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*Marshall McLuhan, Rhetoric, and the
Prehistory of Media Studies*

Who was Marshall McLuhan? This posthumous query has only become more difficult to answer. Further complicating the question, McLuhan's reputation seems to have permanently declined in favour of media theorists such as Friedrich Kittler, who, whatever his debt to McLuhan, writes in the line of poststructuralist thinkers barely known to McLuhan in his later years. Media scholars are probably right to regard McLuhan's tenacious slogans with caution, though it would be hard to deny that there would be no media studies without McLuhan—or rather, that media studies would look rather different if the name of its founder was not Marshall McLuhan. In this brief essay, I want to suggest one way of thinking about the difference McLuhan made to media studies. I am preceded by an abundant scholarship on McLuhan's work, and two good biographies as well; but with the singular exception of W. Terrence Gordon's work, the most important fact about McLuhan's intellectual formation—his training as a scholar of English Renaissance literature—still elicits little interest.¹ The lack of interest is not surprising, given the distance between McLuhan's disciplinary field and the orientation of media studies to recent technologies. From his perspective, the distance was always illusory. Indeed, McLuhan understood his concern with media as arising from his study in the history of rhetoric and in the transmission of rhetoric during the Renaissance. Knowing this, however, has not helped scholars to understand the connections between his intellectual formation and his later work on media.

¹ The scholarship on McLuhan is too voluminous to acknowledge, but for my purposes the biographies have been particularly useful: See Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989); and W. Terrence Gordon, *Marshall McLuhan, Escape into Understanding: A Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

It has always been easier to see McLuhan's invention of media studies as coming more directly out his "modernism," a demonstrable affiliation authorizing many scholarly studies over the years.² It will not be necessary to rehearse McLuhan's well-known relations with modernists such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, or his lifelong passion for the works of James Joyce. But McLuhan came by his modernism in the same way that some other modernists did in England and America during the nineteen-twenties, by a reevaluation (F. R. Leavis's term) of Renaissance literature. Although it seems obvious that media studies followed on the interaction of literature and other traditional art forms with "new media," the question I want to explore touches rather on the Renaissance-modernism relation, which imposed on McLuhan a certain exigency of translation between far-flung discourse networks (Kittler's term). Renaissance rhetoric and poetics are constituted by technical vocabularies no longer adequate to the situation of literature in an age of proliferating media, a circumstance that highlights the counterintuitive achievement of McLuhan, as the first theorist of media studies.

More than a theorist, McLuhan was what Michel Foucault would call the initiator of a discourse. Foucault's examples are Marx and Freud, who invented discourses that were not easy to transform into disciplines. For this reason their discourses continue to be identified with their names: Marxism and Freudianism. There is, analogously, a "McLuhanism" that media studies has had to struggle against in order to constitute itself as a university discipline.³ The difficulty of

² Two recent examples are Elena Lamberti, *Marshall McLuhan's Mosaic: Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); and Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³ For Foucault's notion of "an initiator of a discursive practice," see "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 131-6. I will insist here upon characterizing McLuhan as founder of media studies, despite the other genealogies and lines of influence manifestly integrated into the institutional form of media studies in both the Anglo-American and continental university. McLuhan's work has temporal priority, but more than that is implied by the notion of "founder." In advance of programs or departments of media studies, McLuhan was able develop his theory with the freedom of a charismatic founder, unbound by disciplinary constraints, and to inaugurate a project of media analysis linked to his name. The difficulty of surpassing "McLuhanism" measures the effort it took to transform discipleship into a discipline, which thereafter would be open to the alternative retroactive genealogies of Kittler, Raymond Williams and others.

that transition, which has entailed, perhaps necessarily, the suppression of McLuhanism, has something to do, I suggest, with the earlier moment of McLuhan's own formation, his immersion in the study of rhetoric, and the need to translate that technical terminology into modernist terms.

To open this question, let me recall the relevant facts from McLuhan's intellectual formation that will require situating in relation to the problem of rhetoric: The modernist construction of McLuhan can point to the fact that he took a second B.A. and M.A. at Cambridge studying with I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis. Despite his interest in the modernist poets—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and their successors—he was not deflected from commitment to the Renaissance. After a hiatus working in America, he returned to Cambridge in the early 1940s to complete a Ph.D. on a minor sixteenth-century prose writer, Thomas Nashe, a figure largely unread today except by specialists in the field. In the course of studying a notorious public quarrel between Nashe and the even more obscure figure of Gabriel Harvey, a Cambridge professor, McLuhan realized that the roots of the quarrel lay deep in the history of Western rhetoric. He believed that in order to understand the quarrel between Nashe and Harvey, to grasp its outsized significance—its world-historical significance, in fact—he had to recover a backstory in the relations among the three component discourses of the classical trivium: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. When McLuhan completed his thesis, he entitled it: “The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time.” Only the last chapter of the thesis treated Nashe at length. The remainder recounted a history of the trivium, focusing on what McLuhan saw as a recurrent tension or conflict between, on the one side, the components of grammar and rhetoric, and on the other, dialectic. This was a different way of writing the history of rhetoric itself, and it remains, in my view, an original contribution to that history. But the thesis was not published until 2006, and few scholars were inclined to credit its significance, with the exception of Gordon, who edited the thesis for publication.⁴

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Nashe in the Learning of his Time*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2006).

Even if McLuhan had published his dissertation earlier, it would have been difficult for most scholars to discern the lines of influence between it and his later writings on media. Gordon's edition of the thesis goes a long way toward restoring these connections, but I am interested only in one part of this intellectual trajectory: what I have called the exigency of translation that results from the Renaissance-modernism relation. As we shall see, McLuhan determined in the years after completing his thesis that the conflict in the trivium could be translated into modern (or modernist) terms in order to explain the puzzling fact that each new medium remained in a certain sense invisible to its users until succeeded by another new medium. What McLuhan meant by this invisibility was difficult to define. Print technology, for example, was much celebrated by its users in the centuries after its introduction. In the very language of their celebration, however, as McLuhan argued in his later work, the celebrants of print demonstrated their failure to understand the medium. They had no idea *what it was doing to them*. They saw print instead as just a more efficient way to disseminate writing. (In the same fashion, as we have come to realize, alphabetic writing itself was long perceived as merely the representation of speech, and not a world-transformative technology.) McLuhan argued that those who lived in the first age of print fell into a kind of narcosis, an unconscious relation to the medium.⁵ They failed to understand the message the medium itself was communicating to them, a blinking signal that no one yet could read.

Nonetheless McLuhan's doctoral thesis is hardly a first draft of media theory. Print itself plays little role in the story he tells. Yet that story somehow evolved over the next two decades into the argument of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where Nashe reappears as the subject of what must have seemed one of the more inexplicable of McLuhan's aphoristic chapters. The heading of this chapter announces: "The oral polyphony of the prose of Nashe offends against lineal and literary decorum."⁶ McLuhan's readers may be forgiven for being clueless about what this means, but one reader who certainly did understand its import was

⁵ McLuhan also called this narcosis the "Narcissus trance," and "somnambulism." See *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 8.

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 201.

Father Walter J. Ong, S.J., McLuhan's friend and former student at the University of St. Louis. When Ong was looking for research subjects in the later 1940s, McLuhan urged him to consider the career of Petrus Ramus, whose role in McLuhan's thesis suggested that there was a much larger story to be told. Ramus had undertaken a notorious revision of rhetoric during the 1560s and 1570s, which would result in a drastic demotion of rhetoric in the arts curriculum in favor of dialectic. His work became fashionable at Cambridge in the 1580s, where it found a champion in none other than Gabriel Harvey. McLuhan argued that the position of rhetoric was the main stake in the quarrel between Nashe and Harvey, but he could not treat the figure of Ramus at the length he deserved, and hoped that Ong might take this subject up.⁷ Ong seized upon this suggestion, and never let go. He went on to write his dissertation with Perry Miller at Harvard (Miller had written importantly about Ramus in his study, *The New England Mind*), and the thesis was published in 1958 as *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. Ong's landmark monograph is still in some ways unassimilated by scholars, in part because it is not fully recognized as a Jovian satellite of McLuhan's lifelong project. If McLuhan glimpsed the significance of Ramus in the course of studying an obscure quarrel between minor Renaissance writers, Ong presented Ramism as the pivot of the Western sensibility, the cultural symptom of a shift from a version of "orality," what Ong called "dialogue," to a new, print-influenced practice of "literacy," understood as a dominantly visual or spatial cognitive orientation. Ong developed this argument into a discourse parallel to McLuhan's. From this point forward, Ong and McLuhan worked in tacit response to each other, and both entered into the formation of media studies and its correlative enterprise of communication studies.

For both Ong and McLuhan, the invention of the printing press was transformative, but differently inflected. Ong looked back to the long transition from orality to literacy, which had two major phases, alphabetic writing and print technology. He understood modernity's relegation of print in the face of new electronic media as marking the passage to a "secondary orality." McLuhan, on the other hand, looked ahead from the moment of print to its surpassing in electronic media, in which he glimpsed a kind of backwards transition from the

⁷ See the letter to Ong, 1947, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro et al., (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 188.

linear, spatial world of Gutenberg's "typographic man" to the "audile, tactile" world that preceded print and even preceded writing. Together, McLuhan and Ong created the grand narrative that lies behind media and communication studies. That narrative is now regarded with much suspicion, though it seems to me that the fundamental categories put into play by Ong and McLuhan have not and probably cannot be simply discarded.

In any case, the question I would like to advance is why McLuhan, and one would have to say Ong also, had to be suppressed in order for media studies to develop beyond the founders' grand narrative. This question returns us to the Renaissance-modern relation, upon which McLuhan himself always insisted, as in this statement from the "Foreword" to a collection of his literary criticism:

After a conventional and devoted initiation to poetry as a romantic rebellion against mechanical industry and bureaucratic stupidity, Cambridge was a shock. Richards, Leavis, Eliot and Pound and Joyce in a few weeks opened doors of perception on the poetic process, and its role in adjusting the reader to the contemporary world.

My study of media began and remains rooted in the work of these men. Thomas Nashe was a Cambridge pet in my terms there. I did my doctoral study on him, approaching him via the process of verbal training from the Sophists through Cicero and Augustine and Dante to the Renaissance. When Joyce quipped to a critic, "some of my puns are trivial, and some are quadrivial," he was being, as always, precise.⁸

In these remarks, McLuhan is being, as always, cryptic. The summary of the thesis offered here is scarcely helpful, and indeed confounds elucidation. There is, further, a recourse to translation that fails utterly, though without necessarily being incorrect. When McLuhan refers to "the process of verbal training," he really means *rhetoric* (grammar is implied, but in a special sense we will have to acknowledge shortly). Why not say "rhetoric," then? It is not so much that the word is unspeakable here or elsewhere in McLuhan's work, but that it carries with it a pejorative sense in common usage at the same time that it names an extremely complex practice unfamiliar to most moderns. Rhetoric here is not

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943-1962*, ed. Eugene McNamara (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), xiii-xiv.

mere verbiage, or patently manipulative speech, but an elaborate art of oral performance, developed over many centuries in antiquity. That technique of verbal training survives into the present as an immense body of textual material, enough to sustain the research of many scholars, but it does not survive as a living practice. As C. S. Lewis justly remarked, “Rhetoric is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors . . . an invisible wall between us and them.”⁹ McLuhan could make no assumption that rhetoric would evoke much to moderns, hardly the smallest part of what it meant in his thesis. But the absence of the term reduces the names of Cicero, Augustine and company to a meaningless litany. Here is an instance of what I call the exigency of translation, fraught with considerable risk.

In the face of this problem, let us back up, as it were, into the doctoral thesis, and try to grasp in the broadest terms its argument, and the implications of this argument for McLuhan’s later engagement with the concept of media. Fortunately, it will not be necessary to recover the issues in the quarrel between Nashe and Harvey. In some ways, they are not aware themselves what these issues are. They trade insults in print, there is an attitudinal clash between them, a dispute that circles obscurely around the reception of Ramus’s critique of rhetoric in Cambridge. But because the dispute involves a part of the “arts curriculum,” the famous trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, the stakes in the quarrel seem to be higher than the provoking circumstances of mutual insult. Or at least, we might say that McLuhan’s intuition about these stakes justifies his interest in the whole history of rhetoric, an interest that he pursued doggedly during his years at Cambridge and after. His research into that history discloses a complex system of discourses that never did operate in total harmony, despite its centrality in the arts curriculum. Grammar was essentially the first phase of “verbal training,” dedicated to the skills of reading and interpretation. In a manuscript world, merely construing a text was a laborious and highly refined skill, which unfolded naturally into commentary and interpretation. Grammar was thus much more than what we think of today as a set of rules for sentence construction or usage. Rhetoric, on the other hand, was an *oral* art, deploying the skills acquired in the study of grammar but dedicated to achieving persuasion in

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 61.

all the social situations in which persuasion was requisite or desired. Rhetoric in antiquity was an enormously developed art, crystallized between the time of Aristotle and that of Quintilian into five parts: *invention* (the finding of arguments), *disposition* (the arrangement of arguments into sequential discourse), *elocution* (the ornamenting of arguments with figures of speech and other devices), *memory* (the memorization of the speech), and *delivery* (the technique of reciting the speech). In late antiquity grammar and rhetoric together dominated the educational system, culminating in McLuhan's account in what was called the "second sophistic," a codification of the classical system in the second and third centuries C.E. that was also the high-water mark of rhetoric's prestige in antiquity.

What, then, was dialectic? This word is often identified with "logic," which gives rise to some confusion. Dialectic is just as much a kind of "verbal training" as grammar or rhetoric, but its concern is more narrowly with "proof." This proof is neither mathematical, nor what we would call scientific, but it is a different kind of argument than one finds in rhetoric, which was restricted to the domain of the "probable," what was generally accepted by an orator's audience. Dialectic belonged to the world of disputation rather than oratory. Although "disputation" during the middle ages could be a kind of public, oral debate between scholars, usually on theological subjects, the techniques of dialectic were equally available in textual genres, such as the treatise. In the later middle ages, dialectic achieved ascendancy in the educational system over grammar and rhetoric. It constituted the verbal infrastructure of scholasticism. McLuhan rehearses this well known history (which is much simplified here), but always with the design of putting pressure on the tension between the pole of grammar/rhetoric and the pole of dialectic as competing forms of technical discourse within the trivium.

In the Renaissance, a minor revolution takes place, inaugurating a final phase in the history of the old rhetoric. There emerged a new cadre of intellectuals—the "humanists"—who rejected scholasticism, and who reasserted the priority of rhetoric. They did not reject dialectic, which still dominated the universities, but their alternative emphasis on rhetoric in the humanist schools betrayed a tension that always existed in the trivium. For McLuhan, the quarrel between Nashe and Harvey was a symptom of this tension, with Nashe standing for the priority of

grammar and rhetoric, Harvey for the priority of dialectic. In this context, Ramus is the nemesis looming behind Harvey. In Ramus's controversial revision of the arts curriculum, rhetoric was reduced merely to ornamental functions, finally only to the two "parts" of elocution and delivery. The remainder of the rhetorical system, which concerned argument more directly, was absorbed by dialectic. Both Ong and McLuhan see this breaking up of rhetoric and the redistribution of its parts to dialectic as evidence of a crucial shift in the orientation of the Western sensibility, and they ultimately connect this shift with the coincident emergence of print technology. Print, in their view, favoured and reinforced the tendency of the Ramistic version of the trivium. But how do they make this connection?

Ong offers an argument that directly concerns the print medium, though the relation he sees between print and Ramism hovers between the causal and the analogical. For him, there is a consequential resonance between Ramus's famous reduction of curricular arts to "dichotomies," organized on the page as a diagram that branches as it moves from left to right, and the innate properties of moveable type, as a truly industrial mode of textual production. Ramus's revision of the arts curriculum was enabled by rapid dissemination in print of his notorious diagrams, which simplified the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. Unlike Ong, McLuhan offers no such analogical argument in his doctoral thesis because, as I have already observed, he has nothing to say about print. If Ong developed the orality/literacy distinction by extrapolating from print literacy, McLuhan had yet to discover in the early 1940s print as medium at all. Instead, he brings his argument to a dramatic climax by disclosing what he believes to be the central issue between Nashe and Harvey: an underlying conflict between "words" and "matter." The tendency of the dialecticians was to extoll matter over words, and thence to cultivate a suspicion of rhetoric as mere words. Already in antiquity the Latin rhetoricians had to contend with a version of this problem in their struggle with the Stoic dialecticians. These philosophical critics of rhetoric rejected rhetoric's claims for having achieved a proper balance between matter (*res*) and words (*verba*). But later dialecticians, according to McLuhan, forced the distinction between *res* and *verba* into still more stark opposition. They drove a wedge between the grammar/rhetoric wing of the trivium, and the dialectic wing. The trivium began to fall apart.

The distinction between *res* and *verba* thus emerges in McLuhan's thesis as the key to understanding the crisis of the trivium. Looking back over the history of the trivium, McLuhan sees a line from Cicero to Roger Ascham (Nashe's contemporary and a champion of Ciceronian rhetoric) that affirms the possibility of a just proportion between *res* and *verba*. He cites Ascham's aggrieved response to the Ramistic sign of the times: "Ye know not, what hurt ye do to learning, that care not for words, but for matter, and so make a deuorse betwixt the tong and the hart." (215) McLuhan comments: "Both Cicero and Ascham are opposed to that hostile view of eloquent language which was shared alike by Stoic dialecticians, medieval dialecticians, and Calvinist dialecticians of the Ramist stamp." (215) If *res* and *verba* could be identified in so mutually exclusive a fashion with dialectics and rhetoric, it is easy to see that words themselves would be suspect to the dialectician. The Ramistic rhetorician wanted to "whittle away all the figures from a text, delivering a simple abstract statement which was as useful in one language as in another." (219) The question of translation appears at this moment in its conventional form, as the *possibility* of expressing the same meaning in different languages. But the deeper problem of translation is the translation of *res* into *verba*, of matter into words.

The Ramists, McLuhan concludes, "made a fatal divorce between invention and elocution, between matter and words." (247) What were the historical consequences of this divorce? Remarkably, McLuhan does not yet draw the conclusion upon which media studies is founded, the recognition of *verba* as medium. McLuhan seems unaware of the medial identity of words, and just as regardless of the medial identity of print, the medium in which Nashe and Harvey conducted their controversy. There is much to be said about this blindness in the thesis, interesting in its own right, but I want to suggest that McLuhan's intellectual revolution is implicit in the very absence of media-consciousness; that consciousness arrived, either all at once or very slowly, or perhaps both, in the years following the completion of his thesis. McLuhan found a way to translate the problem of *res* and *verba*, with its enormously complex embedding in the history of rhetoric, into the language of modernity, or modernism. The translation of *verba* into medium, and *res* into message, seems obvious in retrospect; but for a Renaissance scholar, what is lost in this translation is a whole world of discourse. At the same time, however, something was gained for McLuhan, a new world of discourse, of media studies.

In an essay published in 1959 (just after Ong’s dissertation), and entitled “Myth and Mass Media,” McLuhan works out a practice of translation, in the sense we have just acknowledged. The essay ostensibly sets out to bring the concept of myth “into the area of ‘media’—a concept to which surprisingly little attention has been given in the past.” Every language, McLuhan argues, can be considered a “macromyth,” because languages “have that relation to words and word-making that characterizes the fullest scope of myth.” We might say that the loss of the old world of the trivium functioned as a kind of myth for McLuhan, the loss of a language that proved in part untranslatable, but for which the effort of translation brought language itself into a different perspective:

Another way of getting at this aspect of languages as macromyths is to say that the medium is the message. Only incidentally, as it were, is such a medium a specialized means of signifying or of reference. And in the long run, for such media or macromyths as the phonetic alphabet, printing, photography, the movie, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, and television, the social action of these forms is also, in the fullest sense, their message or meaning.¹⁰

McLuhan constructs his own myth here, and gives it a baptismal name. The medium is the message. But what gets lost in this translation of languages is words themselves, *verba*, which must go underground, so to speak, as the elements of an old language, intricately and elaborately captured by the meta-language of rhetoric, its fabulous taxonomy of tropes and figures. Language becomes, then, a *figure of speech for medium*. A medium is like a language, but one that is happily divorced from mere signification or reference, from the message. The divorce exposes the “social action” of the medium, the world-making effects concealed by what we thought was the only purpose of words or media, the “message.”

This myth belongs to McLuhan’s work of the 1950s, still more than a decade away when he completes his thesis.¹¹ The conclusion of the thesis just glances at

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, “Myth and Mass Media,” *Daedalus* 88 (Spring, 1959): 340.

¹¹ I have not discussed in this essay McLuhan’s first published book, entitled *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, 1952. This study of magazine advertising combined Richards’s technique of close reading with Leavis’s program of social

the exigency that will result in the translation of rhetoric into the discourse of media, always implicit in the revaluation of the Renaissance by modernism. McLuhan's last sentences in the thesis sum up the polemical conservatism of his argument, but the very last word belongs to James Joyce, as iconic modernist:

Many facts contributed to make it [the Elizabethan era] an age of rhetoric, and even of conflicting rhetorics; but we have long persisted in viewing it in light of the violent reaction against what Huxley called "that pestilent cosmetic, rhetoric." It required, perhaps, the advent of such a successful devotee of the second sophistic as James Joyce, to prepare the ground for a scholarly understanding of Elizabethan literature. (253)

This backward glance of modernism toward the Renaissance might be McLuhan's fiction, but it was enabling. It brought the alien discourse of rhetoric into relation to the modernist field, where literature itself was contending with the proliferation of alien media.

McLuhan's first run at a full account of his media myth did not come until *The Gutenberg Galaxy* of 1962, a book almost impossible to grasp without the retrospective help of *Understanding Media* and the works to follow.¹² But

criticism, but it was an unrepeatable experiment. The book takes a great step toward media studies, but without arriving there. We can see McLuhan struggling as early as 1944 toward a move beyond the technical language of rhetoric in his essay, "Poetic vs. Rhetorical Exegesis: The Case for Leavis Against Richards and Empson," *The Sewanee Review* 52 (Spring, 1944): 266-276. McLuhan argues in favor of Leavis's "poetics" and against the "rhetorics" of Richards and Empson, though it is by no means clear what he means by poetics. My sense is that poetics is a bridge term, a concept by which McLuhan is able to reject Richards and Empson's versions of a modernist rhetoric, on behalf of a sterner critique of modernity. This Leavisian attitude pervades *The Mechanical Bride*, but becomes less important in McLuhan's work on media. As is well known, McLuhan's turn to the problem of media and communication was incited by the work of his Canadian colleague, Harold Innis, whose crucial work, *The Bias of Communication*, was published in 1951.

¹² I have not pursued the later permutations of McLuhan's translation of rhetoric, such as his employment of the "figure-ground" pairing, or the "tetrad." For these developments, see Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988). Even as late as this work, the trivium reappears (again signaling the effort of translation) in propositions such as, "Vico aimed to heal the rift in the trivium between the Ancients and the Moderns." (222)

McLuhan's doctoral thesis illuminates his breakthrough book from another vantage. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is a study of the "making of typographic man" (its subtitle), but it is also a translation of *The Classical Trivium*, a farewell to that world and its language. When Nashe makes an appearance in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he represents the elegiac survival of an "oral polyphony" that print technology militates against. McLuhan is no longer blind to the obsolescence of this rhetoric in the world of print technology, or indeed, to the dominance of the medium over the message. Nashe pits his "oral polyphony" against the linearity of the print medium, but he is too late: "This sensuous relish for the complex interplay of qualities persists in the sixteenth century even in language intended for the printed page." (201) It is not easy to describe the effect of Nashe's lubricious rhetoric, straddling old media and new. McLuhan quotes a long passage from *Lenten Stuff* recounting the story of Hero and Leander, a passage one of Nashe's severer critics, James Sutherland, singles out for condemnation as all *verba* and no *res*, just playing with words. The hapless critic turns out to be a poor reader of Renaissance prose, however, because he is not enough of a modernist. McLuhan, by contrast, knows how to redescribe Nashe's verbal pyrotechnics in modernist terms. The passage Sutherland quotes, he tells us, has "the brash variety of a Louis Armstrong trumpet solo." (202) All that jazz is so much rhetoric. It takes a new medium to see the old.¹³ With this bold comparison, McLuhan translates Nashe for modernity, and for modernism. If Nashe also gets lost in this translation, his loss makes way for a new, multi-media rhetoric of syncopation, which McLuhan invents, without insisting that we call it a rhetoric at all.

¹³ On the relation of media to the category of the new, see Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).