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ORAL CONTEXTS OF WRITING IN PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS, AND POETRY

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Also by Jesse M. Gellrich

The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages:
Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction

This book is for Michelle

PREFACE

THIS BOOK is occasioned by an increasing body of scholarship which has qualified the assumption that the rise of literacy in the middle ages put an end to oral tradition. Fourteenth-century England is often regarded as confirmation of this shift in Western history. And for that reason I have explored examples from three areas—philosophy, historiography, and poetry—which suggest to me that oral characteristics of communicating and thinking still survive, albeit in embedded or implied formations.

Attempting to account for oral influence on the basis of written records has been a subject of much discussion in several scholarly disciplines. I follow the lead of others who have maintained that writing itself is vital evidence for understanding how the oral channel of language may persist. In particular, fourteenth-century studies have already demonstrated that oral influence is apparent in poetry, manuscript illumination, and the arts of memory. It is now possible, therefore, to attempt a more synthetic view of how and why orality continued at all in this century when manuscripts and books were used more than ever before.

A principle emerging from each of the parts of this book is that one mode of language is an imitation of the other. Most commonly we observe the idea, stemming from the early middle ages and antiquity, that writing imitates spoken language. But how this principle is understood and exercised differs widely in the examples I have studied. The self-consciousness with which the two modes, spoken and written, reflect on each other is sometimes acute, as in certain passages of poetry. "Self-reflexivity" or "metalanguage" is familiar in poems containing images or figures of their own mode as narrative or representation; but it is also true that poetic language in general can be called metalinguistic, and one of the most notable implications of this factor is the extent to which oral and written modes comment on each other in certain contexts.

Such acknowledgment about the status of different media raises the question of whether or not other disciplines of writing are similarly involved in exploring their own use of oral and written forms. Both philosophers and historians took a definite interest in this problem; but they also resolve it quite differently, some leaning toward the writtenness of their own projects, others toward its imitation of spoken language. As a result of such contrasting attitudes, it is no wonder that

modern scholarly assessments have not been able to mark in any decisive way where oral custom ends and the influence of literacy commences.

I take this dilemma to be a reflection of medieval arguments themselves about the nature of language. So long as imitation remains the model of language, we are forced into the situation of locating change in either the source or the copy, orality or literacy. A look at scholarship on the problem confirms again and again that literacy is reckoned to be an unprecedented power of historical change. But how, then, do we explain the persistence of orality in a world making an extraordinary use of books? And how also do we account for the paradox that a social group with only minimal or no literate competence illustrates the influence of skills learned from writing? These are not new questions in the history of literacy. But I suggest an alternative approach to them.

Instead of looking for an answer in oral tradition or in the technology of writing, I argue that the power of language consists in *displacement*, the capacity of one mode of language to take the place of the other, to make the source disappear into the copy. Writing is commonly masked as oral, and just as often spoken language is veiled as inscription—one channel of language is the guise or disguise of the other. But how the difference between them is mediated and accommodated spells out the differences among the disciplines in fourteenth-century England. This claim about the power of displacement is well appreciated from the work of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Jacques Derrida. But it has no application, as far as I know, to scholarship on literacy, or to the integration of philosophy, historiography, and poetry in England during the later middle ages.

The following chapters are concerned with two general matters, first, identifying the margin between spoken and written modes, and second, assessing how that margin was understood. In the Introduction I use these two issues in order to show that orality and literacy are not only identifiable properties in books and manuscripts; they also indicate different theoretical ideas, social values, and ways of experiencing the world. In Part One I take up two representative philosophers of the century, since both were intensely concerned with the status of language. Unquestionably, they represent the high watermark of literate achievement, and thus to probe for the "oral context" of their assumptions would appear irrelevant. But their differences on the question of the linguistic sign provide a way of showing that "orality," understood as an instrument of displacing language as mere inscription, exerted subtle and unexpected influence on a number of their philosophical arguments, such as the nature of evidence, validation,

authority, and history. For instance, the prominence of "voice" in the logic of William of Ockham qualifies the reduction of his so-called "nominalism" and thus confirms other recent assessments of him. John Wyclif swings back in the other direction, as he would fortify what he takes to be the artificiality of writing and history with the presence of the spoken word.

Part Two considers how historians of the time actually tried to represent past and present events. Chroniclers working during the reigns of Edward III (1327–77) and Richard II (1377–99) acknowledged their indebtedness to rhetorical commonplaces and generic forms for writing history. But the use of such "literary" forms appears in a new light when the chronicles are studied for evidence of oral displacement. The rhetoric of the historian as eyewitness appears as a strategy for vitalizing and validating the record as oral testimony from the past; and the observer then takes on the interests of the political and social causes represented. This kind of elision between record and event is well known in the early efforts of medieval historiography, but it also betokens the oral-literate split of the times and the limited attempt to engage it in this discipline. As a result an "oral chronicle" is embedded in the texts of record, creating a picture of chivalry and a story of heroism that the fourteenth century wanted to believe about itself.

Part Three analyzes two poetic romances that address very different attention to these matters of language and history. Romance, the genre associated with historical problems, is also the occasion for unsettling typically medieval attitudes toward the past, as other scholars have noted. Although several medieval poems are relevant, I choose two that employ both oral and written modes in an assessment of the value of chivalry as a political ideal. Without direct reference to fourteenth-century events or people, both poems are all the more pertinent to my inquiry. As explorations of voice, writing, and literary figuration in general, these works comment on the displacement of language as an instrument of dominion in their time, leaving us with a sense of nostalgia that will not mitigate the idealizations of power and history set forth in other disciplines.

The fourteenth century in England presents an exemplary test case for the reformulation of literacy under way in many areas of scholarship today. Not only was this century a cultural watershed in the development of written language; it also illustrates how inadequately a rigid model fits the facts of linguistic experience. Those facts, such as they are, indicate that "literacy," however we define it, must include a much more *pragmatic competence*—one inclined to accommodate, and thus be changed by, the difference between voice and writing, oral priority and textual criticism. Although inquiry into the control of

discourse and the exercise of dominion had been confronted prior to the fourteenth century, never before were these problems developed with such scrutiny and consequence. It is unique to this time. And it is uniquely English.

Finally, a word is in order about translation and documentation. Unless otherwise noted, translations from foreign languages are my own and are always included in the text. Constraints of space have made it necessary to limit the amount of original quotation that could be cited. And thus I have provided original words or phrases only where absolutely essential to an argument. Similarly, the notes abbreviate all documentation and include very little commentary; they are designed to be read with the Bibliography, which provides a full reference for each source cited or consulted. Middle English, however, is quoted in the original, with obscure passages paraphrased in the text.

Baton Rouge
1993

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Various professional organizations and institutions have graciously invited me to represent my work during the last few years. I am grateful for opportunities to speak at: the American Philological Association Convention (New York City, 1987), the Midwest Modern Language Association Convention (Columbus, 1987), the International Society for Comparative Literature Convention (Munich, 1988), the Pennsylvania Symposium on Medieval and Renaissance Studies (University of Pennsylvania, 1989), the Program on Technology and Sexual Difference (Oregon State University, 1990), the French and Francophone Foundation Colloquium (Louisiana State University, 1990), the Symposium on Oral and Written Traditions in the Middle Ages (New York University, 1990), the Symposium on Language and Society in the Middle Ages (Tulane University, 1991), and the International Symposium on the Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages (University of Wales, 1991). I am indebted to the organizers and audiences of these events for responses that helped me with the arguments of this book.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter One

VOX LITERATA: ON THE USES OF ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Grammar is the knowledge of how to speak
without error.
—Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*

Introduction

Scholarship on oral and written language has generally assumed that since medieval societies developed after the advent of inscription, they do not illustrate what has been called "primary orality, the pristine orality of cultures with no knowledge of writing."[1] But neither can they be called "illiterate," if we mean by that term that they were untouched by the influence of writing, including the skills it encouraged. Rather, we are dealing with a historical situation in which orality persists in "residual" form, and its principal channel of expression is the written word itself. From this point of view, medieval writing has sometimes been described as a form of "secondary orality" or of "mixed orality."[2]

For instance, it has recently been argued that among the Carolingians in the early middle ages Latin may have been spoken and written by a much wider sector of society than hitherto supposed; and thus literacy in Latin circulated freely in a culture with other languages that were exclusively oral.[3] In England between the Norman Conquest (1066) and the death of Edward I (1307), the transition from oral "memory to written record," as it has been described, was well under way. And yet we cannot say of this period that England was now literate in Latin, or in the vernacular languages, for that matter. Even during the time of Edward, written documents were not used by literates in a way that assured their efficacy as proof.[4]

Writing was regarded with attitudes formed over many centuries in

[1] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 1. Cf. pp. 6, 11, 31–75.

[2] Ong, "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style"; Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale*. Though Ong uses "secondary" to describe electronic orality, his category has been extended broadly to include the "orality within literate culture," e.g., by Bäuml, "Medieval Texts and Oral-Formulaic Composition," pp. 34 and 47n.15.

[3] McKitterick, *The Carolinginans and the Written Word*, ch. 1, and p. 273. Cf. Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, p. 254.

[4] Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*.

which it was absent or nascent. It was thus received within a culture still used to oral ways of communicating and conducting the affairs of domestic and governmental life. Academic and religious communities, for instance, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, present a special case since they evolved around written documents and books. But it would be oversimplified to assume that the academic wall kept out influences from a world going on busily in the old oral ways of doing things. Rather, the community of the text, or "textual community" as it has been conveniently called, was the result of social and oral habits interacting strongly with the special skills of reading and interpreting manuscripts.[5]

Such considerations clearly indicate that literacy no longer signifies a complete and final separation from the "oral tradition" of the past or present. But where to draw the line of departure in theoretical and historical terms remains a problem. Some time ago, Erich Auerbach remarked with reference to the Carolingians that there was no "Bildungssprache," no language of general culture which expressed the actual living conditions of society, in spite of the fact that documents and books were influencing cultural life.[6] Even if we assume the proposal that Latin was more widespread at this time, Auerbach's insight into the contested situation of a literacy influenced by oral circumstances remains to be explained.

In England poetry and prose composed in Anglo-Saxon have often been documented for the evidence of "oral performance" and "oral transmission." But a recent study has shown that "literature" in the sense of written, crafted composition is also a figure or motif in the writing itself. Bede's story of Caedmon or the Old English riddles replace spontaneous "improvisation" with the "craft" of the text, so that the poem is acknowledged as a "self-consciously crafted expression of a literate aesthetic."[7] A similar acknowledgment of the oral-literate divide has been studied in French manuscripts and books of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In this case, however, the evidence suggests a leaning decidedly in the opposite direction: "writing retained a certain dimension of orality"; poets and rubricators "appropriated the language of oral declamation"; now we have "the performative quality of the medieval book" preserved in both the themes and layout of the documents.[8]

[5] Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*.

[6] Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, p. 255. Bäuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," uses Auerbach in arguing for "the social function of literacy" (p. 239). Cf. D. H. Green, "Orality and Reading."

[7] Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 42–48, 112–13.

[8] Huot, *From Song to Book*, pp. 2, 3. See Camille, "The Book of Signs" and "Visual Signs of the Sacred Page," for orality in romanesque and gothic illuminated manuscripts.