

*The Incidental Thoughts
Of Marshall McLuhan*

MARSHALL at the wheel of his car, driving through the busy streets of Toronto with a nervous impatience that expressed itself in rapid changes of pace, now jamming the brakes full on, now trampling on the accelerator so that the car sprang forward like a greyhound that sees the electric hare receding in the distance . . . Marshall coming in out of the night in Brooklyn Heights, masculine and companionable, a cigar fuming at the corner of his mouth and that burly Irish priest in tow . . . Marshall sitting on a bar stool in Washington DC, burping with indigestion, discussing with one of the local habitués various remedies for 'gas on the stomach' . . . and always Marshall talking, talking, pouring out the continuous stream of notions that issued from his ceaselessly active mind like an unstoppable flow of ticker-tape. 'Incidentally, John, that was the moment when the Ivory Tower became the Control Tower', 'Incidentally, John, the view of the world as global village', 'Incidentally, John, it's no accident that after 1850 English prose becomes a p.a. system', 'Incidentally, John, some of the new material brought into the focus of poetry by Lafargue and Corbiere was intentionally hilarious.' Everything seemed to be thrown off incidentally, as if to one or other side of the main thoroughfare of his thinking, but what it was incidental to I never could tell.

If you are a writer it is natural, though not inevitable, that some of your friends will be writers; and it is interesting, from time to time, to go mentally through the list and sort them into two categories: those whose work you read because you already knew them, and those whom you got to know because you read their work and found it interesting.

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, when American books and periodicals made their appearance again in English bookshops, I was a great reader of

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the New Criticism. Looking back now, the New Criticism seems to me a rather tame affair, and such controversy as it stirred up little more than a storm in a teacup. But it seemed different in those days, from about 1946 to 1950. For one thing, it flourished almost entirely within the English Departments of Universities, and one has to set it against the rather somnolent and unadventurous atmosphere of English literary studies in the preceding half-century or so. In the convention as then established on both sides of the Atlantic, what you did with literature was either to 'appreciate' it, which in practice meant writing sensitive little essays about it couched in rather consciously cadenced prose, or to do 'research' on it, which always meant the unearthing of new information. This information seemed to be valued not because anyone found it particularly interesting but because it had not been unearthed before: it was a 'contribution to knowledge', a notion which had evidently been taken over, largely unexamined, from the physical sciences. Against this the New Criticism put forward a predilection for intensive analysis, particularly with a view to enquiring by what means, precisely, the language of poetry obtained its effects. Since this kind of analysis made 'modern' poetry seem more interesting and acceptable, it was largely the channel whereby the post-Symbolist poets entered the subject-matter of academic discussion, whereas the preceding generation of scholars had reacted to modern writing mainly by shaking their heads over it.

In view of what was to come later, the victories of the New Criticism hardly seem worth much celebration. The intensive study of contemporary writing in Universities can be seen clearly, now that it is established, as not much of a benefit either to the academic world or to the practising writer, and as for the old standards of objectivity and 'research', they were at least better than the trendy nonsense that reigns now. Philology was better than linguistics. It may have been gently boring to listen to a scholar discoursing, out of a vast knowledge, about Scandinavian roots and loan-words and dialect forms, but at least the

scholar *knew* something and could solve real problems; his views were more worth listening to than glib theorising about linguistics by people who can't speak or write any language but their own.

Yes, I have to work hard to think myself back into the state of mind in which the New Criticism seemed exciting and liberating, and when I do so I recall the whole atmosphere of those years, the food shortages and the skimpily produced books and the Universities full of returned warriors, the older ones anxious to get back to something called 'normality' which the younger ones, never having known it, were not certain they would recognise if they saw it; and my own early twenties.

Then it is that I remember the physical feel of those thick, well-funded periodicals, lavishly produced with good printing and wide margins, in which the New Criticism could be read. They were heaped up in tempting piles on the counters of University bookshops, Blackwell's in Oxford, Heffer's in Cambridge and the like. I suppose in publishing terms their sales in England were negligible, amounting to a few score. But they made an impact on the small world in which I had my being, a world in which poetry and criticism were what we mainly talked about. I eyed and fingered them in the shops; when I could (for they were expensive) I bought them; and when I bought a copy I read it to pieces. I can see those magazines now—the *Sewanee Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *Hudson Review*. They arrived like ambassadors from a world that seemed both inciting and reassuring, a world where people were interested in the same things that we were, but looked at them in a different way.

Since this essay is about Marshall McLuhan, it is obvious what I am going to say next; that in these thick, shiny reviews I first became acquainted with his name. Quite so. And yet 'Herbert Marshall McLuhan', as he tended to sign himself, was not quite the ordinary New Critic. He wrote what I used to think of as 'brain-teeming' criticism. Where the traditional scholar rarely ventured outside his 'field', and the conventional New Critic applied what were becoming well-worn techniques

to the text in front of him (the sacred phrase was 'the words on the page'), McLuhan worked by sending up a shower of comparisons, analogies, wisecracks, sudden satiric jabs at people and attitudes he disliked, and equally sudden excursions into scholastic philosophy or modern advertising practice (both these last were subjects he had studied attentively), all in the service of illuminating, or preparing for illumination, whatever book or writer he was discussing. It was like riding on a roller-coaster; it also reminded me of Johnson's description of the practice of the Metaphysical poets: 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.' In McLuhan's case the violence had nothing sullen or offensive about it; it was the natural outcrop of a geniality, an impatience with conventional categories, and a willingness to have a go and try anything for size. Most critics make an *aperr;u* serve them as theme for a whole essay or even a whole book; McLuhan provided an *aperr;u* in virtually every line, and if they were not all equally good, if indeed some of them were unconvincing to the point of absurdity, well, there was always the interest of seeing what the man would say next; and there was a large, gusty breeze of fresh air blowing through the whole enterprise.

I remember feeling more than once that if the title of any of McLuhan's essays were to get lost, no one would be able to say, from reading the essay, what it had actually been *about*. In the 1950s he began to contribute to English periodicals; I believe the first British editor to use him was Cyril Connolly, who included an essay on 'American Advertising' in the number of *Horizon*, in 1950, that dealt specifically with the American scene. You could at any rate tell what that one was about; but when Marshall moved to the Oxford periodical *Essays in Criticism* a little later, he contributed an essay on 'Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry' (I, iii, 1951) which gave me the impression, on reading it, of having to keep my seat-belt fastened. Here is a specimen paragraph:

It might be suggested that landscape offered several attrac-

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tive advantages to the poets of the mid-eighteenth century. **It** meant for one thing an extension of the Baroque interest in *la peinture de la pensee*, which the study of Seneca had suggested to Montaigne and Bacon and Browne-an interest which reached a maximal development, so far as the technique of direct statement permitted, in Pascal, Racine, and Alexander Pope. Pope especially deserves study from this point of view since he first developed the couplet to do the complex work of the double plot of the Elizabethans. He discovered how to make a couplet achieve a symbolic vision. That is, to effect an instant of inclusive consciousness by the *juxtaposition without copula* of diverse and even paradoxical situations or states of mind:

The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine.

The judges are hungry but not for justice; yet there is no suggestion that they would be better judges if they had dined. The stark confrontation of this human condition is enforced by the second line or 'sub-plot' which is parallel but inferior. The suggestion that meat must hang before it is edible, and that jurymen are merely promoting the proper business of society by seeing that it gets hung is analogous to the vision of society in Swift's *I /odest Proposal* and to Lear's vision on the heath. The couplet in Pope's hands escaped from the conditions imposed by univocal discourse which had developed in the Cartesian milieu.

Let no one imagine that I am quoting such a paragraph satirically, to show Marshall as a quaint or clownish figure. On the contrary, I admired it then and I admire it now. I like the sweep and audacity, the impression he gives of having so much to say about so many subjects that one thought can scarcely be brought in without three or four others which have a bearing on it, a bearing often hitherto unsuspected. The incidentals are as

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important as the main line, the digressions as essential as the ratiocinative thread. In that respect Marshall was very like Sterne (who had an Irish mother); and when you add his veneration for James Joyce and the fact that during the war years he had been in close contact with Wyndham Lewis, another adventurous polymath and controversialist, the lineage becomes a little clearer. It wasn't straight 'New Criticism' by any means; it was McLuhanism.

I found these essays enormously helpful in the development of my own mind, not that it was ever going to resemble his mind – we were very different types, and the friendship that developed between us was at least partly a friendship of opposites. But where the New Criticism slightly bored me, and the tradition of 'contributing to knowledge' seemed to me a dead hand, McLuhan's essays galvanised me into a new awareness of the diversity and richness of the field there was to be cultivated. I also liked his watchful, ironic eye on the social scene: no ivory-tower scholar he; his chief claim for literary study, indeed, was that it sharpened one's response to experience and helped one to stand out from what he called the 'zombie horde' of urban consumers.

When, in 1951, his first foray into social criticism appeared – *The Mechanical Bride*, a study of advertising techniques – I was ready for it. The blend of learning, speculation, satire, and comic-strip presentation seemed to me an idiom that only McLuhan could have developed; and now, thirty-odd years later, I am sure I was right. I had a great deal of trouble getting hold of a copy; it was brought out by the Vanguard Press, New York, who did not seem to have a British distributor, and it is a neat instance of the complicated web of relationships that makes up the most ordinary life that the person who ultimately lent me a copy was F.P. Wilson. That gentle, grave and learned man was Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford during the brief time I spent in graduate study, and though I was manifestly a square peg in a round hole ('research', as Wilson and his colleagues pursued it, was not my line

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of country and I think it was a relief to everybody when I got that fact straight and just went away) he treated me with courtesy and kindness, sharing with me his vast knowledge whenever I was in any kind of position to benefit by it. He had evidently met McLuhan at some point on the academic circuit, and corresponded with him now and then; McLuhan had sent him *The Mechanical Bride*, and he lent it to me. I don't think that book was F.P. Wilson country; by the time I could bear to part with it I had left Oxford, and I sent Wilson's copy back wrapped up very, very carefully, as if it had been a Gutenberg Bible. 'Thank you,' he wrote, 'for sending McLuhan's odd book with such conscientious parcelling.'

Perhaps it was Wilson who mentioned to McLuhan that he had an admirer, a rather strange and unsettled young man called Wain who had recently left Oxford to take a lectureship at the University of Reading, twenty-eight miles down the river. Or perhaps someone else did; I mentioned Marshall McLuhan to so many people that sooner or later one of them would be bound to run into him or someone who knew him. At all events, some time in the earlier 'fifties he wrote to me, inviting me to contribute to a magazine called *Explorations* which he and some colleagues were bringing out at the University of Toronto. I wrote a short piece; it appeared; our acquaintanceship was launched, for had I not proudly appeared under his editorship, was I not one of his team of Explorers? In 1956 I sent him my first volume of poetry, *A Word Carved on a Sill* (the first, that is, with a commercial publisher; there had been the conventional limited edition of a 'slim volume' four years earlier), and he replied with a generously appreciative letter.

The first time we met in person was on a wintry night in December 1958, in, of all places, Brooklyn. I was spending some months in America; my curiosity to see more of that country had been aroused by a short and hasty visit the year before, and in the autumn of 1958 I moved my life lock, stock and barrel to America – not on a campus, which would have

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wedged me back into an environment I had only recently summoned the determination to get out of, but simply moving here and there, keeping alive by writing, finding new places and new people. I had spent a couple of months in the New England countryside, but as winter came down I had come into New York and, with the help of friends, found a small apartment in Montague Terrace, Brooklyn Heights. I stayed there till May or June 1959 and have never been back to the place; it was so pleasant, so quiet, so full of a friendly and unthreatening neighbourhood spirit that I am afraid to see it again in case it has been spoilt, sullied, degraded. I remember it with so much affection, the little shops and businesses and bars, the promenade where one walked and admired the finest of all views of Manhattan, the view that makes you catch your breath and think what a wonderful thing it is, after all, to be a human being. (Actually *being* in Manhattan usually has rather the opposite effect on me.) Marshall McLuhan and I had been exchanging letters; he was on a visit to New York and he knew where I was; the letters became telephone calls, the date and time were settled and he appeared in person. I can't remember, at this distance of time, why I received him in the apartment rather than meeting him in town somewhere, but at any rate he took the I.R.T. to Borough Hall, came up to street level in the lift, braved the night and weather along the promenade, and knocked on my door. With him was a thick-set Irish-American priest. Marshall made something of a habit of priestly company. As there are some men you rarely see without a woman, and others you rarely see without a dog, so it seemed to me that when Marshall appeared there was usually a priest in the offing, which after all was natural for an Irish Catholic of blameless life and with no love of solitude.

Of course these priests were always of the jolly, man-to-man kind, well able to laugh tolerantly at a slightly *n"sque* story or hold their own when the bottle went round. The one he had with him on this first occasion was very much the type. The two of them came in smoking cigars the size of cabbage stalks, and

the first impression Marshall made on me was of a kind of all-boys-together jollity. I suppose it was just the dedicated family man and conscientious college teacher enjoying a night out on the town with the boys. He was genial, so determinedly so that he seemed at times to be doing it for a bet, and the cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth made him look like a gangster in a B film. All this I enjoyed. I have never objected to a slight touch of absurdity in people I admire and value; it gives an extra spice to their characters, and sets at a distance the ordinary dullness of life.

The evening passed off agreeably; what we talked about I don't remember, but knowing Marshall I am sure we soon plunged into ideas. When we parted, it was with a promise to meet again soon, and in fact we came together the following spring in Washington, D.C., at something called a Congress of Cultural Leaders, the brainchild of Robin Richman, who was organising a network of events in which various literary and other notabilities criss-crossed the United States. All I recall at this distance of time is a series of isolated vignettes: a reception at the house of Walter Winchell, a party at which Kathleen Raine and George Barker were present- I remember thinking what a puzzle anyone would be setting himself if he tried to get a unified impression of what English poets were like by somehow conflating the three of us.

We were supposed to be discussing the theme of the 'Mass Media'; that would explain Marshall's presence there, because although he was some years away from his flowering of reputation he had begun to be known as a person with interesting views on that kind of topic. I remember his announcing straight off, 'The English language is a mass medium', which had the refreshing effect of broadening the discussion immediately.

There was a lot going on in my personal life at the time, and the subject of our debates and discussions claimed some, but not all, of my attention. The vignettes, however, have stayed. Whose beautiful lawn was I slowly walking across when I came upon the lean, ascetic figure of Father Martin d'Arcy, sitting in

a cane chair? Where was the graveyard in which I spent a fascinating hour with Robert Lowell, reading off names and dates and breathing in the ancestral smell of that green and flowering place associated with death, rebirth, renewal, continuity, history? I met and talked with Lowell quite often during the week or so that our deliberations lasted; became aware of the depth of his knowledge of European history and literature, and how much his view of life, and of death, was nourished by the past. I also remember Lowell's firmness. He had a very clear idea of which people he had time for and which he didn't. I once met him when I was in the company of a perfectly pleasant man who worked on the editorial staff of a literary magazine; we were having a drink together, Lowell happened to come in, and when Lowell and I agreed to meet later I suggested that the other man should come along too; I have always been easy-going about such things, no doubt too much so, and certainly to my cost. Lowell trod on the suggestion very firmly. He wasn't rude, but he left neither of us in doubt that the idea didn't appeal to him. The other man quietly bowed out.

That particular scene took place in a certain bar (I have always gravitated towards bars), and indeed I think there must have been one bar I was in the habit of drinking in, because I can see myself very clearly in there with Marshall. He was sitting on one of those circular stools with metal stalks that American bars always have, and he was bringing up a lot of wind. Marshall was a nervous man, not in the sense of being timid (far from it), but in the sense of being highly wrought, possessed by a kind of nervous impatience that made him eat quickly. This same impatience accounted also, no doubt, for the terrifying quality of his driving ('I drive like a bad-tempered cab-driver'), aiming the car at the narrow and irregular gap between two lines of traffic while explaining ('Incidentally, John') some new development in his thinking. It quite clearly explains his tendency to flatulence. Forty-odd years of eating too fast will have their effect; the gods of the gastric juices are

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not mocked. I can see Marshall now, sitting on the bar stool toying with a glass of beer (and the sudsy stuff they sell you as beer in America would in any case give flatulence to someone who had never had it), stifling a procession of belches, until the man occupying the next stool engaged him in conversation on the subject of how to deal with the problem. Marshall took up the subject with perfect naturalness, taking the man's advice seriously and also advancing rival theories of his own; though he had enormous intellectual pride, in normal relationships he had not an ounce of conceit or affectation in his make-up. Condescension, loftiness, what the English call 'being stuck-up', was entirely absent in him. He would, if occasion served, have started a philosophical discussion with a gangster from a B film.

By the time I returned to England in the early summer of 1959, I had behind me several layers of experience of Marshall: the early years of fascinated reading of his essays, our exchanges of letters, and the man himself in his cigar-smoking hail-fellow-well-met mood, in his quieter, more confidential mood, and finally in his role as a public debater, not yet widely known but already a Cultural Leader. To these layers the next few years added another of more importance, perhaps, than any of them. I got to know him as a family man, at a time when I had begun to be a family man myself.

Not long after getting back to England-on ■ January
1960-

I got married again, and the next time I had contact with Marshall was during the summer of 1962, by which time my wife Eirian had brought forth our first son, William, and was pregnant with Ianto, our second. We were in Canada, and in Ontario, because I had signed on to teach a Summer School on Shakespeare at McMaster University. McMaster is situated beside Lake Ontario in the steel-manufacturing city of Hamilton. I remember that summer as a strange, rather hallucinatory time, not at all unhappy or unrewarding but curiously unreal and dream-like. The stifling heat pressed down, one moved

about in a slow, drugged fashion, and the impression of unfamiliar streets, houses and gardens mixed with the thoughts of basic and familiar stories, ideas and characters – for, during many hours of each day, the talk was mainly of Shakespeare-in a thick, sluggish tide that nevertheless pullulated with rich imaginative life.

Hamilton is not very far from Toronto, and Marshall drove out one evening, early in our stay, to bring his wife Corinne to meet us and have dinner. Of Corinne I will only say that of all the women I have ever met she struck me as the one most deserving of the epithet 'gracious'. Courtesy and good breeding shone from everything she said or did. The dinner in our rented house was a success, and the return invitation soon followed. We took the bus into Toronto, carrying the eighteen-month-old William and his impedimenta, and Marshall drove down to the bus station to meet us.

Another vignette of Marshall: standing on the concrete floor of the Toronto bus station, a long, lean figure, his curly hair thinning above a lofty, furrowed brow and attentive eyes, swivelling his head as if trying to look in all directions at once. He had not yet seen us as we walked towards him, and his expression was an interesting blend of watchfulness, irritation (crowds and jostling always irritated him) and a certain detached thoughtfulness as if he were analysing the scene before him as part of some vast, never-ending piece of research on the anthropology of modern urban man.

Marshall and Corinne lived in a pleasant house in a suburban street well shaded by trees, in fact Marshall told me with some pride that the area within which the house stood was officially designated an oak forest. During that hot, oppressive summer we enjoyed their uncomplicated, generous hospitality many a time, and spent hours reclining in the cool of the garden. Classes at McMaster ended by lunch-time on Saturday until Monday morning, and we several times came in, all three of us, to Toronto, where the McLuhan house was thrown open to us as a second home. North American houses are as a rule bigger

and more spacious than those of Europe, and though their house was no bigger than would be usual among the Canadian middle classes, it seemed big to us, with its liberal allowance of bedrooms and bathrooms. The McLuhans' numerous offspring had not all taken wing then; Eric, the eldest son, had gone, but some or all of the girls were at home and so was the youngest boy, Michael. I never sorted the girls out, though Eirian had their names and their different personalities tagged within the first weekend. Two of them, who shared a bedroom next door to ours, even managed to be polite and friendly to us when reporting that William had gone into their room and relieved himself on the carpet. To me they were all just embodiments of splendid girlhood, and there was no need to tell them apart, though in late years I got to know one of them, Teresa, on an entirely different basis, that of friendship among grown people.

So the Wains shared the domestic life of the McLuhans, and it has left me with a golden sheaf of memories. Predictably enough, at ordinary family meeting-times such as meals, Marshall never made any attempt to lay aside the contemplative life and appear as the family man. The organisation of the household, the comings and goings and small details of family life, were very much his wife's province. I remember one lunch-time when the girls took exception to a joint of beef that Corinne served up. They said it was off, past its prime, on the way to putrefying. Corinne, the careful, responsible wife and mother bringing up six children on a professor's salary, answered firmly that it was the best quality beef at seventy-nine cents a pound (or whatever it was), and they were to eat it and stop being ridiculous. During this small scene Marshall sat at the head of the table apparently oblivious, meditating on how the specialised logical analysis developed in the sixteenth century by Petrus Ramus had infected the seventeenth-century Harvard scholars with scientific scepticism and thus created a thin, over-intellectualised intellectual tradition in New England . . . or some question equally absorbing. I thought myself that the

beef tasted slightly sweet, but I am not a judge of Canadian beef and perhaps it was meant to be like that.

In that garden in the oak forest, another vignette of Marshall: in a short-sleeved shirt, can of beer in hand, sitting in a deck chair and talking. 'Incidentally, John, nationalism is entirely a product of the printing press – it fostered linear thinking and formally drawn linguistic frontiers.' 'You can always predict the next development in a civilisation – the trick is to read the signals – just read 'em off.' Distinguished friends came and went; Northrop Frye seemed to be a frequent visitor, and was it at Marshall's that I met Robertson Davies?

The McLuhans were, in their familial aspect, a somewhat old-fashioned couple, by which I mean that their relationship with their children was along traditional lines. Corinne was very much the patient, attentive, full-time mother; Marshall the head of the family, authoritarian and slightly remote. He undoubtedly loved his children, but he didn't fuss over them. Not that his authoritarianism amounted to much in practice. It rather reminded me of that sentence of S.J. Perelman's: 'He had the air of a man accustomed to giving orders and having them disobeyed.' In some respects he approached the comic-strip stock figure of the harassed father of a household of teenage girls. 'There's no point in trying to telephone our house,' he once said. 'It's much simpler to telegraph.' 'Have you heard about the new after-shave that drives teenage girls mad?' he asked me on another occasion. 'It smells like a telephone.'

Altogether, Marshall was not very much attuned to children. He was a kindly man, but his thoughts and preoccupations were elsewhere. Like all people of this kind, he tended, in the presence of children, either to ignore them altogether or to give them fitful bursts of attention that were slightly overdone. William, only just out of babyhood, was naturally enough outside Marshall's range of cognisance altogether, except in one narrow area. The McLuhans had on the wall of their dining-room an Indian ceremonial mask (at least I think it was Indian; it may have been African or Eskimo). William, on first noticing

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this, pointed to it and said, 'Man'. This pleased Marshall, perhaps because it fitted in with some anthropological or perceptual theory he was developing (he always did like things to fit in). After that, whenever we all headed for the dining-room, he would bend down to William and say in a tone of mounting excitement, 'We're going to see man, William-*man!*' William's usual response was to smile tolerantly.

These weekends at the McLuhan home have left me, then, with a rich store of memories of the man in his relaxed, unstructured moments. And of his habits. One of these was to sit at the kitchen table and pummel the back of his neck with an electrically driven implement which resembled . . . well, now, what did it resemble? It had the kind of curly cable you see on a barber's electric clippers, but its handle was more like that of a hair-dryer, and the business end consisted of what looked like two small boxing-gloves which thudded rapidly and alternately against anything to which they were applied. Marshall used to apply it to the top of his spinal column, on the grounds that this stimulated the trapezium muscle and also the cerebral cortex. All the time the contraption was belabouring him he went on expounding his ideas as usual, making no concession to the self-administered therapy beyond raising his voice slightly to compensate for the noise, and slip in a few asides like, 'Incidentally, John, this blooming trapezium muscle . . . '

Other things emerged in their turn. Once, on a visit to his office at St Michael's College, I noted with interest that one wall was dominated by a huge oar, which turned out to be the one he had pulled in his College boat at Cambridge. To portage such an object across the Atlantic one would need to regard it as of some value; to put it on display in one's study indicates that one is prepared to convey that sense of its value to others. Marshall was in fact something of an Anglophile. His time at Cambridge had evidently left him with good memories of the place. As well as its intellectual discourse he spoke with pleasure of its bodily recreations. Who would have thought that Marshall had been in his day a College hearty, a keen rowing man? But, as we sat in

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the shade of the oak forest with our cans of beer, he recalled epic adventures on the river, feats of prowess and hardihood; a race against some other College in which conditions had been so severe, in wind and lashing rain, that both boats had sunk. I had a vision of the tall, thin Marshall being the last to go down, his head, giraffe-like, staying above the surface as the boat subsided to the river-bed.

So he talked on, and I was glad enough to lean back and listen. I can't think that he got any stimulus from my company, but at least I was a willing pair of ears. Marshall's reputation in the academic world was, at that time, very much that of a wild man, sometimes amusing and provocative but not to be taken seriously ('McLuhan's odd book'). He did not hold a very important post; the University of Toronto was a staid institution, and the English Department tended to follow a tradition of severe scholarship handed down by such figures as A.S. P. Woodhouse. To some of these people, Marshall appeared little better than a gifted clown. They were of course wrong, and yet there was an atmosphere of outrageous humour, a willingness to push the argument as far as it will go, an abruptness of juxtaposition, that gave his work a (to me) highly refreshing quality of unexpectedness and effervescence. But unexpectedness and effervescence are not qualities prized by severe scholars. They have other goals in view, goals of solid knowledge and carefully buttressed conclusions.

Speaking for myself, I prized the Jack-in-the-box quality of Marshall's mind and personality. Yet, at the same time, it increased my respect for him to find out, during these long summer hours of talk, that his basis in scholarship was thoroughly firm. He had studied philosophy at the University of Manitoba and gone on to take the Tripos at Cambridge. In those days one could not get through these courses in the glib, know-nothing fashion that is common nowadays, when (for instance) the University of Oxford turns out graduates in 'English literature' who have never read Milton. Marshall had then stayed at Cambridge and successfully submitted a Ph D,

his title, I believe, being 'The Arrest of Tudor Prose'. I never read this thesis but C.S. Lewis, who had because he had read everything, told me that it was a thesis to prove that all the best prose was written by Catholics and that the art withered at the Reformation. And this, too, would be typical of Marshall, who took his Catholicism seriously and espoused its cause at all times, often leaping out at its adversaries from a totally unexpected position.

Another memory. A former student of Marshall's owned a sailing-boat of some sort, and offered to take a party of us on the lake one afternoon. A mixed bag of McLuhans and Wains assembled on the jetty, got aboard and flapped off before the breeze. Marshall and I were on deck, on either side of the cabin which projected above deck-level. There was a bench on each side, so the logical thing to do was to stretch out at our ease, looking up at the sky, within sound of each other's voices, which as usual meant that Marshall monologued and I very willingly listened. There was a fair swell on the water that day, and I recall lying with nothing in my field of vision except the mast, the heat-hazed sky, and occasional glimpses of the lake as we pitched to one side or the other, with Marshall's voice coming from the other side of the cabin, endlessly developing his ideas.

I think indeed that I had struck him at a moment of immense fecundity, when a mass of apparently random ideas had begun to form into a whole in his mind. He must have been putting the finishing touches to *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and getting ready for the more speculative flights of social criticism that were to take him to the peak of his reputation with *Understanding ;Media*. Perhaps, by listening so attentively through so many hours-and it was certainly no trouble-I played a small part in helping to ready him for his most spectacular burst of ideation.

I found Marshall intellectually persuasive at this period more than later. Indeed, I look back on the years from 1962 to about 1965 as those in which some traces of influence from his ideas filtered into my own. They are slight, shallow traces and no one would notice them who wasn't specifically looking for them,

but I believe they are there in things that I wrote at that time. But I do remember, for instance, being attracted to his notion of a new oral culture which might do more for poetry than the culture of print had done, bringing the poet back into something like the role of the troubadour and slowing down the reading of poetry to the pace of the speaking voice. Not long after I got home, I was asked to speak to the Oxford University Poetry Society and I chose the topic, 'The Poet in the Electronic Age'- spreading some of Marshall's message, as refracted through my tastes and preoccupations, to a new soil.

Another feature of the years immediately following that Ontario summer was that I made a determined effort to get Marshall launched with a London publisher. He gave me, in Canada, a file of photocopies of various essays and reviews, enough to give a publisher an idea of what kind of book he would provide, and with this file I trod the stairs of many a publishing house. But nobody wanted to know.

All in all, I seem to have been regarded, during those years, as the official vendor of McLuhan in England. In 1965 Jonathan Miller, already showing that restless brilliance which has characterised his career, had picked up the message that Marshall had interesting ideas and suggested to me that I should interview him on television in some series he was producing. Marshall was just then on a visit to England, by himself this time, and was staying with us in Oxford. It took me no time at all to decide that I was totally unfit for such an enterprise, and Miller, wisely, got Frank Kermode to do it, thus confronting Marshall with an intellect as well-stocked as his own and with as keen an appetite for speculation. In my capacity as Marshall's bear-leader, I was present at that interview, which was filmed on a sweltering afternoon in a riverside studio in Hammersmith or possibly Richmond. I listened, watching through the glass panel, with interest and admiration but only occasional flashes of comprehension. The discussion operated on a plane so far above vulgar common sense that there were moments when I felt as if I were in a theatre, watching one

of those scenes in Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* which take place in a lunatic asylum. The interview never went out.

Marshall's visit to Oxford, in that year of 1965, provided me with another batch of memories. Some of them will seem trivial, but all are precious to me, as recalling the flavour of the man. I had, by that time, signalled my solidarity with the 'electronic era' by going so far as to acquire a tape-recorder, and we spent some time making a tape of our favourite poems, Marshall reading Hopkins in an extraordinary stop-and-start manner which he claimed was dictated by the poet's own diacritical marks. (I wonder where that tape is now?) Eirian is an excellent cook, and we thought we were feeding Marshall adequately, but it must have been that his accustomed level of protein was not being maintained, for one day he came back from the market with a couple of pounds of steak, which he suggested we should have for breakfast the next morning. We dutifully grilled it, and that is the only time in my life when I have had steak for breakfast, another experience I owe to Marshall.

That Oxford visit of 1965 is also useful to look back on because it helps to date Marshall's spectacular rise to fame. That came with *Understanding Media* in 1966. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* had been much talked about but it was still the book of a literary historian. Marshall had not yet become taken up as a propounder of solutions to social questions. Once he was taken up, he became- for a time- a world celebrity, a sought-after oracle, besieged by publishers and TV networks, and inevitably he tended to disappear from our ordinary life. We were still friends, but my life was never again as close to his as it was during those first seven years.

Already, by the time of my second Canadian visit in 1969, I felt myself beginning to lose interest in Marshall's ideas because they seemed to me to be hardening into a framework, predictable and inflexible. During his first phase, he had been marvelously attentive to the life around him and to what he found in

books from the past, marvellously fertile of suggestion and analogy. During his second, which by 1965 had set in, he seemed to me to be doing little else than read books, and observe phenomena, and see where they fitted in.

One of the reasons why Marshall's vogue blazed so furiously and then went out so abruptly was that its fuel was essentially topical. The earlier part of the 'sixties was a time when a great many people had become worried about what the new methods of communication were doing to them. The coming of instantaneous communications, the shift from newspaper to radio and thence to television as the staple means of informing the ordinary person about world events, the consequences for trade of the decentralisation brought about by electronic dissemination of data – all these changes bred uneasiness. And in the world of education it was being noticed, apprehensively, that the youngest generation of adults, the students who were arriving at the Universities, were of a generation that had grown up in front of the television screen, had largely by-passed the book, and were now confronted with a syllabus and a set of learning conventions based on the printed page.

Marshall, like a cricketer taking an unexpected and glorious catch, was in the right place at the right time. Throughout his career as a literary critic he had consistently shown an interest in the affective side of literature, the ways in which it is perceived by, and works on, the mind. He had proceeded with an eye both to the writer and to the reader. In channelling his interests in this direction, the influence of Cambridge had been crucial. If, after graduating from the University of Manitoba, he had gone to Oxford rather than to Cambridge, the whole course of his work would, I am convinced, have been different. In the Oxford English faculty in the years in which Marshall would have been a student, the three most acute intelligences were those of C.S. Lewis, David Cecil and Nevill Coghill. Lewis, the mediaevalist, saw himself as the interpreter of a vanished world, expounding a centrally Christian tradition to the barbarian ears of modernity. David Cecil was the scholar and teacher

as *belle-lettn'ste*, a skilful biographer, a graceful essayist, teaching good style and historical imagination by example rather than theoretical precept. Coghill, with his Irish instinct for the theatre, delved into questions of Shakespeare's stagecraft which were opaque to the conventional academic. Each of them treated the reader, or the audience, essentially as material to be worked on: to be coaxed, to be instructed, to be guided into a position where the richness of great literature was more easily visible to them. Their approach to the reader was, in the best possible sense, didactic. The Cambridge tradition was analytic. The field of literary studies was very much dominated by I.A. Richards; the middle and late 'thirties, when Marshall, already aiming at Cambridge, would have been intensely receptive to what was emanating from there, were the years of Richards' great vogue. And Richards was a psychologist who had turned his attention to literature because he was interested in the cognitive processes involved in reading. Where the Oxford critics worked to set authors in their historical period and to correct errors caused by the distortions of time, Richards was primarily interested in the psychology of the reader, and this concern spilt over into the work of his most brilliant pupil, William Empson, and also to some extent that of F.R. Leavis, who was in the main an opponent; though Leavis complicated matters by regarding literature as primarily character-building. This was the Cambridge that produced such studies of the mind as F.C. Bartlett's classic study *Remembering*, which was published in the Cambridge Psychological Library in 1932; a *milieu* which whole-heartedly took up the study of the perceiving intelligence and the effect on that intelligence of how, as well as what, it perceived. The future author of *Understanding Media* could have found no better training-ground. This early preoccupation with how the receiving mind grasps and constructs bore fruit in his work from the start; in his *apen;u*, for instance, that modern poetry of the symbolist wing was developed in the wake of the newspaper press. A newspaper page, said Marshall, with its scores of

unrelated items placed side by side, was a do-it-yourself kit for perceiving the world: you read the discrete items and built up your own picture of the kind of world you were living in. And, with that tendency to give the boat one further push after it was well launched, he added that this kind of poetry was born in France, and that the biggest single influence on nineteenth-century French poetry was the theoretical writing of Edgar Poe, a newspaper man.

Or, again, there was his argument, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, that the printing press had ministered to nationalism by making it imperative to regulate spelling, which in turn meant that the differences between languages became much more formalised and clear-cut. French, say, was spoken and written in its fully developed form until one reached a certain frontier, when one switched immediately to Spanish or Italian, also in their fully developed form; whereas, in the old manuscript days when spelling was a go-as-you-please affair, there would be an area of fifty miles on either side of the frontier in which the accepted language was a compromise between the two, with elements of grammar and vocabulary from both.

Willing as he was to explain virtually all the phenomena of a society with reference to how that society moved information, Marshall was ready for television and the electronic media generally. Indeed, there is a sense in which it is quite true that he was ready for them before anyone else was. The result was the perfect blend of the man and the moment.

Understanding Media is, even for Marshall, a fiercely wide-ranging book, dragging the reader breathlessly through ever-widening perspectives in which things 'fall into place' only to fall immediately out again and land in another place. Its effect is, quite simply, intoxicating. To read it is to enter a state very similar to drunkenness in its dislocation of normal spatial relationships and its sudden unexpected juxtapositions. And just as the drunk man believes himself to be continually lighting on brilliant insights, so the reader of *Understanding Media* has the continual illusion of sudden flashes of total comprehension

of the world. But, in both cases, the *aper(U* is exploded by a fresh one before it can be fixed by consciousness. Nothing is retained except the sense of having been on a wonderful trip. For about eighteen months in 1965 and 1966, the whole Western world went along on this trip. McLuhan's theme was 'the [approaching) technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.' To consider the likely effects of this extension of 'the creative process of knowing', McLuhan says, must involve a discussion of each and every way in which we have used the various media to extend our nerves and senses, since 'any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex.' Accordingly, we are given chapters not only on Television, Radio, the Printed Word, the Spoken Word, but also on clothing ('Our Extended Skin'), Money ('The Poor Man's Credit Card'), the Telephone ('Sounding Brass or Tinkling Symbol?'), etc., etc. The whole book has the outrageous all-inclusiveness of the brain-teeming McLuhan I had already admired wonderingly for twenty years, the buccaneering readiness to comment on, and assign a place to, absolutely *anything*; it abounds in throw-off remarks like 'The sewing machine created the long straight line in clothes, as much as the linotype flattened the human vocal style.'

All in all, I would say that the period in which I was closest to Marshall McLuhan was the decade from 1956 to 1966. Our friendship had begun a couple of years before that night when we met for the first time in Brooklyn Heights. It began, as I have related, by correspondence, when I sent him *A Word Carved on a Sill* and he replied with a generously appreciative letter. Perhaps it will clarify what I am trying to say if I put that letter on the page. Here it is in its entirety.

Dear Wain,

Your book of poems begins to implement and express

your stellar name. And I am exceedingly pleased to have so early a view of the book, to say nothing of your generous words to me on the fly-leaf.

The poems seem to me quite delightful. I like your tough elegance and intensity achieved by such seemingly simple means. You make *terza n'ma* seem like the most natural means of discourse. Your voice never falters.

I've seen no reviews but shall be very disappointed if there is not a good deal of enthusiasm for your wit and fun. Your electronic brain poem is one I would admire to hear you read. In fact I wish you could get out an L.P. disc of these poems. The sooner professors of literature become disc-jockeys the better!

Would it be possible for you to write a longish poem on The English Revolution of the past 15 years? It seems to me from here that the scope of the changes involved makes the Russian show puny. You could handle the Dryden couplet, I think, very well.

I am about to take off for a few lectures and especially wanted to get this away to you before I left.

Cordial good wishes
Marshall McLuhan

It will be seen that the man who writes that letter is, to his finger-tips, a literary critic. He reads and judges the poems as poems, commenting on their form and texture; he assesses the kind of gift that he takes the writer to have, and suggests an area of subject-matter within which he might profitably work. The interest in oral presentation, the looking forward to the day when 'professors of literature become disc-jockeys', is of course indicative of what is to come. But, at that point, our relationship was along traditional literary lines. I, as a poet, sent my work to him, as a critic, and as a critic he replied.

Six years later, during the summer of our endless lounging conversations, Marshall was still uttering thoughts which I could regard as brain-teeming literary criticism. *The Gutenberg*

Galaxy made its first impact, I am sure, on literary people. This is neatly indicated by the fact that, during the summer of 1962 when it was being prepared for press, the publisher who was to bring it out asked me for what the trade calls a 'quote' to put on the jacket. I have lost my copy of the book (I lose everything), but I do remember that I came up with a sentence that began, 'This is one of the great panoptic books of our time.' I was rather proud of that 'panoptic'. It seemed to me to indicate the quality in Marshall that had originally attracted me, his wide-ranging alertness, his readiness to draw illustration and analogy from the most diverse areas, his 'yoking by violence'. The sentence duly appeared on the book's cover.

A few months after that 1965 visit, the balloon went up. *Understanding Media* was suddenly installed overnight as the essential survival kit for anyone wishing to cope with our civilisation, either to make money in it or just to live with it. For twelve months or more, that craggily speculative book enjoyed sales that went through the top of the bestseller charts. Phrases like 'The medium is the message' and 'The global village' passed from lip to lip, carrying Marshall's name to the furthest shores of the world. It used to give me a feeling of surprised amusement, or perhaps amused surprise, to think that only a couple of years previously Marshall's publisher had thought that a quote from me would help his book to gain attention.

It was to be four years before I saw him again, years in which a great many things happened to him in quick succession (and even some to me). The first in the succession was, as I have indicated, that he became famous and, for that matter, rich. I can date his rise to celebrity fairly exactly from a letter he wrote me on 26 March 1966, in which he speaks of the stampede to interview him and write about him as a new phenomenon which he was still getting used to. I had been told that Tom Wolfe (then a new phenomenon himself) had written an article about Marshall, and I must have had the curiosity to ask him if this were so. His letter says:

You ask of Tom Wolfe. He is a Virginian. A PhD in English from Yale. Saw him a good deal in San Francisco last summer. Shall send you his piece on me. We have been in *Lzfe* at length – the whole family. Also in *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Vogue* and the rest. Suddenly I'm a bestseller pet of the College crowds. Must get out some more while their mood lasts.

That last sentence indicates his attitude during the first wave of his world celebrity. The cat had suddenly jumped his way, the cat was an unpredictable animal and might at any moment jump away again. He proceeded, with gusto, to 'get out some more'. The next few years saw a torrent of publications, some of them collaborations with his friend Harley Parker, at that time Curator of the Royal Ontario Museum. Among the themes the pair tackled was *Through the Vanishing Point*, a study of the aesthetic and philosophical implications of perspective. *Shades of Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry!*

That same letter of March 1966 contains the wry observation, 'You can imagine some of the local yokel heartburn and nausea at the calamity of my "fame". Wish you were here to enjoy the show.'

That sentence dismissing his colleagues as merely envious peasants undoubtedly links up with a streak of combativeness in Marshall. Though a kindly and well-intentioned man, he was not conspicuous for dove-like patience. He did not easily brook contradiction or scepticism. When, in any intellectual forum, he put forward his opinion, the implication was 'This is so'; not, as would characteristically have been the case in Oxford, 'It seems to me that this is probably so, don't you agree?' Marshall was not much of a one for asking people whether they agreed. He stated his view, and if they didn't agree, that was because they were either being perverse and refusing to see his point because of some vested interest of their own, or because they were inadequate.

I don't believe this attitude grew on him in later years. I think

it was probably inherent in him. I daresay that as a teacher he was quite autocratic with his students; or perhaps he was as a teacher very much as he was as a parent, adopting an autocratic stance which no one took much notice of. But inevitably his dislike of contradiction, whether or not it increased in his later years, became in those years increasingly evident, as his ideas attracted more and more attention and he had more and more frequently to expose them in debate. I first noticed this tendency in him during that 1968 Oxford visit. In a city where intellectual disputation is such an industry, it was inevitable that Marshall should get into arguments. And when he got into an argument his only way of proceeding was to sweep aside his opponent unceremoniously. Walking along St Giles's Street one day, we ran into Christopher Ricks. I introduced them, and we all turned in to the Eagle and Child for a drink and to sit down. Ricks, whose alert eye had gathered in some of Marshall's doctrines, put forward a few objections and qualifications. He did so good-humouredly; but Marshall's answers were much more brusque. 'I don't think I agree with you about simultaneity being the effect of the two-dimensional and homogeneity being the effect of the three-dimensional.' Or whatever it was. 'That's because you've never considered these matters,' replied Marshall off-handedly. Period. He was not going to say anything else. Another point from Ricks, and another very similar answer. We drank up our beer and left. Ricks did not seem to take offence at all, but I remember thinking that it struck me as a strange kind of tavern conversation between two scholars. But to Marshall, already, opposition was effrontery. And this attitude is not, fundamentally, at variance with the deprecating shrug of 'Suddenly I'm the bestseller pet of the College crowd.' That the crowd should be impressed by his work was not surprising in itself. Nor would it be surprising when they turned their back on him. His valuation of himself was not dependent on popular acclaim. Nor did it depend on the acquiescence of fellow-scholars. Marshall was a law unto himself, and it was that law that he would not have

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criticised or doubted.

But Marshall's fame went beyond appearing as a calamity to the local yokels. It attracted money, and money changes lives; and lives, in any case, change with time and the twists and turns of personal history. Marshall and Corinne moved to a large, stately house in a select enclave of Toronto called Wychwood Park. The family grew up and departed. I visited Toronto, with a week or ten days to spare, in the autumn of 1969. Marshall and Corinne showed the same kindness and hospitality, but in other ways changes had set in. The new house was well, the word that springs to mind is 'baronial'. It had large rooms, high ceilings, and was full of dark wood. Am I dreaming it, or was there a suit of armour in a corner of one of those large rooms, like a solemn, Tennysonian version of 'Man'? Certainly it was a house in which one could easily imagine a suit of armour.

I did not actually stay in this edifice. Marshall and Corinne had a smaller house, close by, which they evidently used as a lodge for hospitality. I shared it with Marshall's younger brother Red. (I have no idea what his baptismal name was; he was always just called Red.) A clergyman, gentle and retiring in character, he had, I conjectured, always been somewhat overshadowed by his older and more conspicuous brother. Certainly I formed the impression that, in their young days, Marshall had rehearsed his role as family autocrat on his junior brother. He himself had set off to England soon after graduating in 1934, and when, not long afterwards, Red was preparing for that European Odyssey which is essential for all young North Americans, Marshall had cautioned him sternly not to let the side down and to remember that he was an ambassador for his country. Above all he had told him, in a phrase that stuck in Red's mind, 'not to turn the place into a hobo jungle.' Marshall's attitude towards hobo jungles was always unbending. He was totally free of any tendency to sentimentalise the vagabond. To him, the drop-out was merely one of the standard products of bourgeois society, as predictable as the commuter with his

suburban home and bank loan. 'The Beatnik', he remarked to me in the r9sos, 'is simply the Elizabethan Malcontent.' In other words, those of us who were literate had seen it all before. This remained his attitude to the various phases of hoboism that characterised his later lifetime – from the Beats to the Hippies and thence to the drug culture of the Sixties; all of which, in their turn, produced some reverberations within his family circle.

Much was the same as before – the long conversations in which I mainly listened, the priests of whom there always seemed to be at least one at dinner, and even something of the informality and relaxation. Marshall had bought a tandem, on which he swooped round the leafy avenues of Wychwood Park; and there exists somewhere a photograph of the two of us riding this machine. (Why didn't he get an ordinary bicycle? Was it because he might suddenly have a Thought, as he pedalled along, that he wished to communicate immediately to some faithful Boswell or Sancho Panza sitting behind?) But the old easy-going atmosphere was dead, the swirl of family life, the jokes, the neighbourhood coming and going. Marshall was a great man now, and Wychwood Park was occupied by rich people and guarded by security men. Years before, I had used as the epigraph to an early novel, *The Contenders*, a remark by Anthony Trollope: 'Success is the necessary misfortune of human life, but it is only to the very unfortunate that it comes early.' I suppose I must have seen the truth of that sentence when, at the age of thirty-one, I sent that novel to the press; but now, at forty-four, I was seeing it enacted before my eyes. **It** was no longer possible to imagine Marshall sitting on a bar stool and discussing remedies for flatulence with just any Joe who happened to occupy the next stool along.

Because I was without the family and not tied in to any particular routine, my time was more disposable on this visit, and Marshall involved me to some extent with his students. But of course the students, too, were different now. They were, I think, all graduates. The University (whether or not as the

result of 'heartburn and nausea') had removed him from undergraduate teaching and put him in charge of something called the Centre for Culture and Technology. (A wide-ranging title if ever there was one.) The University of Toronto is a highly traditional body, and I was pleased to note that a flavour of tradition persisted even in the new headquarters wherein Marshall served his strong intellectual punch. It consisted of an early Victorian coach-house, standing in the middle of a yard, dwarfed by the large academic buildings round it. There was something cosy, homelike, makeshift about it. As for what he was trying to *do* there, I take my clue from a letter he wrote me on 11 March 1966:

'Don't miss EdT. Hill's latest book *The Hidden Dimension* (Doubleday). Big new trend now develops in U.S.A. namely concern with the *effects* of technology. e.g. excitement about the safety-car. It moves on many levels. Most un-American. Most to my advantage.'

Those are, of course, just a few sentences from that letter. It starts with a string of jokes he has heard recently and ends, 'Our love to all of yiz whatever, Marshall.'

Now, it was no longer a question of letters and conversations and the rising torrent of publications. Marshall had a Centre, and a Centre meant seminars and enrolled students and a place in the academic scheme of life. I went to some of the seminars, though I cannot honestly say I got much out of them. Perhaps I would have found them more exciting if I had not had, seven years earlier, those long afternoons of talk, talk, talk, the cans of beer and deck-chairs amid the oak forest. God be with those days. The Marshall I saw now was institutionalised. He had suffered the 'necessary misfortune' of success. Earnest students now came to him as to an oracle, whereas in 1962 he had been the local wild man, apt at any moment to throw off some startling *aper(u)*. The earlier role had fitted him better. But as I write that sentence I know that I, too, am less interesting and adaptable than I was in 1962. We all share the same fate, we all cool and harden and become less plastic, and

Custom lies upon us with a weight
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

As for Marshall's method in these seminars, it was basically a formalisation of the old aphoristic deck-chair monologues. He always had proceeded, mainly, by throwing off stimuli; and now each student was presented with a typewritten wodge of thoughts, epigrams, the names and details of books that had influenced Marshall's thinking, all adding up to a do-it-yourself kit for anyone wishing to become a disciple and share the McLuhan insights. The students seemed uncertain what to do with these slabs of typescript. I was uncertain myself. But it was good to see Marshall working, spreading his ideas, receiving even that uncertain homage.

It was not to last. Already he was on a knife-edge. I returned to England at the end of 1969, and a little later came the news of Marshall's brain tumour and the severe operation that was needed to remove it. He told me how many hours he had been stretched out on the table, something horrific-five, was it? Or seven? I remember wondering, no doubt foolishly, whether all that electric pounding on the back of the neck had been good for him; and, no doubt even more foolishly, whether his wildly accelerated mental processes, his restless torrent of analogy and speculation ('the game keeps springing up like crazy,' he wrote once), was not connected somehow with an excessive supply of blood to the brain. I expect these thoughts were as idle and irrelevant as most amateur speculation in the field of neuro-cerebral medicine.

A year or so after his operation, Marshall came to London with Corinne. Their family had dispersed by that time and several of them were on our side of the Atlantic. It was August, the dead middle of the summer, the featureless dog-days when the intoxication of fresh greenness is over and the crisp touch of autumn has not yet arrived. I had escaped from the steamy lethargy of Oxford to the Welsh hills on a family holiday, but to see Marshall and Corinne I took the long train ride south-east,

down through the sweltering counties and the baking towns, past the miles of dandelions and ragwort and deep pink willow-herb that lined the stony bedding of the railway lines, and rolled into sweating, stranded London.

We had dinner, with two or three friends, at, of all places, the Reform Club. The meal-time was not an unmixed pleasure. The game of Musical Chairs that had begun in 1965 had taken another turn: then, Jonathan Miller had asked me to interview Marshall on television and I had managed to push the job on to Frank Kermode. In 1967 Kermode invited me to write a short book on McLuhan for the series 'Fontana Modern Masters', which he was editing; again I managed to side-step and the book was written by Jonathan Miller. I thought then and think now that Miller did an excellent job in his brief, lucid study, sympathetic and interested but at the same time trying to get Marshall's ideas into a wider perspective, which inevitably meant questioning some of them and scaling others down. He says himself that he has deliberately adopted 'a hostile tone,' and the book has its contentious side, but by the dog-eat-dog standards of the literary world it is courteous and moderate.

I had given Miller's book a reasonably approving review in *The Observer*, and it was this fact that slightly marred our dinner-party. To Marshall, of course, Miller was simply one of those who had deviated from the plain way of discipleship and assent. Every caveat, every sentence carrying the implication that Marshall could be less than an infallible oracle, was simply a mark of inadequacy, or envious rivalry, or, at best, of 'never having considered these matters.' And the worst of it was that I had reviewed Miller's book, not only without condemning it, not only without sweeping it aside as a tissue of worthless rubbish, but actually with approval. I had recommended people to read it, though of course it was obvious (to Marshall) that such an expedient would lead them deeply into error. I, the 'great panoptic' panegyrist of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, the original foundation member of the fan club . . . there was a hint of the *Et tu, Brute* in Marshall's accusing eyes as he explained to

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me, over our lamb cutlets, just where Miller went wrong and how important it was to *realise* that he was wrong.

As the evening went on, Marshall got that burdensome material off his chest and seemed more and more ready to relax and enjoy his holiday and the company he was in. Nevertheless, his so recent and so frightful physical ordeal had left marks on him that were still very visible. He seemed nervous, fragile, tense. There had been some talk of my staying the night with them, and I did in fact accompany them to the flat they were occupying- it was Teresa's, in fact- but when we got there Corinne pointed to the fact that the guest-room was in some sort of inner recess of the house and that to get out - to the plumbing, for instance- I would have had to come through the room in which Marshall and Corinne slept: and the least sound woke him, and he had to be in a totally quiet environment.

I was going back to North Wales the next afternoon, and before I left to find a bed elsewhere Marshall and I agreed to have lunch together in a pub before I took my train. So, about noon, we met again. The pub was a modest place in a quiet side street. It was the era when loud juke-boxes in pubs were just coming in; some had them and some didn't, but it had not yet become *de n'gueur* for every pub to greet you with a blast of amplified pop music as soon as you opened the door. That came later. This pub had rather loud music, I think from the radio, and Marshall asked the landlord to turn down the volume. He made the request not ingratiatingly but with something like his old authoritarian manner, merely adding by way of explanation 'We're talking'. The man, for whatever reason, obeyed.

We sat in the suddenly quiet pub and had bread and cheese and beer and talked as of old, one more in that series of conversations, he expounding and explaining, I listening and enjoying the flow and occasionally putting in a question that punted him towards a new pool of ideas: the same series that had been going on for thirteen years since we had first met in Brooklyn Heights. Thirteen years is not very long, and yet I think it must have been a central ridge of my life; looking back,

it seems to stretch over an enormous area.

I can't remember what we said, but I recall clearly the feel of it, and that we were as easy as in the early days. Lunchtime over; Corinne came and scooped up Marshall to go home and rest. She was driving a car; hired, I suppose. They got into the car; I stood on the pavement. As the car moved away down the narrow, airless street, Marshall twisted round on the back seat and waved to me through the window with all his old friendliness. I waved back with all mine.

I never saw him again. He lived almost another ten years-till the last day of 1980-but they were years in which ill-health and lowered vitality largely put a stop to his zapping back and forth across the Atlantic. We corresponded, fitfully, and the goodwill was always there; but after that last London meeting, the relationship between us became one of memory, as it is today. I thought of him often during that last twilight decade, and I think of him often now; with admiration, when I recall the thrust and sweep of his mind, and with affection when I recall his slightly bemused attitude towards that modern world which he claimed, so gallantly, to be able to control by understanding it.

