

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The advantage of being born a Westerner is partly the unimpeded view that it provides of more densely settled areas. A Canadian enjoys somewhat the same advantage in relation to the United States, or to Europe. Canada is a kind of cultural DEW line, a kind of cultural counter-environment. A counter-environment affords opportunities of observation such as are normal to the outsider. A habit of pattern recognition and even of abstract theorizing grows in the outsider, especially if he doesn't feel any anxious need of psychological support from his contemporaries. Apart from having spent my first few years on the windy plains of Alberta, the most formative factor must have been a year of early childhood spent on the Bay of Fundy. The scent and action of the sea has permeated my being ever since. It was, therefore, a grievous shock when I discovered on the cattle boat enroute to Great Britain that I was a very poor sailor.

My studies at Cambridge produced many unexpected advantages; not the least of these was the excitement of encountering many world figures. Seen at a great distance, famous people acquire a quite unreal and discouraging character. Seen close up, the quite human limitations and foibles of such people can be the greatest possible stimulus to self-assertion. The cult of greatness can be a very debilitating and inhibiting thing when developed in remoteness from its public. Another advantage that Cambridge conferred on me was its bland acceptance of the contemporary world as a scene to be understood and controlled.

Cambridge has never had a predominantly commercial setting. It has never been involved in the commerce of its time. This seems to have absolved it from the need to oppose the age. A great deal of valuable energy can be expended in building up moral defences against one's time. The same energies could be more usefully spent in seeking to discover the shape and tendencies of the age. For whatever reason, Cambridge has always been rich in minds that seized upon the pattern of their period in order to foster its best possibilities. I was fortunate to encounter men like I.A. Richards, and F.R. Leavis. It has been said that the job of the teacher is to save the student's time. At Cambridge there were men who knew how to do this by putting a student in touch with his time. Much life and energy is wasted in perceptual alienation from one's own age. The training of perception has been the aim and boast of many educators at Cambridge in this century.

Upon leaving Cambridge in 1936 I began my first teaching job at the University of Wisconsin, an ideal spot for a Canadian to begin his acquaintance with the U.S.A. It was there at Madison that I was received into the Catholic church in 1937.

"Style is a way of seeing," said Flaubert, and since Flaubert, art and literature have consciously assumed the task of probing our new technological environments. Art and literature have revealed the characters of the new environments created by technologies, by setting up counter-environments. It has been my study of contemporary poetry and painting that has drawn me to examine the new human environments wrought by the physical extensions of our own human body. It is the artists and poets who have taught me that the "Emperor's new clothes" are not visible without the aid of art. Men without art, to use the phrase of Wyndham Lewis, are engaged in hypnotized contemplation of the Emperor's old clothes.

During the past century art has revealed that the changing environment is not perceptible to unaided human attention. Throughout all human time, men have been engaged in conscious awareness of the preceding environment, which presents itself as a nostalgic art form. The current environment creates an overload of sensation that obliterates pattern and form. My study of literature became an aid to the perception that led me to undertake the task of understanding the relation between culture and technology.

I had begun my University studies as a student of Engineering, because of my interest in structure and design. It becomes more clear each day that structure and design in all levels of human organization are becoming orchestral. Our new electric age no longer presents any specialized cultural gradient. Ours is the age of the zero-gradient in which all times and cultures are in a continuous dialogue. To be a participant in this dialogue is most satisfying.

When I was studying the work of the Elizabethan, Thomas Nashe, at the Huntington Library, I met Corinne Lewis of Fort Worth, Texas, who was studying at the Pasadena Playhouse. We were married in 1939 and now have six children, the eldest and youngest of whom are boys. By way of participating in the dialogue of this time, I find the open perceptions of all these teenage boys and girls a very rich means of keeping in touch with our time.

Marshall McLuhan