

## **Alterities: On Methodology in Medieval Literary Studies**

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**The Albert Lord and Milman Parry  
Lecture for 1991-1992**

### **Prologue**

Medieval literary studies hold a privileged position in methodological and theoretical argumentation. The privilege is based on the limitedness of and the in-immediate access to their “material.” The latter is created by the philological barrier that virtually keeps theoretical and/or methodological intruders out. In that sense medieval literary studies potentially enjoy a sanctuary privilege: theoretical and methodological novelties may enter the sanctuary only if the philologically trained so warrant. That is, literary medievalists are very much in control of theoretical and/or methodological import because, due to *their* philological training, they are the only ones who can handle the “material” in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Due to the limitedness of their material, medieval literary studies do, however, have another kind of privilege. The concept of some monolithic entity called “the Middle Ages” creates a kind of laboratory situation where new approaches/methods/theories can furnish quick results. Since the Middle Ages—or any period within it, or any ensemble of phenomena from remote periods that are made the object of research—are constructs in the mind of the scholarly beholder to begin with, the (sometimes sparse) building blocks, as it were, out of which the respective constructs are built, can more easily be shuffled about according to one’s (methodologically

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<sup>1</sup> I am excluding here the possibility of gaining access to medieval texts through modern renderings and am thus arguing within the vein of the “Old Philology.”

geared) *Erkenntnisinteresse*.<sup>2</sup>

When speaking about methodology, there is yet another point that I think necessary to bring to mind. This is the particular medievalist “insider feeling” of philologically common ground that so temptingly facilitates (international, and in particular transatlantic) scholarly exchange—or dismissal—of methodologies and/or theories in (medieval) literary studies. This common assumption can lead to a potentially deceptive disregard of what otherwise is—or should be—so much in the medievalists’ (as in anybody else’s) mind: the matter of historically developed differences. This may appear to be such a hermeneutic triviality that most of us probably shun away from admitting it to begin with. Nevertheless, it is necessary to put the fiction of the universal academic community in its proper place in order to adequately appreciate what “the (contemporary) other” has to say.<sup>3</sup>

The great honor of being invited to give the 1991 presentation that, *in memoriam* of the late Albert Lord has been renamed into the *Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture*, has given me the opportunity to formulate my own methodological position in a distinguished forum. The lively discussion that followed the lecture has motivated me to go into more detail about the theoretical basis of this position for the printed version of my original lecture. In this way my present essay is meant to bear witness to the fact that “face-to-face” exchange, the oral-aural encounter, is still most fruitful for our scholarly endeavors.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodologies

Methodological discussion in literary studies of the Middle Ages has

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<sup>2</sup> This is a notion from methodological discussion in Germany for which I cannot find an English equivalent. Analogously to the English translation of Habermas’ title *Erkenntnis und Interesse* of 1968 into *Knowledge and Human Interests*, one may perhaps render it as *knowledge interest*, although I do not find this completely satisfactory, as the German *Erkenntnis* carries a more procedural note. Thus *cognitive interest* may be more to the point, if *cognitive* is not understood as a psychological term. Cf. below, note 28.

<sup>3</sup> I am very much indebted to Adam B. Davis, who spent the 1991-92 academic year in Freiburg as a Humboldt scholar, for many fruitful discussions à propos “transatlantic differences” in scholarly research.

<sup>4</sup> For various shared *tours d’horizon(s)* I owe my kindest thanks to the host of this lecture.

recently been revived under the headings of “New Philology” and “New Historicism.”<sup>5</sup> What I am subsequently outlining has not yet received such a handy tag, and it should be regarded neither as a substitute nor as a rival to “New Philology” or “New Historicism.” On the contrary, it must rely on the methods of Philology—old and new—and it also is indebted to Historicism in respecting the historicity both of the subject and object of understanding and thus also of the analyzer and the analyzed. Moreover, I want to thematize the historicity of the theory itself: its original shaping, its development, and the recent complementation that has given the method a new forceful momentum.

The theory under discussion is what has become known as “Reception Theory,” and the recent complementation may provisionally be termed “the Orality/Literacy Question.” The reasons why I am insisting on maintaining—for the time being—the possibly disconcerting word *question* in the notion are as follows. What the last thirty or so years of research into orality and literacy from various angles have brought to light are not simply “facts” that one adds to the material under investigation—such as one would do with, for example, a second manuscript of *Beowulf* that shows no traces of Christian ideas whatsoever. The consequences of research into orality/literacy go rather to the methodological heart of the medievalists’ matter, as the insights and findings gained from this research necessitate the thematizing of heuristic and hermeneutic agreements, agreements that up to now have been not only tacit but largely pre-conscious. As such, the realization of the Orality/Literacy Question comes close to the effects of a discovery in natural sciences. Thus I am contending that with the integration of the Orality/Literacy Question (of both its “factual findings” and its heuristic consequences) reception-oriented medieval literary studies are “able to account for a wider range of...phenomena or to account with greater precision for some of those previously known” (Kuhn 1962:66). This is no less than postulating that with this integration a specific line of medieval literary studies has undergone a paradigmatic change.

Of course my use of the term *paradigmatic change* is indicative of the source for the quote I have just given: Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The appropriation of Kuhn’s observations on “scientific revolutions” for the humanities is obviously not very original. In 1969, for instance, Hans Robert Jauss published his article “Paradigmawechsel in der Literaturwissenschaft,” in which he accounted for

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of “New Philology” from various aspects, see vol. 65.1 of *Speculum* 1990; the outstanding representative of “New Historicism” in medieval studies is Lee Patterson (1987, 1991).

the history and the contemporary state of literary studies under aspects suggested in Kuhn's book: paradigmatic changes occur when another paradigm has finally proven insufficient for the explanation of given phenomena. Jauss sees the causes for paradigmatic changes in literary studies in a realization that an established approach is no longer able "to wrench works of art from their state of being past through permanently new interpretation, to translate them into a new present" ("Werke der Kunst durch immer neue Interpretation dem Vergangensein zu entreissen, sie in eine neue Gegenwart zu übersetzen;" 55). Here Jauss is also dealing with the question of whether it is legitimate to transfer observations made in the history of the sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) to the humanities (*Literatur- oder Geisteswissenschaften*).<sup>6</sup> In the humanities, and particularly in literary studies, Jauss argues, paradigmatic changes are not caused by anomalies because in the humanities there is "no area of empirically verifiable observations comparable to that of the (natural) sciences" ("kein der Naturwissenschaft vergleichbares Feld empirisch verifizierbarer Beobachtungen;" 54). However, as we will see later, "anomalies" may be of

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<sup>6</sup> Here as in other places in this article I am facing the difficulty of translating the German *Wissenschaft*. Recently it has been translated by *science* even in compounds such as *Literaturwissenschaft*. It may have been under the influence of the texts he has been translating that Timothy Bahti (in the "Translator's Preface" to the 1982 translation of a collection of articles by Hans Robert Jauss), for example, is speaking (in his own text) of *the human sciences*, obviously referring to "the humanities." On the other hand, the term *Literaturwissenschaft* in the title of Jauss' *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* is turned by Bahti into *Literary Theory*, the phrase *der literaturwissenschaftlichen Methoden* (e.g., Jauss 1967:7) into *of the literary critical methods* (Jauss [Bahti] 1982a:4). In trying to find some terminological consistency I will use the "original" English terms—such as *humanities* (= Germ. *Geisteswissenschaften*) or *literary studies* (= Germ. *Literaturwissenschaft*). When giving my own renderings of German quotations into English I will use *science/scientific* when it seems appropriate to reflect a specific methodological and/or theoretical claim. For a discussion of this problem in view of the translation of Gadamer, cf. "Translators' Preface" to *Truth and Method* (1989:xviii). The fact that in German the term *Wissenschaft* is extended to the humanities points, of course, to a concept of such studies that is quite different from that in the English-speaking countries. I suppose that this terminological difference is also a symptom of the "alterity" question with regard to the mutual reception and translation (in the broad sense of the word) of theories in (and to) the States and Europe respectively. In his recent article "Auszug der Wissenschaften aus dem Deutschen" (1991:spec. 587-91), Hans-Martin Gauger deals with these terminological differences between English and German in the context of the observation that the German language is constantly and increasingly withdrawn from scholarly/scientific publication. For a discussion of the applicability of Kuhn to linguistics, see Oesterreicher 1977.

relevance for literary studies as well, since the “discovery” I have in mind has very much to do with anomalies and how to account for them.

Now, the name with which I have preliminarily dubbed this “discovery”—the Orality/Literacy Question—is admittedly quite vague. Yet up to now there is no more precise notion to refer to the growing awareness in fields such as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, history, and literary studies that orality and literacy are phylogenetic conditions as well as conditions of cultural communities. What we have become increasingly aware of is the fact that *orality* and *literacy* do, on the surface, pertain to the absence or presence of the “technology of writing” as a communicative medium for an individual and/or within a community, yet that, on a deeper level, this absence or presence accounts for very different setups of cognition and conceptualization.<sup>7</sup> These different setups are intricately interrelated with different modes of abstraction, different concepts of language, different concepts of “tradition,” different concepts of history and so forth.

If we look more closely into the research that has brought about the realization of the Orality/Literacy Question, and if we look at its connection to medieval studies, we very soon see why Kuhn’s observations with regard to scientific discoveries apply here (1962:55-56):

discovering a new sort of phenomenon is necessarily a complex event, one which involves recognizing both that something is and what it is. . . . if both observation and conceptualization, fact and assimilation to theory, are inseparably linked in discovery, then discovery is a process and must take time. Only when all the relevant conceptual categories are prepared in advance, in which case the phenomenon would not be of a new sort, can discovering *that* and discovering *what* occur effortlessly, together and in an instant.

As to literary studies, those “conceptual categories” for the realization of the Orality/Literacy Question have most certainly not been “prepared in advance,” because what has basically been discovered is the conditioning of those categories themselves. In other words, the awareness of the Orality/Literacy Question involves the awareness of being oneself part of the question. The consequent self-reflection and critical introspection necessitated by the Orality/Literacy Question seems to carry such a forbidding potential that it evidently sometimes blocks the acceptance of the

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive view of these implications, cf. espec. Ong 1982 and 1986, Havelock 1986, Goody and Watt 1962-63.

question in advance.

In various places Walter Ong has criticized the fact that *orality* has mostly been seen and defined from the point of view of *literacy*, a process that views *orality* as a deficiency (1986:23):

The term “illiterate” itself suggests that persons belonging to the class it designates are deviants, defined by something they lack, namely literacy. . . . [The] views of writing as a mechanical skill obligatory for all human beings distort our understanding of what is human if only because they block understanding what natural mental processes are before writing takes possession of consciousness.

It appears to me that this taint of deficiency has led some medievalists either to ignore the question entirely or to just briefly look into it and then put it aside as not pertinent to the Middle Ages after all. If we have *manuscripts* from this period, so their defensive argument runs, if we know that people (at least those in some way or other “relevant” for us because they have provided us with written records of their time) could read (and write), then why bother?

To counter this preconception, one has to put forward the argument that after taking note of the findings furnished by the research into orality and literacy as briefly indicated earlier, those scholars who are willing to check the conditioning of their own heuristics will consider it an epistemological neglect—if not fraud—if the pertinence of those findings for the Middle Ages be denied. To be sure, for medieval studies there has always been a kind of implicit understanding that this period was not that all-pervasively literate after all.<sup>8</sup> Or, at least, that there was some kind of peaceful coexistence of *litterati* and *illitterati*.<sup>9</sup> Once aware of the Orality/Literacy Question and this heuristic opposition (which until recently resulted in a concentration on the *litterati*), the medievalist may develop a sensitivity for the “oral mind” very much present also in the *litterati*.<sup>10</sup> From the historical perspective, the *litterati* vs. *illitterati* opposition translates into accounting for such a “coexistence” as symptoms of transition, conceiving of the Middle Ages, particularly in relation to the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Grundmann 1958.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical discussion of Grundmann, cf. also Green 1990:275-76.

<sup>10</sup> The notions of the “oral mind” and the “literate mind” have been created by Havelock (e.g., 1986).

Germanic cultures, as a transitional period underway from (primary) orality, before their Christianization, to (almost fully developed) literacy in the Renaissance.

Now, the view of the Middle Ages as a “transitional” culture is controversial, since it potentially implies denying this period a position in its own right.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, I suggest that as long as we bear in mind our own perspective, the notion of transitionality should not be dismissed completely. It can still provide a heuristics that causes us to reconsider one of the most cherished—and perhaps most abused—concepts with regard to the Middle Ages: that of medieval *alterity*. Later I want to take up this notion once again and try to place it within the methodological discussion of medieval literary studies. Since Hans Robert Jauss, one of the founders of Reception Theory, has made this notion the center of his methodological discussion of medieval literary studies, it will be necessary to review some historical implications of Reception Theory against the background of recent methodological discussions in the United States. This will bring to light another kind of “alterity,” namely that of American and European (more precisely German) medieval literary studies and their methodologies as historical and/or political idiosyncrasies.

### **The Historicity of Reception Theory**

Let us look now at how American “New Historicism” as represented by the work of Lee Patterson deals with Jauss’ concept. In his recent publications Patterson rides a forceful attack against all kinds of well established approaches to medieval literature, most of all against “historicism in its positivist phase,” which harbored the belief that “natural science was successful because its methodology partook of the certainty and universality of the natural laws it sought to uncover” and hence “assumed for itself a similar methodological purity” (1987:15). This kind of criticism has obviously been valid until well into the second half of our century. Thus in the foreword to the second edition of *Wahrheit und Methode* Hans-Georg Gadamer characterized “the methodology of modern historical sciences” [*der modernen historischen Wissenschaften*] as “making what has grown historically and has been transmitted historically an object to be

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to the historian Hans-Werner Goetz (Hamburg) for pointing out to me in a private communication that my “evolutionary perspective” (as advanced in Schaefer 1992 for the earlier English Middle Ages) “may bar the view of the autonomy of the era where the ‘oral’ and the ‘literate’ were also intimately interrelated.”

established like an experimental finding—as if tradition were as alien, and from the human point of view as unintelligible, as an object of physics” (1989:xxxiii-iv).<sup>12</sup>

Another refutation Patterson produces, although it appears only in a footnote (1987:7-8, n.8), is that of the receptionalist approach as formulated by Hans Robert Jauss. For reasons I find hard to follow, Patterson, on the one hand, credits Jauss with being the “obvious exception” to the rule (stated in the main text) “that the issue of historical understanding per se has received virtually no general discussion within the context of medieval Studies” (7). On the other hand, he accuses Jauss of declining “to confront the historicity of the observer” (8, n.9 from previous page). Whenever a scholar takes up the concept of “horizon” as spelled out in Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode*, he cannot possibly do so and, at the same time, be oblivious to the observer’s historical situatedness (how else could he want to aspire to the “fusion of the past horizon...with the present one”? [Jauss 1979:183]).

I wonder whether Patterson’s judgment has to do with another observation he makes in this context (8):

The inhospitality of Anglo-American literary culture as a whole to a philosophically informed historicism has largely condemned historical criticism to the benighted positivism of the nineteenth century, a darkness that is only now gradually yielding before the arrival of phenomenological hermeneutics, Marxism, and other European imports.

Obviously the methodological discussions within the humanities have followed very different paths on either side of the Atlantic. First and foremost, if we view things from the present situation, the “revolutionary years” of 1968-69 have forever shaken the positivistic complacency of the humanities in all West German universities. The debate about “political correctness” that pervades the American academy these days reminds me very much of the methodological—and hence, ideological—screening any

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<sup>12</sup> In particular with Gadamer it is sometimes instructive to savor the original (1972:xxi): “. . . wo die Methodik der modernen historischen Wissenschaften Platz gegriffen hat und das geschichtlich Gewordene, geschichtlich Überlieferte zum ‘Objekt’ macht, das es ‘festzustellen’ gilt wie einen experimentellen Befund—als wäre Überlieferung in dem selben Sinne fremd und, menschlich gesehen, unverständlich wie der Gegenstand der Physik (1972:xxi). I use the second edition of the English translation of *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*), revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, which appeared in 1989. The German quotes are taken from the third revised edition of 1972.

professor in those days had to face from the students.<sup>13</sup> This screening checked *richtiges Bewusstsein*—something that had to be a *kritisches Bewusstsein*. Of course this was a highly political and politicized discussion, the language of which was charged with belligerent terminology.<sup>14</sup>

I am by no means claiming that each and every professor of German or English or History in those days suddenly and irrevocably turned into a scholar with a *kritisches Bewusstsein* in the sense the Revolution prescribed. However, we had our extensive share of agitation with the ubiquitous and persistently reformulated question of “relevance.”<sup>15</sup> The reason I am making this historical remark is simply to point out that an accusation against Jauss or any other representative of the Konstanz School for declining to “confront the historicity of the observer” must be dismissed, if only for those contextual (historical) reasons! And there is yet another aspect that needs to be thematized with regard to Reception Theory, an aspect that is indispensable for the appropriate assessment of this theory (or method, or approach) within the methodological discussion that is currently going on in North America.

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<sup>13</sup> It may be the European recollection and/or witnessing of totalitarian systems that gives such a disturbing ring to the commitment to “correctness.”

<sup>14</sup> To give a faint impression of what the discussion sounded like in West Germany, cf. the following statement: “Was ist die heutige Verfassung dieser Wissenschaft [i.e., der Germanistik]? Im Polizeistaat Adenauers verriet sie das Geschäftsgeheimnis ihrer Existenz: Opportunismus. . . . [Die] Studentenrevolte [hat] die schmutzige Verfilzung dieser Wissenschaft mit dem Faschismus angeprangert, ihre Geschichtsfeindlichkeit unter der Parole ‘Die Germanistik lehrt das Interesse an der Literatur als Desinteresse an der Gesellschaft’ bekämpft. . . . Die Stosskraft dieses Kampfes gegen die bürgerliche Germanistik resultierte aus den antiimperialistischen Kämpfen der Studentenrevolte” (Autorenkollektiv 1971:1; “What is the present state of this science [*Wissenschaft*, i.e. Germanistics]? During Adenauer’s police state it gave away the trade secret of its existence: opportunism. . . . [The] students’ revolt has pilloried the dirty intertwining of this field and fascism, fought against enmity towards history with the slogan ‘*Germanistik* teaches interest in literature by way of disinterest in society.’ The impact of this battle against bourgeois *Germanistik* was a result of the anti-imperialistic battles of the students’ revolt”).

<sup>15</sup> For a splendid contemporary discussion of the “crisis of the university” and its consequences, see Hartmut von Hentig, *Magier oder Magister. Über die Einheit der Wissenschaft im Verständigungsprozess* (1972).

Reception Theory is deeply indebted to phenomenology.<sup>16</sup> Without taking into account this philosophical background, Jauss' claim that, among other factors, an historical "horizon of expectation" may also be reconstructed through the "opposition between fiction and reality, between the poetic and the practical function of language" (1982a:24) may cause misunderstandings. Thus, Patterson has to advance substantial criticism: what Jauss' "theory amounts to," he summarizes, "is traditional literary history...supplemented with a comparison of the work to 'reality,' a reality whose constitution Jauss does not specify" (1987:8, n. 9).<sup>17</sup> Nowhere does Jauss demand that one compare the work to "reality (as such)." The term "reality" is used and relativized in the oppositional dichotomy of "fiction and reality" (*Fiktion und Realität*) and "the poetic and the practical function of language" (*poetischer und praktischer Funktion der Sprache*) (1982a:24/1967:35). Yet I suppose that from the post-structuralist, deconstructivist stance these distinctions are void anyway. But Patterson draws his notion of "reality"—and thus his footnote criticism of Jauss—from yet another concept: "If social reality is inherently and inescapably theatrical, then the distinction between the real and the fictive (*lege* history and text) need not be sustained" (1987:61). True enough, yet it should also be noted that the constructedness of social reality is by no means a recent discovery.<sup>18</sup> Yet I doubt whether this insight also by necessity erases the distinction between "reality" and "fiction."

Jauss' objective is not, in this context, to say of what "reality" exactly consists. His point is the *difference* between how language is used in literature or poetry *as opposed* to its function outside, thus obviously using structuralist or formalist concepts of language and communication. Again, post-structuralism may put all of this in doubt. However, even if we agree with Derrida's dictum—I do not—that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* we may also agree that *within* this all-pervading text words "do different things." Thus, for instance, Wolfgang Iser sees the distinction between literary and non-literary fiction in fundamentally different manifestations of the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf., e.g., for Husserl's notion of "horizon," Gadamer 1989:245-49; the affiliation is well outlined in Jay 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., in contrast to this position, Frantzen 1990:122-26.

<sup>18</sup> The phenomenologically oriented "Sociology of Knowledge" (first developed by Karl Mannheim) seems largely to have escaped the attention of the present type of literary criticism; cf. Alfred Schütz's *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932/74, for English versions, 1971/74); cf. also (in Schütz's wake) Berger and Luckmann 1966.

respective narrative with regard to those who are exposed to these fictions (1985:215):

... fiction plays a vital role in the activities of cognition and behaviour, as in the founding of institutions, societies and world-pictures. The difference between all these and the literary text is that the latter reveals its own fictionality. Because of this, its function must be radically different from that of other activities that mask their fictional nature. The masking, of course, need not necessarily occur with the intention to deceive; it occurs because the fiction is meant to provide an explanation or a foundation, and could not do so if its fictional nature were to be exposed. The concealment of its fictionality endows the explanation provided with the appearance of reality, which is vital because the fiction functions as the constitutive basis of this reality.

Rainer Warning, another scholar from the Konstanz School (and Jauss' student) retains, as it were, the metaphoric language of the theater that Patterson (independently) uses when he speaks of literary fiction as "staged discourse."<sup>19</sup>

It certainly has to be conceded that in view of the nature of medieval literature the classification of a text as "fictional" is problematic to begin with.<sup>20</sup> Yet I think there is common agreement that "conscious/intended/known" fictionality in narrative literature had been reestablished in the high Middle Ages. And, what is particularly interesting for our present point: this (re-) establishing of fictional narrative was a "consequence of literacy," as Franz H. Bäuml has sketched out from a phenomenological point of view in his seminal article on "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy" (1980).<sup>21</sup> I do not want to elaborate on the notion and concept of fiction any further here; the point Bäuml has so convincingly made, however, indicates the path on which Reception Theory and studies in orality/literacy are eventually bound to meet. Instead I want to follow further—from the European point of view—the path that has led to this point of convergence. For this I suggest taking a closer look at Jauss' notion of the *alterity* of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Warning 1980; the notion of *inszenierter Diskurs* has subsequently been adopted by Iser (1982/85). For a phenomenological assessment of *fictionality*, cf. also Hamburger 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jauss 1982b.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. also Schaefer 1991.

First of all, it is easily overlooked that Jauss actually uses this term in two very dissimilar senses.<sup>22</sup> In the sense of “otherness” it has the most intensive impact for his theoretical deliberations. Therefore it may escape our attention that Jauss has explicitly said that he is using *alterity* also in the sense delineated by the Rumanian linguist Eugenio Coseriu who speaks of “the dimension of the alterity of language” (“Dimension der Alterität der Sprache”) as a universal, for “language is...always...directed toward somebody else” (“die Sprache ist...immer...auf einen anderen ausgerichtet;” 1971:187-88). In this sense a work of medieval literature is for Jauss “an aesthetic object which, thanks to its linguistic form, is directed toward an *other*, understanding consciousness—and which therefore also allows for communication with a later, no longer contemporary addressee” (1979:187).<sup>23</sup> Now, to insist on the communicative nature of (any) piece of literature is trivial unless specific methodological consequences are drawn from this statement. In other words, we should not only make the observation that literature is communicative, but go on asking *how* this communication works.

After the initiatory steps taken by Jauss and Iser in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, Reception Theory quickly saw a further development with substantial qualifications in this very direction. Thus Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in 1975 made a convincing effort to elaborate Receptonal Aesthetics into what he calls “Literaturwissenschaft als Kommunikationssoziologie” (“literary science as a sociology of communication”).<sup>24</sup> Relevant for our present issue is the fact that Gumbrecht wanted the “new literary studies” (as initiated by Jauss and Iser)

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<sup>22</sup> The two senses are, as a matter of fact, *so vastly* dissimilar that one may suspect Jauss of having somehow been trapped here in the fallacy of a homophony.

<sup>23</sup> The English translation of the article “Alterität und Modernität . . .” reads (1979:187, boldface added): “It is not by accident that this term [*alterity*] became the focus of interest in the debate over Paul Zumthor’s *Essai de poétique médiévale*. Along with **his usage**, I follow Eugenio Coseriu’s theory. . . .” In the German original this reads: “Dieser Begriff ist nicht zufällig in der Debatte über Paul Zumthors *Essai* . . . in den Mittelpunkt des Interesses getreten. Ich Folge **in seinem Gebrauch** zugleich der Sprachtheorie Eugenio Coserius . . .” (1977:14). The English version suggests that the term is taken over from Zumthor. As my colleague Richard Matthews has pointed out to me, the reference in *his usage* is ambiguous (that is, it could also refer in advance to E.C.). I would nevertheless suggest as a “more correct” translation: “Simultaneously I follow in **its** use [i.e., the use of the term *alterity*] the linguistic theory of E.C. . . .”

<sup>24</sup> Programmatically so in Gumbrecht 1975.

to be conceived of as a “Wissenschaft von den Bedingungen der Sinnbildung” (“science of the conditions of the constitution of meaning;” 1975:397). This modification of the original Reception Theory is momentous. As Gumbrecht specified earlier in this same article, literary studies—in this heuristic line—are no longer meant to seek the “evaluation of constitutions of meaning over a text as more or less ‘correct ones’” (“Bewertung der Sinnbildungen als mehr oder weniger ‘richtige’;” 390)—in other words, evaluation of an interpretation as correct or not.<sup>25</sup> What Gumbrecht demands of this *neue Literaturwissenschaft* is that it strive for “the detection of the correlation between the conditions of constituting meaning over a text and the constitutions of meaning themselves” (“das Aufdecken des Zusammenhangs zwischen den Bedingungen von Sinnbildungen über Texten und diesen Sinnbildungen selbst;” *ibid.*).

Turning away from questions of “interpretative correctness” meant not only turning away from “text-immanent criticism” (= New Criticism). It also meant giving a new bent to the kind of Receptional Aesthetics that had “blurred the difference between normative and descriptive history of reception.”<sup>26</sup> Gumbrecht’s advancement of Reception Theory results in an (almost) final farewell to traditional philological studies (thriving discontentedly until the arrival of trained linguists in the various language departments during the 1960’s and well beyond). Moreover, it has integrated the “sociological” question—which was so forcefully (and sometimes violently) posed by the Marxist faction—with the methods of then modern linguistics, which started to receive the increasing attention of literary studies in the mid and late 1960’s.<sup>27</sup>

What Gumbrecht (and Stierle) so convincingly formulated in order to contribute to the “discussion about the ‘knowledge interests’ and methods

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Patterson’s similar criticism of “interpretative correctness” (1987:45).

<sup>26</sup> Gumbrecht said this in view of Iser’s concept of the “implied reader,” which he sees as suffering from the fact “dass er [i.e. Iser] den Unterschied zwischen normativer und deskriptiver Rezeptionsgeschichte verwischt” (1975:391).

<sup>27</sup> It is worthwhile noting that—apart from the well-established departments of more or less traditional comparative linguistics (usually “*Indogermanistik*”)—linguistics in Germany has remained within the various “philologies” (that is, the “Language and Literature departments”). This is true at least for the “traditional universities.” Thus for German students of English, for instance, linguistics—usually including the history of the language—is an integral part of their curriculum.

of literary science” (“Erkenntnisinteressen und Methoden der Literaturwissenschaft;”<sup>28</sup> Gumbrecht 1975:388) met with (more or less latent) disapproval within the community of students of the humanities in that period.<sup>29</sup> In the meantime the Marxist challenge of the late sixties and early seventies has since long petered out,<sup>30</sup> but the questions it raised so loudly and clearly have brought about an irreversible *methodisches Bewusstsein*, even if it was of no more avail than recognizing one’s own positivism (which miraculously has somehow managed to survive undercover).

In a way medieval studies was exempt from the hardest “blows” of the time. Nevertheless, for those scholars able and willing to look beyond the walls of their philological *hortus conclusus* the impetus of that methodological discussion has proven extremely fruitful. Thus it was a lucky coincidence—or was it really a coincidence?—that scholars like Hans Robert Jauss and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht are solidly trained medievalists.

What I have said up to this point may suggest that, since the 1970’s, Receptional Aesthetics or Reception Theory has been the all-pervading “paradigm” of (German) literary studies in general and medieval literary studies in particular. A claim to this effect would thoroughly distort the overall picture. It is certainly fair to say that most literary scholars—among them also medievalists—took note of the works of Jauss, Iser, and their

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<sup>28</sup> For a brief discussion of the difficulties in translating the notion *Erkenntnisinteresse*, cf. note 2 above.

<sup>29</sup> This aspect is knowledgeably sketched at various points in Holub 1984.

<sup>30</sup> Obviously it is a “continental” misconception—perhaps only my own—to suppose that as the “Revolution of ’68/’69” took place on both sides of the Atlantic, the Marxist attack on literary studies and its academic institutions must have been as ubiquitous. However, critical harassment such as the “*Ideologieverdacht*” seems to be quite recent in the United States (if we leave the “McCarthy era” aside), now fostered by confluences of Deconstruction and Marxist criticism; cf., for instance, Frantzen 1990:112-13. It is remarkable that the work of Erich Köhler—in part strongly influenced by (moderated) Marxist ideas—is obviously missing in the methodological discussion in the United States. With his *Ideal und Wirklichkeit* Köhler produced perhaps the most convincing mediaeval study in the “sociology of literature” as early as 1956 (2nd ed. 1970); for further moderating qualifications of the Marxist-oriented claims, cf. Köhler 1974. *Literatursoziologie* as developed by Köhler has obviously received very little attention in the U.S. in general. Thus Holub (1984) does not mention Köhler in his section on “Literary Sociology” within the chapter “Influences and Precursors [of Reception Theory].” For an application of Köhler’s approach to Chaucer, cf. Schaefer 1977.

followers. Yet just as Reception Theory proved to be a very integrative approach, it also appears to have lent itself to a subsequent integration into the work of scholars who perceive their research as largely a-theoretical or, at least, not biased toward any particular theory.

As far as I am aware, medieval studies in North America have been, all in all, as much or as little theory-biased as in Germany. Nevertheless, whenever theories (such as Exegetics and New Criticism)<sup>31</sup> intruded into medieval research in America, these theories have been more or less of an exclusive kind. This also holds for initial studies done in what has come to be called the Oral-Formulaic Theory, which, by the way, seems to be of so little interest to Patterson that he does not even bother to reject it.<sup>32</sup> Yet there is one voice that has advocated a more comprehensive and integrative approach to medieval vernacular literature. The voice is that of Franz H. Bäuml.

### Reception Theory and the Orality/Literacy Question

In the postscript to a 1979 reprint of his article “Der Übergang mündlicher zur *artes*-bestimmten Literatur des Mittelalters,” which first appeared in 1968, Bäuml stated (247; italics added):

Aufgrund genauerer Definition der Begriffe “mündlich” und “schriftlich” im jeweiligen Bezug auf Tradition, Komposition, Text oder Vortrag, Publikum oder Publikumsorientierung, soziale Funktion der dadurch gekennzeichneten Überlieferungstypen u.dgl., eröffnet sich die Möglichkeit, die *Literatur des Mittelalters als Produkt einer auf Schriftlichkeit fussenden Kultur, getragen von einer überwiegend analphabetischen Bevölkerung*, zu erfassen. Sofern nun der *Funktion der Literatur innerhalb dieser Kultur* und der ihre Funktionen bestimmende Überlieferungs—und *Rezeptionseigenschaften* Rechnung getragen werden kann, ist es erst möglich—zum Teil in Anlehnung an die von der *Semiotik* erarbeiteten Begriffe—sie *historisch als kommunikativen Prozess*, als

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<sup>31</sup> I am naming these two because Patterson (1987) discusses them in detail; for a critical evaluation of the Neo-Exegetical approach to Old English poetry, see Busse 1984.

<sup>32</sup> The fact that literary studies in orality/literacy (which have long abandoned the first rigid concepts of Oral-Formulaic Theory) have, up to now, reached anything but an overall acceptance in American medieval studies may be deduced from the fact that Suzanne Fleischman’s (1990) contribution “Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse” in the *Speculum* volume dedicated to “New Philology” deals with the Orality/Literacy Question mainly from a *linguistic* point of view.

durch identifizierbare Gestaltungs—und Überlieferungsmomente bedingte sprachliche Manipulation zu sehen.<sup>33</sup>

This is a manifesto for the merging of two kinds of approaches developed from different historical backgrounds and with different methodological claims.<sup>34</sup> As is well known, Bäuml put this program into forceful scholarly practice with his article on “Varieties and Consequences” a year later. Here he successfully unites the one approach—Jauss’ and Iser’s Reception Theory, which was hardly taken note of in America—with the research performed in the wake of Milman Parry and Albert Lord—which was, for its part, almost totally ignored in Germany.

Oral-Formulaic Theory, if we may use this simplifying tag, was or has been a “production-oriented” concept just as much as many other approaches preceding or contemporary with it. Thus it took some time before it was realized that what the Parry/Lord approach had brought to light could be unified with anthropological, psychological, and linguistic findings that, in their turn, made it obvious that “features of orality” in poetry are not only—and sometimes not at all—indications of a compositional technique, but rather of cultural states in a very general sense. Thus the *alterity* of its texts results from encoding that follows different semiotic rules (this is what Zumthor’s 1972 *Essai de poétique médiévale* had brought to the fore). Moreover, this difference (and this is the point Zumthor did not yet fully grasp in 1972) results in its turn from different anthropological conditions.

I cannot delineate here all the findings that have contributed to the insight that oral and literate encoding of meaning—and hence also oral and

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<sup>33</sup> “On the basis of a more precise definition of the notions “oral” and “literate” in their respective relation to tradition, composition, text or recital (/performance), audience or audience orientation, social function of the types of tradition thus marked, and the like, the possibility arises of considering the literature of the Middle Ages as the product of a literacy-based culture, sustained by a prevalently illiterate population. Now, within this culture and for the traditional and receptional properties determining their function, we are enabled—partly in borrowing from notions developed by semiotics—to see them historically as a communicative process, as linguistic manipulation conditioned by identifiable elements of form and tradition.”

<sup>34</sup> In a similar way Bäuml had advanced those ideas in his essay “Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy: An Essay Toward the Construction of a Model” (1978). There he stated that the “question of perception as determinant of ‘meaning’ is of obvious relevance to medieval literature with its parallel oral and written forms of transmission” (41).

literate decoding of meaning—work very differently.<sup>35</sup> In general one may say that written communication requires much more extensive linguistic planning and explicit manifestation, whereas oral-aural communication may rely to a much greater extent on the extra-linguistic context.<sup>36</sup> Suffice it to quote David Olson's dictum that in "oral communication the meaning is in the context" while in written communication "the meaning is in the text" (1977:*passim*). Of course we have to concede two things in view of these statements. For one thing, Olson's generalizations are not formulated particularly with regard to poetic communication. Secondly, Olson's considerations are largely historical; that is, he speaks of the historical development from orality to literacy. As to the first point, literary historians evidently do not deal with "spontaneous speech," with discourse that has not been planned in advance (even if the "planning" is a matter of traditional encoding). As to the second point, we definitely have to take care not to enter the heuristic circle of proving the validity of a theory by applying it to the material from which this theory has been abstracted. However, if the axiom that the strategies of the encoding (and decoding) of meaning are analogous in literary and "non"-literary communications is acceptable, then we may, with the necessary precautions, adopt Olson's observation for our investigations into literature.

This brings us back to my initial claim that the "discovery" of and research into the Orality/Literacy Question (the recognition *that* something is and the simultaneous finding out of *what* it is [Kuhn 1962]) has much to do with "anomalies." Let us recall: Jauss observed—correctly—that the paradigmatic changes in the humanities differ from those in the sciences as there are no disturbing "anomalies" in the scientific sense in the humanities, since as the latter avail themselves of "no area of empirically verifiable observations comparable to that of the [natural] sciences" ("kein der Naturwissenschaft vergleichbares Feld empirisch verifizierbarer Beobachtungen;" Jauss 1969:54). However, in medieval literary studies there are, from the modern point of view, "anomalies," findings that are, at first glance, disconcerting for the modern reader. One such outstanding "anomaly" in medieval poetry is its verbal repetitiveness, its "formulaicness." In the established paradigm of literary analyses this observation has been relativized and newly aestheticized by claims such as

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Schaefer 1992:ch.I.3; there and elsewhere in that book I speak of *Sinnvermittlung* and *Sinnermittlung*. The English notions *encoding* and *decoding of meaning* only imperfectly render the German.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. for this from a linguistic point of view Koch and Oesterreicher 1985.

Randolph Quirk's, who postulates with regard to Old English poetry (1963:153)

that an expectation of the congruous and complementary, expressed through recurrent collocations [= formulae], is built into the poetic system of Old English, and it may be supposed that this is close to the starting point in estimating the original audience's pleasureable experience....

This kind of "aesthetic explanation" has obviously been the only one available.

However, John Foley has recently shown that formulaicness should neither be simply regarded as the prime indication for a compositional technique nor as some kind of aesthetic "anomaly" of medieval (as well as other) poetry. In his recent book *Immanent Art* (1991) he has, instead, made it convincingly clear that the formulaicness of Old English poetry bears witness to a specific encoding of meaning—an encoding that he calls traditional—that is largely alien to a literate culture and thus requires specific semiotic attention. Moreover, Foley's book illustrates how Jauss' demand for the "reconstruction of the horizon of expectation" can successfully be applied to texts from various times and cultures (such as Homeric epic, the epic of the *guslari*, and the Old English *Beowulf*) by reconstructing—or, in the case of the Balkan epics, observing—this horizon with regard to the "pre-understanding of the genre" (here the epic) and "from the form and themes of already familiar works" (Jauss 1982a:22).<sup>37</sup>

A line of thought such as Quirk's, on the other hand, argues away a manifest finding—in this case the formulaicness—that is an anomaly within our modern literary standards of originality, by subjugating it to the aesthetic pleasure principle and simply (re-)defining what must have been pleasurable in that culture. Now, I am not saying that the formulaicness of Old English, or, for that matter, any other medieval vernacular poetry cannot possibly have caused aesthetic pleasure in its audience. My point is just that by using such an argument the need to seek any other reasons for formulaic diction is suspended if not altogether cancelled. However, on the basis of the findings furnished by research into the Orality/Literacy Question, we are now in the position to see that poetic linguistic encoding may follow rules that are subject not only to historical (secondary) rules of aesthetics but also to historical (primary) rules of communication that depend on the culture's situatedness on the scale of the orality/literacy

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<sup>37</sup> Foley expounds his theoretical orientation on Jauss in chap. 2 of *Immanent Art*.

continuum.<sup>38</sup>

A second case of an “anomaly” consists of those various types of vague references that cannot be made out intratextually. Such vague (or even totally unintelligible) references range from the opaque use of personal pronouns, through the indeterminacy of cause and effect in narrative sequence (cf. the Old English *Wife’s Lament*), and on to “co-textual” allusions that forever remain opaque for the modern reader (cf. the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* or the mythological references in *Deor*<sup>39</sup>).

The discovery of the Orality/Literacy Question has furnished us with insights for reading such “anomalies” as these as indicative of encoding strategies closer to the oral than to the literate mode. Again, this is not to say that texts displaying such features are oral in the sense that they are “orally composed.” Given the material circumstances of the (earlier) Middle Ages (e.g., no “scrap” paper but wax tablets for sketchy notes), we will at any rate have to give up the idea of poets sitting or standing at their desk, “making up” their poetry while they write. Yet apart from such “external” conditions, what have sometimes been identified as residuals or “traces” of orality (in the archeological sense of remainders, or indications that the text in question ultimately goes back to times before literacy became available) should rather be seen as symptoms of different textual strategies. From the historical point of view these anomalies may ultimately be left-overs from (primary) orality. But since they appear in texts otherwise indisputably literate, we should conceive of these strategies as functioning in their own right.

The latter idea seems to point to the necessity that the implicit dichotomy in the notion of the “Orality/Literacy Question” that I have created here eventually be resolved. I myself have made a step into this direction by suggesting for Anglo-Saxon England the term *vocality* (borrowed from Zumthor 1987) to denote a cultural situation that very much depended and relied on the voice for mediation of verbal communication even though writing had already been well established.<sup>40</sup> However, orality and literacy in the sense of “communication in the

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<sup>38</sup> With the notion of “orality/literacy continuum” I here want to refer to the observation that the spectrum from (primary) orality to (fully developed) literacy is a wide one with various intermediate stages.

<sup>39</sup> A fine analysis of *Deor* within the (early) framework of Reception Theory has been given by Wienold 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Schaefer 1992.

oral/aural medium” and “communication in the written/read medium” are not just heuristic fictions made up to account for historical phenomena. Present-day findings from psychology, anthropology, and—up to now to a deplorably small extent—from linguistics show that the strategies of encoding and decoding are fundamentally different and that we too avail ourselves of the different strategies in different communicative situations (for instance, hopefully, in drawing up a lecture or writing an article for publication). Moreover, the cognitive differences between literates and illiterates have been extensively investigated and documented.<sup>41</sup> Hence, unless we share the Derridarian postulate that *l’écriture* precedes the spoken word, a postulate that can only be made on a-phenomenological grounds, the dichotomy as well as its translation into a continuum between the “poles” of orality and literacy is more than a heuristically convenient concept.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

(1) More or less tacitly, all *Textwissenschaften* have shared the assumption that the human faculty for encoding as well as decoding verbal communications works in the same way both synchronically and diachronically. Lee Patterson’s knowledgeable and forceful discussion of the literary medievalists’ attempts to gain adequate hermeneutic access to their material shows that the dominant objective has been to make out a “proper” (I am not saying “the correct”) understanding of that literature. Yet, while New Criticism and Neo-Exegetical Criticism were struggling with such “proper” understanding, German Reception Theory had long passed beyond this stage and had thematized the goal of “the understanding of the understanding of texts” (“das Ziel des Verstehens des Textverstehens”; Gumbrecht 1975:400).

This self-imposed task of advanced Reception Theory was, as we have seen, a consequence of the specific history of post-war German literary studies. Historically speaking, the stage of search for “understanding understanding” was skipped in America. Instead theory-oriented scholars in literary studies—and among them also some medievalists—committed

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Carothers 1959, Bruner et al. 1966, Lurija 1976.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of orality/literacy as dichotomy and continuum, cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985.

themselves at once to understanding that “understanding no longer has either a basis or a subject” (“Verstehen wird zum Verstehen dessen, dass das Verstehen keinen Boden und kein Subjekt mehr hat”;<sup>43</sup> Stierle 1990:20) by adopting the post-structuralist stance.<sup>44</sup>

(2) As we may observe at present, medieval literary studies in the last decade of our century are recalling methodologies and theories, such as Philology and Historicism, that have been suspended (up to the point of being completely discredited and/or incriminated) by providing them with a methodological and theoretical update.

If, as Stephen Nichols has stated, it is “manuscript culture that the new philology sets out to explore” (1990:7), then Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has substantially contributed to this exploration with her book *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (1990), at the same time allowing the Orality/Literacy Question to provide Philology an impetus toward a new paradigm.<sup>45</sup>

If, on the other hand, “New Historicism” is grounded in the observation that man “is a creature who is constituted by his own constitution of the symbolic activity that is culture,” as Patterson has phrased it (1987:60), then we cannot avoid taking into account the cognitive bases for this “symbolic activity.” This is where the integration of the

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<sup>43</sup> Stierle has called the post-structuralist approach an “epistemological surrealism” (1990:26); cf. LaCapra’s (early) observation that the “aspects of the work of recent French figures (for example Foucault, Deleuze, Sollers, Kristéva, and Derrida) [may] be seen in terms of processes of carnivalization” (1982:72); cf. also Hayden White, who speaks of the “absurdist moment” of Post-Structuralism (1976/85:269). There is much talk about *writing* (*écriture, s’inscrire*, etc.) in Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction. However, this notion—if it is a “notion” at all (a doubt that is raised by Deconstruction itself since it has a built-in mechanism that coalesces discourse and meta-discourse)—has virtually nothing in common with how studies in orality/literacy conceive of writing. This point is spelled out by Foley 1991:xiii-xiv.

<sup>44</sup> With regard to New Criticism Patterson has remarked (1987:19): “It [i.e., New Criticism] privileged . . . secular pluralism over doctrinal conformity, and above all else the independence and self-reliance of the individual, who is understood . . . as an autonomous being who creates his historical world through his own self-directed efforts.” Could it be that Post-Structuralism exactly matched this “pluralism,” this “self-reliance,” this “world-creation” through one’s own “self-directed efforts,” by providing a superstructure that finally sanctioned this pluralism, and so on “theoretically”?

<sup>45</sup> For the observation that the Orality/Literacy Question may also be very successfully integrated into historical research proper, cf. Vollrath 1981 and 1991.

Orality/Literacy Question into Reception Theory contributes to “New Historicism,” in that it historicizes the semiotics of the encoding and decoding processes of this activity.

As we medievalists are left only with meaning “as it is encoded,” in other words what we usually call “the text,” it appears heuristically logical to “historicize” simultaneously (if not in advance) our own activity of *decoding*. The awareness of differences in this activity has, again, been brought about by the Orality/Literacy Question: not only to name the *alterity* of the decoding procedures but also to account for this alterity on *both* sides of the the “categorical epistemological gulf” (Haidu 1974:3b). We are thus brought closer to “understanding the understanding” of medieval literature — and eventually to a more adequate understanding of this literature itself.

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