

GIBSON, Walker



SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Dear Walker,

Thank you for the copy of Persona and the kind letter which came with it. You are welcome to all the quotes you may wish. Being quoted by Walker Gibson is its own reward.

Quotation is a two-way street where you and I live. All students in my present course in Practical Criticism of Prose have just read your Tough, Sweet, and Stuff and have been quizzed on it. They did very well. It is now obvious that they will have to get to know Persona, too.

I'll need some time with this meaty book. But perhaps one particular, quite incidental, comment might interest you. I suppose I have been influenced by McLuhan, as you state on page 81, since we have known one another for a long time. But I was writing about the oral-to-visual shift explicitly back in the early 1950's, having hammered this out with great agony in the course of my work on Peter Ramus. The roots of this distinction in my own thought are discernible earlier, too, in the late 1940's, long before McLuhan developed McLuhanism. They connect on the one side with the ancient, medieval and Renaissance evidence and on the other largely with biblical scholarship and, to the best of my knowledge, not at all with anything that Marshall had either said or written up to that time. Indeed, he quotes from my Ramus work at some length in The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962). This is just a footnote for your own information as a historian. My own sources, both those I correctly understood and those I misread (these are often more productive) can be found in publications of mine from about 1951 on (some of these written in the late '40's). I've marked relevant items on the bibliography enclosed here.

Besides Perry Miller, the historian Herbert Butterfield of Peterhouse, later Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, was one of the first I talked to at length about the voice-to-print shift. This was either in 1950 or 1953 at Peterhouse in Cambridge. I remember his response: "This is the kind of thing that makes all the difference in history. But how can you show it?" Well, I've done what I can.

I was, it is true, one of the only two persons in the world to review Marshall's first book, The Mechanical Bride (my article-review is marked here). The only other reviewer, I believe, was the sociologist Rudolph E. Morris of Marquette University. But The Mechanical Bride did not treat McLuhan's current themes. Because it did not, he later used to repudiate it, at least in conversations with me, over my objections, for it remains a great book. I tried on my own to interest Macmillan and others in reprinting it when the remaindered stock Marshall had stored in New York with Bernard J. Muller-Thym (a close friend of us both) was giving out. The book was never even advertised seriously, for Vanguard Press had just changed hands and the new owners appear to have had little interest in items on the old list.

McLuhan has influenced me, I believe, in a way most persons would never advert to; that is, in my class room performance, particularly in my practice of reading from and commenting on (unidentified) students' papers. I had a course from him here at Saint Louis University around 1938-39--vintage Leavis, none of the ideas now taken to be McLuhanism. He was completing his Ph.D. dissertation on Thomas Nashe for Cambridge at the time. He has also at least encouraged my tendency to treat past and present as closely related to one another.

Through The Gutenberg Galaxy I can underline stretches of writing which echo directly Saint Louis U talk 1937-44--what Marshall was talking about, what Bernie Muller-Thym was talking about, what George Klubertanz, Bill Van Roo (both Jesuit priests now), and all of us were talking about. The very turns of expression are there. At the core of much of it was concern not with "media" but with noetic processes.

In my Ramus and Talon Inventory the dedication to Marshall McLuhan, "who started all this," refers to the fact that Marshall had first called my attention to Perry Miller's work on Ramus in The New England Mind, when this book first came out (1939).

You see, you've turned me on. I've kept going partly because I've never put most of this on paper before.

A lot of parallelisms in McLuhan's and my writing are just that. As the reader can see in The Gutenberg Galaxy, scores of scholars in all fields have been processing media and sensorium materials, without quite knowing what they were dealing with. The stuff is lying all around. You can identify other deposits in my more recent book, The Presence of the Word. I am going to try to bully Yale University Press into sending you a copy, for I believe that in its pages our minds will meet again.

