

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 6 (1992)

Artikel: Writing and medieval culture
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99887>

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Writing and Medieval Culture

Hans H. Meier

Oh that my words were now written!
oh that they were printed in a book!

Let us put this strange outcry from Job 19:23 over these reflections since it may stand for a wish suppressed in the Middle Ages but emerging powerfully in the Renaissance and asserted triumphantly by the Shakespeare of the Sonnets, which reiterate the theme of his verse as preserved in black ink outliving him to the end of time. We may never know, of course, what made the translators for King James find in poetry of two thousand years back a world of "printing" and of "books." It could be the Reformation longing for *sola scriptura*, or else an unexpected touch of bringing biblical language up to date as Good News for Modern Man.

Introductory

The first meaning of culture was land opened up by the coulter of a plough, or a field to be tilled, as in *Palladius on husbondrie*:

but this consideraunce
Is first to haue, how thing is of nature
In placis ther a man wol ha culture. (M.E.D. s.v. Culture:1440)

And where "writing" now first suggests "literature" we may remember that the latter, too, implied an elementary skill, as when, in Older Scots, a man *cunnand in littrature* was recommended, it could simply mean that he could read and write. (D.O.S.T. s.v. Literatur:1420) Even taken in this primary sense, writing has long been considered not only the soil and the seed but the flower and the fruit of culture. Thus the first move of scripts through

the Fertile Crescent has been straight identified with the march of Culture itself. In this view, unwritten cultures might well be written off, as regrettably unwritten languages of the past must be by the philologist. Now in the transalpine world, last of Europe to be hit by literacy, the Middle Ages are a fruitful field to study the relations between writing and culture. And for those centuries the equation of the two is certainly mistaken. However supreme the role of those *cunnand in littrature* — and this, with few exceptions was reserved for clerics —, the majority, including almost all womankind, were illiterate. The most vital cultural information, everything that among presumed savages has been called "the knowledge of the tribe," could not be handed down to them in writing.

The unfairness of the equation challenged is seen in the 19th century declaring all history not recorded in writing to constitute "prehistory." By this account, when at last scripts circumvented the Alps, and our past became history, what is it that the new technology entails? Is it simply the ability to avail oneself of an alphabet, the infant skill to scratch names and not much more? For such laconicism, almost confined to the names of the sponsor, of the person commemorated, and of the carver, marks the earliest third-century Germanic runes on Danish monuments. The largest and almost unique record of Continental Celtic, from the first two centuries A.D., consists of names of Celtic potters scratched on hundreds of potsherds found on the site of a big *terra sigillata* factory in the Cévennes.¹ Is such writing proof, and its absence disproof, of the possession of culture? Nobody today would dare to assert this (though the assumption lingers). On the contrary, the modern appreciation of archeology (if non-linguistic) tends rather to overrate the importance of material culture. Very successful exhibitions of ancient artefacts reflect the high reputation enjoyed by cultures largely unwritten or undeciphered.

Attainment

The odd career of runes among the Germanic people can illustrate at least two aspects of literacy frequently overlooked. One is our easy but false identification of writing and reading as essentially the same skill. If this were true and if those mysterious "rune-masters" that are supposed to have guarded the runic tradition like secret magic should really have existed,

¹ The so-called *La Graufesenque graffiti* (Evans).

their runes could only be read by themselves. This clearly does not make sense, and it is more likely that any well-educated Anglo-Saxon could use them, as recently four runic names of early 8th-century English pilgrims have been found scratched in the walls of St. Michael at Monte S. Angelo on the Gargano peninsula of central Italy (Derolez, Derolez and Schwab). The other aspect of newly-attained literacy, characteristically shown with runes, is that the mastery of letters is immediately used for quite non-functional purposes, partly surrounded by hocus-pocus, as with the invention of cryptic runic systems, partly by showing off, displaying runic lore in manuscripts as flourishes of learning for its own sake. Postrunic writing, too, was early turned into a tour-de-force of ornamentation and illumination, or used for quite exclusive letter-games, the *Carmina Figurata* of Alcuin's school, looking like some modernist attempts to combine word and image.² And quite generally, the possession of Latin induced many early scholars to compose in very involved and florid styles, of which another Anglo-Saxon, Aldhelm, is a notorious example. Thus the art of writing could be accompanied by various forms of aesthetic and intellectual boasting.

In school practice, indeed, learning to read and to write appears closely related, and unsuccessful pupils are usually deficient in either task. This then results in functional illiteracy, which in our civilisation leads to social and personal misery and, when publicised from time to time, elicits cries of national disgrace. Nevertheless, reading and writing are two distinct achievements, of which the acquisition has only begun to be seriously studied. Now in the Middle Ages the attendant social problems were unknown, but we can still see something of the medieval situation, and of the different skills required, with native speakers of minority languages not taught at school, when we find those who can perhaps read but hardly write even their native tongue. Like "older, first-language speakers of Welsh" who "often cannot write a letter in their own language." (Leith 166—7)

Three momentous steps towards the attainment of cultural status by hitherto unwritten idioms have all been achieved for vernaculars in medieval times: the invention of a suitable alphabetical spelling, the achievement of a first book in the language, and the production of a prestigious poet who sets the standard. We can see the continued

² See the catalogue *Karl der Grosse*. No. 362 Figurengedichte, p. 204, and Plate 37.

importance of these in much later periods, for languages in need of being reclaimed or cultivated as *Kultursprachen* (Kloss). In the 17th century, for instance, Gysbert Japicx was for his native Frisian tongue, which had been disrupted from its remembered medieval past, a deviser of spelling (taking over English graphemes like *ea* and *oa*), the producer of its then only literary book, the *Rymlerije* of 1681, and himself a notable poet, thus demonstrating the three steps in one go (Feitsma 15–9). Now if we try to project this vision of the three steps backward onto Anglo-Saxon, which undoubtedly made great strides, all direct testimony is missing. We do not know how they felt about their creation of an extraordinarily adequate spelling, and no modern historical grammar even stops to marvel at this marvel. The first book-length epic of *Beowulf* and its greatest of Anglo-Saxon poets left no sign of contemporary appreciation, though a note of national pride is noticeable in King Alfred's undertaking to make education available in the mother tongue (in which he was successful where Charlemagne had failed!). All this, including admirable renderings and poetical adaptations of large portions of Christian literature, was achieved without much fuss and almost as a matter of course, and with few thank-yous from posterity. Not only the Anglo-Saxon but also the Middle English Bible was quite forgotten by the time of Luther, when Tyndale's New Testament (for which he was martyred) was smuggled into the country, and latter-day Lollards were treated with contempt for claiming that they already had the Bible in the folk-speech as in 1527 they proudly (if very secretly) produced the "iiii Evangelistes and certayne Epistles of Peter and Poule in Englishe." (Parker 28–9)

Transmission

From the Renaissance and Reformation point of view the cultural significance of reading and writing can hardly be exaggerated. Yet it *has* been exaggerated as seen from the Middle Ages, which would never have believed that only those capable of reading the Bible could be saved, that the readable Bible by itself brought about one true church or that, once it was translated into all the idioms of the earth, the earth would harbour the kingdom of heaven. But of course there was the vital task of providing the majority with the required knowledge of the tribe, and this, as up to our own days, was passed on by word of mouth. Specifically, Christian teaching was likewise practised through memorising and by proverbs, preaching,

pictures, performances, and plays. Already in the 6th century Gregory the Great had remarked that painting was to the unlearned what Scripture was to the literate (Auerbach 215). Pictorial series as on a row of painted windows, of wall panels or sculptured friezes (where every "storey" tells a "story"), sequences like the Bayeux Tapestry, the Ceiling of Zillis, the illustrated *Biblia Pauperorum*, or the still storied stations of the cross, these are the lineal ancestors of our picture books, comics, and strip cartoons. Not only the necessities of spiritual and material life but also its luxury, literature, would be quite normally transmitted in this way. So we find fascinating evidence of the stories about Reynard the Fox being known, long before written versions appear in England, from episodes shown in some two hundred carvings, murals or stained-glass paintings in (of all places) English cathedrals and parish churches (Varty). Proof that the house of God had profane mansions, and a late instance of the iconographic tradition much preceding the literary one, a state of affairs quite common with Greek myths (Brommer).

Certainly, communication between the Latin-trained *lered* and the unlettered *lewed* (which clerical contumely changed in sense to "lewd") was always maintained. But the educational gap was perhaps more divisive, though less disturbing, than its modern equivalent known as "the language bar." (Grove 7–32) Those acquainted with the "liberal arts" would look down on a mere "professor of mechanical arts," as a common blacksmith is once sportingly described in a source of Older Scots. To be sure, the actual past extent of literacy is difficult to assess. For some regions in the earlier period, up to one third of the male population have been surmised to have been clerics, who had the trivium at least, and the late Middle Ages in England were better provided with schools than the Victorian Age. A meaningful turning-point was the 15th century, when laymen started to write personal letters personally and even, like the Pastons, to keep up quite an extensive correspondence.

By and large most non-verbal arts were learnt and practised without any books. Or else the know-how was hidden rather than revealed in writing. The avoidance of leaving records in these fields is no doubt connected with professional secrecy and guarding monopolies. But it is only part of the tenacious trust the Middle Ages placed in orality over written documentation. All utterances in law and legend, prophecy and poetry were by origin unscripted, and there are to this day traces of the medieval attitude of considering orality more reliable and more authentic.

If in modern conveyancing the contract must be read out in full in the hearing of both parties, court sentences must be literally pronounced, all oaths and marriage vows must actually be uttered, this reflects the medieval view that of all binding agreements and legal contracts the spoken word is the effective act or "deed," the written thing only an "instrument" or "evidence." Such utterances have been classed as "performative" ones, and they have never been envisaged as being operational on paper (Lyons 725–45).

If we learnt that the original meaning of *writan*, "scratch, carve, engrave" (like the cognate German *reissen*) was significant as pointing to the incising of runes, the same etymology is behind Latin *scribere* and Greek *graphein*! So that when Jesus "stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground," (John 8:6) he may just have drawn a doodle and not written anything at all. It remains rather strange, however, that of all Germanic languages only English retained native *writan* for actual writing, whereas *scribere* is found here, as *scrifan*, only in senses like "decree," "impose," (a lot, sentence, or penance) then also "take care of," (as through confession) referring not to the fact but to effects of (unknown) writing — a use shared with Old Saxon and Old Frisian, and thus hailing from the Continental period of Roman occupation, on the whole with rather forbidding connotations.

An impressive way of tracing cultural movements from the records of language takes us back to the same premedieval times. This is the interpretation of lexical borrowing from one language to another as marking so many paths of the transcultural migration of words, notions and things. Not only the timing of historic sounds and their shifts but the reconstruction of whole cultural networks has been based on the spread and constitution of loanwords in the various vernaculars.³ What is striking but simply taken for granted, is that such early borrowings, as of many Latin, Gallo-Roman and Celtic words (and place-names!), of terms emanating from missionary or monastic centres, from routes of trade, agriculture, building, cult, or whatever, into Germanic as well as Romance languages, were practically all taken over from spoken forms. The fact that philologists do work out the story of borrowings with the help of written

³ For a classic, making extensive use of such geographical moves as yielding the basic demarcation of German, see Frings (1950).

sources may have obscured its essentially non-literary nature, but taking up foreign words purely from print is a comparatively late phenomenon. Even Chaucer, perhaps the first self-confessed bookworm, (*The House of Fame* 652–60) in whose writings the massive influx of French words is fully visible, had them all as part of the oralised repertoire of so many bilingual generations of educated Englishmen before him.

Script

Now regarding the more elementary aspects of writing in Old English specifically, its basic requirement, the adaptation of the Latin and runic alphabets to Anglo-Saxon, the cultivation of a special script, the Insular Minuscule (from Ireland), for the vernacular, its heedful application in handsome manuscripts, all reflect the high value attached to having as good texts in it as in Latin. Irish and English founders and missionaries, moreover, brought the Insular script with its English graphs wholesale to Old Norse and in details to the earliest writings in Old Saxon and Old High German.⁴ Taking account of considerable time-lags and overlaps, a history of scripts might be shown to mirror the history of culture itself, since scripts are "an index of the continuity of European civilization since Classical times." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* s.v. Paleography:120) Thus in England the shift from Insular to Caroline hands was no doubt a consequence of the Norman Conquest, the change from these to Gothic hands, with greater potentiality for cursive forms, an answer to the needs of students in the recently founded universities and to the rise of a literate middle class when the church ceased to have a writing monopoly, and the development of a fluent 16th-century English secretary hand (also current in Holland and Germany) responded to a great extension of business and administration.

In England, the flowering of vernacular literature in the 14th century may be chiefly due to the evolution of cursive bookhands. As they allowed a much easier, faster and cheaper mode of production, which could be handled by amateur scribes and authors as well, these cursive scripts induced a habit of translating literature into various regional dialects to

⁴ For Old Norse see Gordon lxii–iv, for Old High German and Old Saxon see Priebisch and Collinson 403–6.

find more readers, and brought about an astonishing increase and proliferation of written culture quite generally, while specifically contributing to the spread of Lollardy (Benskin and Laing 90–1, quoting Parkes xvi). An early, formidable example of the medium getting the mastery over the message?

The question whether language is preeminently writing or preeminently speech would hardly have bothered medieval man as it has later students of language (Mackenzie, Crystal 178–81). The deplorable idea, however, that the written form of a language is the real or proper, because "superior" form, may well have first emerged when Latin was taught as a dead language, in schools. On this mistaken model, any *Schriftsprache*, i.e. the standardised, preferably national, written variety of a language was held to be its preeminent and only legitimate representation. The fiercest protest against this idea, which still characterises the typical educated layman who, furthermore, feels that "speech is a rendition of writing," not vice versa, came from linguists who insisted that "writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks." (Mackenzie 4, Bloomfield 21) While we would grant that through writing new, latent, unexpected potentials can be opened to a language hitherto unlettered, we all agree with those, and grave doubts beset us about well-meant suggestions that speech and writing are two "alternative" systems, with "equal" rights, one being language expressed in "phonic," the other in "graphic" substance (Crystal 179).

The whole point, of course, is that the relation between speech and writing is a hierarchical one, with writing, though also making up a secondary sort of linguistic system, playing second fiddle. Rightly considered, even the historical study of language has fostered awareness of the primacy of the spoken word, but has unfortunately always been placed in the position that it had no other records than written ones. Having only letter signs to go by, the philologist has long been after spellings and the reconstruction, from these, of sounds and their changes. Thus writing and speech have in fact been his breathing in and his breathing out. It is remarkable, on the other hand, that for the last decennia an approach that treats spelling as autonomous and studies graphemes as part of systems in their own right has scored singular successes in the structural analysis, and synthesis, of medieval idioms. Quite spectacular results for the mapping of written medieval dialects, or scriptolects, were achieved when procedures

were extended from single texts or authors to a large number of documents in a country-wide scatter. Thus the computer-aided survey of printed Old French charters shows quite a new map of medieval French, while the Middle English survey, carried out "by hand" (or rather, by eye), scrutinising the work of no fewer than 2,500 scribes, using quite different techniques of evaluation, greatly refines and refashions Middle English dialectology and codicology (Dees, McIntosh). In both surveys, dialects are made the object of procedural dialectics between writing and speech: one does it by statistics and frequency, the other by a "fit" technique reminiscent of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle — perhaps symbolic of a contrast between the French and the English mind.

We may be sure that during all the Middle Ages, before printing, writing as a privilege was more highly valued than ever since. Books were not only more precious in embodying much more laborious work, but they were literally much more expensive to acquire. This in spite of the fact that, in the early periods, labour costs were nil, as poor monks copied with stiff fingers in draughty cloisters, though material was sometimes scarce. The astonishing output of Iceland has been said to be due to the abundant supply there of two things: time and vellum. When printing came to set the seal to the Middle Ages, writing was for some time neither improved nor supplanted.

There were not only "dainty Italian humanists, in the sixteenth century, who were so fastidious that they would not allow printed books in their libraries" and so had still handwritten books made for them, but also in much less dainty Scotland secular poetry was copied in large volumes from small cheap prints, of which masses must have perished like modern paperbacks, while those fair copies, painstakingly penned, were treasured and remain the most trustworthy texts." (Fox: quote 156:166—7)

Medievals could not rush off with the manuscripts of their sermons to the printing-house, the same Sunday, as did some Jacobean star preachers — and they probably would not have done so. For the longer one studies their literature, the more it becomes clear that they very carefully considered anything before they put it on parchment, allowing no absolute trash to pass muster. Even the obscure or unassuming bit of verse turns out, on closer reading and closer research, to have some unexpected depth beneath the appearance of crudeness or dullness. Thus, to take a recent revelation, the early 14th-century Hiberno-English poem *Pers of Bermingham*, which had been seen as a rude glorification of one of the

English terrorisers of the Irish, proves not to be such a naive popular ballad but a skilled satire in mock-heroic form, damning its hero with forceful praise and even invoking images of Christ implying its antitype in Sir Pers, the whole pointing to Franciscan workmanship (Benskin, Rostvig and Benskin).

Oral literature

The label "oral literature," seemingly a contradiction in terms, has been applied to much vernacular verse as well as prose, especially to Anglo-Saxon poetry and the saga-style narrative. Perhaps when a song or story is written down its orality is destroyed, at least it ceases to be "oral." That the thing exists to this day, however, is quite certain, since stories, anecdotes and jokes "orally composed," and both these and folksongs, nursery rhymes and all sorts of sayings "orally transmitted," have been universal. This mode of literary existence was rife among medieval folk, and it must account for the age-old migration of motifs even across the continents, for which, as today, wandering individuals were responsible. "Oral poetry" sounds better than "oral literature," and here the watchword "oral-formulaic" has been passed on to both 20th century Serbo-Croatian and Old English epic poetry.⁵ This approach has been cried up as well as down. On the one hand we hear that "it has produced something like a revolution in scholarly opinion." (Diamond 6) On the other, we have pronouncements against "the proliferating fantasy of 'oral formulaic' theory, which assumes that Old English poetry, even as we have it, was orally improvised." (Pearsall 17) The last implication is certainly wrong but, used with caution, the awareness that recourse to formulaic systems and type-scenes, as noticeable in traditionally unlettered simple forms, was continued even in book epics like *Beowulf* can serve to open up striking new insights. Such as finding, purely on the basis of the Old English epic diction, that the famous single combat between father and son is *not* described in the Old High-

⁵ The complex of orality or otherwise has since about 1960 mobilised many minds: see Foley (1983). I have found stimulating thoughts in Ong (1982) and Zumthor (1983, 1990). Also, in the framework of current research on "Uebergänge und Spannungsfelder zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit" of the University of Freiburg i. Br., in Bandle (1991).

German fragment of *Hildebrandslied*, which in truth breaks off with a general battle-scene (Meier 1990).

If "oral literature" is, therefore, not taken too literally but handled as a stylistic rather than genetic label, it can be understood to extend to later genres, to romances, ballads and fairy-tales as well. What is more, even in the earliest, presumably non-scriptorial poetry we can thus in the composition by given types of formula and scene observe the modern-seeming methods of "intertextuality" (literal evocation of other works) and "collage" (putting together pieces from a ready set of requisites).

Yet intertextuality in the modern sense is not to be found in English works before the end of the Middle Ages. By this we mean verbal and thematic echoes from, allusive references to, or parodistic reworkings quite specifically of other secular English authors or works, of a kind to be appreciated as such by the audience. The absence of these traits has been said to be mainly due to the lack of any tradition or continuity in secular literature, the want of a homogeneous public and of anything approaching even on a small, intimate scale what might be called a republic of letters.⁶

This is quite different in the Provence and in France, where we find both small courts of nobles and modern intertextuality as early as the 12th century, among troubadours taking up each other's songs in skits and flytings, and in the astonishing literary game of the *Romance of Fergus* by Guillaume le Clerc (ca. 1200), produced as an ironical "neo-Perceval," a parody, literary criticism, and "fulfilment" of the *Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1182.).⁷ Here we have a detailed "perversion" of the Perceval story, offering a re-secularisation in supplanting the Holy Grail by a luminous shield (to be fetched from Dunnottar Castle in the northeast of Scotland), and the quest for salvation by that for the earthly beloved Galiene. Now, what strikes us in our context is that such games exclusively for connoisseurs are only possible where there are enough manuscripts and a written, received, recognisable text available, which was evidently the case with Old French and Provençal being promoted by aristocrats and copied by secular, professional scribes.⁸

⁶ See Blake 27–33 on the absence of verbal echo, and 116–27 on the questionableness of parody.

⁷ This insight is offered in a comprehensive recent study: see Zemel (1991).

⁸ On the literary production in Old French and Old Provençal see the respective chapters in Langosch (1964).

However, though hardly acknowledged, there *was* a Germanic example, in contemporary Iceland, of a real republic both in the political and literary sense, where letters flourished and brought forth various works of intertextuality, among which Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (ca. 1222) stands out. Ostensibly a handbook of poetics, this is in reality a powerful compound of Northern mythology, with a critical rewriting, invoking and quoting specific earlier verse and alluding to shared literary knowledge, as well as building this up, through Christian and Classical consciousness, into a revised vision of the Norse heritage, including South Germanic legend as well. This feat of Snorri's, like most of the wondrous poetic production of Iceland, needs more than "time and vellum" to explain it. It presupposes the existence of a church-educated, hence literate, lay public. And indeed here, by 1200, even free peasants could read and write, as nowhere else in the Western World. As the pagan world and the pagan ways had receded, Snorri thus set out to save them from oblivion, but could and did find an echo only because familiar, reliable texts were regularly being copied and spread.⁹

The traditional philologist feels uneasy about both the fact and the fiction of "oral literature." He is only happy with a text, if at all possible in more than one manuscript, version or recension, so he can do his proper job of establishing the most authentic one for the man of letters to use. And in the latter's view, what remembered songs or stories may have lived for ages do not materialise until they are written down and, preferably, garnered and garnished in a notable collection. This happened with Homer and the Bible, with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with fabliaux and novelle in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, with Reynard, Dr. Faustus and Till Eulenspiegel. It was only Romanticism that started tapping sources as close as possible to oral origins, yet Percy, Burns, Scott and the Brothers Grimm all tampered with the folktexts they found. Not before our days of tape recording, in fact, can we get the real mouth-to-ear impressions, and completely unedited transcriptions of these are still rare.¹⁰ Memorised literature, too, has become unfamiliar, and the

⁹ On the cultural and literary conditions see Sonderegger 731–2. For this incursion I am also indebted to Häny (1990).

¹⁰ See Leitch (1988) for a fine recent example in the volume of a Scottish tinker's life-story told by himself.

discovery of a Hebridean woman who still knew hundreds of ballads by heart, some never recorded, was quite a sensation in the fifties.¹¹ But we just need such reminders of what was a more common cultural gift in the Middle Ages, of the fact that "scriptless ages have a stronger memory than lettered ones" (Neckel 30) — though admittedly (so much is true about the misnomer "prehistory") even the best memorial tradition is no substitute for historiography.

So far as medieval culture is scriptless or non-literate, there is a natural overweight of the visual and pictorial, a spatial orientation, an intuitive grasping of relationships, a weak individual assertion of self: instead, the impersonal, generally human (and divine) interest prevails. Where that culture finds expression in native language and text, there is a remarkable abiding by nouns and names, and a nominal style quite generally, being typically concrete, iconic, paratactic (even asyndetic-paratactic), non-temporal; a reliance on juxtaposition and forcing unlinked elements into a whole, and a ready responsiveness to musical and prosodic effects rather than logical organisation. Now all of these traits have been found to strongly characterise English and American Modernism (as led by Hulme, Pound, Williams, Eliot, Hemingway and others) and to strangely correlate with a dominance of the right hemisphere of the brain as against the left whose proper domain is language in general, and here its more verbal, abstract, and hypotactic procedures, beside all the ways opposite to those named above, such as more strictly serial, temporal, analytical and rational methods (Crystal 259, Nänny). If these correspondences hold, the Middle Ages must be seen as popularly dominated by the right hemisphere, and Modernism to revert to a typically medieval lateralisation. It would be quite fatuous, however, to infer from this that both the Medieval and the Modernist had somehow their left hemisphere impaired or undeveloped, or were generally less sensitive to language. On the contrary, both are equally sensitive, but the former by instinct, the latter by reaction, comes to sift and reduce it to evocative directness, observing an aesthetic chastity unimpressive to the classical-minded. In more sophisticated forms, with medieval typologists and modern symbolists, this mode of the right hemisphere trusts to much unspoken subtext and understood parallelism where the rationalist expects explicitness.

¹¹ The discoverer was James Ross of the School of Scottish Studies: see Ross (1957).

Literacy and consequences

Returning to what was actually committed to writing in the eight centuries that embrace the English Middle Ages, we may take pride in the statement that already with regard to Old English "in no other medieval vernacular language does such a hoard of verbal treasures exist for such an extended period." (Greenfield and Calder [1]) But at the same time we may not forget that "Old English [writing] is abjectly poor in comparison with the output of Latin literature." (Blake 14) Yet whether in Latin or Old English, even what is extant forms quite a large body of writings, in addition to a considerable portion that must have been lost (see Wilson). Quite apart from the observation that purely quantitative yardsticks are themselves "abjectly poor" in measuring literary output, the sprouting of such an early vernacular literary culture on English soil has even to this day rarely been done justice to. It was for a Romance and Classical scholar to put it into European perspective (Auerbach 201–3). Auerbach points to England as *the* great exception in the Western World where there was no educated society either productive or receptive of written literature in the ubiquitous medium that everybody spoke. What literature there was, was confined to scholastic or scriptorial islets of learning. In this situation, Old English is marked off as unique, though even this lacked a public in any classical or modern sense, except for that of a few Anglo-Saxon nobles. Following the Conquest, English writing fell on evil days, but, as another great Romanist suggested, by an irony of fate it gave rise to French literature! For French literature indeed originated in Anglo-Norman and Norman space, and the Norman aristocracy, especially the great royal ladies, may have promoted a literature in their mother tongue — though of a new cast and stamp — as a counterpart to that patronised by the English nobility (Bezzola 238–9). The suggestion has not been widely echoed. It might be worth renewed attention.

If Gustav Neckel, from his penetrating view of Old Norse, had with some bitterness remarked that "the incoming Middle Ages cracked and crushed the flower of Germanic poetry," (Neckel 26–7) this must be greatly modified for Anglo-Saxon which had, in a matchless symbiosis of its own Antiquity and received Christianity, established literary greatness in the midst of a fully medieval world. In our context, Neckel's dictum will imply that incoming literacy crushed literature that was basically oral. However, the less biased criticism of our days finds that even Old Norse as

we know it, whether poetic or prosaic, hardly allows a clear-cut distinction of purely pagan and oral and purely Christian or classical and scriptorial.

Of course, the otherness of the past shows best from a distance. Among the countless blessings of a written language enjoyed as common property, there are some less desirable consequences such as the Middle Ages never knew. I shall mention only three of the sort fully felt with settled standardisation and schooling in a nation-state. The first is fixed spelling and the identification of writing with language. The Middle Ages were little interested in a unified spelling system, and apparent exceptions like the scriptoria of the Winchester school for Old English merely create the illusion that there was something like a standard *Schriftsprache*. Thereafter, from Middle to Early Modern English, actual spelling always fluctuated, though printers were intent on using widely acceptable norms. Within these, until recent times, there were many variants allowed, and up to the 18th century we find most abominable spellers even among upper-class letter-writers, especially ladies. Our practice of "modernisation" in print, whereby (in the Oxford and Norton anthologies, for instance) Chaucer, as the only medieval author left in the old spelling, has the most antiquated look, has not only produced artificial misinterpretations¹², but has generally sanctioned the schoolmaster's sway. In consequence, in all languages with a literary tradition, even the slightest suggestion of any change or reform of spelling tends to be strongly resented.

Another consequence directly connected, is the decisive social status attached in all countries to the mastery of the ruling orthography. This would have been unthinkable in medieval society, and the modern development is all the more deplorable as correct spelling is in itself of no linguistic or literary value whatsoever. A third desideratum, most pregnantly British, is that not only the spelling but also the pronunciation (partly based on spelling instead of the other way round!) should be the standard one, one often absurdly referred to as "speaking without an accent." Since during the whole of the Middle Ages there was never "a standard variety of English accepted as such wherever the language was spoken," this demand would not even have been understood (Leith 7).

If these last considerations criticise modern achievements (more

¹² Thus the simple inverted spelling *naigh* for *nay* "to say no (to)" went undetected by so many Shakespeare scholars (Meier 1991:350–1).

especially, however, those of the 19th century) it should be recalled that, as with all progress in civilisation, this concerns attitudes towards the instrument (writing), not the instrument as such. We have here a classical example of the social abuse of a technology which in itself is innocent.

Epilogue

In some ways this sketch may seem prejudiced in favour of illiteracy, which, of course, has been far from my mind. On the contrary: for the history of the mind I hold the literate heritage superior to almost any other human legacy of the past. Yet in the interplay of writing and non-writing the latter cannot be denied to have exerted a profound influence even (or rather: precisely) in the establishment of vernacular literature. Which, whether rhetorical or popular or aristocratic, relied on the skilful handling of traditional moulds pointing to oral models intended for delivery before a live audience. For from the receiving end, and for most people, written stuff was still "oral literature" as they, like children today, had it read out to them. So much was even implied by the injunction *Appointed to be read in Churches* on the title page of the King James Bible, of which private perusal at home was thus still being forbidden.

Certain conditions not usually thought to obtain before the Renaissance are already present in the earlier age. As has been justly emphasised, "only when a major educated minority is found, has a stage of good breeding been reached that can be significantly compared to that of Antiquity." And "such a minority can only form a class of society when the mother tongue has become the proper and essential instrument of education." (Auerbach 192) Of this we have noted a few beginnings. But quite a number of further correspondences link us to those undarkened ages. In various ways we see a remedievalisation of modern culture. We have universities (the name is still envied) that cease to aim at a general, let alone liberal, education but tend to become preparatory schools for the practice of certain professions — which is what they were in the Middle Ages, and long after. Then, with the prevalence of audio-visual information, with radio, film, telephone, television, telefax, the computer and the comics, more and more illustrated and picture books — visually splendid, with poor or no text to read — we are surrounded by a flood of non-literate media and messages, modern prophets urging man to become "numerate" rather than "literate." Above all, and possibly lethal to literacy,

there is a ubiquity of the unscripted spoken word, often uncultivated and uncultured. In modern, or at least "modernist" poetry and fiction, we note modes of composition that are decidedly medieval: the decay or demise of the plot in the Nouveau Roman, the open-endedness reminiscent of the Debate Poems, pieces pieced together from "found texts," Hemingway's absolute and "objective" prose having no closer analogue than the Old Norse saga, Pound's enthusiasm for Provençal romance and troubadour poetry.

While England can boast nothing like native troubadour songs or wandering scholars' Latin lyrics — products of drop-outs from establishments —, its most continuous strand of literary inspiration was meditative and devotional. From Caedmon to Margery Kempe we find illiterate authors, too. The finest Middle English lyrics are those devoted to the Virgin Mary. The best vernacular prose like the Katherine Group, the *Ancrene Riwe*, the Wooing Group, the work of Hilton and Rolle, was all written for women who lacked Latin, some by women themselves, like Dame Julian of Norwich. But the story of this strand has been splendidly told in a classic (Chambers). Sermons to this day, though no longer counted among the literary corpus, have retained most medieval characteristics in being still oral in conception and delivery as well as being, like many modern seculars, "engaged" to a single cause. And, as we are nearing the close of the second millenium, there will no doubt be an increase, if possible, of present-day anxieties which remind one more than anything of Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, from the turn of the first millenium, with its famous beginning: Dear People, learn the truth: this world is in a hurry and it draws near its end.

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