

Human Nature of Professionalism

By Walter J. Ong, S.J.

Father Ong, William E. Haren Professor of English and professor of humanities in psychiatry, recently gave his valedictory address after a year as president of the 30,000-member Modern Language Association of America. His paper, titled "The Human Nature of Professionalism," received a standing ovation at the national MLA conference in late December. We are featuring here an abridged version, consisting mainly of excerpts from the last part of the speech.

In the earlier part of the address Father Ong described the identity crises with which all academic disciplines today are subject. Those represented by the MLA, he said, namely the entire field of modern languages and literatures, have especially difficult problems of self-definition. They are latecomers on the academic scene, "with all too many relatives and no clear, unimpeachable, or even plausible ancestry."

Father Ong went on to identify professionalism, which arrived with the birth of the MLA in 1883, as the identifying factor which holds these disparate studies together. The remainder of his paper analyzed the concept of professionalism, from a number of different angles, including economics and technology.

We use the terms profession and professional in various ways. A professional often means someone who, by contrast with an amateur, makes a living or receives financial remuneration for exercising one or other special skills or expertise. In this sense we speak of professional automobile mechanics or gardeners or baseball players. But at its peak usage, in its more concentrated sense, profession and professionalism suggest something more than the use of mere expertise. When we speak of "the professions," we are likely to be thinking of such things as medicine and law, which, with theology, constituted the higher faculties from the beginnings of universities in the European Middle Ages.

Such professions are callings which require long and intensive academic preparation to acquire knowledge that is to be put directly to the service of other human beings in matters touching the others' own persons so closely that the relation...normally is and must be a fiducial or trust relation. The physician's patient or the lawyer's client must put himself as a person in the hands of the physician or lawyer, leaving to the professional decisions intimately touching his own person... "You're the doctor" or "You know best, doctor" are colloquial expressions that register the fiducial relationship.

Services rendered by members of the professions touch the physical or moral or social integrity of the person being served so intimately that they are beyond price. There is no way really to price saving a person from death or disease or vindicating a person from a false accusation of criminal activity... You do not sell an appendectomy or an acquittal from a charge of murder or of grand larceny as you sell a motor tune-up. Professional fees are of the nature of honoraria and of themselves work on a sliding scale—which, it must be admitted has been known to become a

skidding scale under certain circumstances, for members of the professions as well as those they serve share the human condition, which includes at least the possibility of selfishness and avarice.

I have instanced medicine and law as training for professions in the strict sense. To these must be added, from the beginnings of the universities, the other higher faculty of theology and the lower faculty of arts or "philosophy." These in their own way have always been fiducially professional, too. The services of the theologian were to the Christian community rather than simply to individual persons, it is true, but, since Christian faith is always an exquisitely personal matter, though it can exist only within a relationship to the community, the individual as well as the Church as a whole were in a fiducial relationship to the theologian in his work of exploring the depths of man's relationship to his creator and redeemer.

The professionalism of the faculty of arts or "philosophy" was more complicated. In a sense the arts or philosophy course purveyed something of the core of wisdom. But it is easy to exaggerate the arts curriculum at early universities as a "liberal education" or "core curriculum." As a whole, it was hardly this... But the arts or "philosophy" faculty was profoundly involved in teaching as such... At Paris every graduate in arts was obliged to teach for two years at least... Early liberal arts education was entirely in the hands of educationalists.

Teaching of any sort, even in the most banal matters, is indeed a profession in the strict sense of the fiducial relationship I have just described. The bond between student and teacher that is caught in the term *Doktor-Vater*, though perhaps uncomfortably overpowering at places in Germany today, catches the reality of the relationship. *Profiteri*,

from which comes our word "professor," means to speak out publicly on a subject, as the scholar does in his writing as well as lectures. Speech itself is fiducial. The reason lying is wrong, according to much ethical theory, is that speech calls for trust. If speech becomes generally untrustworthy it cannot work and as a result human society collapses. But if teaching and research are fiducial in all matters because of their involvement with the word, they are more fiducial the closer their subject matter is to the humanistic core of knowledge, that is, the core of knowledge concerned with human consciousness, its history and creations. Of all the creations of human consciousness, the most crucial are language and what goes with it, such as thought, or what is made of it, such as oral and written verbal creations.

The professions in something like the strict sense of this term are extending themselves today. Their extension is due to at least two developments. First, the subjects studied at the highest university level have proliferated, so that the intensive preparation once possible in only a limited number of fields is possible in countless subjects today. Secondly and more importantly, the growth of knowledge has subjected more and more of the natural world to man's conscious control and enabled him to direct more and more of nature to the service of the human person.

Thus our present bewilderingly rich knowledge of man's interaction with environment... has, to take one example, given architects, engineers and city planners responsibilities regarding the quality of human life they could never have had before. Their work has to be thought out more in terms of service to human persons as persons. Service to human persons as persons, as I trust I have made clear earlier, seems to define

the idea of a profession in its deepest sense. Thus because of their new highly conscious involvement with the quality of human life, which impinges directly upon the human person, architecture, engineering, and city planning have become professions in the strict sense of the word today as never before. And so with other fields of applied knowledge, as more and more areas of expertise jockey for professional status comparable to that of the classic professions. The present status struggle will doubtless enlarge in some way the concept of "the professions," though I think it will never destroy the special place of the classic professions, including that of teacher and of scholar-teacher.

Be that as it may, what is important to us as teachers and scholar-teachers... is the fiducial service to persons which our profession entails. Understood as fiducial service, professionalism bridges some of our most threatening chasms, that between the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature, or that between formalism and activism.

As a fiducial service, the teaching of writing yields not at all to the teaching of literature. Indeed, because it is more fundamental, the teaching of writing is more crucial to students, and by the same token should be more satisfying to the teacher, even though it is more difficult to sustain day-to-day enthusiasm for what Walter Gibson calls backtracking through student prose than for flying up into *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.

By the threatening chasm between formalism and activism I mean that between those who tend to regard language and literature as matters valuable for their sake... and those who regard all human activity as a continuum in which separation of politics or social or religious commitments from even the most fictionalized creation or the most abstract thought is unreal... My own position here is complex, I suppose, for, while in the last analysis I would subscribe to the activist view, I believe that it is salutary to use formalist approaches. You cannot have *praxis* without *theoria* nor *theoria* without *praxis*, though one is not the other, for they relate to one another in an infinite number of dialectical ways and not in accord with foregone ideological recipes. But the view which I have been propounding here would apply whether one opts for one or the other view, formalist or activist, or both...

The concept of professionalism as fiducial service is certainly helpful to me in relating my own dedication as a Jesuit priest to my academic profession. The Christian ministry is not simply a profession: it is a personal dedication based immediately not on learning but on faith. In the Bible and in the Church's tradition the analogue for the ministry, as for any act of faith, is not the professions but marriage. Matrimonial dedication does not involve intensive academic training such as the professions call for, but it does involve a fiducial relationship at a kind of ultimate depth. It is not difficult for me, nor has it been for many thousands of others, to relate the fiduciality of the Christian ministry, which means service, *diakonia*, to the fiducial relationship of scholarship and teaching. The Catholic faith has no right to supplant or interfere with other fiducial relationships, but if it is truly Catholic, it is not a stranger to them. Trust begets trust.



Father Ong

Economic crises awaken concerns about the commercialization of the profession. Course design can become the academic equivalent of ambulance chasing. With a shrinking student population... how far can we go in making course offerings relevant to what students already know and find themselves interested in?... Of course, to some extent every field of study is shaped by the choices of those in it. The present shape of knowledge has been determined by the interests of earlier scholars: what they did not find interesting in one way or another was simply not studied. But many of their interests were developed in response to demands arising within the field itself. If you wanted to understand Chaucer, you had to develop an interest in Middle English. The danger comes when the shape of knowledge is being determined largely by forces external to it. A field of knowledge has certain structures of its own, demands certain supports in the mind of the knower. How far can we say that someone understands anything in English or American literature if he or she has no acquaintance with anything written in the English language before 1865?

For understanding, we need two things: proximity and distance. It is quite impossible to understand the present without knowledge of the past. When we make a statement about the present as present, we invariably imply one about the past. "Present-day literature is filled with violence," whatever it may really mean, normally implies that this literature is notably violent, which suggests that it recounts more violence than earlier literature did. Do those who make generalizations such as this know how much violence figures in earlier literature as a whole, not to mention oral genres antecedent to literature? They seldom if ever do. Their concept of the past often does not derive from the real past at all, but is a projection of their own emotional needs, made plausible by the assumption that the repertoire of selections they remember from their own childhood was representative of all the literature then extant.

The only way to find out about the real past is study based on research. This ultimately means that someone has to know such unmentionables as Old English, Old Norse, Old Irish, Old Russian, not to say ancient Greek, Sanscrit, classical Arabic, Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Native American linguistics and other linguistics—some of the "hard-nosed" humanities. Without the help of such demanding and detailed knowledge, we are slaves to our own projections. Contact, direct or indirect, with such knowledge cannot redeem us, to be sure, but it can liberate us from enslavement to our ignorant imaginings. "The truth will make you free."

"Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis occiderit, id est semper esse puerum" Cicero writes in his *Orator*: "Not to know what has happened before you were born is to remain forever a child." But diachronicity reaches in both directions. Understanding of the past demands a reflective understanding of the present, which generates our own distinctive questions about the past. Much early literary history and other history is relatively worthless because the historians who knew a great deal about the past knew very little in depth about their own age: they had not studied the context out of which they approached the past. Literary history, like all history, can be understood only from both ends: the distant past and the immediate present. Diachronic integrity must always be honored.

Many would have it that the technologizing of culture also poses problems for professionalism. Technology implies machines. Machines are inhuman. Professionalism is human. And never the twain shall meet.

Most such thinking is based on a specious paradigm: a machine is an imitation organism—an animal that didn't quite make it. It therefore triggers fear and resentment, for the machine obviously lacks the qualities which an organism should have: life, adaptability, moods and responsiveness to moods, adaptability to unpredicted change, and so on. If, however, we cease and desist from representing machines as deficient organisms and regard them as what they are, inanimate contrivances designed by human consciousness, the operation of machines turns out to be no more inhuman than other inorganic phenomena. Indeed, in a very real sense, as products of man's activity, technological creations are more human than are all the works of nature, except for man himself.

The profession of languages and literatures is totally involved with technology, and intrinsically so. We need to face this fact explicitly and honestly. Literature is a technological creation, for not only print but writing as well is a technology, dependent on the manufacture of prepared writing surfaces, inks or paints, styli or brushes or pens or pencils, and many other materials besides. Print is even more obviously a technology. The first assembly line, the first step-by-step operation producing complicated objects that are exact replicas of each other, with replaceable parts, was not a shoe-producing or a knife-producing operation, but the printing press. High technology developed to this initial peak not in servicing the body but in servicing the mind, human consciousness. This fact should be a heartening and a thought-provoking one.

Consciousness interiorizes technology, opens itself to new possibilities with its own technological creations such as writing and print and electronics, which enable it to think and feel in ways it had not been able to command before. Like the history of instrumental music, the history of literary genres is tied to technological development. Before writing, as we now know, oral performance can be a very sophisticated matter. But it cannot produce a Greek drama or many kinds of lyric poetry such as Pindaric odes or sonnet sequences. Before print and the kind of writer-reader relationship print establishes, for reasons still not entirely surfaced, the mind cannot organize an ordinary nineteenth century novel or a detective story, not to mention an *Absalom! Absalom!* Oral performance cannot produce fully "round" characters, but only more or less type characters. The technology of writing and print enter into the human sensibility and enable it—indeed, force it—to reorganize its noetic processes and its feel for man's place in the cosmos. Oral performance can produce epics, which are normally its most impressive creations, and which, in the strict sense, highly interiorized literacy cannot produce.

On the language front, reflectively understood, grammar itself is the product of the technology of writing: its very name, from the ancient Greek *technē grammatike*, the "letter art," means the "study of letters." Oral noetic processes have no access to the intricate kind of abstract analysis and categorization which constitute grammar, or, for that matter, any scientifically abstract thought.

Because the very constitution of our thought depends on writing and print technologies, not to mention electronics,

the development of our professionalism itself is dependent on technology, as is the whole of the intellectual and educational enterprise of mankind today. We traffic constantly in concepts by the thousands which could not even be formed without a feel for massive accumulation of detailed knowledge which was impossible before print terms such as "culture" or "civilization." The *New English Dictionary* records under its entry for "civilization" that Dr. Johnson had decided "civilization" was too much of a neologism for his first dictionary. "Civility" he allowed.

Let us not be misled by the fact that the study of technologies does drain away students from modern languages and literatures today. This is not because technologies are inhuman. It is because they are eminently human, the creations of human beings. Our "matter" is more human than that of technological studies, however, for it consists of the creations of human beings having to do directly not with the external world but with consciousness itself. Of this "matter," of languages and literatures themselves, we should be proud and enthusiastic. We are at the center of the human lifeworld, in certain ways more than any other profession.

Language and literature study can assimilate everything in the human lifeworld, including technology, of which there is a great deal not only in Henry Adams and Saint-Exupéry, but also in Sterne's Uncle Toby, in Cervantes, and indeed almost everywhere you look

sharply. Philosophy believes it can assimilate everything in the human lifeworld but ordinarily finds that either its reach exceeds its grasp or its grasp its reach. History tries nobly, but is overwhelmed with detail. The social sciences are generously ambitious but find themselves beset by distractions, though anthropology comes close enough to language and literature studies to make it possible, I myself believe, to view these studies as in some way a kind of anthropology, a study of man as man. Compared to any of these studies, the study of language and literature may be diffuse in ancestry and ambition. But it is mightily inclusive. Literary studies even aggregate to themselves the oral cultures antecedent to literature, for such cultures have been discovered as oral cultures only by advanced literates.

In the professional study of literature and language, we serve other human beings in encouraging and assisting them to open themselves to the great forces at the center of human consciousness, social, psychological, philosophical, aesthetic and religious. If in the crises which as present beset us we can remember not only that we are a profession rendering fiducial service to fellow human beings, as all professions do, but also that the service we render brings fellow human beings into relationship with what is most human in mankind, consciousness itself in its most richly creative forms, we can weather any of the crises and threats which come our way, and, as Faulkner put it, we can not only endure but we can, and will, also prevail.



Down from the Attic

However the myth goes, valuable paintings are seldom disinterred from people's attics. This one was, though. The 17th century Dutch portrait of a lady, recently added to the University's art collection in Cupples House, was donated by Mrs. Enid R. Gardner, who found it in her attic. She had planned to give it to Goodwill, but after learning that it's of museum quality she decided to make Cupples House the beneficiary.