

# MCLUHAN, TWO MEDIEVAL LITERACIES, AND THE SERMONS OF THOMAS BRINTON

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Smaragdus' commentary (c. 805) on Donatus' *Ars grammatica* and the *Catholicon* (1286), the great dictionary by Joannes Balbus, are focal points useful for understanding two medieval literacies which together can help to situate within the arts-of-discourse traditions the rhetoric of late fourteenth-century preaching in England, as represented by the sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester. The differences between these two literacies can be characterized in part by the distinction between monastic and scholastic learning, but more fundamentally the two share a purpose of reform undertaken by powerful institutions (a purpose that can be summed up for Smaragdus in the word "observance" and for Balbus in the word "edification" ) and a view of language that entails what Charles Taylor has called a "semiological ontology."

Literacy as a critical concept has been the site of considerable theoretical disagreement. At the beginning of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan states his intention to show how the "forms of media technology" in the literate culture of the West have modified the "forms of experience and of mental outlook" (65, 9). The work of the classical scholars Parry and Lord in solving the so-called "Homeric Question" had shown how far-reaching were the differences between oral and literate cultures and the poeties they produced. Taking this distinction to be a paradigmatic one, McLuhan goes on to attribute great shaping power to the specific properties of various media technologies. The particular features of the technology of the printing press (for example, its reliance on visual relationships in space and on consecutiveness) thus serve to explain changes in consciousness and the course of history. It is a very formalistic argument.

Raymond Williams has opposed McLuhan's formalist position, saying that such an analysis "desocializes" culture (*Television* 127) and isolates it from "our common associative life" (*Long Revolution* 56). He proposes instead a sociology of culture which finds its explanations for history, not in technological innovation of the

communications media, but in the interactive relationship between individual and society, between the human organism and social organization, engaged in the "long revolution" towards meeting human needs in a participatory democracy (117-118). Crucial to the sociology-of-culture approach is the placing of cultural activity within the context of the various and overlapping mediating communities that constitute the complexity of society.

Brian Stock, in his book *The Implications of Literacy*, seems to accommodate something of the views of both McLuhan and Williams in his consideration of European Latin culture of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. On the one hand, he sees this period as one in which a society based on an essentially oral "communicative form" (11) is giving way to various combinations of oral and written forms, with written forms beginning to dominate (9). That these centuries are a time of just such a transition from oral to written is taken as an explanation for a number of historical developments. On the other hand, Stock is interested in the "inter-action" between written texts and what he calls the "textual communities" that interpreted them and gave them social meaning (88).

Looking at the array of orality-literacy relationships that are apparent during the Middle Ages--the "bewildering" array, Walter Ong has called it in a review of Stock's book (108)--is, I would agree, very helpful in interpreting the discourses of medieval culture. However, I would not attribute such explanatory power to the particular forms that those relationships take, but would instead try to complicate Stock's concept of "textual communities" in the light of William's view of mediating groups and on-going social life as a basis for understanding a particular medieval literacy or cultural practice. In James Berlin's terms, then, I would be attempting here a project in revisionary history (51-52, 57). And I would add yet another factor for consideration: a fundamental assumption underlying the medieval arts of discourse, though manifesting itself in various ways--what Charles Taylor has called a "semiological ontology." In a paper entitled "Language and Human Nature," Taylor argues that both ancient and medieval metaphysics are essentially "discourse dominated," that is, reality is conceived of as "modeled on discourse-thought" (222). The world presents itself to the understanding in a way that matches the formulations of it in the discourse that strives to rationally express it adequately. In classical

antiquity, the very language of expression does not figure much in the philosophical analysis of reality; but in Christian thought it does take on importance because the act of creation itself is an expression of God's will uttered through the Word to bring forth the world: creation is an articulated discourse which manifests the divine meaning. As Taylor puts it, "The originator of meaning, God, is an expressivist. This sets the framework for the theories of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, what we could call the semiological ontologies, which pictured the world as a meaningful order, or text" (223). I would add that during the Middle Ages the written text of the Latin Bible was also regarded as a manifestation of God's self-revelation articulated in language, a manifestation that is integral with the rest of spiritual and material Creation. Sacred Scripture as a single, specially privileged text constitutes a divinely expressive reality of discourse both in its meaning and in its configurations. The early ninth-century commentary of Smaragdus of St. Mihiel on the Latin grammar of Donatus provides a particularly good illustration of the medieval semiological ontology of language. Smaragdus' arts-of-discourse doctrines situated in the contexts of the Carolingian monastic community and the imperial court will constitute the first medieval literacy I wish to sketch out.

Like his associate, the monastic reformer Benedict of Aniane, Smaragdus came from the south of the Frankish Empire (McKitterick 108). As king of Aquitaine, Charlemagne's son, Louis (when once Emperor himself, to be Louis the Pious), had already allowed Benedict considerable scope for monastic reform in the south, a reform devoted especially to the close observance of the Rule of Benedict of Nursia. Smaragdus also certainly had some contact with Charlemagne's court and the scholars, Alcuin and others, who were connected with it (Holtz xii).

Charlemagne took some official initiatives for the revival of learning in his domains. In a mandated circular letter of about 790, the "De litteris colendis," he emphasizes a number of times the parallel between a faithful adherence to standards of conduct in one's actions on the one hand and a well-informed interpretation and correct oral performance of the divine service on the other: *recte vivendo, recte loquendo*, that is, right living and right speaking, in this special sense, go together (290). Both consist in keeping correct observance.

The concern shown by Smaragdus' various scholarly commentaries to contribute to a more perfect observance of the monastic life is quite in keeping with the reform movement and the renewal of learning. He wrote a commentary on the Benedictine Rule, in which he includes certain specific ideas of Benedict of Aniane about keeping to that single Rule exclusively (Holtz x). He also wrote a commentary on the Psalter, which holds such a central place in the Benedictine liturgy of prayer. His exposition of Donatus' treatise on the parts of speech has as its aim to achieve correctness in performance of the Latin of the divine service, but also to achieve a performance informed by the understanding that, immanent in the system of the Latin language, is the same divine order present in Scripture and the world.

Donatus begins, "There are eight parts of speech." Smaragdus remarks by way of comment that the entirety of the Latin language is confined within these eight parts. It conforms with the rest of reality that the whole of the Latin language should be encompassed in eight categories, for in Scripture eight is associated with figures of the universal church and the promise of redemption it holds out to the faithful. First Peter recalls the Genesis passage about the Flood (1 Pet. 3.20) and makes the point that the few who were saved (the members of Noah's family--Noah's ark is a figure of the Church) were just eight in number; the eight Beatitudes of the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 5.3-10) also offer salvation from destruction through blessings likewise eight in number (Smaragdus 6-7). This explains why there should be eight parts of speech in the language of the church, for that language is the vehicle of Scripture's promise of salvation.

When Smaragdus comes to comment on the various classes of the noun, he begins by making a special distinction between common and proper nouns: only the names of the Creator can truly be said to be proper, in the sense of "exclusive to one's self, unique"; the names of all other things are, on the other hand, multiple and common because they are dependent on God for their being, who called forth all things at Creation by the measure of his speech (13).

The system of the Latin language thus conforms to the realities of the faith that it is ordained to convey. An understanding of this inter-conformity among Scripture, the created world, and language

contributes to a more perfect observance in following the monastic rule and in performing the divine service--*recte vivendo, recte loquendo*. It was a literacy most appropriate to the limited community of the monastery.

In contrast to the monastic community's focus on its own self-sufficient life is the concern of the mendicant orders with the intellectual challenges that the Church met in discharging its responsibilities in Christendom at large. Johannes Balbus, late-thirteenth-century compiler of what was probably the most widely distributed Latin dictionary of the later Middle Ages (Wallis iii), was a Dominican resident at the order's house at Genoa, the prosperous north-Italian city with far-flung commercial interests. One of the names that Balbus gives to his great work, "Catholicon," seems to suggest the universality of reference that is fitting both for the concerns of his order and for the wide-ranging commercial activity of Genoa.

Humbert of Romans, a thirteenth-century Master General of the Dominican order, sets out the purposes to which the accumulation and systematization of knowledge at the universities was to be put by Dominicans and some of the institutional arrangements which would serve to accomplish them. He recommends a list of books which should be in the library of every friary and even specifies that the collection should be organized in such a way that volumes can be consulted quickly (*in promptu*) and easily (*de facili*) (Wallis 15). He also specifies the kinds of knowledge (*scientia*) relevant to the work of the order: knowledge of Scripture, of the natural world, and of history--they are all useful for the purpose of edification (Humbert of Romans 433 d-f).

*Utilitas* and *edificatio* are both important words in the Dominican view of learning; they suggest a literacy that contrasts with that of Smaragdus, which was patterned on the idea of observance. For the Dominicans, the resources of the written and spoken word are directed in response to the needs of the universal Church in its public life. In his article on *scientia* in the *Catholicon*, Balbus explains away what could be for this work of the Dominicans a rather awkward statement by St. Paul: "knowledge puffs up, but love offers spiritual and moral benefit"; *scientia inflat, caritas vero edificat* (1 Cor. 8.1). Paul is trying to say here (Balbus argues) that what matters is, not knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge useful for

the working out of the salvation of oneself and others--not knowledge to satisfy curiosity and vain-glory, but knowledge for edification. Those who wish to know in order that they may edify others are in fact putting love into practice.

For Balbus, the sort of literacy that needs to be acquired to engage in the work of edification is just what his *Catholicon* provides. In the entry under *litteratus* (literate, lettered), he states that the person properly so called is not the one who has lots of books and examines them and tumbles their words over in his mind (as a monk does), but rather the one who, in conformity with the arts of language, knows how to form, out of the raw material of speech, letters into words, words into statements and discourse, and who knows how to present and correctly accentuate that discourse. Correctness in accentuation (prosody) is an important organizing idea in the grammatical supplement to the dictionary; the oral performance of language implied here is not so much repeating the divine service as it is discoursing in Latin in the areas of learning and church affairs.

Balbus' attention to prosody, but also to etymology, in both the grammatical supplement part and the glossary ties together these two parts of the dictionary. Etymology, he explains, gives the truth about words and about the things they signify, so that tracing similarities in the forms of words provides knowledge about the world. Etymology has such importance for Balbus in the analysis of reality that he doubles the number of word classes by distinguishing primary and derived categories for each--primary and derived corporeal nouns, primary and derived incorporeal nouns, and so on. Here is another sort of semiological ontology in which knowledge about the world is gained from investigation of the language system itself, knowledge appropriable for the discourse of edification.

The great compilations of the thirteenth century, which were the achievement of the universities and mendicant orders especially, served as inexhaustible resources for late medieval preaching. Pantin has said that it is "almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the revival of preaching" in the fourteenth century (236); it was a consequence of the church reform movement of the 1300's which undertook particularly to extend religious instruction and participation in the sacraments to all the faithful in the parishes. The movement was given impetus by the efforts of Pope Innocent III; the Fourth

Lateran Council of 1215 enacted a canon requiring every Christian at least once a year both to go to a priest for confession and to take the Eucharistic sacrament at Mass (*Omnis utriusque sexus*). Reform bishops carried on the work in England later in the century, typified by John Pecham, Franciscan friar and Archbishop of Canterbury.

The effort to eliminate abuses in the church and to meet the pastoral needs of the ordinary laity maintained its momentum into the next century. Thomas Brinton was a great scholar, bishop, and Benedictine monk of the last half of the fourteenth century in England who worked energetically to raise the standards of the clergy and to set an example for popular preaching.

Brinton was born in East Anglia and probably attended the grammar school at the cathedral priory at Norwich run by the Benedictines; he almost certainly joined the order there. However, his career reflects not the monastic ideals of the earlier Middle Ages, but rather the new directions late scholasticism was taking in response to its involvement in academic controversies that had clear political and social implications. The black monks of Norwich had established a residence at Cambridge for those who wished to study law; probably Brinton took advantage of this opportunity and later went to Oxford where he received an advanced degree in canon law (Devlin xi-xii). At this time in the English universities there was a turning of attention away from the logical analysis of theological questions towards subjects of more practical application in church affairs, such as legal studies (Courtenay 365-6, 369).

In one of his sermons, Brinton, citing the prominence given in certain papal canons to the office of teaching against doctrinal error (*Quum ex iniuncto*), argues for the importance of knowledge, *scientia*, for the welfare of the Church. "How else," he says "can the clergy instruct others and lead them to justice and edification (*edificatio*), how else expound the Scriptures in intelligible sermons, unless they shine with the light of knowledge?" (*Sermon* 84, 382).

What knowledge Brinton puts to use in his own preaching, particularly, what knowledge about language and its affiliations with the earlier arts-of-discourse doctrines of Smaragdus and Balbus, can be seen in how he proceeds in a sermon delivered to the clergy at London, 1373 (*Sermon* 28). Although following more or less strictly the rules for constructing a sermon in the university tradition as set

out in the scholastic *Ars praedicandi*, Brinton nonetheless brings into the development of his text popular knowledge of the sort his clerical listeners might do well to make use of in their vernacular preaching once back in their own dioceses.

The base text is from Ephesians, "strive to serve the unity of the Spirit," *Sollicite servare unitatem* [Spiritus] (Eph. 4.3). Brinton takes up the words *Sollicite* (out of which comes his protheme) and *unitatem* (out of which comes the main part of the sermon) in a way that does not strictly constitute a division of the text. Instead, the division of the main part is accomplished by a concorded text from Corinthians tying into *unitatem*: "The many of us are one (*unum*) body," the church (1 Cor. 10.17)--but also we are all members of one social body as well. Brinton then proceeds to his bipartite division by choosing to give attention just to the head (rulers, lay and religious) and the heart (prosperous city-dwellers).

In developing the second part, the section about the heart, Brinton begins with an etymology which can be found in Balbus' dictionary: the city (*civitas*) is so-called because it is constituted from a community of citizens (*civium unitas*); this ties back by concordance to the *unum corpus* of the main division and to the *unitatem* of the base text from Ephesians. The preacher continues by introducing an exemplum from classical science, ultimately from Seneca's *Questiones naturales*, regarding the meteorological phenomenon of the halos that appear around heavenly bodies, particularly certain prominent stars. The Latin word for halo is *corona* which falls into place in a sequence of similar-looking words that all represent unity--*corpus* (the one social body), *cor* (the single organ of the heart, representing the community of citizens, which is central to the body of society), *corona* (the circle of faithful citizens joined together around the star--which is Christ, according to Revelations 22:16: *Ego stella splendida*). Seneca explains that when the corona around a star appears broken, it is because wind has torn it, and this portends a storm (1.2.5). Brinton then proposes three reasons (his subdivision of this section) for the analogous disruption of the civic order. Development of these three reasons comprises the last part of the sermon.

Brinton has thus followed out several different sorts of interconnections within and between the system of language and the text of Scripture--etymological derivations, as in Balbus; concordances



of the same word in various places in Scripture (thereby bringing together passages which confirm each other) and setting out sequences of similar-looking words which fall into line as the argument progresses: *corpus*, *cor*, *corona*, implying the inter-conformity of Scripture and the language system, as in Smaragdus. These patterns of associations in language correspond with and mutually inform what the learned disciplines have come to understand to be the nature of reality. Brinton turns to meteorology here, but elsewhere in this sermon he frequently cites from canon law and adduces as well instances from more popular forms of knowledge--vernacular proverbs, fables, and other illustrative stories. The world of learning thus meshes with the sort of lore more familiar to the lay audience that Brinton seems to have in mind. It is as though this is a semiological ontology that goes beyond an essentially text-based literacy and expresses the preacher's pastoral concern (*sollicitudo*) for the faithful people in his charge.

These are three medieval literacies (summed up in the key words, *observantia*, *edificatio*, *sollicitudo*), different, but the same: situated in different educational and social contexts, but all motivated by reform movements and the dynamic of renewals of learning; related to oral forms in different ways, but all showing some version of the semiological ontology that seems to be implicit in the medieval arts of discourse. These literacies successively absorb each other and together elucidate the late medieval preaching of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester.

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