A NOTE TO THE READER

Ong’s mature work from the early 1950s onward can aid us in understanding our Western cultural history and enable us to get our cultural bearings in the world today. Not that he has said everything that can possibly be said about our Western cultural history. But in his multivariate account of Western cultural history, he has delineated for us a number of important variables, or factors, in the infrastructure of Western culture that we should not ignore.

The present annotated classified bibliography of selected works that can be related in one way or another to Ong’s seminal thought represents an attempt on my part to elucidate Ong’s creative thought as clearly as I can. In the spirit of Mortimer J. Adler’s *Aristotle for Everybody* (IX.9), I have tried to write the introduction and the annotations in *Ong for Everybody* in an accessible way. In the spirit of Ong’s own widely-cited essay “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction” (V.10), I have not presupposed that readers are already familiar with his thought. In addition, I have at times repeated certain points in the annotations, because I have not assumed that the readers will read all the annotations straight through as they appear in the text and remember what I had said in a previous annotation. Of course certain readers may prefer to read straight through the annotated classified bibliography as though the categories in the bibliography were chapters in a printed book. No doubt readers who want to can read the annotations straight through. However, readers may prefer to read the lengthy annotations more slowly and meditatively, which could include jumping around a bit from one lengthy annotation to another. Many of them have interconnected themes.

For an overview of the structure of the present bibliography, the reader should examine the categories of the bibliography listed above in the table of contents. When the reader comes to a lengthy annotation in the bibliography – some of which are in effect short essays – the reader might want to read enough of a given annotation to determine whether or not to proceed to read the entire annotation. However, as the reader proceeds to turn the pages of the bibliography and look over the various lengthy annotations, he or she will soon note that certain annotations are connected thematically with other annotations. At first blush, a given lengthy annotation might seem like a lengthy digression. However, certain annotations are connected enough certain other annotations that cumulatively they complement and supplement one another.

Certain works are listed in the bibliography in more than one category, most often works by Ong. To help the reader follow the various threads of materials, or themes, that I have incorporated into the bibliography, I have added cross-references after the first entry in a given thread of materials. On a smaller scale, I have also added briefer cross-references after selected works. In a few instances, I have repeated the cross-references after each work included in a given set of cross-references. In addition, in the various lengthy annotations, I have occasionally repeated certain points.

Next, to spell out the obvious, I do not expect the reader to agree with all the views that I express in the various lengthy annotations. As a matter of fact, Ong himself would not agree with all of my views – just as I myself do not agree with all of his views.
For example, I do not agree with his christocentric religious views; like Eric Voegelin, I am a theistic humanist, not an atheistic humanist (also known as a secular humanist) – or an agnostic. Moreover, I claim that all people are eligible to become mystics, if they want to try to. Furthermore, I claim that the historical Jesus was a mystic and that the kingdom (or reign) of God that he proclaimed is best understood as mystic experience.

Next, I should say a word about myself. Over the years I took five English courses from Ong at Saint Louis University, the Jesuit University in St. Louis, Missouri, starting in my junior year with his upper-division English course Practical Criticism: Poetry in the fall 1964 semester. Later in my life, I had the honor of co-editing five volumes of his essays, contributing introductory essays to four of them. In addition to publishing articles in professional journals based on his thought, I have contributed essays to four collections of essays exploring his thought. I have also published a book-length study of eleven of his books and selected essays, 

*Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies: the Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (2000). A friend who was familiar with Ong’s influence in my life once described him as my muse. The Homeric epics famously start with the invocation of the muses. Thus if we were to judge by the example of the Homeric epics, maybe it’s not such a bad thing in life to invoke the muses -- or in my case, Ong as my muse. In any event, it strikes me that Ong can also serve as the muse for other Americans, perhaps including Native Americans, African Americans, Jewish Americans, Protestant Americans, Catholic Americans, and possibly other Americans as well.

Now, if we Americans were to expand the scope of our awareness to include our neighbors to the north, we might also be able to adopt the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), who at times did teach and lecture in the United States, as another muse. In addition, if we Americans were to expand the scope of our awareness to include Anthony de Mello, S.J., the Jesuit spiritual director from India who regularly toured the United States, we could adopt him as another muse. In any event, I myself have also adopted these other two Jesuits as my muses to keep Ong company as my muse. The other muses in my life who are represented in the present bibliography include the Jungian theorist Robert Moore of Chicago Theological Seminary, the Irish born and raised biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University in Chicago, the prolific secular Jew Harold Bloom in English at Yale University, the prolific philosopher-at-large and public intellectual Mortimer J. Adler, the perceptive philosopher Eric Voegelin, and the insightful classicist Eric A. Havelock. As a result, I invoke these nine muses in my life with regularity in the annotations in the present bibliography.

As I say, the Homeric epics begin with the invocation of the muses, so I take those invocations to mean that it is a good idea to have muses to invoke, eh? Because I grew up as a Roman Catholic, I would liken the Catholic tradition regarding the communion of saints to the invocation of the muses in the Homeric epics. For Catholics, the saints are in effect muses. So this is another example of how it is a good idea to have muses to invoke in one’s life. But my way of speaking here about muses is admittedly not a fashionable way of speaking today. Nor do I expect to start a new fashion by speaking this way. Nevertheless, it strikes me that certain academics consider particular authors to be exemplars in their lives. For example, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas appear to me to serve as muses for certain academics. In other words, the name of each exemplar can be invoked at times in
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a way that bears a family resemblance to the invocation of the muses in the Homeric epics. For the economist Paul Krugman, the muse in his life is the economist John Maynard Keynes. I mention this example to spell out here that I myself am also basically a Keynesian in terms of economic theory and policy. For me, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was an admirable exemplar of the spirit of American pragmatism.

However, I am well aware that many conservative Americans today regard President Ronald Reagan as their muse, just as many Catholic Americans regard Pope John-Paul II as their muse. I mention these examples to suggest that many Americans today do indeed have muses in their lives. In a way, our American culture wars today usually involve the radically different muses invoked by the different parties in the culture wars.

The present annotated bibliography is intended and designed to be my contribution to our American culture wars today. No, I am not a leftist, as are many academics today. But I am also not an unmitigated reactionary either, as are many self-styled conservative Americans. Basically, I believe that the spirit of American pragmatism should be the guiding principle as we continue to work out our American experiment in democracy. In short, I myself do not embody the spirit of Faulkner’s character in his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* named Thomas Sutpen.

Somebody quipped that democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the rest. This quip sums up my basic attitude about our American democracy. In my estimate, at the present time, the Republicans are up to no good. On the one hand, they favor trickle-down economics. But I favor trickle-up economics. On the other hand, the neoconservative Republicans in the administration of President George W. Bush started two wars that should not have been started at all. To his everlasting credit, the paleo-conservative columnist Patrick J. Buchanan was vociferous in denouncing the war in Iraq. In short, it is my fond hope that I myself may also serve the role of muse for those readers who read my annotations in the present annotated bibliography. As I have already stated, I do not expect readers to agree with everything I say in the annotations. However, even if some of my annotations provoke certain readers to disagree with me, I will nevertheless have thereby served the role of muse by provoking them to think through their own positions regarding those particular matters. In short, I aim to be evocative – that is, to evoke thought in the readers.

Finally, I want to say that Ong liked to say that we need both distance and proximity (closeness) to understand something. As a result of our Western cultural conditioning, we bring proximity (closeness) to our efforts to understand our Western cultural conditioning. But Ong’s perceptive multi-variate account of the infrastructures of our Western cultural conditioning can provide us with the distance we need to understand ourselves and our Western cultural conditioning.