The Aural-to-Visual Shift in Cognitive Processing

For Ong, the corpuscular sense of life is expressed not only in world-as-view sense of life in ancient Greek and Roman and medieval and modern philosophy and more broadly in modern print culture but also in the oral sense of life as event. But as Plato and Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and Bernard Lonergan and Ong understand the human mind, the human mind transcends the corpuscular sense of life. The prolific conservative Roman Catholic writer Michael Novak does not seem to have understood the larger import of Ong’s thought about the corpuscular sense of life in depth, but Novak has studied Lonergan’s thought well enough to grasp how the human mind is different from the corpuscular sense of life that Ong writes about. In the introduction to the recent reprinting of his 1965 book Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge (X.37), Novak sets forth the following critique of the visualist tendencies in Richard Rorty’s thought:

Rorty thinks that in showing that the mind is not “the mirror of nature” he has disproved the correspondence theory of truth. What he has really shown is that the activities of the human mind cannot be fully expressed by metaphors based upon the operations of the eye [see Ong on visualist tendencies]. We do not know simply through “looking at” reality as though our minds were simply mirrors of reality. One needs to be very careful not to confuse the activities of the mind with the operations of any (or all) bodily senses [see Ong’s critique of the corpuscular sense of life]. In describing how our minds work, one needs to beware of being bewitched by the metaphors that spring from the operations of our senses. Our minds are not like our eyes; or, rather, their activities are far richer, more complex, and more subtle than those of our eyes. It is true that we often say, on getting the point, “Oh, I see!” But putting things together and getting the point normally involve a lot more than “seeing,” and all that we need to do to get to that point can scarcely be met simply by following the imperative, “Look!” [Or the imperative, “Hear!”] Even when the point, once grasped, may seem to have been (as it were) right in front of us all along, the reasons why it did not dawn upon us immediately may be many, including the fact that our imaginations were ill-arranged, so that we were expecting and “looking for” the wrong thing. To get to the point at which the evidence finally hits us, we may have to undergo quite a lot of dialectical argument and self-correction. (xv)

For a straightforward and useful account of Lonergan’s thought, the interested reader should see Hugo A. Meynell’s An Introduction to the Philosophy of Bernard Lonergan, 2nd ed. (U of Toronto P, 1991).

A word is in order here about the larger import of Ong’s thought about the corpuscular sense of life – or more accurately, about the two distinct corpuscular senses of life that Ong discusses: the aural corpuscular sense of life and the visual corpuscular sense of life. To be sure, he also allows that there is residual orality, involving a strongly
aural corpuscular sense of life that is also under the influence of the visual corpuscular sense of life, but hovering, as it were, between the two. The larger import of Ong’s thought about these two basic corpuscular senses of life is that they can enable us to get our cultural bearings today regarding Western culture and the rest of the world cultures – see Farrell (XII.38). In addition, Ong’s thought about these two basic corpuscular senses of life can enable us to reflect on our Western cultural conditioning and education. Such deep personal reflection about our Western cultural conditioning and education is related in spirit at least to what C. G. Jung recommends when he advises us to become aware of our collective unconscious. In this respect, the present document can be described as providing an owner’s manual for people who grew up in and were educated in Western culture.

Now, in Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue (III.138), Ong has in effect also set forth a critique of “confusing the activities of the mind with any (or all) the bodily senses.” Ong refers to this kind of confusion in various terms: the corpuscular view of reality, the corpuscular epistemology, and the corpuscular psychology – in short, the corpuscular sense of life (65-66, 72, 146, 171, 203, 210). But in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of philosophic thought that Lonergan and Ong and Novak draw on, the human mind is not corpuscular. This is the import of the body/soul distinction with which Ong and others in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of philosophic thought work.

Like everybody else in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of philosophy, Ong works with what is known in philosophy as the body/soul distinction, where the distinctively human soul is understood to be the source of the human mind and rationality. For an excellent and accessible discussion of how and why the intellect is not material, the interested reader should see Mortimer J. Adler’s Intellect: Mind Over Matter (IX.3; also see Adler [IX.2] and Fetzer [III.50]). In short, Ong works within the nonmaterialist philosophic tradition of thought in Western culture.

In the final analysis, there really are only two basic philosophic positions: (1) the materialist philosophic position (aka naturalism) and (2) the nonmaterialist philosophic position. People who claim to be agnostics do not affirm the nonmaterialist philosophic position, so they can be aligned with the materialist philosophic position.

In any event, when Ong refers to the corpuscular sense of life, he is accentuating the sensory-based quality involved. The centuries-old philosophic tag-line is relevant here: “Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.” But the intellect as such is not material (i.e., not corpuscular in Ong’s terminology). So what would a noncorpuscular orientation to life be like? It would presumably involve radical reflectiveness about one’s conceptual constructs and predications.

Late in his life, Ong summed up his view of verbal discourse and communication in “Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the ‘I’” in Oral Tradition (I.134), which can be accessed at the journal’s website.

Next, I want to return to certain points Novak makes toward the end of the above quote about how “our imaginations were ill-arranged.” He points out that “we may have to undergo quite a lot of dialectical argument and self-correction.” Yes, to be sure, occasionally dialectical argument my result in self-correction. However, when our imaginations are ill-arranged, as he puts it, this is usually the result of the combined forces of our cultural conditioning, on the one hand, and, on the other, our personal
psychological baggage, figuratively speaking. But we should add to this already potent mix of factors that contribute to our imaginations being ill-arranged Ong’s perceptive insight about how we in Western culture today are experiencing, below the level of our conscious awareness, the shift in the tectonic plates of our Western cultural conditioning as we Westerners shift subtly from the hypervisualist orientation of print culture toward the new orientation that is emerging in us as a result of our contemporary conditioning in communication media that accentuate sound. In short, according to Ong, our Western cultural conditioning today is in transition from the old sensory world of print and hypervisualism to the new sensory world engendered by the communication media that accentuate sound. But of course in some ways this breakthrough to a new sensory world may seem like a breakdown of the old world and the old order. The great gift of Ong’s work is that he supplies us with the ways in which we can get our cultural bearings as we experience this breakdown that is a breakthrough.

Now, it seems to be part of the human condition that we acquire a certain amount of personal psychological baggage, figuratively speaking. As a result, we need to work to recognize our personal psychological baggage and become aware of how our baggage influences our thinking and our actions. In the spirit of what Ong refers to as the inward turn of consciousness, I have highlighted works that discuss our personal baggage, most notably Anthony de Mello’s posthumously published book of meditations on certain challenging gospel passages, which he claims can be elucidated by mystic awareness (I.42). In addition, he claims to have figured out the underlying pattern involved in our psychological baggage and has described how we can overcome our personal baggage. Briefly, he recommends awareness as the way to overcome our personal psychological baggage. But he cautions that this approach proceeds in its own way and at its pace. Thus his recommendation of awareness sounds like a comprehensive programmatic way to deal with our personal baggage, but there is the catch-22 that allows that after all in the end it is not predictably programmatic. His following eight excerpts from The Way to Love (I.42) about change and growth are worth considering carefully.

First excerpt: “There are two sources for change within you. One is the cunningness of your ego that pushes you into making efforts to become something other than you are meant to be so that it can give itself a boost, so that it can glorify itself. The other is the wisdom of Nature. Thanks to this wisdom you become aware, you understand it. That is all you do, leaving the change – [the] type, the manner, the speed, the time of change – to Reality and to Nature” (53-54).

Second excerpt: “Think of some change that you wish to bring about in your life or in your personality. Are you attempting to force this change on your nature through effort and through the desire to become something that your ego has planned? . . . Or are you content to study, observe, understand, be aware of your present state and problems, without pushing, without forcing things that your ego desires, leaving to Reality to effect changes according to Nature’s plans, not yours?” (56-57).

Third excerpt: “You are always dissatisfied with yourself, always wanting to change yourself. So you are full of violence and self-intolerance which only grows with every effort that you make to change yourself. So any change you achieve is always accompanied by inner conflict. And you suffer when you see others achieve what you have not and become what you are not.
“Now suppose you desisted from all efforts to change yourself, and from all self-dissatisfaction, would you then be doomed to go to sleep having passively accepted everything in you and around you? There is another way besides laborious self-pushing on the one hand and stagnant acceptance on the other. It is the way of self-understanding. This is far from easy because to understand what you are requires complete freedom from all desire to change what you are into something else.

“If what you attempt is not to change yourself but to observe yourself, to study every one of your reactions to people and things, without judgment or condemnation or desire to reform yourself, your observation will be nonselective, comprehensive, never fixed on rigid conclusions, always open and fresh from moment to moment. Then you will notice a marvelous thing happening within you: You will be flooded with the light of awareness, you will become transparent and transformed.

“[T]he transforming light of awareness brushes aside your scheming, self-seeking ego to give Nature full rein to bring about the kind of change that she produces in the rose: artless, graceful, unself-conscious, wholesome, untainted by inner conflict.

“Since all change is violent she will be violent. But the marvelous quality of Nature-violence, unlike ego-violence, is that it does not spring from intolerance and self-hatred.

“It is the kind of violence that arises within mystics who storm against ideas and structures that have become entrenched in their societies and cultures when awareness awakens them to evils their contemporaries are blind to. . . . “[T]he restlessness and dissatisfaction, the jealousy and anxiety and competitiveness that characterize the world of human beings who seek control and coerce rather than [allow themselves] to flower into awareness, leaving all change to the mighty force of God in Nature” (59-63).

Fourth excerpt: “And a strange change will come about in you, barely perceptible at first but radically transforming” (71-72).

Fifth excerpt: “Adults who have preserved their innocence also surrender like the child to the impulse of Nature or Destiny without a thought to become somebody or to impress others; but, unlike the child, they rely, not on instinct, but on ceaseless awareness of everything in them and around them; that awareness shields them from evil and brings about the growth that was intended for them by Nature, not designed by their ambitious egos” (74-75).

Sixth excerpt: “No defect, no neurosis is judged or condemned. . . . Those defects are probed, studied, analyzed, for a better understanding that leads to love and forgiveness, and you will discover to your joy that you are being transformed by this strangely loving attitude that arises within you toward this thing you call yourself” (109).

Seventh excerpt: “Every painful event contains in itself a seed of growth and liberation. In light of this truth return to your life now and take a look at one or another of the events that you are not grateful for, and see if you can discover the potential for growth that they contain which you were unaware of and therefore failed to benefit from.

“If you succeed in discovering this [negative feeling that an event in the past aroused in you], you will drop some illusion you have clung to till now, or you will change a distorted perception or correct a false belief or learn to distance yourself from your suffering, as you realize that it was caused by your programming and not by reality; and you will suddenly find that you are full of gratitude for those negative feelings and to that person or event that caused them.”
“Can you see every one of them as a necessary part of your development, holding out the promise of growth and grace for you and others, that would never have been there except for this thing that you so disliked?” (118-20).

Eighth excerpt: “It is this nonjudgmental awareness alone that heals and changes and makes one grow. But in its own way and at its own time” (146).

When we are eventually freed up from our accumulated person psychological baggage, we emerge as fully functional emotionally – in the terminology that Carl Rogers helped popularize, fully functioning persons. According to Anthony de Mello, our personal psychological baggage limits our capability for clear thinking (137-42). However, persons who have been freed from the personal psychological baggage will not necessarily always agree with one another about moral issues, for example. At that juncture, what Novak describes as dialectical argument will have to come into play.

Next, in my annotations to certain works in the bibliography below, some of which are not short, I have at times singled out statements by Harold Bloom of Yale University for comment. Harold Bloom is a national treasure to be cherished. I have always benefited from reading his books, even when I have found particular points to disagree with. In my annotations below, my disagreements with particular points that Bloom makes are highlighted. Despite my explicit disagreements, I am enormously thankful to Professor Bloom for having the courage of his convictions to say the very things with which I happen to disagree. If he had not said these things, then I could not disagree with him about them. For this reason, I am abundantly grateful to him for stimulating me to think about the very points with which I disagree. He has served as a useful foil against which I have developed my own thinking about certain matters.

For years now, Bloom has been intrigued with the anonymous biblical author known as the Yahwist, the author of the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible, the parts known for their use of the tetragrammaton YHWH to refer to the monotheistic deity, which is Englished as Yahweh. Famously or infamously depending on your point of view, Bloom claims that the Yahwist was probably a woman. For among other things, the Yahwist undercuts the pretensions of men. Of course it is impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Yahwist was a woman, just as it is impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Yahwist was not a woman.

In any event, Bloom is intrigued with the voice of the Yahwist. This anonymous author captivates him, just as Shakespeare’s character Hamlet also captivates him. Now, Ong never tired of urging us to attend to voice, as Bloom regularly does. In this respect, Bloom is one example of the kind of literary critic that Ong wanted literary critics to be. As a matter of fact, Ong wanted to initiate undergraduate English majors at Saint Louis University into the practice of attending to matters of voice in poetry (in his course Practical Criticism: Poetry) and prose (in Practical Criticism: Prose). In Practical Criticism: Prose, Ong assigned us to read Marshall McLuhan’s The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (New York: Vanguard P, 1951), which consists of short essays by a literary critic commenting on different voices in popular culture and experimenting in those very essays with different voices in responses to the voices being discussed. Because Ong would like to see American adults learn how to respond critically to the artifacts of popular culture, we might say that he wanted to see American adults be initiated into the art of the literary critic and learn how to respond to the appeals that different voices make on our attention.
Ong presents his basic argument for paying attention to voice in “Voice as Summons for Belief: Literature, Faith, and the Divided Self” (I.142). We should note that faith in this title does not necessarily refer to religious faith, even though religious faith may work in ways analogous to the ways in which faith works in literature. Faith works in literature by evoking our sense that the author of the work in question is making a genuine effort to speak from the depths of his or her consciousness in constructing the work of literature, as distinct from speaking from more superficial levels of consciousness, as the artifacts of popular culture examined by McLuhan and all forms of kitsch art do.

Bloom is intrigued with the voice of the Yahwist. The Yahwist constructed the character known in English as Yahweh, just as Shakespeare constructed the character known as Hamlet. The character Yahweh has a voice, just as the character Hamlet has a voice. At one time, Bloom put his trust in Yahweh. But Bloom reports that he no longer puts his trust in Yahweh or in the covenant. Fair enough. He is being honest and candid in telling us where he now stands. However, as we listen to Bloom’s voice as a literary and cultural critic, we should notice how his personal cynicism is expressed in certain points in his cultural criticism. In short, Bloom is far more reliable as a literary critic than as a cultural critic. As I explain in my annotations below, I find Ong preferable to Bloom as a cultural critic. Bloom is unsurpassed as a literary critic. But Ong is unsurpassed as a cultural critic.

Unlike Bloom, I did not grow up as a Jew. I grew up as a Roman Catholic. As a result, I did not receive the Jewish instruction to place my trust in the covenant. Nevertheless, in teaching an introductory-level survey course on the Bible annually at the University of Minnesota Duluth before I retired, I devoted most of the course to selections from the Hebrew Bible. As a result of teaching selections from the ancient Hebrew prophets, I came to the conclusion that the covenant is one of the greatest ideas in the Western tradition of thought. Despite the supercessionism of orthodox Christianity (i.e., the New Testament supercedes the Old Testament), self-described Christians are Jews spiritually. Tragically, early polemics between the yeasty followers of Jesus and their unpersuaded fellow Jews produced striking invectives against their unpersuaded fellow Jews, the consequences of which have reverberated tragically down the centuries. As a result of Christian persecution of Jews over the centuries down to and including the Holocaust, we should conclude that those Christian persecutors of Jews demonstrated by their persecution of Jews that they were not part of the covenant (i.e., not part of God’s people), but were acting contrary to the inner meaning of the covenant which calls for God’s people to recognize their mutual responsibilities toward other people. In other words, Christians are Jews spiritually. Self-described Christians want to claim that they are among God’s people. But God’s people are part of the covenant, so let self-described Christians show that they understand the inner meaning of the covenant through the ways in which they act.

Because I myself am no longer a practicing Catholic, I can join with Bloom in hoping to see self-described Christians abandon the various claims of orthodox Christianity. However, I do not expect to see Christians do this. Moreover, I do not join Bloom in advocating the emergence of secular culture to supercede the highly variegated Christian culture that dominates the United States today. Instead, my hope is that secularists such as Bloom and religious people in the monotheistic religious traditions
will live in morally upright and responsible ways. Granted, there is room for debate about how to live in morally upright and responsible ways.

In the following classified bibliography, I use twelve categories of thought to organize selected works that in one way or another contributed historically to the emergence of modernity in Western culture. As I hope the present bibliography and my annotations of certain works show, Ong’s thought is multivariate and ecological in spirit.