

The Listener

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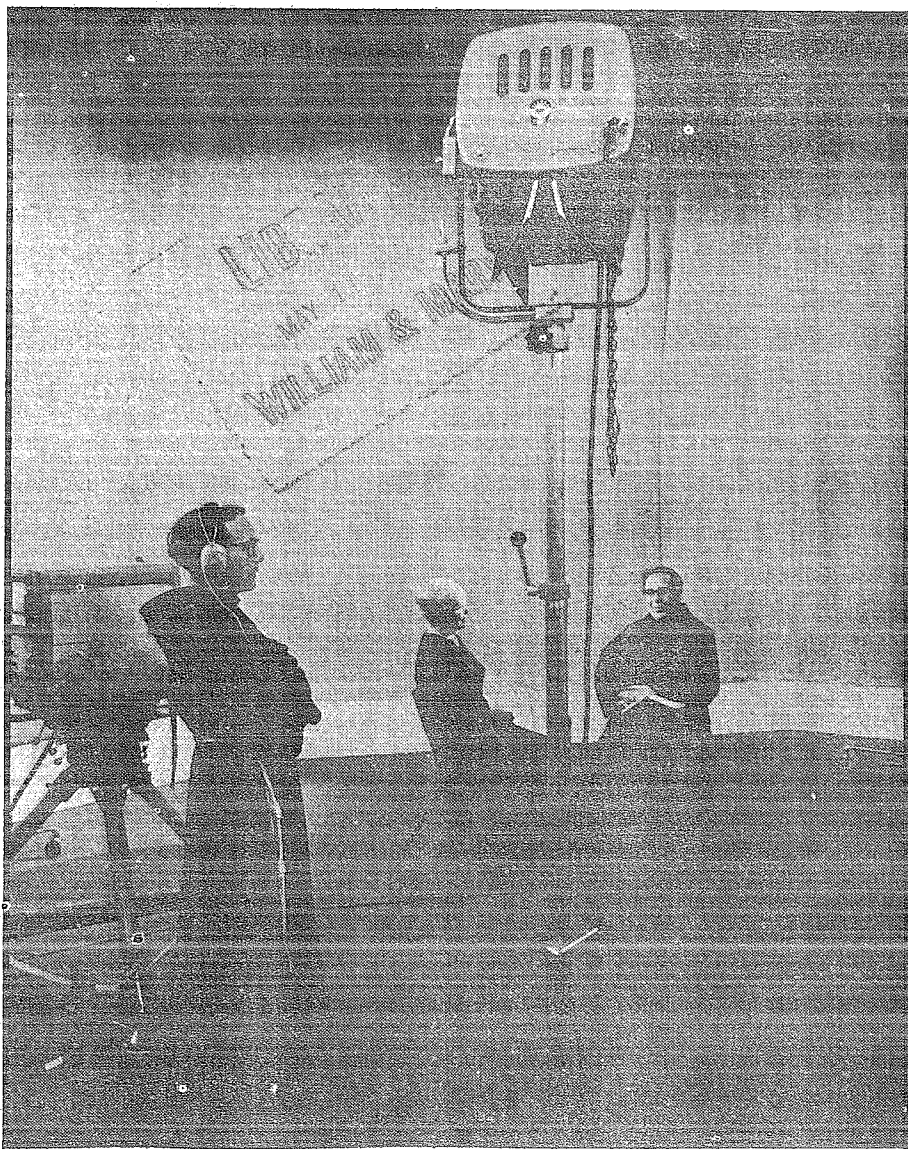
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Electric Consciousness and the Church —Marshall McLuhan talks to Hubert Hoskins

In various articles and in your books 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' and 'Understanding Media' and 'The medium is the massage', you have probed a new way of envisaging technical media as what you call extensions of our human faculties and our consciousness; and I suppose millions of people by now have heard in the form of a slogan the expression: 'The medium is the message.' I take it you reject the idea that what is most effective for change is what used to be called the content of a communication: what really counts is not the what but the how.

Yes. It might be illustrated by saying that the English language is an enormous medium that is very much more potent and effective than anything that is ever said in English, but anybody who uses that medium invokes or resonates the totality of it even with the most trivial remark. Our own mother tongues are things in which we participate totally. They change our perception. So that if we spoke Chinese we would have a different sense of hearing, smell and touch. The same is true of printing, radio, movies and TV. They actually alter our organs of perception without our knowing it. We are never aware of these changes.

The Church meets the media in Hatch End, Middlesex, where Catholic priests are being trained in television techniques: on this occasion, the art of the interview



PETER ROYCE

Two Poems by Henry Reed

The River

Our tasks of the night go on, our ritual, our dance.
Our flames go up, reflected in the black, slow river.
Here you must think we are happy and fulfilled—
 You who still wander

On that other side of the river, for whom, in the fated intrigue
Of the years and the days and the hours, it is not yet time
To set your foot on the silent, crowded raft
 Of the all-expectant.

Perfervid lips here babble, and hands caress.
Your words will mingle with them, your hands reach out.
You will not be alone, you will only be one of the many
 Who are not alone here,

In this sorrowful place, where I with a failing blood
Seek out in this dark place for one yet darker.
And pace the muddy shore, the slow ripple glaring,
 And scan the distance

To where *you* stand, your features already reflecting
What they cannot yet absorb, our hectic lights,
And discerning never the scores of ardent eyes
 That are turned toward you;

And discerning never the one who, bent in a silence of love,
Prays in the dark to be the one who is chosen
And sent from the flames of this raucous side of Acheron
 To conduct you over.

Three Words

What strangeness lies unseen behind our words
And creeps out in protest if we ever chance to disturb them!
When did I find that the words I had always used
 In every poem were 'suddenly' and 'forever'?

Perhaps in one of those many vacancies
 Of the shuttered mind, the eyes and mouth unsmiling,
And nothing to say, the damnation of nothing to say:
 Perhaps it was then, as with pleading perhaps, the small word 'silent'
Followed them, took my hand gently, saying 'Do not forget me:
 I have been also yours.'

 And suddenly I knew
That these three words would perhaps pursue me forever,
 Inescapable, watchful, loitering at a steady distance.

And with that there came a nonchalant acceptance
 That I would never easily use these words again,
Which did not matter, nor did even the sense
 Of bitter weariness and humiliation.

I saw the Freudian catch: it was even a little comic:
 We are suddenly born: and every poem is birth.
We face our life forever: and every poem
 That is ever spelt must face the future forever,
And perhaps forever in silence. So much, alas, for words.

(And I have once suddenly known I had lost you forever.
And have elsewhere suddenly known I would love you forever.
And there will be two occasions, and those not together,
When you and I will be suddenly silent forever.)

breath of sea air out of the Vatican Library. They remind the reader that although theology may be, as John Milton informed us it was, 'the mind's fairest jewel', nevertheless there are some things superior to jewels and even to minds; and such things (e.g. those three little blind mice Faith, Hope and Charity) seem always to have inhabited not the mind but, heaven help us, the soul of Pope John. His deep affection for the members of his family ('My dear niece Enrica, a word for you alone') reminds this particular reader of nothing so much as (ironically enough) the great love of Alexander Borgia for his children. The paternal love of Pope Alexander and the filial love of John seem to arise from sources beyond what Nietzsche would have perceived as Good and Evil. Just as, in an imperfectly perceptible sense, Alexander Borgia and John Roncalli could be seen as antithetical or allegorical personifications of a Papal authority that transcends the ethics of the dust, or the elementary operations of moral and social machinery.

It is, for me, the unconditional serenity of these letters that remains in the mind. And this serenity is by no means that of a man who believes himself to be elevated above the ruck and truck of wars, poverty, death, personal loss and all the humiliations of secular life:

I was sorry to hear of our children's failure in the examinations. These blessed children must be disciplined. That they do not pass because they lack the ability is neither pleasant nor creditable for their family. It is worse still if they are lacking in good will. In the case of B's mathematics and Latin I can tolerate poor results, but failure to get a pass mark seems to me serious. They must not be treated harshly, or made miserable by our assiduous insistence. Nevertheless, they have no excuse. They cannot plead either physical weakness or undue severity on the part of their teachers. I did not like mathematics.

This serenity, which, without the compassion that animates it, could easily be mistaken for a jejune simple-mindedness, arises, I think, from John XXIII's immersion in and emergence from what he himself terms 'the mystery of my life'. In 1959 he wrote: 'This is the mystery of my life. Do not look for other explanations. I have always repeated St Gregory Nazianzen's words: "The will of God is our peace."' When Dante Alighieri discovers these same words in the final illumination of *The Divine Comedy*, he has simply come upon them, like an archaeological inscription. The reason why *The Divine Comedy* is a poem and not the personal revelation of a saint is simply that Dante preached it (*In la sua voluntate e nostra pace*) but found it a little hard to put into practice. Dante is marvellous and ferocious and gorgeous and God knows what, but he does not cast over the intellect and the spirit that serenity Pope John had drawn out of the mystery of his life: the apprehension of the peace that derives from an experiential perception of the Will of God. But then, neither Dante Alighieri nor most of us have ever had the privilege of studying the Will, let alone the Last Testament, of God Almighty.

GEORGE BARKER