Medieval Listening and Reading

The primary reception of German literature 800–1300

D. H. GREEN

Trinity College, Cambridge

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1

Orality and writing

When Guillaume Fichet, a member of the Sorbonne, looked back in 1471 on the history of what we today should term communications technology he divided it into three periods: classical antiquity (which employed the *calamus* or reed pen), followed by a period which for us is the Middle Ages (which used the *penna* or quill pen), and then a period which had only just begun (characterised by *aereae litterae* or movable type).[1] Just over 500 years later an American scholar, Ong, divided a historical span longer than with Fichet into orality, writing, printing, and electronic communications.[2] However much these two may differ over details, the position they occupy is comparable: each stands near the start of a communications shift which has alerted him to other changes in the past. Literacy has attracted scholarly attention at a point when its ascendancy seems threatened by modes of communication which also depend on a 'secondary orality',[3] whilst Ong has claimed explicitly that 'contrasts between electronic media and print have sensitized us to the earlier contrast between writing and orality'.[4] We need not go as far as Havelock, who proposed that our new alertness can be dated by a number of publications in the *annus mirabilis* 1962–3 (including, unsurprisingly, one of his own), in order to agree with the point that recent work has been stimulated by recent technology.[5]

Such developments might seem to bypass the Middle Ages, especially in the light of Goody's view that intellectual revolutions followed revolutions in the modes of communication (in Babylonia with writing, in Greece with the alphabet, in Europe with printing)[6] or Havelock's conviction that the Middle Ages are a cultural trough in the historical development of literacy.[7] We can, however, rescue the Middle Ages as a fit object of study for these new concerns. It is justifiable to see the medieval period as one in which literacy gradually expands, encroaching upon the hitherto oral area of Northern Europe, so that the period is characterised by the clash and interpenetration of orality and writing.[8] It is a sign of these new concerns that two recent histories of medieval German literature conceive their task as tracing the development of vernacular writing alongside the persistence of oral forms.[9] To take this view seriously means following Schmidt's suggestion that the gradual spread of lay literacy from the twelfth century was a precondition for the success of the invention of printing, that the emergence of a visual alongside an oral reception occupied these centuries before Gutenberg, and that in this respect it makes little difference whether the texts read were *codices manuscripti* or *codices impressi*.[10] It also means accepting the force of Clanchy's observation that Gutenberg's invention can be overdramatised, that printing has a prehistory, one of whose constituents is the literate culture of the Middle Ages.[11] The study of this literate culture, alongside its oral rival, belongs firmly to the medievalist's field; it is no mere appendage coming at the end of his period. That certainly is the view which has been taken over the last years by medievalists working in a number of distinct disciplines.

(a) Recent work

The medievalist cannot dispense with help provided by the history of religion in this field. The relationship between scripture and tradition, the written and the oral Torah, concerned Judaism, but was reflected in the problem of oral tradition and written transmission in the Christian gospels.[12] In a much wider context Graham argues the orality of scripture (when recited, read aloud or chanted) as an interpenetration of the written and the spoken word.[13]

Medieval historians have long seen the implications of orality and writing for their discipline.[14] Vollrath classifies the Middle Ages as an oral society in transition to writing, and Richter has studied communication problems in the Middle Ages in terms of the contrasts 'vernacular–Latin' and 'oral–written'.[15] In a book devoted to a short span of English history Clanchy discusses much wider problems: the technology of writing, literacy and illiteracy, hearing and seeing.[16]

In linguistics it has been argued, against Bloomfield's assertion of the primacy of the spoken word, that the visual representation of speech, in isolating units of speech, performs an act of linguistic analysis and makes linguistic consciousness possible.[17] The fact that a language is written cannot be without consequences for that language, which must be seen in its oral function, but also in connection with literacy.[18]

In musicology Hucke and Treitler have been concerned with the transition from oral to written transmission in our period, the latter in particular with the fact that music writing was introduced into an oral tradition and was used initially to support that tradition, not at first displacing it, but assuming a role within it.[19]

The possibility of linking orality and writing to the visual arts has arisen from two considerations: a general one (medieval bookpainting was largely conceived with an eye to the symbiosis of word and picture) and a particular one (Gregory the Great's claim that, whereas literate clerics acquired knowledge from writing, pictures were the books of the illiterate).[20] This situation has been explored for pictures by Camille and for stained glass windows by Kemp.[21]

Over a wide range of disciplines our problem has thus attracted attention of late, more precisely with regard to the position in Germany. In law Schmidt-Wiegand has discussed the tension between oral law and written codification, whilst Heck combines this with the relationship between vernacular and Latin.[22] In history the same tension between orality and writing has been applied to the transmission of vernacular works in the Carolingian period by Geuenich and to the linguistic policy of Charles the Great by Richter.[23] McKitterick begins her study of the Carolingians' attitude to writing with a consideration of the spoken and written word.[24] In linguistics Feldbusch has used her findings on the written language to explain the development of writing in OHG in the Carolingian period.[25] Treitler, too, ties the first use of musical notation to the Carolingian renaissance and its cultivation of writing, but also reminds the Germanist that one of the earliest examples of neumes is the Heidelberg MS of Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch*.[26] Finally, in an article which adds to the double formula 'hearing and reading' the dimension of 'seeing' Curschmann argues that preoccupation with a text also included preoccupation with a picture, and that the genesis of illustrations for secular texts must be seen in connection with the rise of writing in the lay culture of the medieval German court.[27]

In this highly selective survey of a flood of work in various disciplines I have largely avoided touching upon work on vernacular literature, mainly because, whereas in these other disciplines the emphasis was on the two dimensions of orality and writing, work on vernacular literature has been slower to reach this position. If this is because the stimulus given by the oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord has led to a concentration on oral composition at the cost of other aspects,[28] this is now beginning to change. Bäuml, to whom we owe the first application of this theory to medieval German, now stresses more the interrelationship of orality and literacy.[29] Curschmann, always critical of the theory, now sees the dimension of hearing alongside reading and seeing.[30] Finnegan, never a disciple, once wrote on oral poetry alone, but more recently on literacy and orality.[31] This shift of emphasis has even affected those who remain within the oral-formulaic camp. Lord has recently acknowledged the conjunction of oral tradition and literacy in the Middle Ages, and Renoir has conceded the slow transition from a preliterate to a literate culture, hence the opportunity for interaction between them.[32] Haymes, who once saw the *Nibelungenlied* in terms of the oral-formulaic theory, now situates it between oral and written composition.[33]

(b) The oral-formulaic theory

Any survey must therefore proceed from Lord's classic presentation of the theory.[34] Its impact has been considerable: to it we owe the first clear statement of the nature of an oral poetics as distinct from a written one. How revolutionary this recognition of an oral tradition has been is conveyed by Ong's remark that literary history is no longer exclusively literary, that oral forms preceded, in part predetermined and survived alongside the written works which make up literature as traditionally known.[35] Lord was also the first to apply the theory tentatively to medieval literature,[36] but the practice has spread far beyond this. Foley has pointed to its appeal to classical Greek, early Chinese, Vedic Sanskrit and the folk-preaching of the American rural south, whilst Finnegan, more critically, has listed further fields.[37] Any serious concern with oral tradition stems from the theory,[38] so that if we talk of an interplay between oral and written this is because Lord drew our attention to the importance of one pole. For all our debt, reservations are called for.

The first concerns the role of analogy in the argument. In applying findings from oral singing in the Balkans to Homeric texts the theory claims that the latter, showing similar features, were likewise orally composed – a claim which rests on no more than analogy.[39] This is equally true of the extension from the Balkan singer to the medieval oral poet, for it is uncritical to apply a method devised for a living oral tradition to a medieval text which has reached us only in written form.[40] In criticising Magoun's application of the Parry–Lord theory to Anglo-Saxon poetry (based on the assumption that Parry's definition of the oral poet held good for all oral poets) Opland objects that it is unsound to base a general definition on one tradition alone and then to force it on others.[41]

From this it is a short step to questioning whether the practice described by the theory (the poet composes his work orally, by means of formulas, in the act of performing) can be equated with oral practice at large.[42] Finnegan reminds us that composition-in-performance is not the only kind of oral composition, that there are recorded instances of oral composition preceding and separate from performance: by the criterion of composition these examples are oral, but by the criterion of performance they are not oral-formulaic.[43] In addition, there is the common medieval situation of works composed in writing, but delivered orally, so that by the criterion of performance they must be termed oral.[44] She argues that accepting Lord's view that what counts is 'the composition *during* oral performance' would blind us to different ways in which composition, memorisation and performance may be in play in or before the delivery of an oral poem.[45]

Lord is quite explicit in rejecting memorising as a possible basis of some oral performances (as opposed to extemporising composition-in-performance). He distinguishes between unconscious remembering (formulas are recalled from a traditional fund, like phrases in everyday speech) and conscious memorising (learning a poem by heart in a fixed form): for him oral-formulaic poetry involves remembering, not memorising.[46] This leaves him occupying a dubious position when confronted by evidence of oral composition preceding performance, with memorising as a bridge, for he has recourse to forced phrasing in saying of such cases that they 'may not be oral composition, but rather *written composition without writing*'.[47] Elsewhere he says that poems of this type are oral only in the most literal sense and that their method of composition is the same as written poetry, so that they should be considered as such.[48] To equate composition without writing with written poetry is another attempt to save the appearances of the theory by dismissing what does not conform to it, and suggests that the theory cannot accommodate all the facts. It must also be stressed that most proponents of memorisation in oral poetry do not exclude the further possibility of (oral-formulaic) improvisation, an openness to both possibilities which is in marked contrast to the theory's exclusion of memorisation.[49]

That the theory's restriction of oral poetry at large to 'poetry composed in oral performance'[50] is only part of the picture has been shown by evidence from outside Europe. This includes the Hindu Veda, transmitted orally with a meticulous accuracy achieved by memorising it in various modes of recitation requiring a complex manipulation of the base text, but also literature of the Pacific Islands, composed orally before performance and then memorised.[51] Such awkward evidence might be dismissed as irrelevant because of its geographical remoteness (although that sits uneasily with the theory's universalist pretensions). Against this, however, memorisation has been suggested repeatedly for Germanic oral tradition: the heroic lay and praise-song, the Eddic lay, and skaldic verse.[52] These examples suggest that memorisation may not be so remote from our field of study as the Pacific evidence was geographically. Moreover, in applying Lord's findings to Anglo-Saxon Magoun gave an oral-formulaic analysis of *Caedmon's Hymn*, with support from Bede,[53] but recent work sees this hymn rather in terms of memorisation. Renoir stresses that Caedmon, asked to make a poem of a story recounted to him, would go away and return the next morning, having spent the time ruminating on his material like an animal chewing the cud.[54] Since he was illiterate, this suggests preparation ahead of performance. Fry points out that, according to Bede, Caedmon improvised only once (in his dream), and that otherwise his poetic activity was confined to memorial transmission.[55] Conscious memorising outweighed unconscious remembering here, and there was in any case a time-lag between composition and performance.

From the demonstration of the high formulaic content of Anglo-Saxon texts known to have been composed in writing it follows that poems could be both formulaic and literary, literate poets could write formulaic verse.[56] If we accept that there was a lettered tradition which had assimilated the formulaic style to its own purposes, the theory faces the difficulty of telling us when a formulaic text is still oral and when it is already literate. Applying this to the theme of this book we have to acknowledge that, confronted with works which have reached us in written form, the oral-formulaic school has at the most suggested oral predecessors, telling us something about oral transmission, but unable to point to specific examples.[57]

(c) The introduction of writing

The classicist Havelock and the anthropologist Goody have discussed the discovery of writing and its penetration into an oral society. By dwelling on the interplay between these two means of communication they avoid the onesidedness of the Parry–Lord concentration on orality alone.[58] Havelock treats the educational role of orality in Greek society, the nature of a preliterate culture, the problem of cultural storage and the role of memory,[59] but at the other pole he also discusses 'democratised literacy' and the need to see a literate society as resting on readers rather than writers.[60] Goody is concerned with what he terms the 'technology of the intellect': with regard to orality he writes on cultural tradition in non-literate societies,[61] whilst under literacy he treats of the nature of an alphabetic culture, the social effects of writing and restrictions on literacy.[62] He also explicitly compares these two modes of communication and sees them in their interplay.[63]

What these two scholars achieve is to shift the ground of the debate from the merely oral to the relationship between oral and written.[64] Within this overall shift they also, first, widen the debate on orality itself by passing beyond the technique of composition-in-performance to the general function of oral poetry within a preliterate society (cultural storage, acting as a 'tribal encyclopaedia').[65] Secondly, they consider the nature and function of writing and the ways in which its storage of information differs from what is available to a preliterate society.[66] Thirdly, they also detail the losses and gains resulting from a communications shift from orality to literacy. On the debit side belong the impoverishments brought about by writing, but also, less drastically, its initial subordination to oral purposes and failure to realise its full potential.[67] On the positive side, however, they point to emancipatory possibilities in the transition to writing. Writing can liberate from the constraints of time and place to which oral communication is subject.[68] It can also set both the oral poet and his listeners free from their immersion in the immediacy of the recital situation and permit distancing from what is said and a more critical stance.[69] Writing can also bring relief from the burden of memorisation and from the limitations which this necessity had imposed and the mental energy which it had absorbed.[70] Finally, writing opens up the possibility of accumulating knowledge over time, of an incremental proliferation not subject to the 'structural amnesia' of oral culture.[71]

The wealth of this line of inquiry suggests that medieval studies stand to gain much from it, even if exaggerated claims were at first made for it.[72] Havelock claimed, for example, that the Greek intellectual revolution was accomplished not just by writing, but by the use of a simple, efficient alphabet. Goody now questions this, pointing out that not simply the alphabet, but writing of any kind was introduced to Greece, so that cultural features associated with widespread literacy should perhaps be seen in terms of writing itself.[73] Secondly, Havelock argued that the Greeks, by adding vowel signs to the consonantal ones already present in the Phoenician script, really invented the alphabet.[74] What the Greeks adopted, however, was the shapes of letters, most of the names given to these letters, and their sequence – and also a system which did not use a symbol to convey a word (as with logograms) or a syllable (as in a syllabary), but to designate a phoneme (as in an alphabet).[75]

Thirdly, Goody at first gave the impression of technological determinism, talking of the 'consequences of literacy', where now he prefers 'implications'.[76] Against this earlier view Finnegan sees rather opportunities provided, not consequences determined, and reminds us that cultural development is too complex to be subsumed under the mode of communication as a master-key, that the introduction of a new mode can work out differently in different historical situations.[77] Gough also suggests that literacy is at the most an enabling factor, permitting certain developments which only take place, however, in the overall historical context.[78] To apply such considerations to the Middle Ages means asking how far the opportunities held out by writing were grasped and what forces worked against them.

(d) Medieval literacy and illiteracy

Grundmann's essay on this topic supplements Thompson's evidence for lay literacy, but also surveys changes between antiquity and the Middle Ages in this area.[79] There are, however, grounds for thinking that his definition of literacy fails to do justice to the position in vernacular literature. Grundmann's definition comprises three points: medieval literacy was the prerogative, first, of clerics who, secondly, were able to read and write, and, thirdly, exercised these skills in the medium of Latin.[80] This definition serves him well, for his survey moves from classical usage to medieval evidence largely in Latin, but by taking account only of Latin literacy it excludes the position in the vernacular, where a layman could be ignorant of Latin, yet read a text in his own language.[81]

Of the claim that medieval literacy involved reading and writing we may ask whether someone who could read, but not write, must be termed illiterate,[82] but also whether Grundmann is anachronistically applying standards of literacy to the Middle Ages taken over from the modern period.[83] In the Middle Ages these two abilities belonged to different categories: reading was an intellectual attainment (no matter how elementary), whilst writing was more a manual skill and formed no part of the discipline of letters.[84] The medieval separation of two aspects which for us belong together means that we cannot assume that someone who could not write therefore could not read.[85] To call those priests illiterate who in the fifteenth century could not write[86] is to apply a modern yardstick of literacy.

However largely true Grundmann's second point (the equation of literacy with the clergy, of illiteracy with the laity) may be, it should not blind us to exceptions. Some clerics fall short of ideal literacy (amongst the monks Cassiodorus refers to them as *agrammati*), some know the psalms by heart through hearing the liturgy so often, but without knowing Latin, and at a later date Caesarius von Heisterbach still knows many exceptions to the postulate of clerical literacy.[87] More important for us is the converse, the growing range of evidence that some laymen could in fact read: although heavily weighted in favour of the French-speaking area[88] it is still relevant to assessing medieval literacy at large. How disturbing of the distinction which it was in the interests of the Church to maintain (and which Grundmann still retains) these literate laymen were is suggested by Matthew Paris's words of a lay member of the royal household: *miles litteratus sive clericus militaris*.[89] This remark is an attempt to save the appearances of the clerics' claim to an educational monopoly, but that is no reason why, with Grundmann, we should follow them in this reactionary attempt.[90]

Similarly, the equation of literacy with Latinity is calculated to prolong the medieval cleric's view of literacy as confined to his Latin cultural world.[91] The idea that the path to literacy in the Middle Ages involved learning Latin may be generally correct, but is subject to qualifications, since there are cases, no longer so few from the thirteenth century, where literacy was acquired without recourse to Latin.[92] By the fifteenth century, when there were many town schools in Germany which taught reading, but bypassed Latin, there are cases where the ability to read is expressly divorced from a knowledge of Latin (hardly surprising in the age when printing was invented).[93] More important are examples of a similar divorce already in the fourteenth century, as when a Grand Master of the Teutonic Order took account of the possibility that lay brothers in the Order might be *gelêret* (*litteratus*), but ignorant of Latin, so that they might say their prayers in German.[94] In the light of such cases Steer suggests that the earlier distinction between *litteratus* and *illitteratus*, as in Grundmann's definition, no longer holds water and that new terms take heed of a new situation: in place of the simple distinction between literate clerics and illiterate laymen, the latter now have to be divided between those who have some and those with no qualifications in literacy.[95]

This development can be followed back into the thirteenth century where Grundmann, in contradiction to his definition, sees the rise of religious literature in German as meant for a new class of recipient, mainly women (lay or religious) occupying an intermediate position. Like clerics they wish to read religious writings for themselves, but like laymen they have no Latin, so that reading-matter meant for them has to be in the vernacular.[96] The reading-matter of laymen, however, was not always religious, as when the author of *Von dem übeln wîbe* confesses that, although unable to understand Latin, he has read a detail in German.[97]

In one instance Grundmann's evidence goes back to the late twelfth century, where he suggests a parallel between religious and secular literature. The example concerns the conversion of Valdes to a life of apostolic preaching: under the impact of a recital of the legend of St Alexius he asks two clerics to translate the gospels and other works so that he may read them frequently for use in his preaching.[98] Valdes could therefore read, but not in Latin, so that by Grundmann's categories he was *illitteratus*. That is certainly how Walter Map saw it, terming the followers of Valdes *homines ydiotas, illiteratos*.[99] The arrogance which Grundmann here imputes to Walter Map rightly belongs to the clergy at large, scorning the pretensions of laymen by calling them illiterate because their reading did not embrace Latin.

Grundmann mentions secular alongside religious literature when attempting to accommodate Valdes and his followers within his definition. He says that, like the contemporary example of court literature, Valdensian literature was for illiterates who could read, but did not understand Latin.[100] This description of a complex position is unsatisfactory in using two key-terms in a sense taken from two different historical periods: 'Illiterat' in the medieval sense (unable to read Latin), but 'Leser' in the modern sense (able to read a vernacular). The terms of a definition which cannot be applied to a case like this (or, more pointedly for us, to court literature) force Grundmann to tie himself in definitional knots as much as did Lord when driven to say of some orally composed works that they were 'written composition without writing'. Steer's doubts about the adequacy of Grundmann's definition to the fourteenth century[101] can be extended to the thirteenth and even to aspects of the twelfth. Historical changes undermine what has been presented as a static view of medieval literacy.[102]

This view is also undermined by what Grundmann says of the contrast between a literacy of high culture (Latin antiquity and the twelfth-century renaissance) and a minimal literacy, for the tension between these can mean that someone who is literate in the minimal sense (he can read) will not be described as such by someone who regards literacy more ambitiously.[103] The most telling remark comes from John of Salisbury, for whom someone who does not measure up to his ideal of education is illiterate, even if he can read.[104] If even Grundmann's view of medieval literacy embraces two levels, we need to question whether the simple pair *litteratus* and *illitteratus* suffices for the many intermediate forms in lay society.[105] Some of the distinctions proposed by recent scholarship may be socially or linguistically determined,[106] but to tie a definition of literacy to one social group or to one language makes it difficult to follow through historical changes cutting across such boundaries.

(e) Hearing and reading

The study of the reading reception of medieval vernacular literature has been partly attempted for Germany by Scholz,[107] but other literatures lack anything comparable.

Gratitude for what Scholz has accomplished in a pioneer study does not mean that he satisfies us on all scores.

To his positive achievements belongs his critical review of MHG terminology. Although it was long ago realised that *sagen* meant 'to say', but also 'to recount' (it could therefore be used of an oral, but also of a written statement), Scholz has made it impossible to argue that verbs like *sagen* and *hoeren* necessarily reflect oral delivery and reception.[108] He has also demonstrated the frequency with which court authors appear to have readers in mind.[109] By systematically reviewing a wide range of different pointers he has put up for discussion the view that this literature was meant for readers. Here lies the novelty, but also the controversial aspect of his work, for vernacular literature for laymen had previously been seen in terms of recital to listeners, alongside whom the reader was exceptional. When Scholz establishes a reading dimension we need to ask who is doing the reading: is it, in addition to the occasional private reader, someone who recites from a text to listeners?

Among more particular issues chronology is strangely neglected. The dating of a reading reception of German literature is simply not discussed – when he asks at one point when the transition from hearing to reading was made in court literature he asserts, but does not demonstrate, that this must have been in the decades around 1200.[110] Nor is his method likely to have produced a reasoned answer, for Scholz proceeds by discussing a range of examples from different languages and periods, but not in chronological sequence. This method is well chosen to suggest a reading mode for court literature at large, but not to address the question when this mode is first found in Germany. Moreover, Scholz largely confines himself to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[111] By blocking off any prehistory he creates the ahistorical impression that vernacular reading began only in his chosen period, but if he were to reply that he is concerned with reading by laymen, then the monastic examples quoted by him have no place here.

Another omission concerns the question whether one genre might be more predisposed to one mode of reception than another.[112] Again, the method adopted could hardly have answered this question, for even within court literature a genre like the lyric is nowhere treated, and if Scholz were to seek refuge in a concern with narrative literature we face the huge omission of the heroic epic (absent, it might be thought, because it does not lend itself to the thesis of a reading reception). Scholz has also been criticised for not taking account of the difference between clerical and secular texts, as when Kartschoke points out that the clearest examples adduced for a visual reception largely come from clerical works.[113] By his educational background a cleric would have regarded his work as a book to be read, even if it was recited to laymen incapable of reading, but this can be extended to those clerics who composed the majority of court narratives.[114] For court clerics to regard their works as books for reading was justified in view of the literacy of many noblewomen,[115] but since these works were also received by largely illiterate knights the process of reception involved actual listeners as well as potential readers. The interplay between these two is almost entirely missing from Scholz's pages.

He is aware that the question how court literature was transmitted cannot be answered by a simple either–or, and criticises others for falling into this trap,[116] but does not escape this fate himself. The most telling example is his choice of title, for *hoeren unde lesen* was a double formula to indicate two ways in which a work could be received. It is paradoxical that he does not systematically discuss this formula,[117] but the reason is clear from the thrust of his argument: to show that court literature was meant to be read as opposed to the traditional view of a listening reception which he largely plays down.[118] He uses the double formula as evidence for reading, but ignores its implication that the same works could also be addressed to listeners. The recurrence of the double formula in medieval literature means that the transition from exclusive hearing to exclusive reading had not yet been made, that over a long period a manuscript was the basis of a public recital, but could also be read individually. To concentrate on reading alone and dismiss the further implication of the double formula means viewing the transition in oversimplified terms, creating the impression that it took place more quickly than is likely.[119]

His failure to pay attention to the possibility that a medieval work could be addressed to a twofold audience means that Scholz faces a recurrent difficulty with those works in which evidence for a reception by ear is found alongside evidence for reading.[120] He has devised two methods for coping with this, each calculated to resolve what he regards as a contradiction by undercutting the significance of one of its poles. One method is to invoke the difference between literal and figurative, and true to the tenor of his argument Scholz implies that, whereas the evidence for reading was meant literally, that for listening was only figurative.[121] He proceeds here from one of the strong points of the book (the critical analysis of terms too readily taken to suggest oral recital), but takes it too far: to establish the possibility that *hoeren* and *sagen* could be used figuratively is not the same thing as demonstrating that they must always be so used. The other method used to overcome an apparent contradiction is to appeal to an author's use of a 'Hörerfiktion', suggesting the pretence of a recital situation, but not its reality, conjured up for an audience of readers.[122] Scholz nowhere enlightens us on the function of such a fiction or why we must accept its presence. Indeed, with regard to the latter his argument proceeds in the same way as with figurative speech: to suggest the possibility of a fiction is apparently regarded as sufficient. Scholz's argument on both these points is unconvincingly conducted and unnecessary once we accept the implications of the double formula and the possibility of a twofold reception of literature in a society largely but not completely illiterate.[123]

(f) The introduction of printing

Like Guillaume Fichet we can also look at our problem with hindsight, from the invention of printing, particularly the arguments of Eisenstein and Giesecke, both of whom are concerned with the role of printing in introducing features of the post-medieval world.[124] To show this Eisenstein discusses how print culture differed from the manuscript culture which it displaced, whilst Giesecke radically draws printing and modern electronic media closer together, thereby drawing printing further away from manuscript culture. Both stress discontinuity between the Middle Ages and the post-Gutenberg world; both suggest that the discovery of printing was a revolutionary break.[125]

In sketching the salient features of print culture Eisenstein contrasts it with the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages so that, coming to our period from behind, we are shown it in a helpfully novel light. She also shows up the disadvantages of writing as a means of transmission in the Middle Ages, but implicit in this is the fact that the advantages of printing reduplicate many of those enjoyed by writing over orality.[126] Printing provided an escape from the threats to scribal culture (textual corruption, dependence on a restricted number of copies and continuous recopying),[127] but this parallels the answer given by writing to the deficiencies of orality (unreliable memory, the threat that one break in the chain could destroy the whole transmission). Printing may have brought release from the near exhaustion of scribal capacities available,[128] but the introduction of writing had meant liberation from the overloading of memory in oral culture. Whereas the fixity of a printed text made possible a series of improved editions (thus enabling energy to be devoted to new tasks rather than to preservation of the past),[129] writing also had a measure of fixity over against the spoken word, assuring not just survival, but its ability to be 'resurrected into limitless living contexts by a limitless number of living readers'.[130] Lastly, incremental knowledge and the changes it brings are common, to different degrees, both to writing and to print.[131]

These parallels between the earlier shift (from orality to writing) and the later one (from writing to print) can be placed in a wider context. In *Phaedrus* Plato reports Socrates' argument that writing destroys memory, causing the attrition of mental resources,[132] an objection which has recently been voiced by opponents of using pocket calculators on the grounds that they, too, weaken the mind by depriving it of the work that keeps it in training.[133] Similar misgivings greeted the introduction of printing.[134] Such parallels are not meant to suggest that an improvement in technology[135] must mean an improvement in knowledge, but that to the advantages enjoyed by writing over orality there correspond disadvantages suffered by writing in contrast to printing. By looking at both sides of the coin we see our problem in a longer historical perspective.

A substantive criticism can here be made of Eisenstein: her neglect of the prehistory of printing. She is aware of this prehistory, but abandons an evolutionary approach and nowhere discusses what lay literacy in the later Middle Ages may have contributed to the need for and success of printing.[136] How far she is from granting it significance is brought out by her contrast between the reading public (she has in mind the readers of printed books) and the listening public (above all before Gutenberg).[137] By implying a contrast between reading a printed book and hearing a manuscript recited she suggests too clean a break and ignores the hard core of Scholz's argument, that manuscripts could be read in the Middle Ages, not just Latin ones by clerics, but also vernacular ones by laymen. It is vital to look back before 1450, to the growth of lay literacy and lay readers. To the question why printing was invented around 1450 Clanchy has replied that it was because Western Europe had by then achieved a vigorous literate culture strong enough to sustain the mass production of printed books.[138]