Major Themes in Ong’s Thought

Without ever claiming to have rendered a complete and exhaustive account of the factors in Western culture that contributed historically to the emergence of print culture and of modernity within print culture, Ong identified and discussed certain key factors that contributed to the emergence of print culture and thus to modernity:

(A) orality  
(B) literacy  
(C) linear thought, as distinct from cyclic thought  
(D) agonistic structures  
(E) visuality  
(F) the inward turn of consciousness  
(G) the quantification of thought in medieval logic  
(H) commonplaces and composing practices  
(I) the art of memory and Ramist method.

As the mention of medieval logic suggests, all of these different factors had earlier historical developments before the development of the Gutenberg printing press in the 1450s.

Arguably one of the most significant transformations that occurred in emerging modernity involved what Ong styles agonistic structures. In Manliness (III.102), Harvey C. Mansfield in effect writes about agonistic structures. The title of his book involves the meaning of the Greek term andreia, which means both courage and manliness. In any event, Mansfield makes a telling observation about modernity: “The entire enterprise of modernity . . . could be understood as a project to keep manliness unemployed” (230). Yes, it could. In the history of modern literature, the rise of the mock epic should be understood as showing the waning of the old oral manliness and the code of the hero, as should the later rise of the antihero in literature. In general, the old oral orientation toward the heroic gives way to the inward turn of consciousness toward inner-directedness. Nevertheless, modernity cannot be understood as keeping agonistic structures entirely unemployed, for modern capitalism and modern science employ agonistic structures, as do old warrior religions such as Christianity and Islam. Moreover, in American popular culture today, we find an extraordinary fascination with the agonistic spirit in televised sports and in comics and action movies.