

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

[Review of] *The Letters of Marshall McLuhan*
selected and edited by Matie Molinaro,
Corinne McLuhan, and William Toye
(London: Oxford University Press, 1989).

by Sister Geraldine Thompson, C.S.J.

IF THERE IS no frigate like a book, and no riding more enjoyable than a printed page, then here is God's plenty. And if the ship's master insistently invites his passengers to play mental leapfrog with him, the enjoyment of these *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* is very special indeed. And it is. Professor McLuhan was a man for all seasons, and though in some of the seasons the wind bloweth where it will and leaveth the common man breathless in an eddy of elliptical wit and wisdom, still it is all good.

The first third of the book is much simpler than the later parts. The letters from Cambridge to his family, especially those to his mother, who must have been a remarkable woman, are delightful always, and sometimes highly amusing and informative. Mrs. McLuhan was a monologue artist, a sort of Canadian Ruth Draper, and well able to appreciate her elder son's easy allusions to the writers and poets they both enjoyed. It is especially interesting to find in these early letters perceptions of excellence, absolute and comparative, that lasted into his mature years. He reflects, for instance, that Bernard Shaw is a fine writer, but less so than Shakespeare; in fact, the difference is "as great as between sublime genius and clever brilliance"; Goethe is, or seems to be, "in every sense a barbarian"; there are "incredible pedants who crawl all over . . . [Shakespeare] with microscopes and fine combs, and then write their 'discoverie.' . . . Stick to Coleridge." Along with all this there are, too, the affectionate asides: he sends "bundles of love" to his family; he is delighted that Red, his brother, writes to him. One of his professors reminds him of the walrus (in *Wonderland?*), though he is less intellectual in appearance; he has to use his ingenuity to stretch each shilling, and he wishes he had the wherewithal to buy a fine new vest and jacket to

match his fine new trousers.

Still at Cambridge and still in the 1930s, he tells of his growing interest in the writings of G.K. Chesterton. Why, he asks “why, in the nature of damnation does no one else take the trouble of mastering the philosophy of which G.K. is an exponent? It is a social (not faddish) philosophy based on a completely adequate religion. . . .” A study of this completely adequate religion followed hard upon, and was the first impetus to a search that ended in McLuhan’s becoming a Catholic in 1937, in Wisconsin where he was then teaching. Many books and many people had contributed to his conversion, and it was gratifying to note that prominent among them was Father Gerald Phelan, who taught philosophy to Saint Michael’s students for many years in the long ago when I was one of them. Although McLuhan’s diaries, so the editors tell us, give full account of his reception into the Church, the letters do not. There is, however, a long letter to his fiancée, Corrine Lewis, in which he speaks lovingly and eloquently of his religious beliefs and ideals. It is a profoundly moving piece of writing.

These early letters are invaluable, too, in that they allow the reader to see a mind of massive potential honing itself into definite shape, decisive about attitudes and plans, yet deliberately retaining certain flexibility.

Both in content and in style, the letters change after the first 200 pages. Family letters—to his parents, brother, and fiancée—were no longer necessary; the fiancée was now his wife, and his family was living close by. By now McLuhan’s analytic acumen was being recognized by others of his own colour; the letters became deeply analytical and, conversely, highly synthetic; for it was McLuhan’s way to wrest apart all phenomena and all cosmic and technological activity, to find its elemental being, and then to put it together again and examine its effect on man’s mental receptivity and his mode of giving and receiving knowledge.

Again and again one finds oneself wishing this letter-writer would call a moratorium on his “of-coursing” and make friends with a few “for instances.” One just has to remind oneself that the original recipients of these letters were, like the writer, at home in the world of abstractions and leaping perceptions. The Jesuit Father Walter Ong is a case in point. He was, one supposes, not at all stopped short by his friend’s reflection that “one approaches all technologies as ablations of sense and faculty—all in the ablative case.” And, again, that all acting can be regarded as “separate closed systems that re-enter our sensibilities with metamorphic power.” I am tempted to add “Of course!” after this, a facetious “of course,” but all too well I know that whatever Marshall says is worth pondering.

I once heard Professor McLuhan explain to a class that the poet John

Donne was difficult to understand because he presented syllogisms and other bits of logic elliptically—the premise suggested, the middle steps nowhere at all, and the conclusion strongly put. He might have said it of himself. But correspondents of the Ong calibre can fill in lacunae. To list these “understanding media” would require too much space. Here are a few of them: Wyndham Lewis; C.P. Snow; the Watsons, Sheila and Wilfred; Claude Bissell; Jacques Maritain; Ezra Pound, and score of others. These were his dear friends, with whom he could share an intellectual nugget, and now a joke or two. I rejoiced, too, to find among these correspondents our own Sister Saint John who was his good friend and who, now and then, helped him to puzzle out some obscure bit of Greek or Latin.

Often enough there comes, puncturing the hard core of his abstract reason, that lovable streak of humanness. Hot muffins with honey, he says, are surely food for the gods; he and Corinne read aloud to each other in the evenings; he enjoys an Agatha Christie whodunit; he goes, even on his honeymoon, to 7:30 Mass while Corinne, not Catholic at the time, dresses and cooks breakfast; he laughs with Andy Warhol; he delights, as we all did, in the Irish wit and unmatchable jokes of Father Sheridan, a professor in the Classics Department at Saint Michael’s. Even the close-textured letter to Father Ong quoted above ends as simply as this: “With warm regards in our Lord. . . . Mac.” And a letter to Hubert Humphrey he brings to a close by recounting three “gags” which he says he has promised him.

One cannot say enough in praise of the editors. Every correspondent, every person or event mentioned, is identified, often enough not just “adequately” but with a certain informal friendliness, as if the reader were a kindred spirit, eager to know the others. There are two introductions, one by Mrs. Molinaro, who had known Marshall in the days when her husband, Giulio, had been a colleague in the University of Toronto and had hobnobbed with him. The second is by William Toye, who does a tremendous job of thanking all those who had helped make this book. One sees Corinne’s loving touch in many of the long documentations. Making this book must have been a mountainous task, and we are grateful to these three editors.

Those who value these deep perceptions about the ongoing evolution of the human mind and the impinging on it of new technologies will find the *Letters* a goldmine. One of the great advantages of an epistolary book is that reflections and conclusions appear and re-appear, re-stated many times because they are addressed to many people. It is good to see them from various angles. The book is a treasure. ❧