

McLuhan on Poe's Maelstrom

Starting at age 35 — the halfway mark of life according to Dante, life's roofbeam — until he died 35 years later on New Year's eve 1980, McLuhan cited *A Descent into the Maelstrom* over and over (and over) again. Leaving aside his very frequent general references to the whirlpool (sometimes "worldpool"), and his even more frequent discussions of the vortex and vortices, the following are passages in his work (in chronological order) that take off from Poe's short story:

Footprints in the Sands of Crime, 1946

The sailor in his story *The Maelstrom* is at first paralyzed with horror. But in his very paralysis there is another fascination which emerges, a power of detached observation which becomes a "scientific" interest in the action of the *strom*. And this provides the means of escape.

The Mechanical Bride, 1951

Poe's sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by cooperating with it. The present book likewise makes few attempts to attack the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising. It does attempt to set the reader at the center of the revolving picture created by these affairs where he may observe the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved. (v)

The Mechanical Bride, 1951

It is here suggested that the outlines of world order are already quite visible to the student of the swirling flood released by industrial technique. And they are to be discerned in the very way in which the flood operates. Poe's sailor in "The Maelstrom" saved himself by cooperating with the action of the "*strom*" itself. (75)

The Mechanical Bride, 1951

our situation is very like that of Poe's sailor in "The Maelstrom," and we are now obliged not to attack or avoid the *strom* but to study its operation as providing a means of release from it. (151)

The Gutenberg Galaxy, 1962

What could be more practical for a man caught between the Scylla of a literary culture and the Charybdis of post-literate technology to make himself a raft of ad copy? He is behaving like Poe's sailor in the *Maelstrom* who studied the action of the whirlpool and survives. May not it be our job in the new electronic age to study the

action of the new vortex on the body of the older cultures? (77)

Understanding Media, 1964

Now, however, in the electronic age, data classification yields to pattern recognition, the key phrase at IBM. When data move instantly, classification is too fragmentary. In order to cope with data at electric speed in typical situations of “information overload,” men resort to the study of configurations, like the sailor in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Maelstrom*. (vii)

The Medium is the Massage, 1967

“I must have been delirious, for I even sought amusement in speculation upon the relative velocities of their several descents towards the foam below.”

In his amusement born of rational detachment from his own situation, Poe’s mariner in “The Descent into the Maelstrom” staved off disaster by understanding the action of the whirlpool. His insight offers a possible stratagem for understanding our predicament, our electrically-configured whirl. (150)

Playboy Interview, 1969

The extensions of man’s consciousness induced by the electric media could conceivably usher in the millennium, but it also holds the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ — Yeats’ rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. Cataclysmic environmental changes such as these are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants. It’s inevitable that the world-pool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the *maelstrom*, studying the process as it happens to us and what we can do about it, we can come through.

Take Today, 1972

The following chapters explore both the gradual variations and the sudden transformations that occur in the figure-ground interplay of man and his artifacts, as each remakes the other. Our chief resources are the gripes and jokes, the problems and breakdowns, of managers themselves; for therein lie the solutions and breakthroughs via pattern recognition of the processes involved. Managing *The ‘Ascent’ from the Maelstrom* today demands awareness that can be achieved only by going *Through the Vanishing Point*. (13)

Art as Survival in the Electric Age, 1973

[Poe’s sailor] survived by pattern recognition. He perceived [in] the action of the

strom, that there were certain objects which recurred and survived. He attaches himself to the recurring objects and survives. (...) Poe hit upon the key to the electric age, programming from effects in order to anticipate cause

Art as Survival in the Electric Age 1973

“It was not a new terror that thus affected me, but the dawn of a more exciting hope. This hope arose partly from memory, and partly from present observation. I called to mind the great variety of buoyant matter that strewed the coast of Lofoden, having been absorbed and then thrown forth by the *Moskoe-strom*. “By far the greater number of the articles were shattered in the most extraordinary way — so chafed and roughened as to have the appearance of being stuck full of splinters — but then I distinctly recollected that there were some of them which were not disfigured at all. Now I could not account for this difference except by supposing that the roughened fragments were the only ones which had been completely absorbed (...) I made, also, three important observations. The first was, that as a general rule, the larger the bodies were, the more rapid their descent; — the second, that, between two masses of equal extent, the one spherical, and the other of any other shape, the superiority in speed of descent was with the sphere; — the third, that, between two masses of equal size, the one cylindrical, and the other of any other shape, the cylinder was absorbed the more slowly (...)”

“There was one startling circumstance which went a great way in enforcing these observations, and rendering me anxious to turn them to account, and this was that, at every revolution, we passed something like a barrel, or else the broken yard or the mast of a vessel, while many of these things, which had been on our level when I first opened my eyes upon the wonders of the whirlpool, were now high up above us, and seemed to have moved but little from their original station.

“I no longer hesitated what to do. I resolved to lash myself securely to the water cask upon which I now held, to cut it loose from the counter, and to throw myself with it into the water. (...)”

“The result was precisely what I had hoped it might be. As it is myself who now tell you this tale — as you see that I did escape — and as you are already in possession of the mode in which this escape was effected, and must therefore anticipate all that I have farther to say — I will bring my story quickly to conclusion.”¹

The Possum and the Midwife, 1978 [= Pound, Eliot, and the Rhetoric of The Waste Land, 1979]

Poe’s “Descent into the Maelstrom” has structurally much in common with the vortices of the *Cantos*. [Pound’s] “Sargasso Sea” is a vortex that attracts

multitudinous objects but which also tosses things up again in recognizable patterns which serve for survival. Survival for Poe's sailor had meant attaching himself to one of the recurring objects in the whirlpool. The same strategy applies to Pound's readers who need to be alert to the resonance of recurring themes.

Man and Media, 1979

Edgar Allan Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelstrom" had tremendous influence on the nineteenth-century poets and symbolists like Baudelaire, Flaubert, and others. In this story, Poe imagines the situation in which a sailor, who has gone out on a fishing expedition, finds himself caught in a huge maelstrom or whirlpool. He sees that his boat will be sucked down into this thing. He begins to study the action of the *strom*, and observes that some things disappear and some things reappear. By studying those things that reappear and attaching himself to one of them, he saves himself. Pattern recognition in the midst of a huge, overwhelming, destructive force is the way out of the *maelstrom*. The huge vortices of energy created by our media present us with similar possibilities of evasion of [their] consequences, of [our] destruction [by them]. By studying the pattern of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we're involved, it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival.

Man and Media, 1979

The artist's insights or perceptions seem to have been given to mankind as a providential means of bridging the gap between evolution and technology. The artist is able to program, or reprogram, the sensory life in a manner which gives us a navigational chart to get out of the *maelstrom* created by our own ingenuity. The role of the artist in regard to man and the media is simply survival.

Notes

Anticipating [Andy Kaufman \[http://tinyurl.com/yb4cwzjf\]](http://tinyurl.com/yb4cwzjf), who began reading *The Great Gatsby* on *Saturday Night Live* in 1978, McLuhan read this entire segment of *The Maelstrom* in this April 9 1973 lecture ('Art as Survival in the Electric Age', *Understanding Me*, 2003, 207-224, here 211-212). McLuhan had premiered the skit twenty years earlier in his 1954 lecture, *Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters*, when he read an even longer passage from Cesare Zavattini. In 1979, in one of his last public appearances, he was still at it: a single quotation from Martin Heidegger took up 10% of his 'Man and Media' lecture (*Understanding Me*, 2003, 278-298, here 289-291).