



SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI 63103

1 June 1978

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Dear Ron,

In response to your letter of May 22, I am hardly the one to decide whether I have "influenced" another person or persons. I leave that to others, including you. Here are some facts that you could work with.

In The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962) Marshall McLuhan quotes extensively and at critical points from my Ramus, Method, and the Décaý of Dialogue and from two other studies of mine on Ramus, both since included in my book Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971).

I do not know of any work earlier than mine which shows awareness of and studies the effect of print on noetic processes, on the way human beings conceive, remember, recall, and communicate knowledge--for a discussion of these terms, see my Interfaces of the Word (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 44-46. The aforementioned Ramus, Method, and the Décaý of Dialogue sums up effects of print on knowledge in detail after working the matter over in a variety of ways, historical and philosophical, throughout many earlier chapters. This book was published in 1958, but my Ph.D. thesis on which it, together with the companion volume Ramus and Talón Inventory, is based and which contains this same material was submitted and accepted at Harvard University in 1954. Even earlier things of mine dating from around 1952 work with the same discovery about print, e.g.: "Ramus: Rhetoric and the Pre-Newtonian Mind" (a paper delivered at the 1952 English Institute at Columbia University--since I was living and working in France, where I wrote the paper, it was delivered in New York not by me but by the late Philip Wheelright, if I recall correctly, a very good friend), English Institute Essays 1952, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press; Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 138-170; "Ramus et le monde anglo-saxon d'aujourd'hui," Revue de littérature comparée, XXVIII, No. 1 (janvier-mars, 1954), 57-66, which appeared later in English translation as "Ramus and the Transit to the Modern Mind," Modern Schoolman, XXXII (1955), 301-311; etc.

In April 1954 in Philadelphia I delivered a paper on "Space and Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism" at the Catholic Renaissance Society Symposium. This treated the auditory-to-visual shift and the effects of print and I sent a brief of the paper to Marshall McLuhan, who published it in 1955 in his fascinating little magazine Explorations, which came out from the University of Toronto with

support from the Ford Foundation. The full text then appeared in Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance (Geneva), XVIII (1956), 222-239. The editorial board of BHR got very excited and wanted me to do a whole series of articles on the history of the book from this point of view. But my Ramus books were already on their way out at Harvard University Press, so I let it go at that for the time being. The rest of the history is told in some of my subsequent books--in part, of course, for the full history would be too large ever to complete.

When I was working on these things, I did not know Henry J. Chaytor's From Script to Print (1950), which treats somewhat related matters but not really what I was getting at.

Marshall McLuhan and I did not teach at Saint Louis University together. He taught here for some seven years, from about 1937 to about 1944, with a short absence to defend his doctoral dissertation on Thomas Nashe at Cambridge University. This he did between the outbreak of World War II and our entry into the War in December 1941, because I remember that when he and his wife Corinne (née Lewis) returned from England they had to come back on separate ships, since he was a Canadian and thus a citizen of a combatant country and she was an American (Texan) and from a noncombatant country. I was in the Philosophy course at Saint Louis University 1938-1940 and completing my M.A. in English there 1940-41.

I had some courses from Marshall McLuhan and profited greatly from them, but they had nothing discernibly to do with his later work on the media. The courses were on "practical criticism" (a term directly from I. A. Richards) and on Renaissance English literature. Marshall was an outpost in Mid-America for the Leavis school of criticism at Cambridge University: Cambridge New Criticism, not media, was what he brought to Saint Louis University. This criticism was a tremendous breath of fresh air. Marshall also directed my M. A. thesis on the sources in English literature with which Hopkins' sprung rhythm connects. This means, really, that I simply wrote the thesis (later published in Immortal Diamond, ed. Norman Weyand, S.J.) and Marshall signed the papers. He was much interested in modern poetry, as all Leavisites were, but not particularly in an a historical study of sprung rhythm.

Marshall had read Perry Miller's work, The New England Mind (1939), and called my attention to it and to what Miller had to say about Peter Ramus' importance in early New England. (The second volume of The New England Mind, subtitled From Colony to Province (1953), already mentions in its preface my work on Ramus and the late Father William Costello's work on the scholastic curriculum at Cambridge.) Marshall had some photostats of Library of Congress cards for works of Peter Ramus and showed them to me. This is what the dedication means in my Ramus and Talon Inventory, "To Herbert Marshall McLuhan, who started all this"--my huge inventory of over 750 editions plus many other listings reminded me of Marshall's Library of Congress photostats, the first assemblage of some of Ramus' works to come my way (there was in fact a much longer assemblage already in print in Waddington's Ramus, published in 1855, a work in French).

So, Marshall McLuhan when he taught at Saint Louis University was not a media man. But, like many of us--the brilliant layman Bernard J. Muller-Thym (who had graduated from Rockhurst College three years before I had, married, come to Saint Louis University to do an M. A. in philosophy for which he wrote his entire M. A. thesis in Latin, then done his Ph.D. with Gilson at Toronto, and was to become a naval officer and subsequently an outstanding management consultant

for the rest of his life), the young Jesuits George Klubertanz, William A. Van Roo, Charles Leo Sweeney, myself, and others--like all these, Marshall was interested in noetic processes. We all talked about this and many other things. I can go through The Gutenberg Galaxy and underline scores of passages that echo our talk--the Saint Louis University topoi or loci communes. I am sending you an offprint of a review of mine which describes this Saint Louis University milieu a bit.

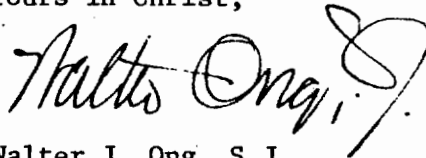
Where did my own discovery of print come from? I found no direct clue anywhere--in primary or secondary sources or in any talk with anyone. Perry Miller's work on Ramus was helpful and his presence and classes and conversation at Harvard had been stimulating: he always seemed to be getting at something that lay just beyond his own powers of articulation, which were considerable. Our minds always met. But there was nothing in his work or talk about the significance of print or the auditory-to-visual shift. ~~But~~ I did my writing almost entirely in Europe, and Perry never saw any of the text of my thesis (the favored word at Harvard for what is commonly called a dissertation most other places) until I submitted the whole thing to him in the summer of 1954--all 1730 pages of it, very likely, the longest thesis in Harvard's history. With part of it left out, it was to make the two books, Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue and Ramus and Talon Inventory, that Harvard University Press published in 1958. (The reason it was so long was that I had had two Guggenheim Fellowships to work on it, given to me under the title of "scholar," for I had done a good bit of publishing already: it just happened that what I was working on I was also using as my Harvard thesis. As you know, Guggenheim Fellowships are never given to complete a dissertation, but normally are competed for and awarded ten or twenty years or more after a person has completed the Ph.D. and shown his or her mettle by significant publications. With the Guggenheim help, I was able to wrap up the whole Ramist question in a way, more or less, instead of dissecting a part of it for a normal Ph.D. dissertation.)

My discovery of the deep significance of print was triggered by, of all persons, Rudolf Bultmann, who was not thinking of print at all when he wrote what was so helpful to me. I had gone to Harvard precisely to do work on Ramus with Perry Miller because I had earlier developed a strong hunch that Ramus was somehow a key figure in the translation from the earlier state of mind to the modern mind--not that he was an "influence" (the validity of this concept is often questionable), but that he was a symptom of what was going on way deep down in the Western psyche. I had accumulated masses of material on him--ultimately I found I had worked in over one hundred European libraries--and sensed that there was some over-arching pattern in it all but could not identify the pattern. Then I read in something of Bultmann's about the difference between the Greek sense of knowing, gignōskein, which means to know in the sense of to be able to analyze, explain abstractly, take apart, and the Hebrew sense of knowing, yadha', which means to know in the sense of to know what's what, to know what end's up, to know your way around, to "savvy." Bultmann noted that the Greek concept associated knowledge with visual activity, the Hebrew with auditory. With this insight all the material I had accumulated began to fall into place. This was what had happened: the sensibility had shifted from an auditory base to a visual base, and print was what had done it. Bultmann's idea was not even original with him and it was developed to handle materials almost two thousand years older than those I was mostly working with. But it gave me the insight. In this situation I would

identify Bultmann not as an "influence" but more accurately as a catalyst or precipitator. The idea I got from him precipitated what was already suspended in solution within my mind.

This is a long letter. Until your query I had never had the occasion to write out an account of these matters. It may be well to have this on record. I hope it helps. Under separate cover I am sending you offprints and other supporting materials.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Walter Ong, S.J.". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name.

Walter J. Ong, S.J.

Cc: Faculty Collection  
C/o Miss Catherine Weidle  
Saint Louis Room  
Pius XII Memorial Library