

*The Precarious Future
of the “Humanities Enterprise”
in the Digital Information Millennium*

Introduction: Tzu-Gung’s Anecdote

In his seminal study *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), Marshall McLuhan, whose prophetic visions of the dawn of a revolutionary electronic and digital communication culture (era) became reality well before the end of the twentieth century, reflects on the potential impact of modern technology and science with reference to the timely relevance and wisdom that the great physicist and Nobel prize winner Werner Heisenberg (1901–76) found in the ancient Chinese anecdote of Tzu-Gung, a disciple of Confucius. The anecdote is quoted here in full since it identifies some of the key problems mankind will be confronted with in the new “global millennium”:

As Tzu-Gung was traveling through the regions north of the river Han, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had dug an irrigation ditch. The man would descend into the well, fetch up a vessel of water in his arms and pour it out into the ditch. While his efforts were tremendous the results appeared to be very meager.

Tzu-Gung said: “There is a way whereby you can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day, and whereby you can do much with little effort. Would you like to hear of it?” Then the gardener stood up, looked at him and said: “And what would that be?”

Tzu-Gung replied, “You take a wooden lever, weighted at the back and light in front. In this way you can bring up water so quickly that it just gushes out. This is called a draw-well.”

Then anger rose in the old man’s face and he said: “I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines does all his work like a machine. He who does work like a machine grows a

heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. He who has lost his simplicity becomes unsure in the strivings of his soul.

Uncertainty in the strivings of the soul is something which does not agree with honest sense. It is not that I do not know of such things, I am ashamed to use them. (GG: 29–30; UM: 63)

Despite the origin of the anecdote in the pre-literate Chinese world, some two and a half thousand years ago, its relevance and timeliness is beyond doubt and exemplary of literature and art in general as a sensitive register of human insight, concern and Socratic wisdom and thus of great value and interest to the globally open, inclusive and critical mind.

Without a doubt, Marshall McLuhan's voluminous critical oeuvre and his lifelong affinity to the humanistic aims and objectives of comparative literary and cultural studies is the modern embodiment of such inclusive critical openness, as underlined by such critics as George Steiner and Janine Marchessault, among others: "These conceptualisations have helped define some of the most productive questions for media studies and have served to lay the foundations for the development of cultural studies in a variety of national contexts from the 1950s onward." (JM 2005: 4)

1. The Ancient Skill of Reading

Although Marshall McLuhan's international reputation rests primarily on his research on modern technology and the understanding of the media, he was essentially "a Victorian man of letters, a satirist, very much steeped in literary culture" (ib. 75), past and present, Anglo-European and extending to such distant Asian cultures as China, Korea and Japan and to remote and little known tribal cultures in Africa and South America. The complex intersection of disciplines (literature, film, electronic media, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, history, mythology and architecture, to name the most prominent ones, and temporalities and everyday life, highlighted above all in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and closely related to Henry Remak's concept of the "humanities enterprise" (Remak

1999: 100; 104–106), constitutes a hallmark of Marshall McLuhan’s lifelong scholarly and pedagogical commitment to the study of literature and culture, starting in Cambridge as a scholarship student of F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, among others, (JM 2005: 8) and subsequently as university teacher in St. Louis and Toronto summed up by Janine Marchessault as follows:

McLuhan’s work needs to be understood as arising out of collective engagement, conversations, letters and dialogue. Just as *The Mechanical Bride* grew out of courses he taught at St. Louis University, so too did *The Gutenberg Galaxy* grow out of an interdisciplinary confluence of students, scholars, scientists, artists and journalists in Toronto. Moreover, it is important to remember that McLuhan’s insights depended on the coming together of different disciplines as well as different cultures that were beginning to populate the city (JM 2005: 77; Remak 1999: 100).

It was probably Marshall McLuhan’s outsider-position with regard to the dominant elite culture at Cambridge and his comparatively modest Canadian social and cultural family background, which explains his lifelong “search” for what Janine Marchessault refers to as “an integrated *aesthetic*, conceptually bound to both English literature and American popular culture” (JM 2005: 8). The desirability of including popular culture in the study of high literature and culture attracted Marshall McLuhan’s attention, above all, during his early years in Toronto, where he witnessed the rapidly growing importance of popular culture in the United States, on television and in daily life, just across the border: “It was precisely the new culture that emerged in post-war America that was of interest; the *commodity culture* that he had studied in *The Mechanical Bride* had expanded to cover every aspect of lived experience.” (JM 2005: 79–80) Significantly, books, and art in general, were reduced to commodities and subjected to market strategies. His commitment to the study of popular cultures as an article of faith documents McLuhan’s open mind and progressive attitude towards teaching and research, though only reluctantly embraced by some of his colleagues and rejected or ridiculed by others. A noteworthy exception, is Henry Remak, who also highlights interdisciplinary

inclusiveness in his scholarly reflections (Remak 2002: 245–250; 1999: 100) and a “synthesis based on international collaboration” (Remak 1999: 104–105) as the cornerstones of comparative literary studies and the ideals of a liberal education in general (Remak 1981: 217–228; Trommler 2010: 149–150).

The very fact that the debate on the inclusion of popular culture (sometimes also referred to as “mass culture”) is still in progress among present representatives of comparative literature and culture, highlights the open-mindedness, farsightedness, and intellectual affinity of Marshall McLuhan and the late Henry Remak. McLuhan (together with Edmund Carpenter) also formally argued his insistence on inclusiveness and openness in education in a Government report entitled *Classroom without Walls*, in which the liberation of education from traditional impediments and restrictions and the equipment of students with “the analytical tools to understand culture” (JM 2005: 167) is proposed:

The class-room without wall, like the counterpart in Malraux’s museum, is an argument for an education that is connected rather than separated from the life-world. McLuhan believed that the real education was essentially taking place through the media. (JM 2005: 108)

Significantly, this proposal was rejected in parliament, which underscores Marshall McLuhan’s visionary perspective of education and his affinity to some of the key tenets of enlightened comparative cultural studies, which is also based on intellectual openness and inclusiveness. The report was eventually published some twenty years later in a book, co-authored with his son Eric McLuhan and Kathryn Hutcheon and published under the title *The City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (1977). It should be mentioned here, that the Chinese scholar Song Li has applied McLuhan’s “City as Classroom” template in an exemplary study of the Imperial Palace, published in Issue No. 5 of the *Marschall McLuhan Studies* (Song Li 1996).

However, critical openness and inclusiveness alone do not suffice as guiding educational principles in the rapidly changing techno-

logical world of “global villages” (GG: 31; UM: 34; 96ff.) where everything is *in flux* and the future precariously uncertain. But as always, Marshall McLuhan believes in the power of education, mental adaptability, intellectual resistance and the search for solutions and, above all, in what he refers to as “the ancient skill of reading”:

The goal of science and the arts and of education for the next generation must be to decipher not the genetic but the perceptual core. In a global information environment, the old pattern of education in answer – finding is of no avail: one is surrounded by answers, millions of them, moving and muting at electric speed. Survival and control will depend on the ability to probe and to question in the proper way and place. As the information that constitutes the environment is perpetually in flux, so the need is not for fixed concepts but rather for the ancient skill of reading that book, for navigating through an ever uncharted and uncharitable milieu. Else we will have no more control of this technology and environment than we have of the wind and the tides. (McLuhan 1988: 239)

2. Gargoyles and Grotesques

While McLuhan’s lifelong reflections on the global network society and its impact on the future of mankind are generally speaking balanced and critically open-minded, the subtext of his deliberations tends to be tinged with serious concerns and reservations as to the impending consequences and the role of education and human intellectual resourcefulness with regard to their solution. Marshall McLuhan’s disquiet on this matter runs like a red thread through all his works, overtly and covertly. Significantly, he reflects on great ideas and shared concerns among great writers and thinkers, past and present, highlighted most conspicuously in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1967), which ends in a disconcertingly dark, Kafkaesque, apocalyptic vision of the future, overshadowed by questions without answers:

What will be the new configurations of mechanisms and literacy as these older forms of perception and judgment are interpreted by the new electric age? The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deep into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such co-existence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person. Our most ordinary and conventional attitudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques. Familiar institutions and associations seem at time menacing and malignant. These multiple transformations, which are the normal consequence of introducing new media into society whatever, need special study and will be the subject of another volume on *Understanding Media* in the world of our time. (GG: 278–79)

However, there is also an element of encouragement in Marshall McLuhan's concern for the future: the call to study the rapidly changing world in search of solutions. As indicated previously, Marshall Mc Luhan is a man of letters whose critical approach is deeply embedded in literature and culture, as a cursory glance at the "Index of Chapter Glosses" at the end of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* underscores (GG: 291–294). The affinity of Marshall McLuhan's comparative practice and understanding of literature and culture, his interdisciplinary style, and the contextualisation of literature in culture, signal not only the lasting influence of Matthew Arnold's (1822–1889) deep-seated humanism and professed commitment to the study of foreign nations, their culture and thought, which was still alive at the time of Marshall McLuhan's enrolment at Cambridge, but also his lifelong intellectual and scholarly alignment with such cultural theorists as Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Howard Innes (JM 2005: 3), Henry H. Remak, and other leading thinkers and representatives of comparative literature and culture studies, despite obvious differences with regard to "academically defined norms of writing", that is, a succinct, aphoristic literary style, brevity of argument or statement, and what Janine Marchessault perceptively refers to as "exceeding of disciplinary boundaries" (JM 2005: 4).

While Marshall McLuhan had no doubts as to the validity of the global openness of his critical mind and his scholarly commitment to

the tenets of a liberal education, other leading educators and scholars declared the comparative approach to literature, and the humanities in general, in a state of irrevocable crisis and demise.

3. The Death of a Discipline?

No doubt, a key concern among supporters of Comparative Literary and/or Culture Studies has been the vulnerability of the discipline and the question of survival due for a plethora of reasons, scholarly, cultural, and socio-political. Significantly, René Wellek addressed this problem already as early as 1958 in his often quoted paper on *The Crisis of Comparative Literature*, presented at the Second Congress of the International Association of Comparative Literature in Chapel Hill (Wellek 1963: 282–95). Susan Bassnett, amongst others, pronounced comparative literature “dead” in 1993 (Bassnett 1993: 47; Kernan 1992; Zhou and Tong 2000: 4), just like Gayatri Spivak some ten years later, who also characterizes the discipline as being “at the last gasp” (Spivak 2003: vii) or David K. Harrison (2007), Andrew Dalby (2002), Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine (2000) who deplore the “loss” and “extinction” of linguistic and cultural diversity and the “erosion of human knowledge” associated with it.

Others identified comparative literature as an “endangered discipline” suspended between life and death, ready for an “autopsy” (Bauerlein 1997), or “dead” with the potential of “resurrection” (Schwartz 1997) and numerous other conditions of “near death”. Wang Ning’s rhetorical question “Death of a Discipline?”, on the other hand, signals, tongue in cheek, the fact that comparative literature is not dead at all, on the contrary, alive and well in China:

Even in the age of globalization when many of the other disciplines of the humanities are severely challenged, comparative literature studies in China is still flourishing as it is closely related to or even combined with world literature into one discipline, with many of the internationally discussed theoretic topics “globalized” in the Chinese context. (Wang 2006: 149; see also Zhou and Tong 2000: 4)

While Zhou Xiaoyi and Q. S. Tong agree with Wang Ning’s view expressed above, they see the situation in China much more critically. Their reflections, albeit placed in a predominantly historical

Chinese context, focus, like Lydia Liu's groundbreaking perceptive studies (Liu 1995), on fundamental theoretical aspects of the problem and the necessary methodological modifications due to the political and ideological changes in China:

The crisis of comparative literature that has been a cause of concern for scholars in China in recent years registers, in fact, a deeper level of crisis of the ideological and political foundation of comparative literature – its conviction in the existence of the universality of literary values. (Zhou and Tong 2000: 8)

Despite the widespread scholarly pessimism in the West concerning the demise of comparative literature and the "death of languages" and the "erosion of human knowledge" directly associated with it (Harrison 2007; Wade and Harrison 2007), Chinese scholarship and research is unambiguously Western oriented, but at the same time also based on the maintenance of Chinese cultural traditions, national independence and self-assuredness:

In the field of comparative literature, René Wellek and Austin Warren and Henry Remak (e.g. 1961) are the most translated Western scholars because some of their formulations can be readily appropriated for legitimating and strengthening comparative literature, not just as an academic discipline but as an agency enabling a dialogical relationship between Chinese and Western literary traditions and thereby allowing Chinese literature to be integrated into a world system of literature. Embedded in this desire to have a direct and equal dialogue with other literary traditions is the conviction of the existence of a common system of valuation in culture akin to Goethe's much debated notion of *Weltliteratur*. (Zhou and Tong 2000: 6)

The reasons advanced for the alleged predicament of comparative literature in the West (USA included) are manifold and range from Henry Remak's characterisation of the scholarly representatives of the discipline as "guardians of yesteryear's topical and methodological conventions" and "intellectual incoherence" (Said 1999: 3) to questions concerning the viability and legitimacy of Comparative

Literature/Culture (Studies) as an autonomous scholarly discipline in the light of the financial constraints imposed on the humanities and social sciences in Western (i.e. European, American, Australian) universities and the forced commercialisation (Bok 1995) and overt vocational focus of education at the expense of the traditional university and the ideals of a liberal education, in brief, what Henry H. H. Remak refers to as the “Humanities under siege” (Remak 1999: 101).

One of the most outspoken critics of the malaise (“last gasp”) of Comparative Literature in the United States is the internationally acclaimed literary theorist and cultural critic Gayatri Spivak, who blames “self-doubt”, that is, “a discipline always in search of itself”, rigid academic rules, disciplinary boundaries, questions of canon, core curricula, outmoded concepts of culture, teaching (class-room) conditions, or what she refers to as the “teaching machine”, and the inability to handle the reality of change, which echoes Marshall McLuhan’s already mentioned reflections on this matter.

In the light of her research focus on deconstruction, it comes as no surprise that she is arguing in favour of a “Deconstructive Cultural Studies” discipline, an approach fiercely critiqued together with other flaws by John M. Ellis in his seminal study *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1999) and the early work *Against Deconstruction* (Ellis 1989), in which he attacks the marginalisation of (great) literature as traditional core of the liberal education tradition in favour of apparently incoherent (see Said 1999: 3) and fragmented teaching programs (including film, television, documentaries, comics, cartoons, sitcoms, amongst others) at the expense of great works of literature. and the politico-ideological focus on race, gender, class, sexuality and the numerous “ism-fads” (see also Remak 1999: 100) which earned him the “literary Jeremiah” tag and triggered off a lively debate in the United States and Europe (France), well documented by Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Stallknecht and Frenz 1961/1971). Also, Gayatri Spivak’s emphasis on the “precariousness and marginalization” of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies in the United States is not shared by other representatives of the discipline, as highlighted in Haun Saussy’s collection of essays, published in

2006 under the title *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation*, where comparative literature, and world literature, "appear enviably well-established in the USA" (Saussy 2006).

4. Legitimising Comparative Literature

A completely different proposal with regard to the legitimisation Comparative Literature as a discipline, comes from Emily S. Apter who, under the "traumatic experience" of 9/11 (Apter 2006: vii), and inspired by Walter Benjamin's reflections on translation (Apter 2006: 7ff.), developed, what she calls "A New Comparative Literature", by liberating translation from textual restrictions and the "fidelity to an original" which she considers "ripe for expansion as the basis for a new discipline, with emphasis on "language wars" (including mistranslation in the art of war), linguistic incommensurability in translation studies, the tension between textual and cultural translation, the role of translation in shaping technologies, a global literary canon, censorship, the resistance to Anglophone dominance, the global impact of translation technologies on the complexity of language politics, and a detailed history of comparative literature, among others. (Apter 2006: 4–5).

Emily Apter's complex proposal has its roots in the public criticism after 9/11 of American mono-lingualism as a political, military, and economical handicap in the impending war in a culturally and linguistically largely alien part of the world (echoing Sarkhan in William J. Lederer's and Eugene Burdick's influential novel *The Ugly American* (1958) and a breakdown of communication and cultural understanding as reflected in McLuhan's vision of the "global village", which, at least in the early years of his career, had raised contrary hopes and expectations.

Significantly, such breakdowns have a long history, as underscored in Lord Macartney's ill fated expedition to China as envoy of George III in 1791 (Snell-Hornby 2006, 166–169) and many others since, as for example Western cultural illiteracy in contacts with other cultures in the East, highlighted by Marshall McLuhan in the failure of the UNESCO experiment to provide an Indian village with running water (UM: 86). The systematic study of such problems in

the context of the digital age thus constitutes the premise of Emily Apter's reflections on her new approach to Comparative Literature and translation studies, which she briefly sums up as follows:

An underlying premise of the book has been that language wars, great and small, shape the politics of translation in the sphere media, literacy, literary markets, electronic information transfer, and codes of literariness. The field of translation studies has accordingly expanded to include on the one hand, pragmatic, real world issues, intelligence gathering in war, the embattlement of minority languages within official state culture, controversies over "other Englishes" – and, on the other, more conceptually abstract considerations such as literary appropriation of pidgins and Creole, or multilingual experimentation among historic avant-gardes, or translation across borders. (Apter 2006: 4ff.).

The introductory reflections on Marshall McLuhan's scholarly strategies, while not strictly compatible with what Henry Remak refers to as "methodological conventions", nevertheless, point at the need of a paradigm shift and at exemplary innovative methodological templates and perspectives with relevance to comparative literature in a global information environment (McLuhan 1988: 239).

5. Distressingly Monolingual and Monocultural

Emily Apter's introductory reference to the political background of 9/11 as trigger in the conceptualisation of a *new* approach to comparative literature highlights the serious consequences of neglect, marginalisation and disinterest in foreign languages and culture translation and literary studies had in the United States:

The urgent, political need for skilled translators became abundantly clear in the tragic war of 9/11, as institutions charged with protecting national security scrambled to find linguistically proficient specialists to decode intercepts and documents. Translation and global diplomacy seemed never to have been mutually implicated. As America's monolingualism was publicly criticised as part of renewed calls for shared information, mutual under-

standing across cultural and religious divides and mutual cooperation, translation moved to the fore as an issue of major political and cultural significance. No longer deemed a mere instrument of international relations, business, education, and culture, translation took on a special relevance as a matter of war and peace. (Apter 2006: 3)

While government (military) interests responded promptly to the public outcry for remedial action, previous warnings by leading scholars in the field, such as Henry Remak, among others, was far less successful, when he aired his distress on this matter in his books and articles: "I find most interdisciplinary studies currently carried out in the United States distressingly monolingual and monocultural." (Remak 2002: 250)

The matter is specifically raised by Emily Apter in the context of the design and the objectives of her vision of comparative literature as a "new" discipline, when she proposes the acquisition of a foreign language and its cultural matrix as integral part of the course structure. The global implementation of such a proposal should be given serious consideration, and academic appointments in this field without at least second-language proficiency should not be considered.

Unfortunately, in Australian universities, the majority of lecturers in Comparative (World) Literature are monolingual (and monocultural), which is regrettable. As in the United States, the belief that English "is the only language that counts and the mentality that language diversity is a problem rather than a resource" (Wiley 1996: 65) is well and alive in Australia. Significantly, this mentality is also widespread and aggressively promoted by such leading public intellectuals as Andrew Bolt and influential national newspapers such as the *Herald Sun*, where the following vilification of learning languages was published on May 28, 2010:

It was a dud idea the day Premier Jeff Kennett decreed in 1998 that all children should learn a foreign language up to year 10. Even more doomed was Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's \$62 million plan two years ago to make yet *more of these poor children* learn an Asian language. The results are now in, thanks

to a study from Melbourne University's Asia Education Foundation. For many students, it seems those *years of forced study* have been largely *wasted, and wasted most with Asian languages*. Moreover, what was sold as a way to reach out to other cultures *has divided students on ethnic lines*. (Bolt 2010) (italics by the author of this paper).

The reduction (and ultimate loss) of linguistic and cultural diversity under the pressure of the mass-media and globally powerful languages such as English “spawns new forms of multilingual aesthetic practice” (Apter 2006: 2) and has serious global consequences with regard to societies and the future of mankind (Dalby 2002). While it has become commonplace, for example, to bemoan the hegemony of global English as the *lingua franca* of technocracy, there has been insufficient attention paid to how other global languages are shifting the balance of power in the production of world culture. Chinese, for example, is now a major language of Internet literacy and is taking on English as never before (Apter 2006: 3–4).

In the context of the reflections on the societal status of “minority” and “other Englishes” (ib. 4), Emily Apter also raises the problem of the unprecedented loss of languages which must be of concern to comparative literature and culture studies (Wade and Harrison 2007). Her brief references to David Crystal, who has written widely on this matter (e.g. *Language Death*, 2000) and Andrew Dalby, who underlines in his study *Language in Danger: The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to our Future* (2002) that 2500 languages (out of 5000) will be lost over the course of the century.

In the light of the widespread assumption, that every language equals a library in terms of cultural wealth and human knowledge even in oral and unwritten form (Harrison 2007; Deutscher 2010 and 2011; Nettle and Romaine 2000) the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity is catastrophic and the promotion of “ecolinguistics” an absolute must. (Crystal 2000: ix). In order to highlight the implications of the impending crisis and immensity of cultural loss, a brief statement published in the *1995 Newsletter of the Foundation of Endangered Languages in the UK* will be quoted here:

There is agreement among linguists who have considered the situation that over half of the world's languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation. We and our children, then, are living at the point in human history, where, within perhaps two generations, most languages of the world will die out. (Crystal 2000: vii).

5. The Tower of Babel

The alarming extinction of the world's diversity of languages and cultures (matched by flora and fauna) and the associated irretrievable loss of the wealth of knowledge about the human condition accumulated over the centuries, constitutes a paradox in the age of the global village (GG: 31) in a steadily shrinking world, where man is no longer subjected to the laws of time and space, but capable of being "henceforth (actively and passively) simultaneously present, over land and sea, in every corner of the earth" (GG: 32).

The formal and systematic study of "great books" or what Henry H.H. Remak refers to as the "Humanities enterprise" as a broadly inclusive academic discipline and focus for thought and reflection (Remak 1999: 104), has lost its past status and legitimacy and has crossed the threshold of the digital information millennium, where "great works" are no longer "needed" (Spivak 1989: 43–52) and more vulnerable than ever before, as succinctly underpinned by Marshall McLuhan, amongst others, as follows:

Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside, Big Brother goes inside. (GG: 32)

The cryptic reference to the destruction of books (echoing Elias Canetti's novel *Auto-da-Fé* (1935) signals the ominous future of knowledge (printed books) in the brave new world of television and electronic information technology and the far-reaching detrimental effect of the electronic media on society in form of "division" and "separation". Significantly, it is the "media", and not the "content"

they carry, that matter; in short: the medium is the message. A negative outcome of this development is also underpinned in Marshall McLuhans's Biblical references to the "Tower of Babel" (Genesis: 11: 1–9; James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) and the complex archetypal connotations associated with it:

Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a collective awareness may have been the preverbal conditions of men. Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the "Tower of Babel" by which men sought to scale the highest heavens." (UM: 80)

While most interpretations of the Biblical narrative of the "Tower of Babel" are based on religious aspects and/or reflections on the role of language, as for example George Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) and Jacques Derrida's *The Tower of Babel* (1991), Marshall McLuhan's thematic point of reference is James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and his identification of the "Tower of Babel" with "sleep" and "witlessness" as hallmark of the human condition in the global village of the electronic century, and the blind faith in the promise of technology, that is, the computer, of "a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity" (UM: 80): "Throughout *Finnegans Wake* Joyce specifies the Tower of Babel as the tower of Sleep, that is, the tower of the witless assumption, or what Bacon calls the reign of the Idols. (GG: 183)

The complementary reference to the "somnambolists and zombies" in T.S. Eliot's early part of *The Waste Land* and the mechanical regulation of city life (London) (UM: 149) highlights the embeddedness of Marshall McLuhan's critical reflections on the "electric century" and the role of the media, in "great books" and the precarious future of "Arnoldian humanism". The above characterisations of modern Western man as "zombie" and "witless" machine are closely related to *Tzu-Gung's Anecdote* in the introductory section of this paper. A closely related character trait is also the prevailing "apathy"

in the electric century: "Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of unconsciousness and apathy." (UM: 47) Among the numerous other negative character traits of modern Western man (UM: 50; 69; 82; 86) as product of the "electric world", above all television, and a mechanical culture (UM: 308–337) intellectual "numbness" is most frequently underpinned (UM: 16):

The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed. (UM: 17–18)

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, as predicted by the great British poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744), in the "new mass culture" the notion of "great works" would lose its relevance:

Language and the arts would cease to be prime agents of critical perception and become mere packing devices for releasing a spate of verbal commodities. (GG: 268)

Another significant factor in the depreciation of the printed word is the rapidly growing global influence of electronic technology, summed up in Marshall McLuhan's prophecy of the primacy of the Visual (television) at the expense of the printed word as core of a liberal education or comparative literature and culture studies, an argument, however, dismissed by Umberto Eco as a "fallacy" (Eco 1996: 298–301):

For the world of visual perspective is one of unified and homogeneous space such a world is alien to the resonating diversity of spoken words. So language was the last art to accept the visual logic of Gutenberg technology, and the first to rebound in the electric age. (GG: 136)

The demise and uncertainty associated with the humanities as defined by Henry H. H. Remak (Remak 1999: 106), among others, is further aggravated by a general trend in the electronic media to mono-lingualism and mono-culturalism, massive cuts in government

funding of universities, even in such rich countries as Australia, the associated closure of departments (predominantly humanities), the “market-model university” (Engell 1998: 50–54), the “vocational siege” of the universities, that is, an imposed focus on vocational training with employment prospects, the restriction of cross-cultural engagement and the promotion of business interests, and finally, the numerous internal conflicts, alluded to above, concerning the inclusive and broadly knowledge-focused role of the humanities in defense of the endangered diversity and the wealth of human knowledge and cultural traditions in the brave new world of the digital information millennium,

References

Abbreviations:

(GG: The Gutenberg Galaxy; UM: Understanding Media; JM: Janine Marchessault)

- Apter, E. S. 2006. *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Bassnett, S. 1993. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford, UK.: Blackwell.
- Bauerlein, M. 1997. *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy. (Critical Authors and Issues)*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bok, D. 1995. *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press
- Bolt, A. Schools Teach Bad Language. – *Herald Sun*. May 28, 2010.
- Crystal, D. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalby, A. 2002. *Language in Danger: The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to our Future*. London: Allen Lane.
- Delbanco, A. 1999. The Decline and Fall of Literature. *The New York Review of Books* (nyrb), November 4.
- Deutscher, G. 2010. *Through the Language Glass: How Words Colour Your World*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Eco, U. 1996. Afterword. – Geoffrey Nunberg (ed.), *The Future of the Book*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 295–301.
- Ellis, J. M. 1999. *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Ellis, J. M. 1989. *Against Deconstruction*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Engell, J. and A. Dangerfield. 1998. The Market-Model University. – *Harvard Magazine*, May-June, 50–54.
- Harrison, K. D. 2007. *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heisenberg, W. 1958. *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*. London: Hutchinson.
- Kernan, A. 1992. *The Death of Literature*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Levinson, P. 1999. Millennial McLuhan: Clues for Deciphering the Digital Age. – *The Chronicle Review*, October 15, 1–7.
- Liu, L. 1995. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China 1900–1937*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Marchessault, J. 2005. *Marschall McLuhan*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications. (MJ)
- McLuhan, M.. 1967. *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographical Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (GG).
- McLuhan, M. 1964. *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. (UM)
- McLuhan, M. with E. Carpenter. 1957. Classroom without Walls. – *Explorations*, No. 7, 22–26.
- McLuhan, M., K. Hutchon and E. McLuhan. 1977. *The City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*. Agincourt, Ontario: Book Society Canada.
- McLuhan, M. and E. McLuhan. 1988. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Nettle, D. and S. Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wang Ning. 2006. "Death of a Discipline? Toward a Global/Local Orientation of Comparative Literature in China". – *Neohelicon*. XXXIII, No. 2, 149–163.
- Remak, H. H. H. 1999. Once Again: Comparative Literature at the Crossroads. – *Neohelicon* XXVI, No. 2, 99–107.
- Remak, H. H. H. 2002. Origins and Evolution of Comparative Literature and its Interdisciplinary Studies. – *Neohelicon*, XXIX No. 1, 245–250.
- Remak, H. H. H. 1981. Comparative History of Literature in European Languages. The Bellagio Report. – *Neohelicon* No. 8, 217–228.

- Remak, H. H. H. 1971. *Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function*. – Stallknecht, Newton P. & Horst Frenz. (eds.) *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*. Carbondale, Illinois, USA: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Said, E. Restoring Intellectual Coherence. 1999. *MLA Newsletter*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring, 3.
- Saussy, H. 2006. (ed.). *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schwartz, R. B. 1997. *After the Death of Literature*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press. [Online Book at Questia Online-Library].
- Snell-Hornby, M. 2006. *Turns of Translation Studies*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Song Li. “The Imperial Palace – The Palace that Rules”. 1996. *McLuhan Studies*, Issue No. 5. <http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/mcluhan-studies/mstudies.htm>
- Spivak, G. C. 2003. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. 1989. Who Needs Great Works? A Debate on the Canon, Core Curricula and Culture. – *Harper's* 279.1672, September, 43–52.
- Spivak, G. C. 2000. Arguments for a Deconstructive Cultural Studies. – Nicolas Royle. (ed.): *Deconstructions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 14–43.
- Spivak, G. C. 1994. *Outside the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge.
- Stallknecht, N. P. & H. Frenz. 1961/1971. (eds.): *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*. Carbondale, Illinois, USA: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Trommler, F. 2010. In Memoriam Henry H. H. Remak (1916–2009). – *The German Quarterly*. Vol. 83, No. 2, Spring, 149–150.
- Wade, D. & K. D. Harrison (eds.). 2007. *Book of Peoples of the World: a guide to cultures*. With Catherine Howell. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic.
- Wellek, R. 1963. The Crisis of Comparative Literature. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. – *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 282–95.
- Wiley, T. G. 1996. *Literacy and Language Diversity in the United States*. (Chapter2). [ericidigest.org/1998].
- Zhou, Xiaoyi and Q. S. Tong. 2000. Comparative Literature in China. – *Comparative Literature and Culture*. Vol. 2, No. 4, 1–10. CLC Web: <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/issue4/9>>