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McLuhan as Medium

by Thomas Dilworth

[This is a revision of a chapter with the same title in *At the Speed of Light There is Only Illumination: a Reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*. Ed John Moss and Linda M. Morra. University of Ottawa Press, 2004, pp. 17-26.]

Key words: modern poetry, Bob Dylan, Hopkins, *The Waste Land*, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Wallace Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', acoustic or tactile and visual space, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, technology, Christianity, neuropsychology.]

By 1964 when Marshall McLuhan was already an international culture star, I was an undergraduate at St Michael's College in the University of Toronto where he taught in the English Department. He was pointed out to me as he strode across campus, tall, lanky, in what looked like an orange tweed suit. Various people who knew him remarked that he was colour blind, but he was not. He was simply unconcerned with matters sartorial. He took vast strides, his long legs pushing slightly to the outside, as if he were trying to cover as much ground as possible in all direction, even as he moved steadily and rapidly straight ahead.

That year or the next, he gave a public talk at nearby Victoria College, to which I went with a friend named Tom Mitrano. I remember McLuhan talked for an hour about electricity as having transformed the world. I came away with a memory of him saying that radio waves pass right through us.

In 1966 another professor at the college (a nun named Sister Geraldine) asked him to speak to her class on Renaissance literature. When she asked the students what the purpose was of some aspect of Spenser's style, he impatiently cut her off saying, 'To involve the reader, of course,' then put his hands to his head and rushed out of the room. It was the first any of us knew of the painful headaches that, we later learned, were caused by a brain tumour.'

The next year, he was away at Fordham, where he occupied the Albert Schweitzer Chair, which was funded by a \$100,000 New York State Fellowship. Of that, \$40,000 went to McLuhan, the rest toward salaries for two colleagues, a secretary and an assistant.* Fordham had to supply the full amount because the State of New York would not give money to a Catholic institution. In late November, McLuhan spent sixteen hours on an operating table having the tumour removed.

* Here and elsewhere in this essay I am indebted to Teri McLuhan for factual information.

The following year, 1968, he returned to Toronto and his college, St Michael's. I was in his class in modern poetry with about twenty-five other students, including Philip Marchand, who would write his biography. During our first meeting, on 23 September, McLuhan sat on a table swinging his legs and talking about 'poetry concrete' and how buildings are poetry but only when under construction or in ruins—incompletion imaginatively engages the viewer. In the same way, he said, poetry, especially modern poetry, has to be finished by the reader as co-creator. People come to advertisements, he said, only for experience. That is an inadequate reason for reading a poem. You do experience art, a poem, before starting to criticize it as art, but which is primary, experience or art? Does the experience depend on the artiness? It's the chicken and the egg. He wisecracked, 'Chickens were eggs' idea for getting more eggs.'

He spent much of that class speaking about the then fashionable concept of 'camp' in relation to art. Advertising is an art form intended not to be noticed but to create a new point of view. Only owners of advertised objects actually read the ads, for comfort, and then the ads become camp. Camp is an antidote to good art, which is upsetting because it concerns the present. 'The moment of truth is a blast in the face. Unqualified or unfiltered, the present would kill,' he said. We would all be Lot's wives, turned to pillars of salt. So we all head away from the present. Poetry causes us to turn back and see it a bit. The music of Bob Dylan is 'a feeble, half-baked form of art, but it gives you a new dimension. It reaches out and gets hold of you or forces you to get hold of it, to reach out. I can sing Bob Dylan incantation off the page of any book or newspaper.' Poetry casts us out of the near past, out of comfortable self-image, into the real present; it is shocking, causes loss of identity. 'The poems on this course belong in a museum,' he said. All art over fifty years old is camp and comforting. With Eliot, the 'present' is industrial and mechanization—aspects that are camp, he implied, to us in a post-industrial age. People like to read old poetry partly because it offers no threat and therefore reassures, like an old record at which people clap in recognition. Camp is not so much an escape, however, as a safe way to look at the present without getting shattered. Camp must have continuity with the present but be far enough away to be quaint: wide lapels, cuffs, mini-dresses as in the 1920s. Camp consists of something just beyond our time range, is someone else's present a generation ago. It varies with age groups. For twenty-three-year-olds (remember, this was 1968), W.C. Fields and the underground of the first quarter of the century are camp. For older people, the late nineteenth century is camp. Camp is non-perception to some extent—commercialized now that extreme

change has made nostalgia-cushions profitable. It is meant to be a testimony to continuity, but it really testifies to the rapidity of change. Genuine camp is better than fake modern. He had begun the class by saying, 'We're prepared to accept all your points of view as part of the show.' I said that maybe the current psychedelic subculture is camp Dada. He said, 'I never thought of that.'

Myths, he continued, are conjectural systems that embody views of life. In our age, myths are epitaphs. Minerva's Owl, which takes flight at dusk, either announce the pastness of its age or attempts to heal the wound of loss-of-identity that is caused by rapid change. Art is the centre of education of consciousness. He then paraphrased Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: 'I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience'—not 'of my race' but—'of my age.'

It was a terrific first class. The next few classes were also fascinating. But the course as a whole was disappointing. McLuhan had not fully recovered from his operation. His memory was bad. When he finished his discussion of the first half of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, he said, looking at the second half, 'I don't know what *this* stuff is' and closed the book. He assigned a six-page essay for the course (it was a year-long course), forgot the specified length, and was furious when everyone handed in essays that were only six pages long. Most received a 'C' grade. He was hypersensitive to noise. Construction work on an apartment building some blocks away on Bay Street was barely audible to the rest of us but pained him so much that he sometimes had to stop the class. He was irritable. Once when a student walked into class half an hour late holding a can of Coke, McLuhan cut him to shreds as 'the living embodiment of the current or coming shallow art.' (McLuhan probably knew about Andy Warhol; we didn't.) Others, too, he dressed down for arriving late. Before long we were all afraid of him and barely spoke in class. He was also abrupt and impatient with his former student, Sheila Watson, author of the novel *The Double Hook*, who was on leave from the University of Alberta and team-teaching the course that year. On the rare occasions when he was absent, she was brilliant and animated literally on tiptoe—she was very short—with intellectual excitement; when he was present, she was cowed. I visited the Watsons in their apartment near campus and mentioned McLuhan's irritability. She apologetically explained that before his operation he had been much more cheerful, full of humour, and kind. Even that year, when one of the brightest students, Mike O'Brien, traced the origin of Eliot's Sweeny poems, McLuhan generously published his

discovery in a small magazine he edited (and mostly wrote) and saw that he received a graduate fellowship to Cornell.*

Of the poets he taught that year, he was most interesting on Eliot and Hopkins. He recited Hopkins by heart speedily at the top of his voice. I remember him saying, “‘The Windhover’ is the greatest modern sonnet.’ In the second or third class, he began talking about Eliot. He spoke about ‘Sweeney Erect’ as a comment on the caveman cult of the 1920s, in which Hemingway participated. He quoted the line, ‘This oval O coped out with teeth’ and said that teeth are man’s basic weapons. He had a copy of the cover of Wyndham Lewis’s second magazine, *Tyro*, on which a figure with an open-mouthed smile displays thick, long ‘paleolithic’ teeth. ‘Character is indicated by the degree of exposure of teeth,’ he said, and suddenly I realized how disquieting I had always found photos of people with toothy smiles.

He loved *The Waste Land*. He said that when you read it, a momentum is created that carries you over dead areas for which you lack experience or knowledge for the poetry to resonate against. The literal surface of the poem is the kinetic sense of the city—the flow of people and voices, environment, an orchestration of fragmented urban sense perception. The individual voices that take up the burden of the poem have character, experience, depth of their own. He quoted the originally intended title of part one of the poem, ‘He do he police in different voices.’ (The plural verb after the singular pronoun multiplies point of view.) I have a vague memory of him bringing in a newspaper and pointing out that its aesthetic is entirely juxtaposition. It is the written approximation of the city. Eliot’s poem is like that. It also alludes extensively to the historical and literary past. About this, McLuhan said, ‘The past is used in order to probe the present, which is the reason for studying history and literature. To travel back on a time-track is to achieve on one level a mental breakthrough, perspective, an objectivity that enables you to watch, to name the present, to have power over it, to control it, to gain identity.’

He said that the situations in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ are juxtaposed and related by resonance. Symbolism is from the Greek for ‘throwing together without connection’ and involves resonance instead of connection. He said that lying behind Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ are Collins’s ‘The Evening Walk’ and Gray’s ‘Elegy’ at sunset, poems reflecting the romantic evening walk, a social convention begun in the eighteenth century. The romantic agony (Mario Praz’s term) must be taken under anaesthetic—‘The evening is spread out against the sky like a

* Michael O’Brien, ‘Apeneck Sweeney,’ *Explorations*, *University of Toronto Graduate* (June 1970), 86-93.

patient etherized upon a table’—and by reverse pathetic fallacy. Prufrock’s agony is postponed by ether. In the early nineteenth century, the romantic impulse concentrated on the slum, the artists’ quarters, an alternative to the romantic landscape—both worlds of felt alienation from steel and concrete. ‘The artists’ quarter was the predecessor to Haight Ashbury.’ Prufrock moves in the circle of aesthetes, dilettantes. ‘Talking of Michelangelo.’ He is self-deceived among the self-deceived, pretentious even in his self-depreciation. He measures out his life in coffee spoons—only aristocrats had coffee spoons. He thinks mermaids will not sing to him—a way of saying, paradoxically, ‘I am Ulysses, the heroic voyeur.’ The contemporary version of Prufrock has his self-consuming fantasies chemically accelerated and represents the mob aestheticism of hippies. If this poem is an inventory of the world’s benefits—elegance in dress, female company—it is also the hell of self-deceivers, the world of Gatsby, of shirts, ‘top drawer’, that are wept over. The effect of the disparity between the need of the human spirit and material supply is sadness. Byron faced the high society of his time and gave the same verdict. The Paris spleen of Baudelaire is blues.

In mid-autumn, the class moved from the southern-most house on the east side of Elmsley street into a converted coach house, which became McLuhan’s ‘Centre for Culture and Technology’. Earlier his ‘Centre’ had been his office in large red-brick House 96, now called McCorkell House. His new office was upstairs in the coach house. The class was held in the green-carpeted seminar room on the ground floor, decorated with a boringly symmetrical mural depicting a central TV screen with trumpets and ten dancing harlequins. The painting was by René Cira, who, in his youth, McLuhan told us, had known Renoir.

Just before the Christmas break that year, I met McLuhan late one afternoon crossing St Joseph Street from the St Mike’s library and, on the far curb, we had our first conversation. He said that the cyclic vision of life and cyclic causality were more profound than the linear vision because unconcerned with progress. I mentioned Aquinas’s concern with causality, and he replied that the literal interpreters of Aquinas, including Gilson, are all wrong. ‘Aquinas is concerned with horizontal cause, not linear cause—“the *ground* of being.”’ The concept of linear history comes, he said, from the Hebrews, for whom history was linear because theirs was a written history.

McLuhan’s public manner was stiff, a little pedantic and pompous, but in private, even though he was not yet feeling well, he was friendly and natural though utterly self-confident. He

saw or assumed that you shared his interests. Always he was inclined to launch into a monologue. When this happened, you became an audience.

In the summer of 1969, I began graduate work in English at the University of Toronto and as a don in residence and a scholastic in the Basilians, who ran St Michael's College and supplied a portion of its faculty, ate in the faculty dining room and often had lunch with McLuhan. He was usually accompanied by a minion, who would scribble down on a pad anything he said. Harley Parker was the first of these I think, followed by McLuhan's brother, Maurice, a retired United Church minister whom Marshall's students called 'Sheriff'. There were others, including McLuhan's eldest son, Eric. All were hired by McLuhan to help staff his Centre for Culture and Technology, and all functioned as lackeys and portable audiences.

Long after I began occasionally eating lunch with him, McLuhan would ask my name and tell me he should know it. Once he leaned across the table and said that his brain operation had cost him two years of memory. His minion—I forget which—leaned over and added reverently, 'yes, even of things he has read!' Once McLuhan said that Einstein had learned all his math from the Indian mathematician Ramanujan, whom he kept constantly with him to interpret what he meant—in fact to tell him what he was saying. Also at the table, Father Larry Shook (president of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies) objected, saying Ramanujan had died before Einstein could have met him. This didn't faze McLuhan a bit. He replied that he was 'interested not in "a fact" but in "effect"'—as though punning made up for the error. I remember him on another occasion saying that the pun was a miniature revolution, a moment of anarchy. He was half genius, half foolish, too sincere and playful to be what he sometimes seemed, half hoax. At lunch he told corny jokes. 'A new name for the birth-control pill: 'Absorbing Junior'. 'Show me a man who keeps two feet on the ground and I'll show you a man who can't take his pants off.' He spoke of a man 'who lived every moment as though it were his next'.

One summer afternoon, a friend (Greg Mack) and I met McLuhan in a bookstore on Bloor Street. He had bought a stack of *Master Plots* and, holding the volumes, confided to us, 'It's all here.' This purchase may have been a response to his having lost so much memory owing to his operation, although he did also have a reductionist attitude towards certain works of literature. After class once, he boasted to a group of us about being able to speed read and said, 'I can read *Paradise Lost* in five minutes.'

In the winter of 1970, an acquaintance of mine passed John Lennon as he was leaving the Centre, where he had been visiting McLuhan.

That winter I asked McLuhan whether he had read David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, on which I was writing my MA thesis. 'No', he said, but about the title he added, 'Parentheses are metamorphic.' (And certainly Jones's Great War epic is that.)

Again that winter I met him walking on campus, and we talked for about an hour. He said he had to speak to the Salvation Army, which was out of date, as were the Jesuits because they were based on a Renaissance model. I asked about the Basilians, who ran St Mike's. He said, 'Them too, but I can't tell them that because I'm too close to them.' He said they should break up into small units like NASA, which really began to work only when its staff was split into teams of five. The conversation ended in a monologue about the railroad having broken up the neighborhood.

In 1970, I sometimes audited his graduate class. Steadily recovering from his operation, he was now a much better teacher. I went to a class in which he gave a fascinating analysis of Wallace Stevens's 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', all of which, he said, was contained in the title—'which is the job of a good title'. First he played a recording of Stevens reading the poem:

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Let the lamp affix its beam.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The poem is a satire on American culture, McLuhan said. ‘Emperors create environments: the King’s English, the King’s Highway, the King’s Justice—like the emperor’s new clothes.’ The first stanza evokes the atmosphere of Coney Island, which was originally infested with rabbits. A coney is a rabbit. ‘Ice-cream is okay, hunky-dory.’ It is produced for bland consumers, is relative slush, not real or permanent, formless. Highly organized violence creates formlessness, in the name of nothing. The ‘roller of big cigars’ is probably a gangster, the cold corpse at the end of the poem his ex-moll. Once there were ‘fantails’, genteel good taste. Now all is degenerate. The ‘dresser of deal’, with its missing knobs, puns on ‘deals’ and symbolizes spiritual poverty. ‘The whole poem is an advertisement written by the President of the Prudential Life Insurance Company.’ (When he wrote it, Stevens was working for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, of which he would become vice-president.) At the conclusion of his analysis, I mentioned that ice cream is cold, as the corpse is said to be. He said that had never occurred to him. He was always happily surprised when someone told him something he had not thought about. He then quoted Stevens as saying, ‘Art is to de-create’, and said that for the whipper of curds, composition is to decompose, to make an ultimate formlessness. With a metaphysics such as that of Stevens, life is poetry, an ice-cream slush to be whipped, a snow job. Like William Carlos Williams, Stevens is cut off, McLuhan said, from the sinews of English, from its rhythms and word quality. This would have been one of several occasions when McLuhan told us that the common American habit of eating ice cream while drinking coffee was a great mistake because the alternation between cold and heat loosened fillings in teeth.

He did not have a very good ear; otherwise he would not have wasted so much time playing recordings of poets reading their own works. Certainly he would not have played for us Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, who have terrible voices and do not read well. Once he told his colleague Bill Blissett, who later became my masters-thesis supervisor, that the reason most English poetry is iambic is that so many English surnames are iambs. To demonstrate, he recited: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, Jonson, Milton, Dryden, Johnson, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Browning, Arnold, Hardy, Hopkins, Lawrence, Auden. As Blissett immediately realized, not one of these names is iambic; they are all trochaic, which is the reverse of iambic. Although McLuhan’s surname had by then become a word in the French

language, *mcluhanisme*, when he tried to pronounce French—in preparation for lectures he was to give at the Sorbonne—his accent was hilariously bad.

After he analyzed the Stevens poem, we distracted him from the record player and primed him with questions and remarks. The result was an extraordinary lecture on the difference between visual space and acoustic space—the latter also being tactile. Acoustic (and tactile) space is, he said, all interface and resonance. See Linus Pauling, *The Nature of the Chemical Bond*. In quantum physics, matter is resonance, whereas in the visual world everything is connected, uniform, as in Euclidian geometry. The space of modern physics is tactile or acoustic, the space of the interval. Civilization has been, he said, an enormous experiment in separating vision from the other senses and giving it priority. This tendency began with the phonetic alphabet: ‘Over the door to Plato’s universe are written the words, “Let no one who does not know his Euclid enter here.”’ The visual sense is the only sense that gives private identity, allows people to be citizens. There are no private people in a tribal society. Acoustic space cannot be divided. Order is essentially auditory, acoustic, the logos. I mentioned a recent guest lecture at St Mike’s, the philosopher Joseph Piper, who had been in the crowds herded into the Nuremberg rallies and, although passionately anti-Nazi, had all he could do to keep from throwing up his arm and screaming ‘*Heil*’ by the end of each rally. McLuhan said that Hitler filled acoustic space, and people get lost in it. Audio increase achieves visual decrease. As vision is lost, so are goals, ideals, principles—intellectual principles, moral concepts. These are undone by the perceptual imbalance of hearing over vision. With loss of eyesight, you are immersed, and privacy is impossible; with loss of hearing, you experience solitude. Tennyson lost himself in acoustic space by repeating his name with his eyes shut. He merged with ‘the Universal’. So by filling acoustic space, Hitler not only captured others but lost himself. Dylan Thomas also creates acoustic space. That may help explain his monism and lack of fixed viewpoint. ‘He is the universe, and the universe him.’”

It was about three thousand years ago, he said, with the creation of Euclidian space and reading, that human sensory synchronization was jumbled and the visual sense became dominant. The visual sense is essentially two-dimensional. It sees only a continuous surface, whereas touch discovers depth of surfaces and disjunctions between surfaces. A man blind from birth, operated on and enabled to see, will walk off a balcony because he sees a continuity of

multicoloured surface where there is none. Only later, when he integrates touch with his newfound sight, can he avoid such accidents.

Experience of touch is abrupt, he said, an experience of non-continuous, unlinked surprises. The blind bump, glide, bump. They are fully alert and engaged, as sighted people are not. This tactility was introduced into our culture in visual terms through hard-edged art by Wyndham Lewis and Picasso. Like a Cubist, a British Columbian Indian will draw a bear with all sides showing: front, profiles, and inside with intestines and bones, everything. Tactility is a matter of interface and interval, gap and collision. This discovery of tactility was also made in everyday language. In *Ulysses*, this interface occurs between phrases and between large prose passages; in *Finnegans Wake* it occurs within the individual words themselves, so that our eye-progress is slowed and you no longer whiz over a surface. You crawl into it and around the bits, having to understand and bridge gaps between surfaces and layers. A two-dimensional medium replaces its two-dimensional language with a three-dimensional language, which is more oral and represents a new synchronization of the senses. In music, this new tactility is represented by sudden blasts without connection. It exists in rock but was born in jazz. Jazz is interval and sudden interface, without the symphonic connection of the old smooth predictable music; jazz was created by the illiterate, ear-oriented black American.

For two days after that class, I could think of nothing else. I wrote down what I recalled of it, which is why I can reproduce it so fully here. I thought then, and still do, that McLuhan's distinction between visual and acoustic space sheds important light on—or, a more appropriate metaphor, resonates significantly in—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

I audited McLuhan's seminar on technology one year, and afterwards occasionally dropped in on this seminar, which was open to the public. In this seminar he one-upped Heraclitus by saying, 'You never step into the same river once.' I think it was during this seminar that he spoke what is, for me, his greatest line, which he never published, as far as I know: 'Boredom is horror spread thin.'

Each class of students heard him say that his examination of the new tribalized culture was not an endorsement of it, and that his own values belonged entirely to the print era.

After I had known him a few years, he still wasn't sure of my name and once addressed me as 'Mr Longworth'. I had heard of a student writing a master's thesis with him, who had discovered that every time he visited him, McLuhan had forgotten his name and that he was

directing his thesis. Discouraged, the student eventually chose another director. There may have been method in McLuhan's absentmindedness, as there was, surely, in his forgetting to attend university committee meetings, so that, before long, he was seldom put on committees. I heard that at the end of his life he began showing up at committee meetings—a sure sign, I thought, that he was in decline.

In one class—I cannot now remember which year it was—he gave an interesting account of the history of language as it affects literature. In its early stages, he said, language is poetic; later, it tends to become conceptual. At its primitive stages, language involves a minimal vocabulary and tends to generate metaphors, which are fundamentally tactile, an interface of fundamental meanings. The word 'wrong' originally meant wrung, twisted. 'Abstract' meant to pull away from. 'Human' meant of the soil (*humus*). 'Consider' meant know, *con*, the stars, *sidera*. All our abstract words were once metaphors. The boldness of metaphor is a result of limited vocabulary. This boldness, which also involves drama and gesture, was renewed and allowed to survive only in the vernacular languages and not Latin because Latin was refined to abstraction. So when the vernacular came into literary vogue at the end of the Middle Ages, first with Chaucer and Dante and then in the Renaissance literature displayed a unity of the sensorium, or co-ordination of the sensorium which made possible the writing of Shakespeare and, especially, the metaphysical poets. As language became less crude it became less beautiful, more refined, more abstract—and metaphor became either impossible or ornamental and unnecessary, except in rare instances. This refinement of language created the 'dissociated sensibility' that Eliot complains about, the separation of emotion from intellect that pervades the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it also resulted in the extraordinary achievement of the neoclassical poets. That path, however, goes only so far, and after a certain point, as Dr Samuel Johnson said, it becomes uninteresting. The neoclassical age considered itself better than the age of Rome in many ways, but as Johnson asked, where is the Virgil of this age? Behind the smooth eighteenth-century façade was a widespread suspicion that something had gone seriously wrong. Joshua Reynolds on his deathbed repudiated his refinement and wished that he had crudely tried to equal Michelangelo. Edmund Burke longed for the lost sublime. In Greek precedent, McLuhan said, there were ways out: tragedy, the emotional immediacy of the language. In the mock heroic, the attempt to break free manifested itself in parody. In eighteenth-century England and France, Jacob was wrestling a classical angel if only, initially, in order to get its blessing. The

reactive cry set in with the romantics and continues through Ezra Pound's desperate cry 'Make it new.' Today there seem to be, he said, two courses open to the artist, both of which are represented in Pound. Because class-time ran out, he stopped talking. He may have had in mind the satire in 'Moeurs Contemporaines' and *Mauberley*, and the abrupt juxtapositions of the *Cantos*.

McLuhan had begun his teaching career at St Louis University and had returned to Canada—he was born in Edmonton, raised in Winnipeg—to teach at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario. He had taken a job at Assumption, now the University of Windsor, partly because Wyndham Lewis was teaching there. Lewis had led the British avant-garde before the First World War and had fled an inhospitable Toronto to be supported by the Basilian Fathers of Assumption College, which appears as 'the College of the sacred Heart' in his novel *Self-Condemned*. McLuhan taught there from 1944 to 1946.

In McLuhan's final year at Windsor, Pat Flood joined the College's Philosophy Department. He remembered that bourgeois morality took a severe beating in McLuhan's classes. McLuhan would question popular slogans: "Crime doesn't pay." What if it did? or 'Honesty is the best policy', but not a virtue.'

McLuhan was interested then in Spinoza and in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which he used to discuss with Flood. Aristotle's plot corresponds to Spinoza's 'soul' or 'form'. Words in a poem do not have dictionary meanings, he said. Their meaning is largely determined by their context, and that context is the soul or form of the poem.

Flood remembered McLuhan at a party in 1946 discoursing on the difference between 'the vertical' and 'the horizontal'--notions analogous to the Thomistic ideas of rest and motion. Reasoning is horizontal; insight is vertical. 'Aristotle is horizontal; Plato is vertical.' The making of art is horizontal; art itself is vertical. McLuhan delivered this monologue throughout an informal piano recital to which he was completely oblivious. The words 'horizontal' and 'vertical' would be replaced in his vocabulary by 'linear' and 'simultaneous'.

He was then teaching that 'the pedestal does for a statue what the frame does for a painting and what the stage does for a play'. The artwork must be isolated in order to have what Aquinas calls *integretas*. This idea was the basis of McLuhan's subsequent conviction that when an old technology is surrounded by new technology it becomes art. I remember him saying that

television turned movies into the art of film and that orbiting satellites have transformed nature into art, which is why we now have 'ecology'.

At this time, he was strongly influenced by Aquinas and was especially interested in Thomistic angelology. Angels do not reason; they experience instantaneous intuitions. McLuhan saw this as analogous to the instantaneous transmission of information by electric media. As we shall see, he continued to think that the new media made man metaphorically angelic. He was at this time interested in Ralph Barton Perry's *One World in the Making*, which discusses instant communication as making everyone simultaneously aware, abrogating the heretofore limiting effects of space and time.

In 1946 McLuhan moved to St Michael's College, whose president was then Father Louis Bondy, a Jansenistic Franco-Ontarian of part Native descent—we called him 'Lou the Sioux'. Spiritually narrow and emotionally rigid. Bondy had immense strength of will. A.S.P. Woodhouse was then head of the English Department at University College and the virtual dictator of the university's English faculty. After McLuhan had been hired, Woodhouse told Bondy that McLuhan 'is not the sort of person we want at the University of Toronto. Get rid of him.' But Bondy liked McLuhan, and colleges within the university then being autonomous, McLuhan stayed.

McLuhan had told Bondy that as a student at Cambridge he had once sat for supper next to the head table, at which G.K. Chesterton was guest of honour. During the meal, Chesterton overheard McLuhan talking about advertising and its relationship to classical rhetoric. After finishing his meal and as he was hulking past McLuhan, Chesterton said, 'Young man, if you want to find out what you're talking about, read Alfred North Whitehead.' McLuhan did and subsequently told Bondy that he learned a considerable amount from Whitehead.

McLuhan respected Chesterton, whose writings played a part in his conversion to Catholicism in 1936. In the 1960s, he had in his home the chair on which Chesterton had sat on stage in Toronto's Massey Hall in the 1930s as he was being introduced. Father Gus McCorkell, who had been there, told me that Chesterton was so fat that when he rose to speak, the chair stuck to him, causing everyone, including Chesterton, to laugh uncontrollably.

When he first arrived at St Michael's College, McLuhan was sought out by Hugh Kenner, an undergraduate at University College and the former editor of the student newspaper. He was then finishing his master's thesis under Father Gerald Phelan (the authority on Aristotle) on G.K.

Chesterton. McLuhan became Kenner's mentor. As a result, Kenner was appointed as his replacement at Assumption College. During his two years teaching there he was in constant communication with McLuhan and made frequent visits to Toronto. In his old Plymouth, he and McLuhan made a trip to Yale, where McLuhan had arranged for Kenner to receive a scholarship and study under Cleanth Brooks. From there they went to Washington to meet Pound in St Elizabeth's Hospital. Lewis was McLuhan's entrée to Pound. Bill Blisset told me that when McLuhan visited Pound, Eliot also happened to be visiting. All through their conversation, really an hour-long monologue by Pound, one of the patients—referred to by McLuhan as 'this nut'—kept coming round shoving a switched-off vacuum cleaner at McLuhan and Eliot so that they were obliged continually to lift their feet to allow the patient imaginatively to clean. From Washington, McLuhan and Kenner went to New York to visit the cartoonist Al Capp, who told them that, for him, the cartoon strip was a form of drama.

According to Flood, Kenner used to pump McLuhan for ideas. Much of what McLuhan said to him about Pound went into Kenner's Yale dissertation, which was published as *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*. It is dedicated 'To Marshall McLuhan / A catalogue, his jewels of conversation.' One evening, Flood recalled, McLuhan had some ideas that Kenner wrote up the next day and subsequently published as an article. McLuhan was put out by this, but they remained friends. For the most part, McLuhan was a generous collaborator, giving far more than he received. In those early years he was, Flood said, a second father to Kenner.

Flood said that McLuhan influenced Kenner in his decision eventually to become a Catholic. Flood remembered the two of them often talking about Chesterton, Eric Gill, and Newman. McLuhan believed that the continuity of Christianity survived in the Catholic Church and that the Reformation was not an authentic return to the early Church. He was devout and thoroughly orthodox, which does not mean that he was stupidly conventional. I remember his taking part in a panel discussion at an international theological conference in Toronto and saying that 'at the Incarnation, the whole universe was reprogrammed'. In the 1960s, at the height of his fame, he often attended weekday noon Mass at St Basil's Church on campus. During Lent he went daily. He gave the church money to wire its steeple so that it could broadcast recordings of bells. He thought he had made this contribution anonymously, but we knew who the donor was. He used to wish his students at the appropriate times a 'blessed Christmas' or a 'blessed Easter'.

One evening in March 1973, he spoke to all the theology students, who packed the third-floor auditorium in St Basil's Seminary at the southern edge of campus, at 95 St Joseph Street. He talked (as usual without notes) about the spiritual crisis brought on by the new media—ideas that, as far as I know, he never wrote about for publication. His theme was that the electronic media disincarnates people so that human life becomes angelic. The meaning of the metaphor is that by moving at the speed of light, electricity maximizes intelligibility. Like angels, we know everything, he said—he could not speak without exaggeration. And we know it quickly. This renders irrelevant the wisdom and prudence of our ancestors. There is one alternative: folly. There are no secrets now. You suddenly realize that Winston Churchill was an ass—'The question is not whether I am prepared to meet my Maker,' Churchill had said on his deathbed, 'but whether my Maker is prepared to meet me'—and everyone around Churchill was a fool. At the speed of light, everything human is a joke. People brought up on TV's electric speed and penetration can't take school seriously. They live a superhuman state and are being offered human goals. This was ten years before the coming into being of the Internet.

All this has revolutionary implications for religious institutions. The Vatican, for example, is a nineteenth-century 'utopia', not a place from which to seek guidance. The Catholic Church is a bunch of old broken-down bureaucrats trying to take seriously—as show business, as an ongoing proposition—a world that no longer exists. Protestantism and its decentralized authority are even more severely challenged. The Protestant Reformation depended on privacy, on private interpretation of scripture. But there is no privacy at the speed of light. In other words, the distinction between Protestant and Catholic has ceased to mean much. We are closer together than the first thirty Christians, he said, closer than the apostles in the Supper room.

At the speed of light we not only know everything, we know that 'it ain't much'. There is no attraction or appeal or value in the world we know: 'Does Trudeau, does Howard Hughes, the hotel hermit, have anything to live for?' We cannot offer human goals—a big income, for example—to people rendered superhuman by electronic speed-up. The only option for them is to become a saint or a devil. Asceticism is more available and almost inevitable to disincarnate man, who knows, without having to achieve wisdom, that he has nothing to lose. Today asceticism is capable of a new dimension. Of course, McLuhan said, some cling to an anachronistic view of reality, like Nero's mother clinging to the side of the boat. (Nero took her for a row in a boat built

to collapse in order to drown her.) Our job is to kick their hands free. We cannot take the world seriously. If you say so, of course, ‘they will call you a cynic. Laugh at ‘em’.

As usual, he spoke in aphorisms:

- The Vietnam War was a matter of educating the Orient in becoming Western. It was an anachronism because the distinction is now irrelevant.
- Is there death at the speed of light, or exertion? Is there lust? The Church? Sacraments?
- Man has become a fortuneteller. Question: ‘Why did you change jobs? Answer: ‘The future ain’t what it used to be.’
- Advertising is Good News and, like the Gospel, no one wants to hear it.
- Humour is laceration. Suffering is the basis of perception, the stimulus that the antennae cannot ignore.
- Participation is a slowdown. Matter deprives form of its vividness and glory. Air does the same to light. Intelligibility speeds things up, is instant, far beyond the speed of light. It is a divine dimension, which can allow man to laugh at all technology. You can go to Mars and back faster than many times the speed of light. The human mind can make distinctions in this vastness or simply forget it.
- The practical man lives fifty years in the past, with both feet on the ground. He can’t get his pants on. He is ‘the Morning Smile’.
- The Greeks and Romans took seriously their Greek and Latin, which I wouldn’t study if I didn’t enjoy it.
- Teilhard de Chardin fell into the trap of thinking there was a direction. Newman fell into the same trap. Evolution is an unfortunate metaphor. Clock time is visual. Other cultures don’t have it, and it is useless even as a metaphor at the speed of light. Under conditions of literacy, ‘continuum’ makes sense. Acoustic man lives not in a continuum but in a sphere without margin or centre. Man-the-Sphaeros, acoustic, simultaneous man, is back together with a rush, Humpty Dumpty. At the speed of light there is only illumination. Tactile, smelling, hearing man senses no continuum. Spengler was right. Western man went down the hill and disappeared.

McLuhan was at his best. He talked extemporaneously for fifty minutes. When he finished, applause filled the auditorium.

In these years—between 1972 and 1974—he suffered a minor but deeply felt disappointment. He loved St Mike’s. As he walked across campus he would go out of his way to

pick up litter from the lawns. One of the things he especially liked about the campus was a dirt path running along the south side of St Mary's Street between Elmsley Hall and Bay Street. He used to say, 'It's the last country path in downtown Toronto.' Noticing one day that the path had become a paved sidewalk, he was furious. He approached everyone in the College administration demanding to know who had ordered or approved the paving. Everyone denied responsibility and pretended ignorance, including brash, personable Father Norm Iverson, the treasurer of the College, who had asked the city to pave the path. McLuhan never found out. Iverson was the sort of priest who had things paved or repaved, which gave me the opportunity to inscribe in wet cement of another sidewalk the best student comment on McLuhan—its author was John McAndrew, who would go to Yale School of Drama and write for SCTV: 'When I grow up I want to be like Marshall McLuhan when he grows up.' In deference to McLuhan's feelings, Iverson had the inscription ground out of the hardened cement. It was, I think, deference misplaced. Believing as he did in the importance of play McLuhan would have thought we ought all to resist 'growing up'.

In 1975, I enrolled in his graduate course, 'Joyce and his Contemporaries'. It was a wonderful break from the tedium of ordinary graduate courses, which generally consist of students taking turns reading papers on works that only the student reading the paper has read. For most professors such courses are recess, a collapse into mental passivity. But McLuhan always initiated and dominated discussion. The class was also exceptional in that it was, half the time, extremely interesting. Because he never prepared what he was going to say, he was half the time brilliant, the other half chaotic and tedious. Even so, he was one of my four best university teachers—the others being the Canadian poet and Gothicismist Jay Macpherson, the Renaissance-drama scholar and theologian John Meagher, and the historian, John Beattie. Even when brilliant, McLuhan bewildered some listeners. You had to have listened to him long enough, for perhaps a year, to understand all of what he was saying.

Working closely with him was awkward because he insisted on your adhering to his ideas. That year he had a theory that the twelve stories in Joyce's *Dubliners* parallel the twelve books of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The theory is bad because while writing all but the last one, Joyce had not planned to write twelve stories. There were twelve graduate students; with characteristic generosity, he instructed each of us to write about Ovidian correspondences in a chosen story for what would be a chapter in a book he would edit and introduce. He submitted a

condensed elaboration of his theory to the *James Joyce Quarterly*, whose editor rejected it, I subsequently learned, on Hugh Kenner's advice. On Kenner's part, this was an anonymous act of kindness to an old friend.

That year McLuhan had an especially harebrained obsession, a conviction that the structure of all works of literature could be reduced to the five divisions of rhetoric: *memoria*, *inventio*, *dispositio*, *pronuntiatio*, and *elocutio*. He said that this was true of *The Waste Land*, which is divided into five parts, and he attempted to demonstrate that they also informed the Lord's Prayer. Whenever he got on this, his current hobbyhorse, we silently, patiently waited for him to dismount. He had an essentially medieval mind, which had to impose categories on experience—as did St Bonaventure, who saw the imprint of the Trinity in all the triple aspects discernible in creation.

One of the highlights of the course was a guest lecture on Samuel Beckett by a young assistant professor named Vince Murphy. After the course, in late June, he and I took McLuhan to lunch. I remember how he talked about mercury pollution and its effects as vividly described by Lewis Carroll in his Mad Hatter. In the nineteenth century, hatters had to work on felt up to their elbows in mercury solution, which poisoned them. It was common for them to go mad. He complained about 'the Cassandra phenomenon' as he was experiencing it. (Cassandra was the Trojan prophetess cursed by Apollo always to tell the truth but never to be believed.) 'To understand cause is to be responsible for action, and so nobody wants to understand formal cause.' Shifting topic, he said, 'Specialization is bad.' Close-up concentration on a single thing, on only one plane, does not lend itself to the discovery of patterns: 'The complexity and multilevel nature of reality demands a different approach. There must be no argument or persuasion, 'a selling of opinion'—the ego must be left out if the mind is to probe;. A good example of such probing is, he said, Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. He continued, 'Consciousness is analogical.' It works by analogy not by restricting the object of thought to one plane and making it a 'concept' to be analyzed. This tendency falsifies. Learning should be the acquiring of the means of perception, which he called 'percepts'. The problem of theology has always been that it converts mystery, which is revelation, to concepts—which are comparatively meaningless and can be thrown out. The Protestant reformers threw them out. Modern theologians, McLuhan said, are imply continuing the process begun by 'Aquinas and the scholastics and subsequent theologians, who abstracted and logicized mystery—a process that

has always been counteracted by the liturgy, by scripture, by contemplation, and by mysticism. Apropos of this idea, he recalled that after having a mystical revelation near the end of his life, Aquinas said that all his theological writing was straw and should be burned. I brought up the distinction that the British poet and painter 'David Jones makes between utility as essential to civilization and gratuity as essential to culture. Agreeing, McLuhan responded, 'Kenneth Clark is wrong about civilization, which comes from the word *civis*, is a product of the power-extending phonetic alphabet, and is generally antipathetic to culture which is a matter of play, where there is solitude but no privacy. Contemplation, yes, but analysis by itself? Seldom.' When Murphy and I paid for lunch, McLuhan asked for the receipt, which he wanted because, being incorporated, he could use to increase his tax deductions. Genetically, he was a Scott.

One of the last times I saw him was after Mass one Sunday at his parish church. I was married then, and he asked my wife, Kate, and me to his house nearby in Wynchwood Park for coffee. We met Mrs. McLuhan and sat for a while on a sofa. The conversation flagged. He was bored and impatient so we left. He was a complicated person. His family must have suffered from his habitual preoccupation, his obsessive enthusiasms, and his impatience. After his death in 1980, Mrs McLuhan confided to Kenner (who told me), 'You know, Marshall was not very loving.' On the Myres-Briggs scale, he would have registered as 100% a thinker. But whatever his emotional range and however limited his ability to achieve and sustain intimacy, his students certainly experienced his kindness. He was genuinely charitable. He did not use people. He never spoke unkindly of a person. He always gave freely to whoever would listen. And if his students and friends had to bear with a certain amount of nonsense from him, they were rewarded by a profusion of rare insights and by genuine friendliness. Most who knew him felt affection for him.

Although astonishingly prophetic, his thinking is dated. It needs to be updated in light of recent developments in neuropsychology. In the 1970s he was interested in the differences between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. We now know more on this subject than anyone did then. (See Iain McGilchrist's important book, *The Master and the Emissary, the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* [2009].) McLuhan's idea that the phonetic alphabet, reading, and the printing press emphasized visual sensation at the expense of the other senses needs to be reconsidered. The visual organ is not the eye but the brain. As you read, the left hemisphere of your brain abstracts—it does not mentally see the letters or words. That is why habitual readers are usually incapable of appreciating (intellectually viewing) visual art—a

deficit of which they are unaware but which can be overcome by insistent attention in viewing. So McLuhan's emphasis on visual dominance aligned with linear continuity can be retained, I think, only as a metaphor. It is abstraction, to which reading habituates us, that diminishes all sensation and affects our sense of spatial reality.

On my infrequent visits to Toronto, his absence is, for me, almost a presence. When I visit the campus of St Michael's College, I anticipate any moment seeing him stride into view with his self-amused, half-ironic smile, a glint in his eye, and maybe a cigar in his mouth.