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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Dear Maud,

Because of our long personal editorial association (1958 to 1983!), it has seemed only fitting that I address this inquiry to you rather than to anyone else at the Press, leaving it to you to route it to others if it needs any routing.

At present I am completing a quite short book manuscript, Language as Hermeneutic: A Primer on the Word and Digitization. Some of the chapters are designedly very brief and the whole book would come only to something like 140 or so printed pages. But I think this is the length called for. In a way, the book is comparable in tone and length to the late Eric Havelock's final work, also short, The Muse Learns to Write (Yale UP, 1986), which features on its dust jacket a fulsome blurb by me and is still selling like hotcakes, listed in Yale's current sales catalogues alongside the brand new 1990 titles. Like this book of Havelock's, mine is a synthesis which I hope will prove useful at multiple scholarly levels, although its tone is at times also somewhat personal. It has been worked up in connection with a seminar I have given in two successive years.

Besides the title page and table of contents, I enclose here the five typescript pages of the Prologue. Do you think Harvard University Press might be interested in a book of this sort and brevity?

A capital point in the book (which I believe no one has previously noted) is that each of the three major applications of technology to the originally oral verbal world has entailed some kind of binary digitization: (1) writing, through Socrates's dialogue (oral peoples do not engage in Socrates's binary yes-no dialogue); (2) print, through Ramus's dichotomizations; (3) electronics, through the computer. The computer has thus been in the making for over 2000 years, ever since technology first impinged on the spoken word. The book's conclusion is that it is no accident that our own era is both (1) the greatest age ever

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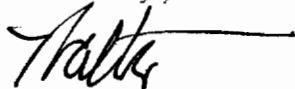
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of digitization (taking things apart numerically) and (2), compensatingly, the greatest age ever of hermeneutics (relating everything back to everything else again--to the unbroken web of history). And hermeneutics dominates. Myth (which preceded logic by tens of thousands of years and which is holistic) still envelops logic. Logic cannot totally envelop myth--or, for that matter, cannot envelop anything else totally. Hence the title of my last chapter: "Epilogue: The Mythology of Logos." And the book title, Language as Hermeneutic.

The connection between Ramist dichotomies and computerization suggested in my Foreword to your 1983 paperback Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue is attracting a good bit of attention by now. By way of current example, Professor Philip Leith of the School of Law at the Queen's University of Belfast is making pivotal use of the connection between an initially popular but inevitably evanescent Ramism as explicated in this book and the proposed but inevitably unrealizable total "formalism" demanded by AI (artificial intelligence). He has sent me a typescript of his impressive forthcoming book, Formalism in AI and Computer Science, in which he makes this connection in detail.

Let me know what you think and where to go from here. Meanwhile, deepest thanks for all your help and interest over the years, and best wishes to Bruce.

Cordially,



Walter J. Ong, SJ  
University Professor of Humanities Emeritus

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- ① title page.
- ② Contents
- ③ Prologue (5 typescript pages)
- [④ updated "Books by..."]