

## Why Bother with Marshall McLuhan?

*Alan Jacobs*

In October 1958 an organization called the National Association of Educational Broadcasters held its annual convention in Omaha, Nebraska, and featured as its keynote speaker a Canadian professor of English named Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan gave what appears to have been a dazzling speech, as was his wont, and on the basis of it the NAEB—a forward-thinking body—commissioned him to produce for them a syllabus for a year-long eleventh-grade course devoted to the study of media, especially new and visual media. They wanted American high-school students to understand “the various and often contradictory qualities and effects of media,” and believed that McLuhan was just the person to explain such matters. McLuhan gladly accepted the commission and set to work.

But the syllabus and accompanying “textbook” he eventually produced baffled the leadership of the NAEB. They discerned that McLuhan had given them an ambitious and intellectually dynamic project, but could

not see how to use it in a high-school classroom. One can scarcely blame them for their befuddlement, given that this was McLuhan’s idea of an appropriate discussion question for eleventh-graders: “Speech as organized stutter is based on time. What does speech do to space?”

When McLuhan revised and expanded his report and published it in 1964 as *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, his general readers were often just as baffled. Nothing puzzled them more than the book’s most basic and, in McLuhan’s mind, crucial distinction, that between “hot” and “cool” media:

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in “high definition.” High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, “high definition.” A cartoon is “low definition,” simply because very little

visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.

I think one reason readers had so much trouble with this distinction is that, on first reading and perhaps on second and third, it seems so obviously to be false. How different, really, is the amount of information the ear receives through a telephone's speaker and through a radio's speaker? Is it really the case that what comes from the radio is "well filled with data" while what comes from the telephone is "meager"? Is this just a matter of radio speakers, in general, being of higher quality than telephone speakers? Does it matter whether what comes through the radio is music or speech, given that "speech is a cool medium of low definition"—so that if people are *talking* on the radio then it becomes somehow a cool medium? Why does

he say that a movie "extends one single sense" when movies have sound—not just speech but musical accompaniment, which was intrinsic even to films of the "silent" era? (Indeed, later in the book McLuhan says that "film is not really a single medium like song or the written word, but a collective art form with different individuals directing color, lighting, sound, acting, speaking.") Seriously, what gives?

McLuhan was simply dismissive of such puzzlement. In his preface to a later edition of the book, he wrote that "the section on 'media hot and cool' confused many reviewers of *Understanding Media* who were unable to recognize the very large structural changes in human outlook that are occurring today." His critics, then, are just out of touch with contemporary experience. In a later interview he would add, shifting the ground of his defense, "Clear prose indicates the absence of thought." Any confusion we experience is the inevitable result of McLuhan's profundity—a claim quite similar to the ones made by Judith Butler when responding to the news that she had "won" the 1998 edition of the Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*.

I have been reading McLuhan off and on since, at age sixteen, I bought a copy of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. His centenary—McLuhan was born in Edmonton, Alberta on July 21, 1911—provides an occasion

for me to clarify my own oscillating responses to his work and his reputation. I have come to certain conclusions. First, that McLuhan never made arguments, only assertions. Second, that those assertions are usually wrong, and when they are not wrong they are highly debatable. Third, that McLuhan had an uncanny instinct for reading and quoting scholarly books that would become field-defining classics. Fourth, that McLuhan's determination to bring the vast resources of humanistic scholarship to bear upon the analysis of new media is an astonishingly fruitful one, and an example to be followed. And finally, that once one has absorbed that example there is no need to read anything that McLuhan ever wrote.

That last judgment may perhaps be rather strongly worded. We shall revisit it.

What must always be remembered about McLuhan—though people rarely remember it—is this: he was a professor of English. In the early 1930s he took bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Manitoba, and then decamped for England for another bachelor's degree, this one from Cambridge University. He earned an upper second—not the first-class degree he had hoped for, the kind of degree that would have marked him out as having a clear academic future. Nevertheless, he

was allowed to return to Cambridge a few years later to write a doctoral dissertation, which he successfully completed in 1943.

McLuhan's periods in Cambridge would prove decisive for his intellectual future, for several reasons. First of all, his decision to focus on the bawdy and energetic Elizabethan writer Thomas Nashe led McLuhan into some unexpected intellectual territory. Nashe wrote everything from plays to political pamphlets to scurrilously erotic verse, and was about as of-his-moment as a writer could possibly be. Yet McLuhan discovered that Nashe, himself Cambridge-educated, was deeply learned in classical rhetoric; its tropes and techniques saturated his work. So there near the beginning of the age of print, in a London raucous with ballads, playhouses, and pamphleteers, were people who were at one and the same time thoroughly classical and utterly contemporary. The lesson would not be lost on McLuhan.

But in Cambridge McLuhan also encountered major critics—especially F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards—who were intimately connected with literary Modernism. If today literature and criticism seem to be running on parallel tracks, rarely threatening to meet, such was not the case in the early twentieth century. For one thing, some of the most important poets—T. S. Eliot above all, but also Ezra Pound—were deeply influential critics as well. But more decisive was

the willingness of professors to intervene in literary disputes as champions of certain authors and styles. For instance, Leavis celebrated D. H. Lawrence as a worthy heir of what he called “The Great Tradition,” while Richards allied himself with the more experimental Modernists, such as Eliot, who returned the favor by citing his work in their criticism.

McLuhan seems to have adopted Leavis’s assured lawgiving manner, while embracing Richards’s critical judgments. The writers Richards celebrated—James Joyce and Ezra Pound especially—became touchstones for McLuhan, and later for some of his students and younger colleagues (including the brilliant polymathic literary critic Hugh Kenner). But it is vital to understand, if we wish to grasp these thinkers’ influence on McLuhan, that the Modernists were anything but sympathetic to the basic character of the modern world. Eliot commended Joyce’s *Ulysses* because he thought that it found a way to address “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history”; he envied the writers of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras because they “possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience,” a power of assimilating everything that might happen to someone—a power we have lost: “in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.”

Similarly, Ezra Pound celebrated the Troubadours and Trouveres of twelfth-century Provence, along with certain ancient Greek and Chinese poets, for finding a comprehensively elegant style that he felt was impossible in his own day. For much the same reason, William Butler Yeats longed for “the holy city of Byzantium”: “I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato.... I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one.” The great Modernists were united in little but their distaste for their own period, and their sense that it offered them few and shabby resources in comparison to what many of their distant predecessors had been able to draw upon.

This lesson too was not lost on McLuhan. Everything he wrote that would make him famous he wrote as a professor of English literature, rooted as a scholar in the technological, scientific, and religious upheavals of the early-modern world, and fascinated as a thinker by the immensely ambitious attempts of the great Modernists to use the resources of the past to respond, critically but constructively, to the twentieth century. Perhaps the best way to think of McLuhan is as a belated Modernist: born a generation or so later than

Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, and working in a different intellectual medium than they worked in, but one with them in interest and ambition. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is as much a document of magisterial Modernism as *Ulysses*, the *Cantos*, or *The Waste Land*.

**T**he *Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, made McLuhan famous. Like other major texts of Modernism, this one repudiates conventional forms of organization. It begins with a page explaining, in discreet small type, that the book “develops a mosaic or field approach to its problems. Such a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only practical means of revealing causal operations in history.” (The *only* practical means? So *all* the historians have been wrong?) For anyone confused or troubled by this method, McLuhan gently suggests that “the last section of the book, ‘The Galaxy Reconfigured,’ deals with the clash of electric and mechanical, or print, technologies, and the reader may find it the best prologue.” So *The Gutenberg Galaxy* opens, before the beginning as it were, with a suggestion that one might want to start at the end: a classically Modernist bit of deliberately disorienting stagecraft.

The reader who disdains this advice and plunges in at page 1 discovers that the book has a prologue followed by 107 sections, averaging fewer than three pages in length each. Many run

less than a page. The usual structure involves quotation followed by commentary. Sometimes McLuhan quotes primary sources—the book begins with a meditation on *King Lear* and near the end focuses on Pope’s *Dunciad*—but more often he responds to recent work, and his instinct for the most provocative and influential scholarship is uncannily fine. A few of the books he cites warmly—Patrick Cruttwell’s *The Shakespearean Moment* (1954), for instance, or Rosemond Tuve’s *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (1947)—have been largely forgotten, though they mattered much in their time; but a surprising number of the books McLuhan quotes have transformed their disciplines and, though they’ve necessarily been superseded in some respects, are cited today: Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963), Walter Ong’s *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958), Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957), Erwin Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951), Johan Huizinga’s *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919). All of these books are still in print, still read by scholars and students.

It’s also true that the books McLuhan was drawn to are strongly interdisciplinary. McLuhan’s mind was not of the sort that fit into standard disciplinary categories anyway, but when he came to the University of Toronto in 1946, he entered an environment filled with extraordi-

narily ambitious thinkers whose work cheerfully, and fruitfully, disregarded the usual boundaries. Most important to McLuhan was a political economist named Harold Innis who was also an early theorist of communications. Others included the aforementioned Eric Havelock; the great literary and cultural critic Northrop Frye—with whom McLuhan had tense relations; the political and religious philosopher George Grant; and the historian Charles Norris Cochrane, whose masterpiece, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (1940), should have influenced McLuhan's thinking about the transition from the classical to the medieval era, but unfortunately did not. This may be because Cochrane died in 1945, the year before McLuhan came to Toronto.

To today's reader, McLuhan's responses to these works resemble nothing so much as a series of blog posts. (As my friend Tim Carmody has pointed out, this is even more true of McLuhan's first book, *The Mechanical Bride* [1951], which is basically an anthology of advertisements with brief commentaries, a kind of proto-tumblelog.) He quotes a passage, riffs on it for a few sentences or paragraphs, then moves on to another book: quote, riff, quote, riff. And sometimes just quote: one section consists largely of a lengthy three-paragraph selection from Iona and Peter Opie's *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), while another gives seven brief paragraphs from

Erik Barnouw's *Mass Communication* (1956), in both cases with very brief introduction but no comment. As I have noted, the "mosaic" method here is an intentional homage to or imitation of the non-linear structures of the great Modernists. It may even be significant that what Yeats wanted to *do*, had he been granted the privilege of traveling through time to Justinian's Byzantium, was to work in mosaic tile, to be absorbed thereby into a great collective endeavor in devotion to which he could forget his own identity. McLuhan's refusal to produce a consecutive argument might well be an indication of his own mental quirks and limitations, but surely it was an attempt to allow "the Gutenberg Galaxy"—the vast constellation of idea, inventions, and practices that constitute "the making of typographic man"—to speak for itself.

But what does McLuhan *think* about all this that he has assembled? In his reading of the *Dunciad*, he asserts that Pope sees the coming of "universal darkness" as largely the result of the rise of the printed word, and he seems to endorse that interpretation: "Pope has not received his due as a serious analyst of the intellectual *malaise* of Europe.... Supported by the Gutenberg technology, the power of the dunces to shape and befog the human intellect is unlimited." (Note that this diagnosis of *malaise* chimes nicely with Eliot's belief in the "dissociation of sensibil-

ity” that “set in” just a few decades before Pope wrote.) He concludes his reading of the *Dunciad* by saying that that “universal darkness” is “the Night from which Joyce invites the Finnegans to wake.” For McLuhan believes, he says a few pages later, that the “Gutenberg technology” has created a “dilemma” for us, and “our liberation from the dilemma may, as Joyce felt, come from the new electric technology, with its profound organic character....While the old Finn cycles had been tribally entranced in the collective night of the unconscious, the new Finn cycle of totally interdependent man must be lived in the daylight of consciousness.”

Given the usual difficulties involved with trying to understand McLuhan—what does it mean to say that “collective” experience is opposed to “interdependent” experience?<sup>2</sup>—and given that this statement misreads Joyce about as badly as it is possible to misread someone, it seems to make a pretty straightforward statement about the perniciousness of the culture ushered in by print and the hopes for liberation generated by a post-print world. Gutenberg’s invention began a process of rationalization and systemization of human experience, directed by the sovereignty of sight over the other senses, which reached its apogee in the industrial nineteenth century. Against this the Modernists have led a revolt. “Consistently, the twentieth century has worked to free

itself from the conditions of [print-induced] passivity, which is to say, from the Gutenberg heritage itself.” On this point, and in this book, McLuhan’s stance is perfectly clear.

But beyond this point, puzzlement returns. “The electric light is pure information,” McLuhan once told a gathering of businessmen. “It is a medium without a message, as it were.” He seems not to have noticed that those two sentences directly contradict each other, nor that if either is true, it is true in a completely trivial sense. It was Tom Wolfe who seems first to have scoped out what was happening here: “Perfect! Delphic! Cryptic! Metaphorical! Epigrammatic!” he wrote in 1965. “With this even, even, even voice, this utter scholarly aplomb—with these pronouncements—‘Art is always one technology behind. The content of the art of any age is the technology of the previous age’—with all this Nietzschean certitude—McLuhan has become an intellectual star of the West.”

Throughout the 1960s, McLuhan moved with sedate dignity across the firmament, his Delphic-cryptic-epigrammatic pronouncements emerging with regular frequency. “The medium is the message,” yes, and we live in a “global village.” But also: “The day of political democracy as we know it today is finished.” “Mysticism is just tomorrow’s science dreamed today.” “Mass trans-

portation is doomed to failure in North America because a person's car is the only place where he can be alone and think." "Well, of course, a city like New York is obsolete." "Heat obliterates the distance between the speaker and the audience." There seems to have been no subject on which McLuhan was not willing to pronounce authoritatively.

It is in the attempt to put the pronouncements together into some coherent form that we run into trouble. Douglas Coupland, in his light and snappy recent biography of McLuhan, is right to say that McLuhan "pined for pre-modern, pre-technology times when people talked and didn't watch TV (he never took to it) and where books were read aloud in church by priests." That note is often struck in his writings and in his recorded speeches. But he also told *Playboy* magazine in 1969 that "The computer can be used to direct a network of global thermostats to pattern life in ways that will optimize human awareness. Already, it's technologically feasible to employ the computer to program societies in beneficial ways." Now, to be sure, the claim that "global thermostats"—*thermostats?* and *global?*—can somehow "optimize human awareness" is about as purely nonsensical as English gets, roughly on a par with "All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe"—except that it *does* manage to indicate that people who clas-

sify McLuhan as a techno-utopian aren't simply making stuff up.

But it's useless to take any *one* statement by McLuhan as indicative of his general orientation to technology or to anything else. In that *Playboy* interview he suggests the possibility that "the extensions of man's consciousness induced by the electric media... [hold] the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ—Yeats's rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born." But then, mere moments later, he sunnily affirms, "I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos." We shall flourish—unless we perish utterly. We shall be annihilated—unless we emerge into the bright light of a new cosmic morning as lords of all we survey. This resembles nothing so much as the morning horoscope: "Great opportunities await you today—if you are ready to seize them!" Amazing how that horoscope is *always right*.

At this point, one might be tempted—legitimately and justifiably tempted—to classify McLuhan as a huckster and move along to better things. And yet there's that line that Wolfe quotes: "The content of the art of any age is the technology of the previous age." This could possibly be



right, and importantly right—think about movies based on books, or the number of websites devoted to television programs—and even if it's not, in the strictest sense of the term, *right*, it is usefully provocative. It stimulates thought.

In this context I find myself thinking about a passage in Tom Wolfe's essay on McLuhan in which he tries to summarize McLuhan's primary ways of distinguishing between oral-aural and print-visual cultures. I quote the passage without commenting on its accuracy as a summary, in part because, as should by now be clear, there's really no such thing as an "accurate" summary of McLuhan's ideas. Wolfe:

The TV children...have the tribal habit of responding emotionally to the spoken word, they are "hot," they want to participate, to touch, to be involved. On the one hand, they can be more easily swayed by things like demagoguery. The visual or print man is an individualist; he is "cooler," with built-in safeguards. He always has the feeling that no matter what anybody says, he can go check it out. The necessary information is filed away somewhere, categorized. He can look it up. Even if it is something he can't look up and check out—for example, some rumor like "the Chinese are going to bomb us tomorrow"—his habit of mind is established. He has the feeling: All this can be investigated—looked into. The aural man

is not so much of an individualist; he is more a part of the collective consciousness; he believes.

Again, leaving aside the question of whether this is a faithful account of a McLuhanian distinction, and also leaving aside the question of whether the distinction actually holds, I think the passage is helpful in identifying what qualities the reader of McLuhan needs. The worst reader of McLuhan is what's called here the "aural man," the believer, the emotional or instinctual responder. Such a person is basically credulous, and for him McLuhan indeed *becomes* a huckster. It is, by contrast, the skeptical and analytical "visual man" who can get the most out of McLuhan, because he is provoked by McLuhan's pronouncements to intellectual exploration. To what extent *is* the content of an informational medium generated by the previous dominant medium? To what extent *are* we becoming a global village? *Are* there some media that demand more from their users than others, and if so, what do they demand? And how do we respond to those demands? Has McLuhan given a good account of the differences between oral and literate cultures, or between writing before Gutenberg and writing after his great invention? If not, what would be a better account?

So it may be that the person best suited to evaluate McLuhan's claims is someone formed by Gutenberg's

world—as McLuhan himself was. After all, though McLuhan frequently cites television programs, print advertisements, radio DJs, and the like, he invariably analyzes those phenomena by quoting from *printed books*—from poets, novelists, and scholars formed wholly by print culture and available for his use strictly through the media of print culture. (What else would you expect from a professor of English literature?) Surely he could not have been deaf to this irony, though I have not been able to find a point where he acknowledges it directly. He frequently says that the lineaments of the Gutenberg age are visible to us because we are living in its aftermath, but that would scarcely account for his interest in doing something like the opposite: making visible the lineaments of the electronic age by using the wisdom acquired through Gutenbergian means.

But I think this point enables us to see something central to McLuhan's enterprise, a peculiar kind of consistency that helps to explain his many inconsistencies: McLuhan is constantly setting different media, and different periods of cultural history, against one another—constantly using X to explain Z, never allowing Z to explain itself. Through the age of print we understand, or strive to understand, the era of the handwritten word that preceded it *and* the era of the electronic word that succeeded it. Since we cannot leap ahead of the

electronic era, we explain it in terms of the Gutenberg galaxy it strives to leave behind. McLuhan's method is to explain everything in terms of what it rejects, what it ignores.

I believe that once we realize the centrality of this oppositional or, I might say, *isometric* method to McLuhan's thought, we are prepared to approach a question that has long befuddled McLuhan's critics and biographers: the relationship between his ideas and his deep Catholic Christianity. McLuhan was received into the Catholic church in 1937—to some considerable degree influenced by his reading of G. K. Chesterton—and remained steadfastly faithful for the rest of his life. He taught only at Catholic institutions, moving from St. Louis University to Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario, to St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. He received the Eucharist almost daily, lamented the ignorance and apathy of the average Catholic layperson, and wished that priests more strongly emphasized doctrine and preached the dangers of Hell. And yet he rarely mentioned his faith in his writings or speeches.

His best biographer, Philip Marchand, claims that McLuhan's decision to convert “settled all theological questions for him; they no longer had to be reasoned out or defended in his mind. After his conversion, in fact, he seems to have adopted

the time-honored Catholic habit of leaving theology to the professionals, as if investigation into matters of divinity was dangerous to the rank and file.” Douglas Coupland comments that “Marshall didn’t publicly discuss his religion. His theory was that people who can see don’t walk around saying, ‘I’m seeing things’ all day. They simply see the world. And so, with religion, it was simply there with him. This unwillingness to discuss religion caused him much trouble. Some people perceived it as arrogance. Some people saw it as weakness and shirking. Some people saw it as outdated and ridiculous. Some saw it as a wasted chance to make converts.”

I see it as a fundamental mistrust of *language*. McLuhan’s comment that “Mysticism is just tomorrow’s science dreamed today” should, I think, be taken seriously. McLuhan may, as Coupland says, have “pined for” a time when “books were read aloud in church by priests,” but he knew perfectly well that that era held its own spiritual dangers. This is why his short chapter on orality in *Understanding Media* is called “The Spoken Word: Flower of Evil?” Every form of communication, for McLuhan, presents a temptation to idolatry. Its failure to live up to its own promises *must*, therefore, be demonstrated through an invocation of its technological alternatives. It cannot be demonstrated through comparison to the secure knowledge found in mystical contemplation and in the Eucharist itself, for these are beyond words.

McLuhan’s dream that “man’s consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos” can only truly be understood within these mystical, Eucharistic, and eschatological contexts—though McLuhan never bothered to make that clear. From *Understanding Media*:

Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to bypass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by [twentieth-century French philosopher Henri] Bergson. The condition of “weightlessness,” that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.

To this “collective harmony and peace” *all* speech, spoken, written, or digitized, is inimical. A strange thing for a professor of English to believe, one might think; but perhaps not so strange for one whose strongest daily experiences involved the silent reception of transubstantiated Bread and Wine.

McLuhan's hopefulness about humanity's future was then ultimately theological, his reading of the advent of the computer shaped by his belief in God's interventions in human history; his dream was that God might bring about a perfected—a complete and fully immediate—communion of all His creatures by means of the digital computer. (And why not that means as well as any other?) But it is easy to see why the average reader would see his invocation of Pentecost here as wholly metaphorical. And so eschatological hope appears as nothing more than an early manifestation of cyber-utopianism.

There are several ways to read McLuhan badly. One is to take the slogans and run with them: "The medium is the message"—*Go!* A second is to take any one of his isometric exercises, in which one communications technology is set against another, and see it as a free-standing illustration of his overall view of something—of anything. A third is to swallow his vast bland assertions without a great deal of mastication and, if necessary (and it's often necessary), regurgitation. A fourth, and the most understandable of them all, is to mistake his specifically Christian eschatological hope for a purely secular and material utopianism.

In these circumstances, with so many ways to go wrong, I am tempted to suggest that McLuhan now be ignored—to argue that his greatest

long-term value has been his ability to provoke people who are, if not simply smarter than he was, then more patient, methodical, and scholarly. McLuhan's attempts to account for the general landscape of media are fragmentary and inconsistent; those of his friend Neil Postman, who in following McLuhan's example virtually created the field of "media ecology," are far superior in evidential detail and conceptual clarity. McLuhan's interest in literary modernism, and especially in Joyce and Pound, yielded a few memorable apothegms; but his student and friend Hugh Kenner, inspired and directed by him, produced major, field-transforming work on both writers. McLuhan's thoughts about oral and literate cultures, dependent largely on his reading of a few scholars of ancient oral poetry, lack historical grounding and intellectual rigor; but another of his students, Walter Ong, would make a great scholarly career specifying the lineaments of that historical transformation. The work of each of those scholars is far superior to anything that McLuhan ever wrote. So why not just read them instead of him?

It is easy to come to dismissive conclusions when dealing with a thinker as distinctive as McLuhan. W. H. Auden once wrote of Kierkegaard that he

is one of those writers whom it is very difficult to estimate justly. When one reads them for the

first time, one is bowled over by their originality (they speak in a voice one has never heard before) and by the sharpness of their insights (they say things which no one before them has said, and which, henceforward, no reader will ever forget). But with successive readings one's doubts grow, one begins to react against their overemphasis on one aspect of the truth at the expense of all the others, and one's first enthusiasm may all too easily turn into an equally exaggerated aversion.

McLuhan is also one of those writers, and the difficulty of estimating *him* justly is exacerbated by his one-time status as an international intellectual celebrity, appearing regularly on bestseller lists, jetting from place to place to give lectures to adoring crowds, appearing on television talk shows, and running an institute devoted to his own ideas at the University of Toronto.

It must then be remembered that McLuhan never asked for such celebrity; that he did much of his lecturing in order to provide for a family of eight; that in the last years of his career at Toronto he had to ask for administrative help in drumming up interest in the center he ran; that in his last semester of teaching, before a major stroke permanently disabled him, only six students signed up for his class. He outlived his fame.

And it must also be remembered that it is not likely that Postman, Kenner, Ong, and many others would have achieved anything like what they did had it not been for the example and the provocation of McLuhan. He was, to borrow a useful phrase from Michel Foucault, a "founder of discursivity"—someone who didn't just have strong ideas but who invented a whole new way of talking, who created vocabularies that others could appropriate, adopt, adapt, improve, extend. In his recent book *The Information: A Theory, a History, a Flood*, James Gleick cites a classically provocative McLuhanian assertion—"Man the food-gatherer reappears incongruously as information-gatherer"—and comments, "He wrote this an instant too soon, in the first dawn of computation and cyberspace." Much of what McLuhan wrote came an instant too soon, and perhaps that's the best reason to read him, infuriating and confusing though that experience may be. To read McLuhan is to gain at least an inkling of what it might be like to look around the next corner of history.

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