

MESSAGES IN MCLUHAN'S LETTERS: THE COMMUNICATOR AS CORRESPONDENT

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"Outtragedy of poetscaids, acomedy of letters"--James Joyce

In one of his recently published letters, Marshall McLuhan gently disagrees with a writer who had failed to understand his works since, primarily, the writer had not previously studied Joyce or Baudelaire:

I have no *theories* whatever about anything. I make observations by way of discovering contours, lines of force and pressures. I satirize at all times and my hyperboles are as nothing compared to the events to which they refer. If you study symbolism you will discover that it is a technique of rip-off by which *figures* are deliberately deprived of their *ground*. You do not seem to have grasped that the message as it relates to the medium, is never the content, but the corporate *effects* of the medium as an environment of service and disservice, (McLuhan, 1987: 448).¹

By implication, McLuhan reveals to us here what he makes very explicit elsewhere in his correspondence: his own writings are dramatic, comic and satiric, utilizing the tactics of hyperbole, analogy and metaphor, so that (as he suggests) he ought not be described as a framer of theories but as a creative communicator--an essayist and poet. Such a statement raises problems for most critiques of McLuhan which usually regarded him, in one way or another, as a theorist. For him, however, writing theoretical works is not creative and creative activity is the prime means of understanding the processes of the new electric age:

A hundred years ago, the painters abandoned pictorial space...in favor of what they call "automorphic" space, a space in which each person, each thing, makes its own world. This is the kind of world that the Beatniks are struggling towards; they spurn consumer goods, they crave the do-it-yourself-world...because they insist on assuming the producer role in all matters and at all costs (254-5).

The recently published *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, edited by his former literary agent, his widow and the Editor of Oxford University Press of Canada has the potential to touch off a reassessment of McLuhan, including a discussion of his continuing contribution to the dialogue concerning communications which is now well established in the international university community. William Toye's careful introductions and notes will be a major asset to anyone participating in these discussions. As part of such a reassessment it will be necessary to confront the fact that McLuhan

considered the writing of satire to be the most appropriate means of elucidating the social, cultural and psychological aspects of human communication and communications technology. Many other specific issues should also be addressed, such as his criticisms of Harold Innis' writings on the history of communication and technology and his relationships with structuralist and post-modernist writers interested in communication and the arts.

A number of these letters discuss Innis' writings, including one written in 1971 to Claude Bissell, then President of the University of Toronto, announcing what he calls the biggest discovery of his life--the discovery that Innis, and of course until then McLuhan as well, had not realized that:

Pens and swords and ships and sealing wax which actuate human potential, creating specific new patterns of energy and form of action--these along with all technologies whatever...were *written off*. That is the Greeks and their followers to the present time have never seen fit to study the entelechies generated by the human arts (429).

He suggests that this happened because: "only natural and living forms are classified as hylo-morphic" so that in considering the life of forms expressed by Aristotle in the terms *energia* (act) and *entelechia* (perfection) the human arts are by definition excluded. In this typical hyperbole McLuhan does, however, suggest how in the history of Western thought, the natural and living forms are privileged in opposition to the products of the human arts. Without pursuing the complicated discussion that would be required to cope with the technical and historical problems posed by these statements, they do demonstrate the extremely high value which McLuhan placed on the relationship between art and *techne* in the shaping of human society. Accordingly, Innis' work is deficient in two ways: first, for having missed the importance of the relative downgrading of technology in the history of forms of human culture; second, in his general ignorance of the arts, for as McLuhan clarifies in another letter:

Harold Innis (incidentally, he was baptized Herald Innis very prophetically by a mother who was devoted to the *Family Herald*!) had no training whatever in the arts, and this was his gross defect, (448).

McLuhan contrasts this with his own "surrealist" canvasses, observing that: "As you will find in my literary essays, I can write the ordinary kind of rationalistic prose any time I choose to do so," (448). Such a conscious counterpointing of his work with Innis' does not appear in his previously published writings and this necessitates reconsideration of his position. For example, in such a reassessment, one might re-examine James Carey's aphoristic summation of how the development of Canadian Communication theory ought to have taken place:

Despite the simplification, it is possible to describe Canadian communication theory by an arc running from Harold Innis to Marshall McLuhan. 'It would

be more impressive', as Oscar Wilde said staring up at Niagara Falls, 'if it ran the other way' (Carey, 1975: 27).

While McLuhan's letters do not achieve the miracle that Carey or Wilde were looking for, they clearly make a claim for a reevaluation of McLuhan that may transform his work into the type of advance and extension of Innis' which Carey wishes it had been. If McLuhan's claims to his correspondents are correct, his approach would ultimately reveal more facets of the actual situation of human communication in the electro-technical era than Innis. Furthermore, he would also regard that era far more critically than Innis had.

Other issues not encountered in McLuhan's previously published writings also appear in these letters. For example, he wrote to the Editor of the *Toronto Star* in 1978, when Robert Fulford described Roland Barthes as France's Marshall McLuhan, saying that "the article was very flattering: he placed me in the company of Roland Barthes who once asked me to collaborate with him on a book" (539). By then the subject of Barthes and McLuhan was quite topical and had been the subject of a seminar series at the Université de Bordeaux in the Fall of 1975.² Prior to that it had been a continuing theme in seminars in Montreal where the bicultural development of communication studies made it a natural topic for discussion. McLuhan suggests the difference is that Barthes studies patterns as a phenomenologist, while he prefers "to study pattern minus the theory." The striking similarities in interests and evolution of their work is, however, worth examining. Both men begin by considering objects and events of popular culture: ads, products, spectacles, newspapers, magazines, fashions and the like. Both wrote about the history of rhetoric and allied disciplines. Both were literary critics and both were intrigued by the new interest in communications. Both were essayists and admirers of the tradition of Montaigne and Pascal; both were literary critics and prose poets. Later in their careers each of them turned to reflecting on himself and his activities as myth. Barthes was a structuralist with a left wing political orientation; McLuhan was a Catholic with a right wing political orientation. While Barthes was attracted to structuralism, McLuhan was fascinated by systems theory.

Although the writings of Jacques Derrida are not mentioned in his correspondence, the *Letters* also provide grounds for a comparison with Derrida. Even though Derrida appears not to have taken serious note of McLuhan's work, since he mentions him only one time in his various books and essays, there are a surprising number of similar themes, (Derrida, 1982: 329). These are the very themes which McLuhan reiterates again and again in the *Letters*: the fundamental opposition between speech and writing but also such associated themes as logocentrism, writing, phonetic transcription, dissemination, plurivocity, synaesthesia, and a mutual fascination with the writings of Mallarmé and Joyce to mention only a few (See Fekete, 1982). These comparisons with post-modernists will form an important aspect of any reevaluation of McLuhan or any critique of the introduction of structuralist and post-structuralist theory into current discussions of communication theory.

One important question is why did these parallel interests evolve in Canada and France (without any consciousness on the part of thinkers in either country about the interests of the other) much earlier than in the United States or England? McLuhan, following Innis, would probably suggest that it had to do with the distinctness of vision provided by being from a marginal culture, for McLuhan says: "Today with electronics we have discovered that we live in a global village, and the job is to create a global *city*, as center for the village margins. With electronics any marginal area can become center, and marginal experiences can be had any center," (278). Since in an electronic society, the margins can become the center, it was clear to McLuhan, writing in the 50s in the relatively village-like atmosphere of Toronto, that he should naturally be able to understand the changing patterns of American society more readily than those directly involved in the process. McLuhan regarded this as similar to the way that thirty years earlier the achievement of getting English poetry into the main-line European intellectual currents could not be done by the English, but could by Yeats and Joyce (two Irishmen) and by Pound and Elliot (two Americans)--from countries then at the margins of the British Empire and Europe.

Canada, as we have heard often enough from McLuhan, then provided a DEW line (an early warning system) for the States, intellectually as well as militarily. In his *Letters* we see a McLuhan so dedicated to the DEW line concept that he writes to Ann Landers trying to sell her on a subscription to the executive suite platinum card publication which he created, the monthly *McLuan Dew-Line Newsletter*. In the 1969 letter he tells her of the inclusion of a bonus in the most recent issue--a new deck of playing cards for playing management games! He describes it as working by triggering off creative thought through startling associations, for he tells her "On each card there is an outrageous aphorism such as "Thanks for the 'mammaries'." and the directive is "Relate this aphorism to your top hang-up" (393). But he also lectures "Dear Ann" on her privileged position to "make a creative contribution in this troubled area of identity image," once again assuming the role of a prophet crying out from the margins his warnings to those at the center.

Nevertheless, it is not on the issue of his playing with or playing up to the great names of his generation--Pierre Trudeau, Hubert Humphrey, Jimmy Carter, William Jovanovich, Ashley Montagu, Jacques Maritain, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, John Wain (the English novelist), John Cage and many others--that the *Letters* will lead to a valuable re-evaluation of McLuhan's contribution. While the editors have successfully selected a galaxy of media stars to make the volume attractive to a larger audience, the *Letters* reveal a perpetually curious, rather perverse, yet dedicated intellectual confronting the collective socio-political phenomena of his time. Further, it is the conversational frankness of the *Letters*, which complement his writings, that underline just how far McLuhan's objective analyses of the age of communication were developed to protect a set of biases which were *conservational* as well as conservative.

Rightfully, McLuhan can now be called "the last Victorian," for these messages to family, friends and colleagues clearly document his lifelong commitment to being a later Twentieth century man of letters, a contemporary equivalent of his youthful hero, G. K. Chesterton. He repeatedly suggests his bias is for print; his preferences, for the life of Oxford and Cambridge between the two wars; his motivation, the dislike of the new tribal world and its corporate activities. Unabashedly, he further documents Arthur Kroker's (Kroker, 1984) and my claim (Theall, 1971) concerning the importance of his Catholicism by suggesting that his thought was metaphysical, that he was primarily a Thomist (though hardly one accepted by Thomist orthodoxy) and that, in spite of the stupidities of its bureaucracy, one can only live reasonably within the Catholic Church whose spiritual mission is triumphant. Consequently he expresses in his correspondence moral views which may appear contradictory when related to his writings: his condemnation of abortion, pornography and of frank, illustrated texts on sexual education for young children. From the outset of his career he was critical of Marx and Marxism, considering them as largely irrelevant to serious thought. Many Canadians and some Americans will also be disappointed by his casual dismissal of opposition to free trade as a relevant issue.

This aspect of his *Letters* hardly presents the ultra-modern, futuristic, left-wing idol who dominated the media for nearly a decade as the prophet of the communication society. But the *Letters* also underline a schizophrenia which is central to understanding why McLuhan achieved what he did and made some of the most central contributions to dialogue concerning communication in our time. Balancing his Thomism is McLuhan's continuing use of Joyce's work, even though early in his career he had concluded that Joyce's work was demonic, for he says of the last page of *Finnegans Wake* and the opening of *Ulysses*: "the whole thing is an intellectual Black Mass....As he (Joyce) reads it (*Ulysses*)...it is horrible. Casual, eerie. Speaking of Existenz and the hatred of language--what about Finnegan" (183)? He tells a former student and colleague, Father Walter Ong, that the church has it all wrong with respect to Nietzsche:

"God is dead" (Nietzsche) equals: God has abandoned the work of grace in creation? Prelude to incarnation as understood in pagan cults? At least, so I hear from the inside boys. Catholic view of Neech [sic!] would seem to be a bit off the beam there" (234).

The whole of his achievement--in fact, his interest in communication--he attributes to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry and other French Symbolists, but even more particularly to their English modernist and post-modernist successors, Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Joyce. In what could only be an indictment of many students of communication who have turned to McLuhan, he wrote in 1974 that: "Nobody could pretend serious interest in my work who is not completely familiar with all of the works of James Joyce and the French Symbolists" (505).

Symbolists, modernists, Nietzsche, the avant-garde, diabolists--these provide counterweight to McLuhan's love of print, his literary humanism, and his Thomism. Intellectually, McLuhan inhabits the world of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes; emotionally, he seeks refuge in the comfort of the traditional academy, in personal romanticism, in a pietistic Catholicism and a romantic reconstruction of medieval universalism. The resulting tension and paradoxes between faith (emotionally based) and knowledge (intellectually based) reflects a prime modern dilemma, whatever the emotional or intellectual poles may be. McLuhan is himself representative of "the crucifixion of intellectual man" (See Havelock, 1950) which permeates the philosophy and literature of the Twentieth Century. Yet from this tension, often nearing the edge of schizoid dimensions, there arise penetrating elucidations of what he considers to be modernity's prime concern: communication.

To understand what he contributes to such a discussion it is necessary to confront a problem which it appears communication studies has found nearly impossible to confront: the role of the arts and the artists in furthering understanding of communication. For the major, thought by no means exclusive, influences on McLuhan's work are literary. This ought not to be surprising since many other very important contributors to discussions concerning communication either have been writers or have been strongly influenced by literature: the post-modern French (Barthes, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss), a British Marxist (Raymond Williams), the great Irish and American writers of the early contemporary period (Yeats, Joyce, Pound and Eliot) and Proust.³ For McLuhan as his *Letters* reiterate, literature, especially poetry is essential for understanding the modern world. The other arts--film, the visual arts, sculpture and dance--are also very important, but they clearly occupy a secondary role compared to that of the poet. He relates the creative processes of poetry and other arts to the creative act as he understands it to be described in Thomistic philosophy.

If, as McLuhan claims, he is a Thomist (though of a somewhat hermetic and neo-Platonic nature), his own theory of communication, which he attributes to St. Thomas, can be summed up in the word, "participation" (460). He sees modern art as "being in the business" of "direct participation in experience," and, therefore, as no longer being the "communication of thoughts and feelings." In the Twentieth Century the "high arts" share with the press and advertising a "tendency toward participation in a process rather than apprehension of concepts" (221). Participation occurs through interaction, so that McLuhan is speaking of a communicative action, similar to Kenneth Burke's concept of symbolic action (Burke, 1968) in which all of the participants are co-creators. Such a bias towards participation, by which McLuhan characterizes modernity, is the basis of the drama of human communication. For McLuhan associates this communicative action with the activity of making sense, which he associates with the Thomistic conception of the agent intellect. "Knowing is making," he asserts and for him the poetic activity is every bit as rational as other forms of communication. This he claims concerns the process of recognition and *re*-cognition, retracing and thus remaking the product of the labyrinthine human consciousness. His

view of communication as a shared process of human making--of producing and reproducing cultural work (one of the leading forms being conversation)--recognizes the collective aspect of social communication.

McLuhan again and again stresses that he is reading the collective unconscious of the drama of society, even though he uses other signs to symbolize this. Gregory Bateson's writings (which McLuhan certainly read) prepare us to understand this position, since Bateson has argued how the most important aspects of what we ought to consider the unconscious are only revealed by turning Freud upside down (Bateson, 1972: 135-6). When McLuhan again and again refers to Joyce's "His producers are they not his consumers?" (252-3), he is asserting that only through reading the social text produced by the participants in society can the poet or any artist produce his or her own text. For its producers, that social text is primarily unconscious. The artist transforms it by making sense of the producers' work which they then consume, literally devour. About this, McLuhan says in a letter to the Canadian poet, Wilfred Watson, his collaborator in writing *From Cliché to Archetype*:

Redoing old things. Remember the phrase in the mass?

Mirabiliter condidisti

Mirabilous reformasti

[Miraculously founded/Still more miraculously re-formed]

It is the difference between matching and making, between spectatorship and total dramatic participation. Through the drama of the mouth, we participate daily in the total re-creation of the world as a process (347).

For McLuhan, conversation or speech constitutes the ideal mode of communication. Music, he argues, is always based on some mode of speech so that there are substantial ethnic differences within the production of music. To Wyndham Lewis in 1955 he wrote, "I find myself somewhat lacking in pride of authorship. I prefer conversation" (248). The "drama of the mouth" strongly suggests the communion-like nature of the dramatic dialogue of communicative interaction.

In his stress on communicative interaction, as in the valuation he places on creativity and participation, McLuhan's work is not deterministic. In fact, his stress on the importance of conversation as interactive and participatory is contrary to a deterministic position. In the final analysis McLuhan cannot properly be called a determinist although he is susceptible of the charge of utilizing a pseudo-deterministic terminology as the surface for his satiric constructions. All the modes of technological reproduction and distribution (which McLuhan calls "media") are discussed in one or another of his letters. The various remarks concerning TV are typical. In what would seem paradoxical, in view of the "deterministic" orientation of his surface, McLuhan does not argue that TV achieves its effects exclusively through a technically realized system of projection and distribution. He also believes TV to have a "metaphysical" form which, while including its technological aspects, arises from the

way in which TV functions as a social institution both in terms of its socio-economic practice and of its particular use of signifiers which is a result of the biases implicit in the nature of this particular medium.

Reading through the letters brings attention to all of the varied ways McLuhan approaches television and how many of them are not related specifically to hardware. Naturally, he takes notice of the effects of the technology. In 1952 he wrote to Ezra Pound noting that the radio and telephone were the mechanization of speed, while cinema and TV were characterized by the mechanization of total human gesture (232). While this division does not specifically distinguish Television from Cinema, it is implicit that only television as a medium of transmission combines the mechanization of speed with that of total human gesture. When he speaks of the "intensely dramatic character of this image," (286-7) and that people are introverted (i.e., driven inward) by the screen, (270) McLuhan extends his analysis to social aspects of TV as well. The image is more dramatic and more "introverted" because of the social situations in which TV is experienced--in the home, or in small groups and in a setting where members of the audience are potentially visible to one another (not in darkness). TV is "very, very polluting," (177) in need of ecological control, (534) and it contains within its form a paradoxically hot and aggressive reflection of its social reality, advertising (177). The intimacy, the manipulation, the persuasiveness are partly implicit in the technology which responds to a world which is sensuously responsive as reflected, for example, in its slang which McLuhan described to the editor of *U.S. Catholic* as "the tactile, haptic, proprioceptive, and acoustic spaces" of the slang of the TV age (385). That the sensuously responsive generation of the 60's shaped by this electric age of television agreed in their attitudes and actions with such an analysis is apparent both through their commitment to the romance of the "hippie" and to the social criticisms implicit in student radicalism. That they also agreed in their ways of thinking is only too clear from their uncritically embracing both McLuhan and Marcuse as hero figures in the later 1960's.

When McLuhan speaks of the "form" of TV, it encompasses all of this. McLuhan's familiar aphorisms present elements like the components of a mosaic, a form which he associates with TV but which clearly reflects his understanding of how to communicate in the electric age. His strategy (which he compares to Joyce) is vivisection, a presentation of the living community of men in action. It is, therefore, itself a practico-poetic activity not theorizing in the usual sense we would understand today. This provides it with a strength that no theorizing can achieve, for while he is not producing a theory and never claimed to be, he is thinking and elucidating the way communication works in much the way a psychoanalyst engages in a process of elucidation with and about the one being analyzed. His *Letters* clearly reflect that practice and should provide a basis for a renewed interest in his work informed by a much deeper understanding.

A concept of sensuous, dramatic action is central to McLuhan's feeling his way through the process of thinking reflectively about communication. It underlies his conception of the iconic form which is characteristic of the electric media and of his own mode of communicating. He suggests that the satiric genre, within which he believes his reflections must be realized, is associated with such iconic form. Such a poetic technique permits him to merge figure and ground to study their interplay in communication and to involve his audience in participating actively in the process of understanding. If he saw TV presenting "an X-ray icon which penetrates our entire organism," (466) he also saw his own poetically crafted essays presenting the interior landscape of the community's drama with equal penetration, thus justifying the description of its as viviseptive. But the mosaic method also provided a distancing which permitted him to see his activity as formally and generically comic and satiric. He writes to Michael Hornyansky (a Canadian poet and English professor) that "Those people who think that I am an enemy of the book simply have not read my work, nor thought about the problem. Most of my writing is Menippean satire, presenting the actual surface of the world we live in as a ludicrous image" (517).

This genre of learned satire, which is usually closely involved with contemporary problems of communication, culture and society represented by such works as Erasmus' *Encomium Moriae*, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Pope's *Dunciad*, Wyndham Lewis' *The Human Age* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* provided a natural convention for McLuhan's comic critique of contemporary communication. He speaks frequently in the *Letters* of one of his favorite examples of this genre, which is also one of the earliest critiques of the new potential for mass production of printed literature, Pope's *Dunciad*. McLuhan asserts that this work sums up the liquidation of traditional learning (the trivium and quadrivium) by the mass production of print. To illustrate, he quotes from *The Dunciad*: "Art after art goes out and all is night" (370). McLuhan sees this satire as one example of the "more ludicrous extremes of mechanism perceived by Swift and Pope. *The Dunciad* is a dismissal of the crushing impact of an excess of printed matter on the human intellect" (385). This "exposure to seas of ink" produced "the illusion of separate and private individuality and of 'inner light'" (370). The strategy of Menippean satire is especially well adapted to situations involving communication and society, since the development and dissemination of knowledge is so intricately interlaced with the networks of communication. For McLuhan such works present dramatic cross-sections of the actual process of communication in the production of knowledge and of the means by which distorted communication impedes that process.

Consequently, the sense of humor which permeates the letters is an equally essential aspect of his writings. "Humor as an institution," he tells Jonathan Miller, "can be seen as an anti-environment of grievances, whether it is Hamlet's 'antic disposition' or Steve Allen's theory 'the funny man is a man with a grievance'. What a light that sheds on the medieval clown, and King Lear!" (316). In an unusual letter to a prison

inmate who had been free only about 90 days in the previous 30 years, McLuhan wrote stressing the importance of play and humor:

Perhaps it is the ability to *play*, the good humor needed to enter into fun and games, which is the final mark of sanity. When people become too intense, too serious, they will have trouble in relating to any sort of social game or norm. Perhaps this is why jokes are so important. On one hand, they tell us where the troubles and grievances are, and, at the same time, they provide the means of enduring these grievances by laughing at the troubles (465).

McLuhan is aware that jokes and humor, like anecdotes and clichés have an essential role in how serious communication takes place in business, diplomatic and political circles. Such strategies provide an allusive means of communicating about critical issues, so in his *Letters* he periodically shares jokes and humorous anecdotes with Claude Bissell as a way of equipping his friend with an arsenal for making speeches on critical issues. His own mnemonic method for remembering jokes and anecdotes was based on hints and suggestions, for as he explains to Ernest Sirluck (then President of the University of Manitoba), who had requested a file of these conversational gems for use in his speeches: "Apropos the joke file--alas! My stories exist as one-line reminders, on backs of various sheets and envelopes and are not in narrative form" (423). In fact, those who knew him well were familiar with the 3x5 cards (which he kept in Laura Secord candy-boxes) that contained notes for his books, his anecdotes, and his teaching as well as the joke file. This idea file continually nourished his conversational style.

"Conversation has more vitality than books, more fun, more drama," he said in a *Life* interview in 1966 (176). The vitality of laughter and a conversational mode is essential to dealing artistically and satirically with the relation between communication and knowledge which McLuhan had analyzed as essential as early as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). From a post-Nietzschean perspective, it is understandable that he pursued such an aim when it is viewed in light of what he said about Nietzsche. This also justifies that strange combination of Aquinas and Nietzsche which he discovered in Joyce's writings. Aquinas' Philosophy of Being provided a justification for poetic knowledge and Nietzsche's negation of value opened a way to utilizing satire in exploring knowledge. McLuhan saw himself, like Wyndham Lewis, as an artist who is: "...engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person who lives in the present" (372). Whether ultimately such a perspective can teach us something about communication still awaits an extended discussion oriented towards an understanding of McLuhan that was never achieved during the period in which his name stood for an international fad.

His complex analysis of the problems of communication, knowledge and the arts has yet to be fully confronted. First of all, like Innis, McLuhan's work on communication is rooted in the importance of the concept of the university. The *Letters* bear ample

evidence to his deep interest in the history of the university just as Innis' *Idea File* (1980) does to his. The double theme of communication and knowledge has been central to the establishment and growth of the university as a social institution. McLuhan and Innis see the university as itself an instrument of communication and as the institution by which the teaching of the modes of communication has been nurtured. McLuhan's interest in the Trivium shows not only an interest in Rhetoric but also an interest in the history of education, both as they relate to art and communication. This major theme concerning higher education, which pervades his writings to Claude Bissell and other university colleagues, must be part of any reassessment.

The incredible complexity and ambiguity of McLuhan's interest in these areas is reflected in a rather surprising feature of the *Letters*. They reflect not only his interest in the history of occult knowledge which has characterized many contemporary artists and thinkers, but an immediate concern with the ongoing operation of occult knowledge through "secret societies." While the latter reflects part of his own darker side inclining to delusions of persecution, the former is surprisingly important to understanding the arts which he sees as so central to communication⁴. In his *Letters* he praises the work of Frances Yates, especially her *Art of Memory* (339). Describing this "marvelous book" McLuhan is obviously remembering the value of her work in showing the intrinsic connection between the growth of modern knowledge, the development of post-medieval literature and drama and the importance of the "occult tradition" in the Renaissance. Throughout his work, as he alludes to the importance of the "secret societies" in the shaping of modern art, he plays with what is the core ambiguity of his thought--the way the value of the new electric age and its demonic aspects are intertwined, if not inseparable. "Electricity scrapped industrialism and retrieved the occult" (413) he writes to a former student, and we may rest assured that the individual who wrote to Ezra Pound of his disillusionment with the modern arts (shortly after the discovery of what he considered to be the importance of this esoteric knowledge), seriously considered the vast potential within esotericism, which Morris Berman (1984) has associated with part of the "re-enchantment of the modern world"-McLuhan's electric eco-land.

The university as institution and the hidden "University of Being" as they relate to the themes of communication and knowledge are only two aspects of McLuhan's thought which are illuminated in new ways in the *Letters*. His contemporary conception of the mystical "University of Being" where intellect was regarded as the foundation of Being (not Being of intellect) stresses the centrality of the intellect in the "information society" where understanding the process of intellection becomes the central product in the sciences and the arts and "the increasing volume of information flow substitutes for products in the sense of becoming the major product" (271).⁵ Together with his insistence on his role as poet, satirist, "pattern watcher" and sci-fi predictor of the future (because of his living in the present and his loving the past), a new figure of McLuhan emerges which demands his revaluation as a fundamental Twentieth Century writer concerned with communication. If properly understood and

properly assessed, with a recognition of his genuine strengths and weaknesses and his relation with the other writers of the era in which he wrote, hopefully McLuhan will finally occupy his proper place as one contributing to our understanding of communication, culture and technology in the contemporary world.⁶

Notes

1. Further page references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses immediately following the quote.
2. This seminar was presented to students in the Communication and Canadian Studies programs by D. F. Theall.
3. With respect to the question of Proust's contributions, see Gilles Deleuze (1972), *Proust and Signs*, tr. Richard Howard (Braziller: New York), especially pp. 148-50.
4. In a forthcoming article on McLuhan and the secret societies, "McLuhan and the Cultic Inventors: Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Secret Wisdom in Science, Art and Media," to be published by the University of Alberta Press, I discuss this particular aspect and its importance to contemporary communication theory. See also Wm. Toyes' notes on this subject in the *Letters*.
5. The phrase "university of being" is part of the title of Bernard Muller-thym's study of Meister Eckhardt's philosophy of Being which is referred to in this letter of May 5, 1960.
6. In this statement I include my own early work (1971), *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan* (McGill-Queen's Univ. Press: Montreal), for at the height of McLuhan's international reputation as the guru of communication, it seemed important to stress disproportionately certain characteristics of McLuhan's work which were aspects of the surface of his satire, such as the technological determinism, his apparent claims as a theorist and his complicity with the world of big business. While I believe the main thrust of my work to be correct, it does take the stance of examining McLuhan as a social theorist in a way that was consistent with his reputation, but not with the importance with which he viewed his role as a satirist.

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