thought. His work brings together many muted and otherwise submerged lines of inquiry about sound; it is fabulously synthetic. Although McLuhan is generally credited as the originator of the concept (since he was Ong’s mentor), Ong’s entire career was dedicated to the exploration, analysis, and promotion of the orality/literacy dyad, while orality is a much less coherently articulated concept in McLuhan’s oeuvre. McLuhan’s ideas were also heavily influenced by Ong’s during their interactions in the 1950s (see Marchand, 1989).

This article thus offers a new intellectual-historical account of orality through an extended reading of Walter Ong’s oeuvre. Ong’s concepts of the difference between sonically based oral consciousness and visually based literate consciousness (and inasmuch as they follow the same logic, McLuhan’s) are derived from Christian theological debates regarding interpretation of the Bible that went on during the early and mid-

twentieth century. Orality operates as such a weighty *doxa* in communication historiography precisely because it animates categories of Christian spiritualism. Although other writers such as McLuhan and Havelock do not explicitly cite the same religious literature, the compelling power of their accounts actually derived from the powerful and enduring cultural resonance of Ong's spiritualist sources much more than any particular genius of these men or their writings. Having established the theological basis of the orality concept, I turn in conclusion to Harold Innis' much more omnivorous approach to media in the ancient world. I argue for a reconstruction of deep communication history, a reconsideration of what I will call early media, and a new kind of global consciousness in communication historiography. By freeing ourselves of the concept of orality, we can offer a richer, more varied, and more robust deep history and global anthropology of communication.

As a concept, orality has something of a vexed and uncharted intellectual history. We largely believe its advocates on questions of its pedigree. For instance, Eric Havelock claims in *The Muse Learns to Write* (1988) that 1962-1963 represented the "modern discovery" of orality with the publication of a small group of texts dealing with the subject: his *Preface to Plato*, Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind*, Marshall McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Goody & Watt's "The Consequences of Literacy," and Ernst Mayr's *Animal Species and Evolution* (Havelock, 1988). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), Marshall McLuhan grounds his analysis of orality on J. C. Carothers' 1959 paper "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word" (Carothers, 1959), although discussions about orality had been going on for over a decade at that point, as documented in Carpenter & McLuhan's *Explorations in Communication* (Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960).

Another history of the theory traces it to an application of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that linguistic categories constrain a culture's perceptions of the world. Specifically, Dorothy Lee's (1950) writings on linear and non-linear conceptions of reality, originally focused on Trobriand Islanders, contrast White Western "lineal" cause-effect thinking and language with that of the Trobriand Islanders studied by Malinowski. In travel, work, eating, play, and many other contexts, Lee argued that the islanders did not think in terms of temporal sequence, but only in terms of self-enclosed events, whereas the line is everything in White Western culture. While White Westerners decided everything from university admissions to the success or failure of a person's life on the basis of a line, Trobrianders did not even use adjectives. For them, things just were (Lee, 1950). This specific comparison would later be expanded upon by Edmund Carpenter and others as the basis for a theory of orality in non-Western cultures (see Carpenter, 1972; Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960; Feld, 1986). Jack Goody's writings on literacy could be read as an extension of this line of thinking, where the "mode of communication" affects the formations of a culture. Goody sought to examine the connections between psychological and cultural forms without some of the more "ethnocentric" and "developmental" sensibilities that had shaped earlier anthropological work on the senses. Thus, he moves between attempts to develop a general account of the cultural significance of writing and an anthropological desire to move beyond models of the West that are imposed on the rest of the globe (Goody, 1977).

Yet another history of the concept would take us closer to World War II: Harold Innis had already offered a developed account of the characteristics of orality as preliterate Western consciousness in his "Minerva's Owl" paper, originally delivered as a speech to the Royal Society in 1947:

[T]he oral tradition emphasized memory and training. We have no history of conversation or of the oral tradition except as they are revealed darkly through the written or printed word. The drama reflected the power of the oral tradition but its flowering for only a short period in Greece and in England illustrates its difficulties. ... A writing age was essentially an egoistic age. ... Richness of the oral tradition made for a flexible civilization but not a civilization which could be disciplined to the point of effective political unity. ... Writing with a simplified alphabet checked the power of custom of an oral tradition but implied a decline in the power of expression and the creation of grooves which determined the channels of thought of readers and later writers. (Innis, 1991, pp. 9-11)

There is, however, a significant difference between Innis' and Carpenter's conceptions of oral tradition and the conception of orality that has since come to dominance in scholarly literature. For Innis, oral tradition was multisensory and based in dialogue. In "The Problem of Space" (originally published in 1951), Innis describes sensory dimensions of orality in this fashion: "In oral intercourse the eye, ear, and brain, the senses and faculties acted together in busy co-operation and rivalry each eliciting, stimulating, and supplementing the other" (Innis, 1991, p. 105). Carpenter (1972) echoes this position in *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me* when he writes,

The term "oral tradition" is misleading, for generally all the senses are involved in such cases. There seems to be everywhere a natural tendency for the senses to interpenetrate & [sic] interplay, "the ear-bone connected to the eye-bone" creating a concert or orchestration in which the ear sees, the eye hears, one smells-tastes color, and all the senses engage in every experience. (p. 52)

For Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and their followers, oral consciousness is a sonic consciousness, and the difference between orality and literacy is based on the difference between the eye and the ear: "tribal, nonliterate man" lived "under the intense stress on auditory organization of all experience" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 35). Paul Heyer and David Crowley (1991) note that the difference between Innis and McLuhan is eminently political:

For Innis, the important feature of an oral tradition is not its aural nature, as McLuhan has stressed, but the fact that it emphasizes dialogue and inhibits the emergence of monopolies of knowledge leading to overarching political authority, territorial expansion, and the inequitable distribution of power and wealth. ... Innis, of course, did not use this oral/literate contrast to advocate a romantic return to the former. Rather, it functioned as an element in a critical theory of knowledge whereby recapturing something of the "spirit" of the oral mode, with its attendant "elasticity," would foster, he believed, intellectual exchange and generate a skeptical attitude toward entrenched dogma. (pp. xvii-xviii)

Similarly, John Watson (2006) argues that McLuhan's critique of Innis comes from the former's reduction of oral tradition to sound and consequent turn away from the politics of knowledge. And so we have the various possible histories of orality: perhaps it emerges from Innis' critique of communication technologies and an effort to understand what came before; perhaps it comes as an attempt to generalize a mode of non-Western, non-literate consciousness from a few specific ethnographic studies; perhaps it comes from Marshall McLuhan's theory of the senses; and perhaps it comes from Eric Havelock's reading of Greek texts. My argument in this article is not that Ong's sources for the concept of orality are more true, but simply that because Ong's conceptualization of orality is the most influential, his sources deserve the most scrutiny.

Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) presents a formal theory of consciousness and culture deductively derived from a set of binary oppositions between hearing and seeing. Ong posited orality as that mode of consciousness structured by the impossibility of writing anything down, or of even conceptualizing that possibility. "Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. ... They are occurrences, events" (p. 30). For Ong, cultures without writing are by definition oral cultures, and they have a distinctive set of characteristics. Ong causally derived most of the salient features of oral culture from the ephemeral character of sound. When sound is present, it is already going out of existence. The rest were derived from hearing's ability to detect interiority without violating it. You can hear what is inside an object without passing through its surface; according to Ong, you cannot do the same with touch, taste, smell, or sight. "It will be seen that most of the characteristics of orally based thought and expression ... relate intimately to the unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound as perceived by human beings" (Ong, 1982, p. 72).

Ong moved freely between characterizations of oral thought and oral culture because he considered the latter to be a necessary expression of the former. For Ong, cultural forms emerged from psychological states. Ong elaborated a cluster of related characteristics of oral thought and culture. Oral thought is conventional, using mnemonics and formulas to aid in recall. Oral thought is additive rather than subordinative, putting events together in sequence rather than relation. Oral thought is aggregative rather than analytic, putting things together rather than taking them apart. It is redundant, since oral cultures cannot "refer back" to what was spoken. Oral culture is conservative or traditionalist because it must "invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages" (Ong, 1982, p. 41). Oral culture is close to the human life-world. It does not deal in many abstract categories or abstracted procedures. Oral culture is agonistic because ideas cannot be separated from the people who present them. Oral culture is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced because there is no separation between knower and known as there is in cultures with writing. Oral culture is oriented toward the present over the past and the future because the latter categories are more abstract. And most generally, oral thought is more situational and less abstract in all its forms, because hearing fosters engagement with the world, and only writing, structured by the faculty of sight, allows for the high degree of abstraction on which we depend in modern life (Ong, 1982).

In contrast, Ong's concept of literate culture was structured by the psychological characteristics he attributed to sight. Abstraction becomes possible through writing because it separates knower and known. He argued that it was not until the rise of printing that literacy and sight became predominant in European culture. With print, however, abstract thinking becomes even more depersonalized than with writing, and print space is *visual* space, where objects may be separated from their contexts and considered in relation to one another. For Ong, print and visibility allow the mind to move beyond the immediacy of the present to an abstract past and future. Print fosters a sense of individuality separate from collectivity, and print delegates the function of memory from internal psychic processes to an external object. For the literate mind, knowledge inheres in things outside the self and the eventfulness of the world (Ong, 1982). From this account, Ong built an entire theory of modernity as growing out of a shift from auditory to visual dominance of the sensorium. Ong traced the dehumanizing and alienating aspects of modern life to this shift, which he called the "hypertrophy of the visual" (Ong, 1967).

The cultural history implied by the oral-literate dyad is relatively straightforward. Ong's account of communication history is structured by sets of paired assumptions about the differences between seeing and hearing, a grouping I have elsewhere termed "the audiovisual litany" (Sterne, 2003, p. 15):

- hearing is spherical; vision is directional
- hearing immerses its subject; vision offers a perspective
- sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object
- hearing is concerned with interiors; vision is concerned with surfaces
- hearing involves physical contact with the outside world; vision requires distance from it
- hearing places you inside an event; seeing gives you a perspective on the event
- hearing tends toward subjectivity; vision tends toward objectivity
- hearing brings us into the living world; sight moves us toward atrophy and death
- hearing is about affect; vision is about intellect
- hearing is a primarily temporal sense; vision is a primarily spatial sense
- hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, while vision removes us from it.

The audiovisual litany's account of the differences between hearing and seeing is rhetorically powerful, but not very accurate. As Don Ihde (1974) has shown in his classic phenomenological study of hearing, many of the aspects of auditory perception writers attribute to the litany do not actually hold up when we closely examine auditory experience. Especially in recent years, anthropologists, historians, and countless others have chronicled organizations of sonic culture that call into question the assumptions about sound, culture, and consciousness implied by the audiovisual litany.² And yet, in the cultural theory and history that it subtends, the oral-literate-electronic triad continues to exert a surprising degree of influence over the ways in which many

scholars characterize the long history of communication in the West and how they differentiate dominant Western constructs of communication from its many Others.

The binaries between seeing and hearing in Ong were not always universal or either/or propositions. In his earlier works, Ong took pains to make clear that he was talking about ratios among different senses (though the characteristics of each sense ostensibly remained a constant) (Ong, 1967). And Ong intended his work on orality to be a critique of literate culture, a gesture toward a form of what he believed to be more collective ways of living and a set of mores devalued in his own culture. Like the Romantics responding to the Classicists, Ong wished to inject some mystery and transcendence back into a world of thought he considered too concerned with order and reason. His work thus falls into a long tradition of iconoclastic anti-modernism. But the triumph of sight and images in the modern age was not the starting point for his analysis. His anti-modernism was not a full justification for his turn to orality/literacy as an analytic of culture. For that, we must turn to Ong's earlier and more original work.

As Thomas Farrell (perhaps Ong's most emphatic advocate in the secondary literature) argues, *Orality and Literacy* was written to summarize a whole field of work and should not be taken as Ong's most significant scholarly contribution (Farrell, 2000). *Orality and Literacy* does contain a neat summary of the concepts named in its title, but it loses the flavour and purpose of Ong's work. The many "findings" summarized in the later book and cloaked in the rhetoric of scientific certainty are restored to their original epistemological homes if we move backward in time.³ Ong's earlier *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967) offers a much more elaborate theory of orality as sound-based culture. It also makes clear Ong's purpose in conducting the inquiry: he aimed to better understand the conditions under which it was possible for people to hear the word of God in his age. A more careful elaboration of the contours of his position, especially the connections he posited between orality, sound, and the divine, will clarify my claim that the concept of orality has its roots in a spiritualist theological orientation.

Ong's interest in questions of sound emerged from his first major book, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958). Ong had amassed a great deal of material about Ramus and believed him to be a bridge between the Middle Ages and the modern world, but initially could not explain why. "[T]hen somehow I came across the difference between the Hebrew idea of knowing and the Greek idea of knowing and in that moment everything fell into place" (Ong, quoted in Reimer, 1971, p. 27). It is not clear what specifically sparked Ong's interest in the matter. Farrell speculates that Ong "may have been attuned to [the] sound-sight contrast by the work he had done in his 1941 Master's thesis on sprung rhythm in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins" (2000, p. 28). This is possible, though the key framing of the sound-sight contrast in Ong hinges on a debate over the meaning of the word *dabar*—דבר in Hebraic scripture—and around the larger question of the relationship between Hebraic thought and Greek thought. Ong was attuned to the issues highlighted in that debate and very concerned with the distinction between spirit and letter. Ong's notion of orality (inflected by Thorlief Boman's characterization of Jewish thought) was his idea of a sensorium more attuned to the spirit, while his notion of literacy (inflected by Boman's characterization

of the ancient Greeks) was more attuned to the letter. In the tradition of Christian spiritualism, Ong sought a way to commune with the spirit of God. Thus, a detour through these old philological discussions will allow us to fully apprehend the spiritual basis of orality as a concept and to understand the kind of theological work it was originally designed to do.

Although this debate over the meaning of *dabar* seems like a relatively minor or technical issue, it points to several larger problems in Ong's conceptualization of orality. He imported the Jewish/Greek distinction manifest in a mid-twentieth-century debate over the interpretation of the Bible as a model of the oral/literate distinction in general. He attached a historical telos to that distinction, where progress naturally and necessarily flowed from Jewish constructs to Christian ones. And he offered a very selective interpretation of both ancient Hebraic and Greek languages and cultures. A particularly local philology was thus the basis for what would become a universal cultural and psychological theory in the guise of orality and literacy.

Thorlief Boman, in his *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (1960), contrasts the two in terms we have already encountered. Boman casts Hebraic thought as dynamic and temporal, and Greek thought as static and spatial. For Boman, Jews lived in a world of sound, Greeks in a world of light. Though he did not use Ong's terms, Boman's Jews were primarily oral and his Greeks were primarily literate. A centrepiece of Boman's argument is his interpretation of *dabar* in ancient Hebrew as meaning both "word" and "event." In his comparison of *dabar* with its Greek equivalent, *logos*—Boman argued that while they meet in the domain of "word," their other definitions point to very different etymological trajectories, and therefore different cultural psychologies. In Boman's reading, *dabar* connotes "drive forward, speak, word, deed" while the Greek word *logos* connotes "gather, arrange, speak, reckon, think, word, reason" (Boman, 1960, pp. 58-69).⁴ Boman argued that the Hebrew notion of "word" is linked to actions, presentations, and events, while the Greek notion of "word" is based on abstract reason and thought. Based on this and other etymological discussions (for instance, asserting that Hebrew numbers have their origins as nouns), he arrived at the conclusion that the difference between Hebraic and Greek thought is a difference between hearing and seeing:

[F]or the Hebrew the most important of his senses for the experience of truth was his hearing (as well as various kinds of feeling), but for the Greek it had to be his sight; or perhaps inversely, because the Greeks were organized in a predominantly visual way and the Hebrews in a predominantly auditory way, each people's conception of truth was formed in increasingly different ways. The impressions gained by way of hearing or perceived sensually ... have the three aforementioned Hebraic characteristics: they are constantly changing, they are of a dynamic-qualitative sort because they can be expressed in all degree of intensity and in varying qualities Sight impressions must, therefore, chiefly be based upon images which have form, objectivity, and immutability. (Boman, 1960, pp. 206-207)⁵

So for Boman, the Hebrews lived in an eventful world of sound, whereas the Greeks lived in a static world of sight. Certainly, Boman was not the first author to note

this distinction, nor to develop it. Boman traced his project back to Johann Gottfried Herder, and there are countless references in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to differences between Hebraic and Greek thought. Boman's importance derived from his synthetic statement of the problem as a psychological and perceptual one, subsuming prior scholarship under that rubric and doing so within the context of scriptural interpretation.⁶

For Boman and other mid-twentieth-century biblical scholars, the stake of this difference was in the interpretation of the Bible itself, since the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Boman's line of thinking clearly influenced Ong's argument in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, but it is not explicitly cited in the book. By the time Ong wrote the lectures that became *The Presence of the Word*, the Hebraic/Greek heuristic was a clearly foregrounded concern at the outset (see Ong, 1958, 1967). Ong extended the theses of Boman and his contemporaries, building two entire sets of conditions of the soul from word-as-event and word-as-thing. Boman's reasoning flowed from his etymology. The association between words and events in *dabar* evidences the auditory emphasis in ancient Hebraic thought. Ong went a step further in deducing the general characteristics of orality from the sound culture suggested by the connection of "word" and "event" in *dabar*. Similarly, the association of "word" and "thing" in Boman's etymology became the basis for Ong's notion of literacy as a logical extension of visual culture. That is to say, Ong essentially extrapolated the general categories of oral and literate from the figures of the Jew and the Greek in mid-century Christian theology. Ong's "oral man" was Boman's Jew, who lived in a dynamic, ephemeral, and engaged world shaped by sound as an event, where the power of words is carried in their sound. Ong's "literate man" was Boman's Greek, who lived in a world defined by sight and oriented toward distance, objectivity, rationalism, disembodiment, and form, where words derive their power from being seen.

But Boman and his contemporaries were not the sole discussants on the matter of etymology. James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961) takes apart in thorough and systematic fashion the use (or rather, misuse) of etymology in biblical scholarship performed by theologians with little if any linguistic training or orientation. Though Barr was unceasingly modest, saying that his linguistic criticisms did not invalidate the larger theological points presented by theological scholars, his critique of their use of language was devastating.⁷ Specifically, Barr's critique of Boman and other theologians who argue history through etymology lays bare the long series of elisions necessary to characterize the ancient Jews as oral and the ancient Greeks as literate and then extrapolate the general categories of orality and literacy from these two historical instances.⁸

Barr began his discussion of *dabar* by citing several theologians who asserted a dual meaning for *dabar*. They claimed that it refers both to a "hinterground of meaning, the inner reality of the word" and to a "dynamic event in which that inner reality becomes manifest" (p. 130). The problem, as Barr noted, is that no known Hebrew lexicon made any reference to an inner reality of the word. Moreover, the second definition—"event"—was also grossly overstated in the theological literature. As any

beginning student of Hebrew knows, *dabar* refers to speech and words, and to things and matters that are spoken about. These meanings are also well documented in the secondary literature on the Old Testament (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1962). Following Barr, if we consider the use of “thing” in English, we will see a pretty good parallel example. If one reads a sentence stating that “the thing happened at Waterloo in 1815,” we are presumably able to distinguish between the fact that the “thing” at Waterloo is indeed a dynamic historical event without extrapolating that the word “thing” itself always refers to dynamic historical events. Barr argued that the same is true of the Hebrew *dabar*: we cannot deduce its meaning in any particular usage from the etymology of a word alone. This is of course a basic principle of semantics, and it holds here as well. “Thus the conception that the Word of Yahweh enters history as dynamic event may or may not be a true representation of an aspect of the theological thinking of the Israelites, but has nothing to do with the meaning of the word *dabar*, except in so far as *dabar* is or may be used for ‘word’” (Barr, 1961, p. 132).

The larger problem, according to Barr, is that etymology is a totally voluntaristic approach to biblical interpretation. Interpreters can choose to attend to associations among possible meanings they wish to connect and ignore the meanings they dislike. Connecting this voluntaristic etymology to a theological approach that takes the Bible as a system is further troublesome since the Bible is “a complex and often paradoxical fabric of historical and theological traditions from different times and sources” (p. 139). Interpreters using the etymological method also get to select which current of biblical thought they wish to highlight and can choose to ignore the others. The result is a reading of scripture in which interpreters can make it say almost anything they want (Barr, 1961).

Barr thus undermined the epistemic platform on which etymological theology rested. Although Ong acknowledged the debate, he argues in *Presence of the Word* that Barr’s objections over method do not ultimately invalidate Boman’s fundamental insights (Ong, 1967). Barr’s excessive modesty made this move possible, though his arguments do in fact call into question the very evidence that Ong accepted as factual. Ong used the same etymological method—derived from Boman—that Barr criticized to reach the same theological conclusions. The word-as-event/word-as-thing construct became an important hinge in the history of the senses in general:

[T]he question of the sensorium in the Christian economy of revelation is particularly fascinating because of the primacy which this economy accords to the word of God and thus in some mysterious way to sound itself, a primacy already suggested in the Old Testament pre-Christian [i.e., Jewish or Hebraic] tradition. (Ong, 1967, p. 12)

The entire debate as framed by Ong was skewed, because at no point did he reckon with the meaning of *dabar* as “thing.” If Ong argued that the association between “word” and “event” in *dabar* evidenced a sensorium oriented toward orality and sound, then the equally strong association between “word” and “thing” in *dabar* casts serious doubt on the plausibility of that argument.

Ong’s and Boman’s reading of *dabar* was the Trojan horse carrying the spirit/letter distinction into Hebraic thought, which is not itself concerned with this distinction.

My cursory reading of the etymology suggests an interpretation quite different from Ong's, but equally plausible based on the available evidence: the operative split between "thing" and "event," between word-as-event and word-as-thing, is not an artifact of the Hebrew language. Rather, the ancient Jews were able to distinguish the meaning of a word from its semantic context, much like people today. Further, to have one word that in different contexts can refer to "word," "matter," or "thing" is not necessarily to extrapolate Hebraic notions of "word" into dynamic, event-based, and temporal conceptualizations of language, presence, and meaning.

In linking orality to a Christian conception of Hebraic thought, Ong marshalled Jewish theology to support a side of an argument originally designed to exclude the Jews from Christian theology. While some Jewish thought certainly comes before Christian thought historically, the characterization of Jewish thought as "pre-Christian" suggests a developmental progression from Jew to Greek to Christian, which is paralleled by bio-psychological development from a primarily oral sensorium to a primarily literate sensorium to the "secondary orality" Ong found in modern consciousness. This framing of Hebraic thought as "pre-Christian" (despite the fact that as a tradition it continues through the Christian Era) was suggested by Ong's own religious position: "[T]he Catholic Church, accessible to all man's senses through her identifiable members, is, I believe, the focus in the present in which the word of God given to man in the past most eminently lives and in which the person of the Word is most eminently present" (Ong, 1967, p. 320). Ong was most emphatically not a religious pluralist in his argument, nor should we expect him to have been. In Ong's present, Hebraic thought was thus *necessarily* pre-Christian. But as a participant in a larger discussion about the spirit and the letter, Ong selectively cited Hebraic thought to suit his position. In the logic of his argument, he had already put aside the possibility of considering Hebraic thought on its own terms before even arriving at the specifics of *dabar*. In Ong's spiritualist logic, modern Catholics strangely have the potential to be better Jews than the ancient Jews themselves.

As Susan Handelman has made clear, Jews' purported overreliance on the written text was a central theme in medieval Christian polemics against them. She writes that "while claiming to spiritualize Judaism, Christianity in effect literalized it with a vengeance" (Handelman, 1982, p. 17; see also Ong, 1967, p. 168). Thus, the debate among twentieth-century Christian scholars over the meaning of *dabar* as word and event ought to be read as an adaptation of Hebraic philology to a longstanding Christian agenda and most certainly not as an affirmation of rabbinic thought. By denying the importance of sacred writing to Jewish theology (for instance, the status of the Torah itself), Ong's deployment of the question about the relation of word and event in the definition of *dabar* ultimately missed the larger connection between speech and writing in Jewish theology. It also left out the very important qualification that the original distinction between spirit and letter was a Christian response to rabbinical writings.⁹

In his larger project to privilege the spirit over the letter, Ong carried on a line of thought begun by St. Augustine: "For Augustine, the appearance of God to humans is essentially a media problem" (Peters, 1999, p. 71). Ong was ultimately interested in the usefulness of the history of the senses for understanding the history of the rela-

tionship between the human and the divine from a Christian perspective. Ong's idea of a shifting balance or ratio among relatively static sense-faculties informed the larger question of how divine revelation could occur:

[I]n our present perspectives, this is to say that divine revelation itself, whether seen from within by the eyes of faith or considered from without as a series of events in secular history, is indeed inserted in a particular sensorium, a particular mixture of the sensory activity typical of a given culture. (Ong, 1967, p. 11)

The question animating *The Presence of the Word* and the turn to orality-literacy more generally was thus a question of the preparedness of any particular sensorium to receive the word of God. On this point, Ong was unequivocal: listening is an activity closer to the divine than seeing. As he concluded, "the mystery of sound is the one which in the ways suggested here is the most productive of understanding and unity, the most personally human, and in this sense closest to the divine" (p. 324). For Ong, sound gets us closer to each other, and therefore closer to God.

For all its emphasis on orality, *The Presence of the Word* is not a strictly nostalgic book, and this is because Ong saw a new era of secondary orality as an emergent possibility. From Ong's perspective, this optimism was necessary since eventually there has to be a Second Coming. His notion of secondary orality was precisely intended to denote the paradoxical condition of a world that had some of the immediacy and collectivity that he attributed to oral cultures, but at the same time carried with it the baggage of literacy and the culture of the eye. Ong's hope for secondary orality had to do with its possibilities for once again preparing the subject to receive the word of God.

Summing up the theory of orality and literacy he presents in *Presence of the Word*, Ong (1967) wrote:

The story told in the foregoing chapters suggests that a certain silencing of God may have been prepared for by the silencing of man's life-world. The ability to respond directly to the word enjoyed by oral-aural man has been attenuated by objectifying the human life-world through the hypertrophy of the visual and the obtrusion of the visual into the verbal itself as man has moved through the chirographic and typographic stages of culture. (pp. 288-289)

He later qualified this statement with a measured optimism about the present (1964-1967) state of affairs: "[W]ithin time and space, the human consciousness and with it man's word remains a primary point of entry for the divine. As it expands its purchase in the universe, enlarges itself, the ground on which grace operates and God's presence is felt is enlarged" (Ong, 1967, p. 313). This is the central affective tension in the *Presence of the Word*. Ong was torn between two affirmations. The first affirmed orality as the mode of existence where the human and the divine are most closely intertwined. The second affirmed secondary orality, a new and expanding sonic consciousness in the 1960s as opening up new possibilities for hearing the word of God. On this second point, he was cautiously optimistic, without committing himself to a millennial certainty. "This itself gives us a unique opportunity to become aware at a new depth of the significance of the word" (p. 9). So he hedged his bets. Ong saw that

the new electronic culture presented possibilities for divine revelation, but they had not yet been realized. At the same time, he was clearly resolved that it was the sonic aspect of the new media environment—insofar as that sonic element was similar to orality—that was the source of his optimism:

The question is: Once the word has acquired these new limitations [the limitations imposed by visuality] can it retain its old purity? It can, but for it to do so we must reflectively recover that purity. This means that we must now seek further to understand the nature of the word as word, which involves understanding the word as sound. What earlier man possessed instinctively and confusedly, we must possess more explicitly and clearly. (Ong, 1967, p. 92)

It is in this suggestively messianic context that we need to read Ong's sensory history. "Oral man," dweller of a temporalized world of sound, gave way to "literate man," who resided in the spatialized and externalized world of sight. Ong's sensory history is the story of the fall from innocence and a possible future redemption. At the moment of Ong's writing, he saw the construct of literacy giving way to a new electronic oral-aural consciousness consisting of a new kind of immediate co-presence. Only then might it be possible to find God again.

Ong (1967) was clear that his history of "the word" in human culture was not identical to a history of the word of God as revelation, but he was equally clear that it was the necessary precondition of a "salvation history," a messianic history:

Study of man in terms of the changes in the verbal media establishes new grounds for the relation of sacred and secular history. ... The history of the word and thus of verbal media has rather more immediate religious relevance than the history of kingdoms and principalities. (p. 181)

Ong could not be clearer, and from a theological perspective his project could not be bolder: he argued that the balance of the sensorium is itself a precondition for human receptivity to divine revelation and messianic intervention. For Ong, the connection between the history of communication and sacred and secular history is precisely an openness to divinity.¹⁰

This returns us once again to the question of *why* one develops a history or theory of communication, sensation, and culture. If the goal is to find God through properly conditioning our perception, very well. But for those of us who do not believe the work of communication studies is identical to the project of the church, we must ask how appropriate the orality-literacy model really is for more secular cultural theory and cultural history. Ong's understanding of culture brackets questions of power, agency, and ultimately the human role in human history, instead searching for pathways to the divine (a point echoed in Farrell, 2000).

Nowhere is this more problematic than in the exportation of what is considered a historical progression in the West out to other, non-Western cultures. And here we move back out from Ong to other key thinkers of orality. Marshall McLuhan (1960) is quite clear that a notion of orality places non-Western cultures in the collective past of the settler nations that surround them: "[U]ntil WRITING was invented, we lived in acoustic space, where the Eskimo now lives: boundless, directionless, horizonless,

the dark of the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition, terror. Speech is a social chart of this dark bog" (p. 207). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he approvingly cites J.C. Carothers, who equates Greek culture before the invention of writing with modern Kenyan culture (McLuhan, 1962). The point is not to single out McLuhan for his racial ignorance (since many White Canadian thinkers of his generation would have been no wiser in their evaluations of non-White culture), but to trouble the paradigm. To use Johannes Fabian's terminology (Fabian, 1983), the concept of orality denies coeval existence to different cultures. It transforms spatial differences into temporal differences, so that people who live elsewhere also live in the past.¹¹ In his critique of Carpenter and McLuhan, Steven Feld (1986) writes that

these confounding typologies of society ... do little to explain the dynamics of oral and literate processes, but rather, simply blur or push aside social detail, historical accuracy, and the complexities of oral-literate interactions for the sake of developing sweeping generalizations that do not provide real evidence for the assertion that oral/literate are fundamentally different states of mind. (p. 20)

Anyone familiar with the distinctions between, for example, Inuit and Zulu society would find the generalization of both as examples of "oral man" as "laughably oversimplified" (Finnegan, 1977, p. 259).

The denial of coevalness is an inherently political gesture: it perpetuates an unexamined acceptance of Whiteness and White experience as the default categories of experience in Canadian cultural studies (Nelson & Nelson, 2004). As Lorna Roth (2005) points out, by depoliticizing communication as apolitical technology, McLuhanite approaches to media colluded with existing institutional prejudices to keep First Peoples (especially the Inuit) out of Canadian media policy until the mid-1970s:

Well aware that it was only through viewing communications as *interaction*, as opposed to technological *extension*, that they could move the struggle from a technical to a politically based challenge to the ruling relations within the media in Canada, it became important to First Peoples' representatives that they enter into a critical dialogue with federal government policy-makers and bureaucrats. (Roth, 2005, p. 105)

If orality is not a very good description of non-Western, non-industrial cultures, we must also raise questions about its validity as an empirical description of the preliterate West. Even if we limit the spirit-letter distinction to Ong's particular inflection of the concept, a host of issues remain. The evidence on which the orality-literacy split rests is thin and dated. As a concept of how the human brain works, the "sensorium" was discredited in the late nineteenth century, as physiologists learned there is no single centre of the brain that processes sensory information (not even for individual senses, as it turns out). The evidence for differences between oral and literate culture is based on 50- to 100-year-old interpretations of textual sources. Harold Innis' account of the sensory dimensions of oral culture was derived from S. H. Butcher's *Some Aspects of the Greek Genius*, published in 1891, as well as writings on ancient and modern cultures by Solomon Gandz, Ernst Cassirer, and others (Butcher, 1891; Cassirer, 1943; Cornford, 1936; Gandz,

1939; Innis, 1991; Nilsson, 1920; Watson, 2006). Eric Havelock (1988) deduced the historical importance of the orality-literacy distinction through reading the Greek texts' own accounts of the historical and social significance of writing's invention. But we should be suspicious of the verity of these Greek sources. After all, we would not take *Wired* magazine's account of the digital age as a disinterested and empirical rendering of recent history (see, for example, Turner, 2006). In the present moment, we know better than to take texts' own accounts of their historical significance at face value. It is time to turn that same wisdom back on the deep past and onto other cultures.

What if the invention of writing and its stabilization in print were not the single most important turning points in communication history, but only one of many technological turning points? What if scholars—whose lives' work is dedicated to the written word—have overestimated its world-historical importance? We want to believe Plato that everything changed with writing. We are inclined to imagine writing as the moment that consciousness first allowed itself to be externalized in physical form. But what would happen if we instead submitted the history of communication technology to the rigours of the broader history of technology?

In his critique of McLuhan's conception of orality, Sidney Finkelstein (1968) noted that McLuhan's overemphasis on the historical significance of the phonetic alphabet causes him to underestimate the importance of other forms of exteriorization besides writing:

Tribal society ... was not "oral" and "auditory." It had its speech "magic," incantations, poetic rituals, music and also its "magic" paintings, sculpture, masks and dances as well as its tools and shapely utensils. There are extraordinary cave paintings dating back 20,000 years. The tribesmen had keen, observant eyes and skillful hands as well as sensitive ears. More developed civilizations, like ancient Egypt, produced tremendous sculpture before the phonetic alphabet. (p. 37)

Finkelstein did not fully develop the point, but its implications are tremendous. There were technologies prior to writing that served some of its functions. Painting and sculpture externalized memory and solidified institutional forms over time. Musical instruments and musical technique were disciplines of the body that subordinated collective communication to abstract codes, even if they were not semantico-referential codes like those of writing.

There are at least four major communication technologies that predate writing and that could conceivably have performed some combination of the functions Toronto School authors attribute to writing: painting, sculpture, architecture (especially its monumental and ornamental forms), and musical instruments. If, with Edmund Carpenter (1960), we believe that language and writing are media, then all of these pre-writing technologies are also "early media." As with modern media, these technologies engage, orient, and organize the senses even as they are conditioned by them. One of the most vital and seductive parts of the Toronto School tradition is its comparative curiosity—across cultures and into deep history. We could use some of that curiosity now. As John Durham Peters (2008) writes,

Innis has been more cited than imitated in his interest in comparative civilizations, ancient and modern. Prehistory offers a rich field that was long the lone province of anthropologists. ... The accumulated archive of the human race—religious, philosophical, legal, literary, and artistic—is a rich repository of media practices. There are histories of communication outside Europe and North America that await their historians. The globalization of scholarly communication in the contemporary world might help stimulate a more global past. The push toward interdisciplinary studies might help us move toward the history of science and of technology. (p. 32)

While art history, philology, and classics have reconsidered methods, interpretations, and paradigms held in dominance a half-century ago, scholars of communication have not yet fully accounted for more than a half-century's innovation and discovery in the study of the ancient world. Similarly, some of us have digested postcolonial theory in the present moment but have not yet really applied its insights in order to reconstruct histories of communication around the globe. Harold Innis engaged the ancient world with all the analytical tools available to him in his time. We could say the same of Edmund Carpenter's intense anthropological curiosity (e.g., Carpenter, 1972). These authors asked the right questions for their moments, but our moment is not theirs, and our world is not their world. We can honour their spirit by re-asking the central questions in their work and following them through to new conclusions. It is time we left aside antiquated notions of sensation and cultural difference and built a global history and anthropology of communication without a psychosocial, developmental concept such as orality. We must construct new studies of early media and new ethnographies that do not posit the ascendancy of the White, Christian West as the meaning of history. In the process, we must re-read our own historical and anthropological archives, but it is also time that we reach beyond them.

Notes

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2. A vast literature of sound studies has developed over the past 20 years that almost to the work has provided more robust conceptions of sonic culture than orality. Some collections that give a flavour of the field include Bull & Back, 2003; Cox & Warner, 2004; Davis, 1992; Erlmann, 2004; Greene & Porcello, 2005; Kahn & Whitehead, 1992; Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2004; Strauss & Mandl, 1993.

3. *Orality and Literacy* also relies heavily on the writings of Jack Goody (1977; Goody & Watt, 1963), but largely dispenses with Goody's critique of ethnocentrism.

4. I criticize these etymologies below. James Barr (1961) cites another example of this type of thinking in J. D. A. Macnicol, "Word and Deed in the New Testament" (Macnicol, 1952).
5. In a footnote on the same page, Boman criticizes physiologists of sensation for being unaware of "the essential difference between and the incommensurability of optical and acoustical perceptions," yet the physiology of the time did not actually support his position.
6. Another version of this argument is built on the absence of vowels in the Hebrew alphabet (and their presence in the Greek), wherein some authors argue that Hebrew is actually a syllabary, not an alphabet. There has been some debate on this matter in the Canadian tradition, but it is worth noting that Ong did not appear to believe that Hebrew was less of an alphabet than Greek, and therefore it is less of a concern for the present discussion (Logan, 2004; Ong, 1982).
7. For instance: "[W]here linguistic evidence has been used in aid of a theological argument, and where I believe that evidence to have been misused, I do not necessarily believe the conclusion of the theological argument to be itself wrong in particular. ... But while in some such cases I do not hold the particular point argued to have been disproved because of bad use of evidence, I commonly do think that such misuse of evidence argues a wrong understanding of biblical interpretation in general, and almost certainly implies a seriously faulty theological method" (Barr, 1961, p. 6).
8. Although Boman is at several points a target in Barr's text, Barr also takes on other writers in his discussion of the meaning of *dabar*.
9. The figure of the Jew as "exiled, wandering, mourning, condemned outcast, accused of unredeemed original sin" is a central motif in Christian theology (Handelman, 1982, p. 169). To elevate it as a figure of otherness—"oral man"—without reckoning with the connections between that discourse of otherness and the history of European anti-Semitism seems an especially dubious endeavour. That argument aside, I do not mean to advocate for a "Jewish" position as an alternative to a Christian one (which is ultimately Handelman's goal), but rather to question the whole enterprise of building a universal, developmental theory of culture on the basis of supposed psychological differences between ancient Jews and ancient Greeks.
10. Another key influence on Ong's theology was Martin Buber, who argued that modern life had brought about an "I-It" relationship with the world that displaced a more primary, authentic, and primitive "I-Thou" relationship with the world (Buber, 1970). Buber's discourse was heavily shaped by early twentieth-century social theory, especially accounts of modern life and alienation. In contrast, Ong effectively avoided the concept of "the social" altogether, since he deduced cultural forms from psychological qualities. Farrell (2000) discusses the Ong-Buber connection at length.
11. Careful readers may object, since Fabian himself uses the orality/literacy dyad in service of his argument, but the fact that the critique can be applied to Fabian's own text does not invalidate his larger point.

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