

# Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

## O RARE McLuhan

by Geraldine Thompson, C.S.J.<sup>1</sup>

**G**ENERALIZING and of-coursing are procedures all too frequently used by producers of theses. “Spenser,” they will say, “was, of course, in the school of Gower and Lydgate.” Was he? Give me an example. “Baroque writers reflect, of course, their indebtedness to Jesuit complexity.” Perhaps they do, but show me where. I have a few of-course’s of my own, of course. In the not too distant future, there will be many doctoral candidates, of course, writing theses on erudite topics like “The Apocalyptic Quality in Marshall McLuhan.” And there will be, of course, a last chapter on the man himself, which will say that, his cordiality was, of course, a by-word, his humility incredible, that he was, of course, a devout Christian convert, and that it was not just that his students loved him, but, of course, he loved students too. What I would like to do here is to submit a few footnotes to some of these of-course’s; for all of them are true.

Many of Marshall’s colleagues knew him more intimately than I did; but for several years I shared courses with him, and I have some poignant memories of those days. For two or three years, for instance, we shared a course in drama—a terrible survey course that began with *Oedipus rex* ended with *Murder in the Cathedral*—and, for many years we shared a course in seventeenth-century prose and poetry. Each year, when we met to plan the sequence of lectures, he would begin with “Which do you prefer to teach, the poetry or the prose?” And with great courtesy he would beg me to be perfectly honest. But of course (of course!) I too am very virtuous, and would choose the prose, knowing that he loved to teach the poetry and that his lectures on poetry were matchless. He always took a great interest in what I was doing with the prose, in any case, and was prodigal with suggestions—alarming ones, sometimes, though I was flattered that he thought my scholarship was commensurate with his. Once he asked, “What are you doing with those Renaissance youngsters these days?” I groaned as I told him: “Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. It doesn’t exactly excite them!” He grinned in sympathy and then, with a burst of inspiration, said,

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<sup>1</sup> Sister Geraldine, a long-time colleague of Marshall McLuhan’s in the English department at Saint Michael’s College, wrote this article for the (now defunct) *Canadian Catholic Review* in 1985.

“Why don’t you make something of his being in the tradition of Lactantius—tremendous fellow in the third century. You’ll find him in Migne’s *Patrology*.” I did. Lactantius occupied many columns of close-textured Latin in the multi-volumed Migne. O Marshall, in your present home where there are many mansions, do you sometimes hobnob with Lactantius—and with the Hooker?

Sometimes we had a joint session, a sort of dialogue lecture. “Let’s do a class together on Herrick,” he would say. “You make the statements and I’ll needle you; then I’ll say something and you needle me. We do this sort of thing so well, needling each other.” Not quite true: he needled me very well—he was an experienced needler—but my needlework was less convincing. Even the cat, I used to tell myself, might look at the queen—or the king; but not surely in order to find fault with the royal convictions. I think he may have sensed my diffidence (though I am not normally a diffident person), for once or twice he said to the class, “Bear in mind now, that Sister Geraldine knows more about this writer than any of you do, or do I”—an assertion more kind than true. But that was his way: he was just a scholar among scholars, he would say, and no more important than the next fellow.

I once ventured a pun in one of these joint classes. We were talking about the differences between two seventeenth-century poets, Ben Jonson and John Donne; Professor McLuhan asked if any in the class could guess why the epitaph on Jonson’s tomb began “O Rare Ben Jonson.” I thought I knew what he wanted. Some biographer had conjectured that it was not “O Rare Ben Jonson” but “Orare Ben Jonson,” an exhortation to the passerby to pray for the poor soul of Ben. Since no one volunteered to answer, McLuhan turned to me: “Sister Geraldine will tell us the why of this strange phrase.” And I, God help us, made bold to say that Jonson was rare, of course, because he was not Donne. McLuhan pretended to be very pained by the frivolity and begged the students to forgive it. Still, he enjoyed word play and was delighted to hear that his admirers called themselves “McLunatics,” or that one of them, unable to answer some academic poser, had said that he “hadn’t a McLue.”

Kindliness was innate in him, I used to think. Once when a doctoral candidate came to Toronto looking for early editions of some Renaissance writer, it fell to me to show her where to find what she wanted. During the course of our meanderings she realized that this was the stomping ground of Professor McLuhan, and sighed. Since he was a famous man and she was small wares, she thought there could be no hope for her meeting him. I trundled her over to the funny old coach-house that Professor McLuhan had

turned into offices for himself and his secretaries and his assistants.” Yes,” he said with his usual courtesy, but he wouldn’t be free till 11:30. When I brought her back, he told me that there was no need for me to remain; he would talk to Mrs. X and bring her back to me later. She came back, starry-eyed, in the mid-afternoon. The famous man who, she thought, would have no time for the likes of her, had talked to her about her project, had taken her, willy nilly, to noon Mass at Saint Basil’s (he never missed Mass), and then had taken her to lunch at the faculty dining room.

His kindness extended to his marking of exam papers—especially finals. He scolded me once, gently but with some firmness, for giving low grades. I protested that one question had been a stumbling block to many; they had not properly read the question and had missed the point. “I know,” he said, “and mine too muffed the part. But remember that these youngsters are greatly tensed up with this week of exams; it stands to reason they can’t think straight. Why, I’m happy if they just know what the novel or the poem is all about. Of course, I gave extra high marks to the few who did read the question rightly.”

Doctor McLuhan once told me, and I think of it now as I realize I have overrun the proposed length of this sketch, that it hardly mattered if a critic panned your work; the important thing was the amount of space given your book or article, the number of words it was worth. Well, my dear Marshall, you have been well worth my unwarranted flow of words. ❧