In his preface to *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (2006), editor W. Terrence Gordon tells us that Marshall McLuhan never abandoned the goal of publishing his 1943 Cambridge doctoral dissertation. It remained, however, a perpetually deferred project, a wrong only made right not so long ago by Gingko Press—and in a stylish manner, my own copy being a beautiful hard-bound version complete with attractive paper jacket. Originally entitled simply “The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time,” the published version rightly indicates that the author’s focus throughout this work is less directed at the Elizabethan pamphleteer, poet, and satirist himself than toward the two thousand year historical development of the *trivium*, up to and including Nashe’s time. An understanding of this history, claims McLuhan, is essential not only for an educated reader of Nashe, but for a proper apprehension of the entire Middle Ages and Renaissance. He concludes his short introduction suggesting that “this study offers merely one more testimony that there is finally no way of studying Western society or literature which does not consider, and constantly reconsider, the entire tradition from its Greek inception” (p. 8).

Given that many of us consider ourselves students of Western society, McLuhan’s statement ought to remind us that Harold Innis did not mean to exempt academics when he remarked that electronic cultures were typified by their “present-mindedness.” And reminiscent of how one must approach Innis’ scholarly writings, Gordon observes that, “If McLuhan’s dissertation is intended to provide a new tool for scholars, it also challenges them to undertake very large tasks” (p. xii). Quite frankly, this is a gross understatement.

Newly converted to Roman Catholicism, McLuhan tells us that preliminary to his course of study he surveyed all the recognized authors of prose from Thomas More and Hugh Latimer through Thomas Stapleton, Cardinal William Allen, Robert Parsons, and Edmund Campion, overlooking none of the recognized writers who found themselves embroiled in the religious quarrels of sixteenth century England. This included a thorough examination of “the theologians, the preachers, the pamphleteers, the letter and memoir writers, the historians, romancers, annalists and anonymous authors of newsletters and broadsides” (p. 3). When he began to set his sights on a study of the style of Thomas Nashe, he found it required him to conduct a survey of the rhetorical theory and practice of the sixteenth century. Accordingly, McLuhan tells us that Nashe began to appear increasingly insignificant to him during this process, unprepared as he was to encounter the “wealth of rhetorical doctrines and the varied and self-conscious exemplification of those doctrines at every level of expression which the sixteenth century exhibits, not only in England,” he suggests, “but, perhaps, more fully in Italy, France, and Spain, and Germany” (p. 5). McLuhan concludes, therewith, that the sixteenth century in both prose and poetry was nothing if not an “age of rhetoric.”
Just as readers begin to appreciate the fact that destiny did not place them on the examining committee of this precocious scholar, McLuhan posits that the problem of understanding Nashe amounts to the problem “of discovering the main educational traditions from Zeno, Isocrates, and Carneades through Cicero, Varro, Quintilian, Donatus, Priscian, Jerome, and Augustine” (p. 6). That is, the first thousand-years of “The Trivium until St. Augustine”—the title that McLuhan chooses for the first of his four chapters. Those that remain he devotes to the trivium’s second millennium of transmission “from Augustine to Abelard,” “from Abelard to Erasmus,” and from there to a direct consideration of the dangerously public quarrel that embroiled Nashe with his contemporaries, most notably Gabriel Harvey.

Each chapter is further sub-divided to include a discussion of the trivium’s development, with the focus upon each of its complimentary parts—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. This requires McLuhan to also investigate the evolution of the methods of grammar and dialectics. He then argues that an informed reading of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance requires just such an awareness of how the internal dynamics of the trivium manifest themselves in the doctrines of particular opposing parties or schools throughout the historical periods outlined. In other words, the various quarrels that constitute Western intellectual and cultural development, then, are connected to how different educational traditions emphasize certain components of the trivium to the subordination of others, something which, in McLuhan’s analysis, colours the way these traditions define, utilize, and disseminate knowledge.

In this, one sees a clear affirmation of his later aphoristic formulation “the medium is the message,” and it is helpful to keep in mind the internal clash of media within the trivium that William Kuhns describes as the historical “war within the word,” which is to say that grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric can be conceived as corresponding consecutively to “the word on the page,” “the word in the mind,” and “the word as spoken.” Of course, the attendant sensory and cultural biases of these various elements inherent in the trivium would later be central in McLuhan’s study of better known artefacts, such as the alphabet, print, radio, and television, analyses through which he helped to forge the field that was later to become known as communication studies.

McLuhan tells us in *The Classical Trivium* that the Middle Ages can only be tackled when one has established the primary traditions as formulated by St. Augustine, who, despite being a Ciceronian, determined grammar to be at once the mode of science and theology. This had much to do with the goal of Scriptural exegesis, but, of course, Augustine is also widely known for his Platonism. Plato in his *Cratylus* asserts the superior claims of dialectics, but was never entirely confident, as McLuhan points out, that grammar could or ought to be wholly superseded, as evidenced by his habitual employment of the grammatical modes of poetry and myth. Thus, allegorical or analogical reasoning was to retain a place in Plato’s scientific method, and though his student Aristotle was to establish non-grammatical scientific method in his *Posterior Analytics*, this was an achievement that failed to bear any fruit until the twelfth century.

Identifying the Carolingian renaissance as “a renaissance of grammar,” McLuhan points out that grammar remained unrivalled as the prime mode of science for quite some time. In contrast, he typifies the rise of the Scholastics as “a renaissance of dialectics.” Though dialectical methods gained primacy everywhere, save Italy, grammar
continued to flourish at the hands of Bernard of Chartres and John of Salisbury. Moreover, contemporaneous with St. Aquinas came what McLuhan calls “the consummate achievement of grammatical method” with St. Bonaventure. Notwithstanding it successfully retaining some footing, grammatical method was to come under serious threat, given that the curricula of the medieval universities then being set up taught dialectics to the relative exclusion of all else—including not only the Fathers, but the classics, which had always remained prominent in the patristic tradition. The University of Paris, according to McLuhan, came into being only after dialectics broke away from the trivium to set up shop for itself, and it came under particular attack from those who sought to reassert the claims of grammar. The culmination of these efforts, as he argues, were to manifest themselves in the Grand Renaissance.

For Petrarch, McLuhan asserts, everyone outside of Italy was a barbarian. But invectives aimed at the “goths and huns of learning at Paris” were common, too, among those outside of Italy who followed in his footsteps. Rejecting the “streamlined” grammars of the dialecticians and setting out to restore patristic or grammatical theology, Erasmus was to reintroduce the full discipline as it had been understood by St. Jerome. Grammar remained, thus, an important basis of scientific method in ancient and medieval times, while likewise providing the sixteenth century approach to both scripture and “the Book of Nature.” As McLuhan suggests, a fact not sufficiently indicated prior to his own study was that this was particularly the case for Francis Bacon. Grammatical method and the doctrine of analogy thus persisted well into the eighteenth century, as did alchemy with which they were strongly associated, but, as McLuhan observes, from the time of Descartes “the main mode of science is, of course, mathematical” (p. 17). Suggesting that the nineteenth century disciplines of anthropology and psychology succeeded, however, in re-establishing grammar as a valid mode of science, McLuhan refers to Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933) as providing a full justification of “the old grammar,” which he was able to rearticulate in his own unique way, too, in his own posthumous work *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988).

I would be remiss if I did not devote some special attention to McLuhan’s discussion of rhetoric. Cicero’s concept of the orator won over St. Augustine entirely, his ideal theologian resembling very much Cicero’s ideal orator—that is, one versed in the encyclopaedia of the sciences. It was on the basis of the Stoic principle of innate reason, virtue, and wisdom that Cicero was able to identify eloquence and wisdom, and the profoundly ethical character of the former was to secure both its adoption by the Fathers, and its later cultivation by the medieval Church. Rather than addressing men with the goal of guiding them toward the common good of the Republic, “St. Augustine and the Christian orators resorted to eloquence to guide Christians to God and the common good of the City of God” (p. 74). Cicero believed that the exercising of civil prudence was the supreme science, and that the concept of rhetoric, as derived from the sophist Isocrates, was the art of practical politics. Dominating Renaissance handbooks on the education of princes and nobility, the full Ciceronian concept of the secular orator or statesman was to emerge once more with the return of opulent commerce to Western Europe, and with the concomitant growth of an educated laity.
Apart from its role in elucidating the history of ideas, McLuhan's work holds significance for those of us interested in education, in so far as it illustrates the age-old tendency for different groups to attempt to capture the entire educational direction of a culture. He extended this analysis to his own contemporary context in subsequent pieces like “An Ancient Quarrel in Modern America” (1946) and in the excerpt “The Great Books” from his first monograph, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), where he sketches how the traditions of the trivium developed upon their transplantation to American soil. Explaining the modern quarrel in terms of the old one, with the dialecticians on one side lined up against the grammarians and rhetoricians on the other, McLuhan points out that this cleavage manifested itself in the distinct differences in the educational traditions of the American North and South: Whereas the former developed along scholastic lines, with its abstract method of scientific specialization and instrumental reason, the latter was in large part rooted in what we could roughly identify as the modern humanities and law. McLuhan (1951) suggests that “humanly and intellectually speaking,” the University of Chicago is almost as poorly off as Harvard “in its unconscious and uncritical assimilation to the rigid mores of a technological world” (p. 43), and—in this relation—he draws our attention to the fact that nearly all American political thought emerged from Southerners, including the Great Books program of Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, with its underlying complaint concerning the continuous avalanche of triviality and propaganda against which modern educators persistently struggle. Where most of us come into this picture, of course, is with McLuhan’s insistence that the practical answer to the situation, which Hutchins and Adler describe involves bringing these phenomena under control through our “uninhibited inspection” of them.

I have said nothing about McLuhan’s discussion of the relation of etymology to the doctrine of the Logos, nor anything of his account of the latter’s passage from Heraclitus through certain of his successors into Christianity. Likewise, I have neglected to mention that, as a member of the patristic party within the Anglican Church who happened to hold the view that the highest of all arts is divinity, Nashe’s professed aim was to attain the status of *tragicus orator*. As is no doubt now clear, the sheer scope of McLuhan’s study forbids any kind of brief synopsis. Beginning with the proposition that “no sound evaluation of a writer can be given in terms which exclude his basic assumptions as an artist” (p. 4), McLuhan then proceeds to demonstrate that one must read Nashe with the same consciousness of the trivium’s internal dynamics that permitted the Elizabethan author the composition of his various works in the first place. Moreover, McLuhan notes that the history he recounts incidentally provides a basis for an understanding of many of Nashe’s contemporaries as well. But in order to arrive at this point, one must recall Terrence Gordon’s statement that a study of *The Classical Trivium* requires of its readers “very large tasks.” Following the centenary year of this iconic Canadian’s birth, one can equally say that such is an inherent requirement in cultivating a thorough understanding of the oeuvre of McLuhan himself.

Notes

1. The writings of both men were eventually suppressed by Ecclesiastical authority.
2. The trivium is the first and formative component of the seven liberal arts, complemented by the subjects comprising the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.

3. McLuhan elucidates that the tradition of Descartes, Hobbes, and Newton is not that of the Fathers but of the schoolmen or Moderni.

4. See Neil Postman's essay on Korzybski's importance to communication studies in *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology, and Education* (1988). McLuhan says that the long prevalence of the doctrine of analogy was dethroned by Cartesian mathematics in combination with Ramistic nominalism. At one time a student of McLuhan's, Walter Ong was further to explore the influence of Ramus in his *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue, from the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1979).

5. Cicero's achievement, suggests McLuhan, is second rate beside the best of the Greeks, however, and his influence on Medieval and Renaissance culture are out of all relation to his intrinsic worth.

References


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