11

Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?

Reinhard Wittmann

> For as long as the world has existed, there have been no phenomena so remarkable as the reading of novels in Germany and the Revolution in France. They have evolved more or less simultaneously, and it is not beyond the bounds of probability that novels have been just as much the cause of unhappiness to people in secret as the terrible French Revolution has been publicly.[1]

In his comparison between the political upheavals in western Europe and a reading revolution in central Europe, the conservative Swiss bookseller Johann Georg Heinzmann expressed a conviction shared by many of his contemporaries in 1795: it was not the Jacobins who dealt the fatal blow to the *ancien régime* in Germany, it was readers.

This momentous transformation in the function of reading, previously a widespread cultural practice, was greeted with enthusiasm by revolutionary zealots, but it met with the disapproval of moderate Enlightenment thinkers wearing troubled expressions. It was bitterly opposed by reactionary, conservative and clerical strata of society and by groups representing the interests of the state, but it was refuted by no one. In this respect, too, Britain and France in particular were ahead of central Europe. From as early as the eighteenth century, German travellers had been reporting a conspicuous change in reading habits. In Britain, roof-tilers had newspapers passed up to them during their meal breaks, and in the French capital one observer remarked that

> everyone in Paris is reading ... Everyone, but women in particular, is carrying a book around in their pocket. People read while riding in carriages or talking walks; they read at the theatre during the interval, in cafés, even when bathing. Women, children, journeymen and apprentices read in shops. On Sundays people read while seated at the front of their houses; lackeys read on their back seats, coachmen up on their boxes, and soldiers keeping guard.[2]

A few years later, however, Germany (in the context of this chapter 'Germany' denotes a linguistic and cultural area rather than a political area or territory) was also completely gripped by this cultural revolution. Indeed, it seemed that this degree of social transformation was not achieved anywhere more than in central Europe, where a previously unknown illness now broke out and spread very rapidly. It was initially a single infection, a 'reading bug' that quickly escalated into a collective 'reading epidemic'. In 1796, the Erfurt clergyman Johann Rudolf Gottlieb Beyer made a record of its main symptoms, observing

> readers of books who rise and retire to bed with a book in their hand, sit down at table with one, have one lying close by when working, carry one around with them when walking, and who, once they have begun reading, are unable to stop until they have finished. But they have scarcely finished the last page of a book before they begin looking round greedily for somewhere to acquire another one; and when they are at their toilet or at their desk or some other place, if they happen to come across something that fits with their own subject or seems to them to be readable, they take it away and devour it with a kind of ravenous hunger. No lover of tobacco or coffee, no wine drinker or lover of games, can be as addicted to their pipe, bottle, games or coffee-table as those many hungry readers are to their reading habit.[3]

The infection that contemporary observers were correctly diagnosing, but were unable to treat, has been termed a 'reading revolution' by modern researchers. The term implies an interpretive model that conceives the secular change as a revolutionary transition from 'intensive' to 'extensive' reading. Drawing on sources taken from the Protestant north and middle regions of Germany, Rolf Engelsing has described a process by which the intensive reading of a small collective canon of texts, mostly of a religious kind and primarily the Bible, that were familiar, normative and repeatedly recited, was replaced with an extensive form of reading. In a modern, secularized and individual way, extensive reading was characterized by an eagerness to consume new and varied reading materials for information, and for private entertainment in particular.

Clearly, there was not a rapid and comprehensive substitution of the traditional approach to reading for a more modern one. Even if we prefer not to use the term 'reading revolution', nevertheless it remains doubtful whether, at the end of the *ancien régime*, the reading habits of a constantly expanding public could be quantitatively or qualitatively differentiated according to social stratum or region throughout Europe. From then on, more extensive reading habits came increasingly to be the obligatory and dominant cultural norm; traditional intensive reading was increasingly regarded as obsolete and socially inferior. However, it is not so easy to identify the causes of this transformation: 'intensive', repetitive reading could be a ritual devoid of meaning, while 'extensive' reading could be performed with passionate intensity.

In order to understand this process, one so momentous for the cultural history of Europe, to grasp its causes and its development, its influence and its consequences, and to some extent to get closer to the reality of the eighteenth-century reader, we need to carry out a comprehensive initial examination of a large number of sources, together with a careful interpretation of them. Researchers in Europe have endeavoured to do this, especially in the last two decades, albeit by very different means. On the whole, though, we are just as at the beginning, and we have for a long time lacked a sophisticated picture of the processes involved.[4] Even this chapter can provide no more than a rough outline.

The World of Readers

We can only give a suggestion of the varied and closely interwoven conditions and premisses of reading in the eighteenth century, together with the political, economic, sociological and cultural changes it underwent. The population of the German linguistic area must have almost doubled between 1700 and 1800, to about 25 million (excluding the Habsburg Empire), reaching a high point in the last third of the century. At the same time, a clear, if initially only gradual, trend toward urbanization began, even though around 80 per cent of the population continued to live on the land. In all the territories belonging to the politically very fragmented Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, the social status and structure of the nobility and peasantry remained largely unchanged until the end of the century, but within the bourgeoisie situated in between there were important processes of transformation, emancipation and differentiation that ultimately led to the breakup of feudal society.

The 'bourgeoisie' was not a unified order in the sense of a *tiers état*. On the contrary, it continued to comprise the traditional urban, middle and upper strata of society occupied by merchants, guild-masters and the highest-ranking craftsman; in addition to these, there was a similarly urban, innovative and entrepreneurial economic bourgeoisie. However, the 'educated bourgeoisie', consisting of scholars or 'intellectuals', as well as officials with an academic training, played an especially significant role. The restricted political area occupied by the Empire, had a large number of small courts and imperial cities acting as administrative centres, so there were more of these élites than in the other countries of Europe. Their opportunities for social advancement worsened considerably at the beginning of the eighteenth century, because the comparatively lively social mobility of the Baroque period came to a standstill, the feudal system became decrepit, and the new bourgeois agents of culture increased in number, but no longer found adequate employment. Excluded once more from leadership positions, these 'free-floating intellectuals' constituted a potential for unrest through their more and more explicit questioning of the traditional system.

This development was embedded in the familiar pan-European embourgeoisement of society, culture and literature. It represented the historical achievement of the Enlightenment movement, with its new value system, its ideal of equality based on natural law, its spirit of utilitarian efficiency, and an intensive striving for education that served to demarcate the nobility, but primarily for social advancement under the dominant themes of reason, humanity, tolerance and virtue. Jürgen Habermas has outlined this change in consciousness, using his theory of the 'structural transformation of the public sphere'. According to this theory, bourgeois identity emerged with a new public sphere that was independent of the courts, a 'sphere of private people assembled into a public' that questioned the monopoly of information and interpretation enjoyed by the authorities of Church and State, and developed new, anti-feudal structures of intercourse and communication, initially through literature but then politically too. Individual identity replaced status bestowed by birth. It was first and foremost within the intellectual sphere that this identity sought to win and maintain the autonomy to which it aspired. The characteristic feature of this bourgeois individuality was the way it discovered and liberated subjectivity, and strove toward constant communication, in order to expand its restricted sphere of experience.

No medium could perform this function better than the printed word. Written culture and literature became the training ground for self-understanding and reasoning, while books and reading acquired a new status in the public consciousness. For the first time the bourgeoisie now had at its disposal enough time and purchasing power for reading.

Reading acquired an emancipatory function, and became a productive social force: it expanded one's moral and intellectual horizon. It made of the reader a useful member of society, allowed him to command his range of duties better, and was even an aid to his social career. The printed word became the vehicle of bourgeois culture.

In previous centuries, the book had been principally regarded as an authoritarian medium with an impersonal claim to power. It was seen as an indispensable factor of social discipline imposed by the State and the Church. It was not until the general change in attitudes in the eighteenth century that people recognized the capacity of printed matter to 'completely penetrate the reader's subjective life'.[5] Precisely because the mechanically duplicated text could be read in its complete uniformity, far more automatically than any manuscript, it drew new readers hook, line and sinker into the imagined world of the book. To do so, of course, there was a fundamental prerequisite: namely, literacy.

Without even approximate figures for the whole of Europe, the extent of reading and writing at the end of the eighteenth century can only be guessed at. What are the criteria for selection? What use are rough approximations of an 'elementary reading ability', deduced from a limited school education, if during a whole lifetime this ability is never converted into reading *practice*? Do we count among 'readers' people who are able to scribble their signature at the bottom of a bill of sale? Or those who pore over their catechism in an effort to decipher it? Or could 'readers' include any illiterate person who listens eagerly and attentively to another person who is reading aloud? We must take gender differences between readers into account (female literacy centred more on reading than writing), differences in religion, but in particular differences between readers in the town and those in the country. The only country for which we have accurate figures is Sweden, where the entire adult population of around 1.3 million had a semblance of reading and writing ability. But Sweden is a unique case; for the remaining countries of Europe the rough figures and contemporary accounts that are available to a large extent give the same picture. For Britain, the 'nation of readers' (Samuel Johnson), E. Burke estimated that the reading public in the 1790s amounted to 80,000. Out of a total population of 6 million, this constitutes less than 1.5 per cent. Even by 1788 a quarter of all British parishes were still without a school. The figures for France are just as vague: in the 1780s around 9.6 million people were able to write their name, but even there the proportion of illiterate people around 1789 was still thought to be a good 60 per cent.

In central Europe in the eighteenth century there was undoubtedly a dramatic *relative* increase in the number of readers. We can assume that they doubled, if not trebled, but only at a very low level. Contemporary accounts differ enormously in their assumptions, and there is a similar variation in the sources of information.[6] In 1773 Friedrich Nicolai reckoned that the 'learned' public in Germany amounted to 20,000 people (that is, around 0.01 per cent of the population). Jean Paul numbered the readers of *belles-lettres* at 300,000 towards the year 1800, or about 1.5 per cent of the entire population. However, these two sets of figures – from before and after the 'reading revolution'? – differ by a factor of more than 100. Researchers today, on the other hand, give far higher figures, estimating that, around 1770, 'potential' readers accounted for 15 per cent of the population over six years old, and 25 per cent in 1800.[7] Here is a far more realistic supposition (in spite of the fact that the average print run is fixed too high): with an estimated 25 million inhabitants in Germany and an average first print run of 2,500 copies, a book was bought by 0.01 per cent of the population, and read by about 0.1 per cent.[8] Complaints levelled by contemporaries at the 'reading mania' raging through all classes of society were without doubt an 'ideological falsification'.[9] A truly numerical or quantitative democratization of reading did not come about for approximately another 100 years. We have at our disposal more accurate statistics for the number of actual readers in the duchy of Württemburg, which can serve as a case study (albeit not as a representative one). In his study of *Das gelehrte Wirtemberg* in 1790, Bathasar Haug conducted a careful census of the class of dignitaries within the duchy who for the most part must also have been the agents of literary culture in their society: 834 clerics, 388 curates and scholarship-holders in Tübingen, 452 lawyers (who probably included higher-ranking officials), 218 doctors and apothecaries, 300 officers (two-thirds of them from the nobility), around 200 graduate students, 75 merchants in Stuttgart and around 450 in the country, and finally, 1,324 *Schreiber* ('clerks') – that is, middle-ranking officials without a university education.[10] If we add to these 4,000 members of the property-owning and educated bourgeoisie a further 2,000 women and young people and a few hundred nobles, we arrive at a figure of around 7,000 'extensive' readers in Würtemburg in the last years of the eighteenth century – a little over 1 per cent of the population as a whole. Those who practised the traditional mode of reading continued to revert to the edifying 'old solaces', the Bible, the catechism and the calendar.

However, it would be a mistake for us to assign only a marginal role, culturally or within society as a whole, to the regularly reading public in Germany, which numbered approximately 300,000 people, or 1.5 per cent of the adult population. For this (initially very small) ferment of new readers started some momentous cultural and political chain reactions.

Old and New Forms of Reading in the Eighteenth Century

How did reading evolve in the eighteenth century? To answer this question, we would need to have a more sophisticated model of the history of readers to work with, one that took account of both the diachronic sequence of events, together with its intermediate stages, *and* instances of synchronic overlap. Reading evolved into an individual process independent of social class. The class to which people belonged scarcely determined their access to reading any more: 'The literary public of the pre-revolutionary era was still largely élitist, homogeneous and closed. Between 1789 and 1815 it was independent of social class, heterogeneous and open.'[11]

The most widespread form of interaction with the printed word continued to be 'unruly' reading, a mode of reading that was naïve, non-reflexive and undisciplined, and for the most part performed aloud. It constituted the sole form of reading among the rural population and a large section of the urban lower classes too. Given that they worked week in, week out, from sunrise to sunset, six days a week, there was neither the time nor the motivation for these people to read. For the static world of the rural populace, from the stable-boy to the large farm-holder, reading was a social practice or technique of domination that was superfluous to their daily lives. If they had a rudimentary reading ability, they applied it to reading blood-letting tables, rules for the weather and sowing, and devotional works sold at market and by pedlars, as well as chapbooks both spiritual and secular in character. Many provincial publishers, particularly those in Germany, published dozens of these little chapbooks. However, like the *Bibliothèque bleue* in France, even the chapbook 'was not necessarily bought to be read, or at least not to be read carefully, precisely, and within an attention to the letter of the text', but 'a person of weak reading skills, who could assimilate only brief, elementary bits at one time, could find satisfaction in a minimally cohesive text without attaching too much importance to its incoherent aspects'.[12] In fact, with time the contents of these booklets underwent textual modifications that anticipated the change in reading habits.

This 'unruly' form of reading could, however, be linked to a collective 'alfabetismo di gruppo' (Italo Sordi) – in other words, a well-developed capacity to listen, implying an indirect 'literalization' without any literacy education. It was promoted by a hierarchical form of communication, the lecture: in most family circles, religious texts were recited by the father of the house or the children, while in public places such as inns or markets, those who could read, including teachers and priests, distributed political and other new publications. In the last years of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers largely failed in their intensive efforts to transform 'unruly' reading into a socially integrative 'useful' form of reading among the rural population using an authoritarian method of teaching people to read.

This situation underwent a permanent change following the trauma of the French Revolution. An elementary interest in the sensational news about freedom, equality and fraternity began to spread beyond the towns. Backstreet lawyers, schoolmasters who had abandoned their duties, rebellious students, ecclesiastical reformers, innkeepers and coach-house owners read newspapers aloud in schools or taverns, and encouraged noisy debate. All this helped considerably to motivate people to learn to read for themselves (measures taken by the counter-revolutionary authorities to control opinion had much the same effect), to the discomfort of the leading political and social classes, who were increasingly determined to oppose this intellectual emancipation.

A quicker and earlier change in reading habits occurred among the urban classes than in the rural lower and middle classes, in particular among domestic workers, lackeys and barbers, chambermaids, employees in trade and craft industries, and among the middle ranks and some lower ranks in the army. This group possibly constituted up to a quarter of the urban population. It also enjoyed the necessary preconditions for reading: namely, that precious resource, light, together with brief times for reading throughout the day, and often when there were free meals and lodging, a small budget for a lending library too. By emulating the ruling class, the workers also acquired its fashionable reading habits, in particular its extensive consumption of *belles-lettres*. In the city the printed word was a natural component part of daily urban life: posters on houses, public notices on walls, town criers and market criers with their declarations, the ubiquitous newspapers in the smoke rooms and taverns. In the progressive England of 1740, Richardson's *Pamela* was already regarded as the 'culture-heroine of a very powerful sisterhood of literate and leisured waiting-maids'.[13] After an interval of several decades, this literary emancipation came about in Germany as well. In 1781 a Viennese author noted a true passion for *belles-lettres* among chambermaids: 'Not satisfied with this alone, they also play the part of sentimental souls, demand the rights to *belles-lettres*, read comedies, novels and poems conscientiously, and learn entire scenes, passages or verses off by heart, and even argue about the sorrows of young Werther.' These reading tastes could no longer be disciplined by a moralizing work like the *Little Book of Morals for the People* (Lavater, 1773). Long hours of idleness on guard duty encouraged reading in the urban army, as one observer lamented in 1780:

'Even the musketeers in the large towns have library books brought to them at the main guardroom.' Apart from novels, the preferred reading materials in the garrisons were racy stories and pamphlets.

Socially, 'unruly' reading was in decline, but in percentage terms it was still prevalent. Its opposite had always been 'scholarly' reading. Among the intellectual élites a 'modern', cursory reading to gain information was not the only current form. An extensive, polyhistorical and encyclopaedic mode of reading had also become established by the seventeenth century. However, from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the scholarly bookworm who remained oblivious to the world as he pored over his folios was looked upon as a figure of ridicule. His knowledge of books, which stubbornly resisted any form of pragmatism, was contrary to the enlightened bourgeois world-view. The ponderous, pedantic thinker reading within the confines of his room was replaced by the learned and versatile 'petit maître' who was more superficial in his pursuit of the sciences.

Enlightenment ideology, on the other hand, propagated 'useful' reading for both traditional and new agents of culture. Between 1720 and 1750 the main vehicles of this reading propaganda were the *Moralische Wochenschriften* ('moral weeklies') that appeared principally in the commercial towns of the Protestant north. In addition to Leipzig, Hamburg played the decisive role as the gateway for British Enlightenment thought. Following the model of the 'moral weeklies' such as the *Spectator*, *Tatler* and *Guardian*, these publications disseminated a specifically bourgeois 'message of virtue' and the cultural ideal of the Enlightenment, opposed to the *galant* life-style of the court. Using such programmatic titles as *Der Patriot*, *Der Weltbürger*, *Der Vernünftler*, *Der Biedermann*, *Der Menschenfreund*, *Der Freygeist*, *Der Gesellige* and *Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen* and the reader-oriented strategies of the earlier edifying books, they now conveyed secular information from this world, in an effort to pass the time in an entertaining way. For both the well-to-do tradesman and the ambitious student, the well-mannered woman and the honest official, reading material that was both socially useful and at the same time promoted individual morality was no idle pleasure but actually a moral duty.

This strategy was particularly effective among the female reading public. With their increasing economic prosperity, the wives and daughters of the bourgeoisie had more free time available for reading. Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, their reading canon had been almost exclusively confined to edifying religious writings (even if such restrictions were not always effective), but it was now allowed to expand. The 'moral weeklies' recommended several 'women's libraries', which were not intending to educate any 'femme savante', but merely

presupposed a 'relative education, narrowly confined to a range of domestic duties'. However, they undoubtedly quenched the female thirst for knowledge with travel stories and fables, even with British family novels. The teaching of literacy skills to youngsters was pursued with a similar level of commitment. As childhood was now recognized as a properly defined stage in life, greater attention was given to what children and young adults actually read. From 1760 onwards, an intensive method of teaching the young generation of the bourgeoisie to read was implemented. This had scarcely any impact among young students, who did not have very much time and who had always had a more extensive and secularized mode of reading.

This 'useful' form of reading not only considered the text as a moralizing allegory, as a guide to achieving the perfection of the individual, it later developed within the rising bourgeois public, thanks in particular to the institution of the reading society (see below), into a form of reading oriented toward communication and reflection, with the aim of shaping the social identity of the bourgeoisie through reading. Even Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his home town of Geneva, contrasted this stage of 'rational' reading, which was practised in a useful and pragmatic way, with the diversionary reading matter popular in the city of Paris:

> The Frenchman reads a lot, but only new books; or to be precise, he leafs through them, not in order to read them, but in order to be able to say that he has read them. The Genevan does not read good books; he reads them and thinks at the same time; he does not appreciate them but he understands them.[14]

Following the example of the Encyclopaedists, this kind of reading was regarded even by some German Enlightenment thinkers as an act of liberation from a feudal obscurantism. On the part of the bourgeoisie it promoted a new, collective self-understanding that was based on a secular argumentation and was freeing itself from the religious and legal doctrinaire discourse of the feudal structures of the *ancien régime*. The bourgeois individual was thus able to keep his sense of direction, and gain a new corporative, social and cultural identity. Obviously, this 'rational' way of reading was a male preserve. With their growing economic prosperity, men had more and more time for reading. They were interested not only in information related to their trade or profession, but also in new political publications and works of diversion.

The role played by the German nobility in all this was relatively minor. We have clearly to distinguish their reading habits, which we have only little knowledge of, even today. In France, right up to the end

of the century, the landed gentry still possessed very few books. Similarly, in Germany the 'Krautjunker' (country nobleman), whose homes contained perhaps several dozen books, faced a small circle of educated patrons of literature, who, like the educated bourgeoisie, modernized their roles as readers. Among the courtly nobles and especially the landed gentry, the number of book lovers who had amassed valuable collections was extremely small. None of them played more than a minimal role in the 'reading revolution'.

As previously mentioned, the process of modernizing reading habits sprang not so much from the residences and courts as from the Protestant commercial towns of northern and central Germany. The Catholic regions of the Empire did not begin to participate in the process until later. Unlike the Protestants, they lacked the tradition of individual Bible reading, a quasi-religious act providing a fundamental stimulus to reading.

> In Catholic areas the clerics are the necessary intermediaries between the Word of God and the faithful, and no other book has a similar existential importance to that of the Bible for the Reformed, the Bible whose presence in each family is verified, and the text of which could be recited to oneself after learning it by heart from multiple recitals and readings.[15]

Of course, even among the Catholic population, popular mass-market publications such as calendars and leaflets were in circulation, and it was not strictly forbidden for laymen to pore over the Bible. However, in contrast to the early Protestant argument, which held that writing prevailed over tradition (*sola scriptura*), here oral mediation via the authority of teaching had absolute precedence. Nevertheless, for the role of the popular book, this only applied to the wider strata of religious believers. The clergy and the monasteries, by contrast, had always constituted a literary public *sui generis*. Libertine reading matter was especially popular in religious cities, as it was in France. But a far more significant role was played by the monastic libraries, which, right up to the period of secularization at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were the locus of a late and prestigious burgeoning of scholarly life.

It was also at this point that reading began to be modernized. From 1780, serious complaints about the reading of novels by seminarists were increasingly heard in Catholic regions; but, by contrast, the ridicule directed at members of the clergy who could not read grew conspicuously rare. A new generation of readers among the clergy had their first modern reading experiences in the monastery or the seminary. The progressive journal, the *Zuschauer in Bayern* (Spectator in Bavaria) reported the change that took place between the old and new

generations of Bavarian clergymen: 'the old generation takes snuff, smokes tobacco, drinks and reads nothing. The young generation is modernizing, reading, beginning to acquire taste, and to think.'

Remarkably quickly, albeit between two and three decades behind the Protestants, educated Catholics adapted to the new ways of reading, along with the wider public, and did so in a radically secularizing manner:

> Nothing is more keenly coveted, printed, sold, read and recommended, than precisely those writings in which religion is discredited. They pass through everyone's hands. They are reprinted. Some of them go out of stock in the first three months. The Normalschulen and press freedom enable even the common man to read everything that is hatched and published by these writing fanatics. There are public schools where the teachers recommend them to their pupils and read out extracts to them. Young girls take them into church with them. Young boys learning grammar are familiar with them. Clergymen – and God willing only the lowest, only those upon whom one does not bestow trust – put them up in their bookcases.[16]

While Bible reading among Protestants became increasingly rare, first in the towns, the processes of acculturation and de-regionalization and the 'reading mania' spread among Catholics, including those in the metropolises. A perfect example of this was Josephinian Vienna, with its deluge of anticlerical pamphlets. Clergymen who were hostile to reading resorted in their sermons and pamphlets to the old Baroque model for criticizing this reading mania. They feared, not without justification, that reading would lead to a general process of secularization and de-Christianization.

The 'Reading Mania'

Around 1770 even this model of reading, one which fitted with Enlightenment doctrine, and in which the social aspect of education played a central role, changed and became more sophisticated. Though a rapid process of modernization which also began to break free of the constraints of rationalism, the criteria for its reception, which were both authoritarian and academic, became more emotional and individual. This marked the beginning of a particularly decisive phase in the history of reading, one that remained especially virulent for several decades: that of a 'sentimental' or 'empathetic' form of reading. This form of reading was mid-way between, on the one hand, an individual passion that isolated the reader from society and his environment and, on the other, a hunger for communication through reading. This 'overwhelming desire to make new contact with the lives behind the printed page'[17]

led to a completely new and incredibly intensive familiarity, even an imaginary friendship between author and reader, the producer of literature and its recipient. The isolation and anonymity felt by the reader who was emotionally aroused yet isolated was compensated by his awareness that reading made him part of a community of like-minded people. Undeniably, this form of reading was – in the sense of a 'revolution' in reverse – far more 'intensive' than before, and not in the least 'extensive'.

In Britain, France and Germany respectively, this culturally very significant process is specifically associated with the names Richardson, Rousseau, Klopstock and Goethe. At the root of the new relationship that existed between author, text and reader was Samuel Richardson (1689–1761). His novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–8) were received with greater enthusiasm than any representative of this literary genre before him. It was primarily a female readership who responded enthusiastically to *Pamela*. In this novel Richardson portrayed specifically the world of women's experience with a precision previously unheard of, whether by virtue of its domestic details or the intimacy of a love affair, using the form of letters, the subjective medium of articulation *par excellence*. All this helped to make *Pamela* into a work that 'could be praised from the pulpit and yet attacked as pornography, a work that gratified the reading public with the combined attractions of a sermon and a striptease'.[18]

In France, too, this reading matter created a considerable stir, as Diderot's *Éloge de Richardson* (1761) showed. But it was not until the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) appeared that the passion kindled by Diderot's book turned into a conflagration. Rousseau demanded to be read

> as if he were a prophet of divine truth ... What set the reading of Rousseau apart from his religious forebears – be it Calvinist, Jansenist or pietist reading – was the invitation to read the most suspect kind of literature, the novel, as if it were the Bible ... Rousseau ... wanted to penetrate life through literature, his own life and that of his readers.[19]

Conversely, his readers hungered for this kind of reading matter, 'not in order to enjoy literature, but better to master life, in particular family life, and precisely according to Rousseau's ideas'.[20]

La Nouvelle Héloïse (1761), probably the top bestseller of the *ancien régime* and reprinted at least seventy times by 1800, unleashed an overwhelming response, including floods of tears and extreme despondency. Robert Darnton emphasizes that the readers of pre-revolutionary France

threw themselves into texts with a passion that we can barely imagine, that is 'as alien to us as the lust for plunder among the Norsemen or the fear of demons among the Balinese'[21] – or simply like the ecstasy of teenagers at pop concerts?

In Germany this revolution took place in a significant intermediate stage. Here, the female readership in particular needed a link between purely religious and purely worldly reading material. This was Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's (1724–1803) biblical epic *The Messiah*, published after 1749. It dealt with an edifying and, even for women, perfectly permitted subject, that of the life of Christ, but it did so from a sentimental perspective and in a boldly subjective way. Readers seized upon it at the moment they were preparing to emancipate themselves from traditional scholarly and religious reading materials, and it was abandoned immediately this emancipation was achieved, at which point they dealt with poetry and *belles-lettres* so naturally and casually that they no longer comprehended how 'Klopstock's *Messiah* could have once meant so much to them.'[22] The success enjoyed by C. F. Gellert's works is similarly explained. In the first bourgeois novel in Germany, his *Life of the Swedish Countess of G* (1746), the author's moral and religious intention was above all suspicion, which allowed the reader to devour the story's events all the more greedily.

A crucial breakthrough ultimately came in 1774, with Goethe's bestseller *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the young Napoleon's favourite book. In contrast to Rousseau, however, its author placed not the slightest value on any kind of intimacy with the reader. Nevertheless, a proportion of his largely youthful reading public interpreted this tragic love story, in which bourgeois morality on earth was no longer propagated but exposed, as something other than a work of art. In line with the traditional concept of the 'useful' and edifying text, they constructed it as an invitation to emulate. A wave of suicides among *Werther* readers was the disastrous consequence of this misinterpretation. However, the great majority of readers were content to identify with the hero on a merely superficial level, turning Werther's clothing (a blue tailcoat and yellow breeches) into a symbol of rebellious youth, and bought cult objects such as the famous Werther cup. Finally, a small minority succeeded in objectifying the story aesthetically, distinguishing between the world of reading and everyday reality.

The example of *Werther* illustrated the sophistication of the new reading public who were trying out various forms of interaction with literary texts, new modes and rituals of reading. Both social and solitary forms of reading assumed new functions. The main reading public for *belles-lettres*, namely women, preferred a mode of collective reading that for them was a means of direct communication. However, the

authoritative, 'frontal' method of reading aloud used by the *paterfamilias*, priest or teacher was now replaced by a gregariousness legitimized and formalized by reading, whose significance lay in the 'experience of empathetic role-playing',[23] or in other words a controlled and disciplined common mastering of literary texts. An exemplary case was a day described by Luise Mejer in 1784, in a letter to her friend, Heinrich Christian Boie. She worked as a lady's companion at Tremsbüttel in Holstein, at the residence of the Countess of Stolberg, whose husband and brother-in-law were successful writers:

> Breakfast is at ten o'clock. Then Stolberg reads out a chapter from the Bible, and a song from Klopstock's *Lieder*. Everyone retires to his or her bedroom. Then I dip into the *Spectator* or *Physiognomy*, and a few books the Countess has given me. She comes downstairs while Lotte translates, and I spend an hour reading her Lavater's *Pontius Pilate*. While she has her Latin lesson, I copy for her or read myself until dinner is served. After dinner and coffee, Fritz reads from the *Lebensläufen*, then Lotte comes downstairs and I read Milton with her for an hour. Then we go back upstairs and I read to the Count and Countess from *Plutarch* until teatime at around nine o'clock. After tea Stolberg reads a chapter from the Bible and one of Klopstock's *Lieder*, then it's 'goodnight'.[24]

Luise Mejer assessed this excessive kind of reading, which was both intensive and extensive in character, as follows: 'Here people are stuffed with reading matter in the same way that geese are stuffed with noodles.'

As a counterpart to the gregarious and communicative form of reading, solitary reading too assumed new qualities, characterized by quiet, peaceful appreciation. The body as a medium of textual experience was relegated to second place, and 'unruly' reading was disciplined. Quiet and relaxation while reading were now regarded as bourgeois virtues and as the prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation. By no longer putting himself at the mercy of the text, the reader remained master of himself and consequently free to interact with the text in a controlled way.[25] The immobility required from then on when reading at one's desk posed difficulties for more than just a few men, who continued to prefer the most casual positions. Literacy teaching at the end of the eighteenth century regarded the physically accentuated practice of reading aloud solely from a dietetic viewpoint, describing 'the acting of walking, in which the effort required causes the blood to circulate, prevents the bodily fluids from coagulating, and wards off illnesses and feelings of weariness. During rainy or unhealthy weather, or when we are ill, we have to take refuge in reading aloud as a substitute for the pleasures and benefits of a walk in the open air.'[26] Furthermore, as it internalized all emotions, quiet reading itself encouraged the reader to withdraw into the realm of the imagination.

The intensity conferred by closeted reading was further heightened by the 'sentimental' practice of reading in natural surroundings, in the open countryside, which for a time became a popular setting for the academically educated bourgeoisie, as an ostentatious retreat from society. It reflected the bourgeoisie's precarious position between, on the one hand, its revolt against the norms of late feudal society and, on the other, its humiliating consciousness of the fragility of its social prestige. This pointed escape from society, from the unreasonable demands of the court, from the town and from daily duties, into a sentimental retreat with a literary vade-mecum, conferred a particular intensity to the experience of reading by creating an interplay between the idyll of the surrounding landscape and imagined destinies. Readers liked to enjoy 'beautiful places' to the full by reading beautiful passages.

However, the principal location for reading continued to be the private domestic sphere, the bourgeois living space. The new cultural practice was integrated into daily life. Hitherto, the only people who had spent the hours of darkness unhealthily bent over folios had been scholars. Now, however, the evenings and nights also became available as free time for the literary public to enjoy reading. A change came about in the bourgeois attitude to time: once the day and time were structured and 'departmentalized', people gradually learned to alternate effortlessly between the imaginative world of reading and daily life, and the risk of confusing separated spheres of life with each other was reduced.[27]

The manufacturers of luxury items made 'reading furniture' available for the first time: *chaises longues* with an inbuilt reading desk, convertible furniture for the lady of rank, furniture that could serve simultaneously as a dressing table, a dining table, a desk for reading and writing, comfortable 'English chairs for reading or sleeping', and many others.[28] Women could procure clothing to match: the *liseuse*, a warm yet light house-frock or two-piece for imaginative journeys. For *galant* rococco ladies the boudoir had been a private space to which they could retire, but for the new bourgeois woman it was a 'closet' for reading, a refuge of female independence. It coupled the act of withdrawing from society with that of giving free rein to feelings. It 'was not used to conceal lovers, but to keep them out'.[29] It no longer contained courtly decorations, just reading materials and a writing desk, complete with letter-writing equipment. Just as popular among the female reading public was the habit of reading in bed, as can be inferred from contemporary accounts (often containing highly erotic allusions).

By the end of the eighteenth century, only a small proportion of the

reading public had succeeded in achieving the highest, 'adult' stage in the literary culture of reading, namely 'by effecting the transition to the fictional world solely through the imagination',[30] and in integrating reading into everyday reality. They read hermeneutically, as an autonomous artistic practice, no longer in order to confirm already familiar truths within the range of their own expectations, but to discover new and unknown ones. These competent readers of classical national literature were few in number, and have remained so right up to the present day. This was why Friedrich Schiller rejected the search for a 'Volksdichter' (national poet): 'There is now a very large gap between the *élite* of a nation and its *masses*.' Jean Paul referred to a similar division, describing German readers around 1800 as follows:

> In Germany there are three types of reading public: 1. the broad, almost completely uncultured and uneducated one of libraries, 2. the learned scholarly public consisting of professors, students and critics, and 3. the cultured public consisting of men of the world and educated women, artists and members of the upper classes, among whom at least frequent contact and journeys form the rudiments of an education. (Of course, these three categories of public often communicate with one another.)[31]

The great majority of readers practised a quasi-pubescent variant of sentimental reading, a 'narcotic' (as the philosopher J. G. Fichte put it) and often escapist 'reading mania'. This practice was at the heart of contemporary discussions.

Around 1780 this new epidemic began to spread rapidly, again emanating from central and northern Germany outwards, and particularly among the younger, female audience. The debate in the newspapers and journals, sermons and pamphlets, at the end of the century even detected it 'among classes who otherwise did little or no reading, and who even now do not read in order to teach and educate themselves, but do so simply for the purpose of personal entertainment' (in the words of the Bavarian Enlightenment thinker L. Westenrieder).

The authorities of Church and State were not alone in taking offence at the new reading mania. Even progressive Enlightenment thinkers regarded it as a principal obstacle to the emancipation they were striving to bring out in a disciplined and rational way. This socially harmful practice would, they believed, lead to vices that conflicted with the bourgeois, Protestant work ethic, and belonged within the world of the nobility and the court: idleness, luxury, boredom. Initially, however, the case against reading was brought mainly on dietetic and sociomedical grounds. While Tissot's *On the Health of Scholars* (1786) merely warned of the health risks to scholars who spent all their time in their

rooms, in the pedagogues' tracts of the late eighteenth century the 'masturbation' debate was linked to the debate about reading. Both were counted among the harmful 'secret sins of youth':

> the obligatory position, the lack of all physical movement when reading, combined with the violent alternation of imaginings and feelings [create] limpness, bloatedness and constipation of the intestines, in a word hypochondria, which has a recognized effect on the genitals of both sexes, particularly of the female sex [and creates] coagulations and defects in the blood, excitation and exhaustion of the nervous system, as well as conditions of langour and weakness in the whole body.[32]

Instructions on reading in the late Enlightenment condemned reading as a socially useless diversion: 'To read a book merely in order to kill time is an act of high treason toward humanity because one is belittling a medium that was designed for loftier purposes.'[33] Instead of being 'a method of educating toward independence', in the sense intended by Immanuel Kant in his definition of Enlightenment, it served 'merely to shorten time and maintain a condition of eternal dependency'.[34]

Reading Tastes and the Book Trade

The fundamental changes in the cultural practice of reading naturally had direct effects on the book trade that modernized both its forms of communication and its products. From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, the book was consistently regarded as a cultural commodity, and with the transition from the barter economy that until then had been dominant to a monetary economy, the market was realigned according to capitalist principles. Starting with Leipzig and the booksellers of Saxony and northern Germany, the trend toward strictly sales-oriented book production led to a new market of demand, and even to new forms of advertising. The number of booksellers in the provincial towns also increased conspicuously, and a new generation of publishers pursued Enlightenment as a business. For this they were denounced by conservative publicists as the principal cause of the reading revolution.

At the same time the role of the author became professional, and in Germany the 'freier Schriftsteller' (freelance writer) emerged, on the one hand insisting on the autonomy of his creativity, and on the other having to subordinate himself to the laws of the emergent anonymous traffic in goods. This necessity for self-prostitution on the market before an anonymous public induced the author to have intensive contact with the recipient of his work, and vice versa, leading to a spiritual community created by the book.

The book market now tended to deal with a reading public that was unlimited, heterogeneous and anonymous, whose reading tastes and needs were becoming increasingly sophisticated, and who were interested in both specialist books for advancing their professional careers *and* political information, in bloody horror stories *and* spiritual comfort. Nevertheless, these special, overlapping interests were matched by the homogenization of reading tastes transcending former class boundaries. The same moving family story was read both by the noblewoman and by her maids-in-waiting; the same horror story was read by the high-ranking official in the judiciary and the tailor's apprentice alike. However, they were all able to rise to the level of the canonized national literature. While the anonymous reader was at the mercy of market supply, he also made collective demands of this market that could not be ignored without risk of commercial failure.

The fluctuations in the market and reading tastes are (despite inadequate statistics) reflected in the Leipzig book fair catalogue that represented the transregional book trade throughout the entire century. The sheer expansion in the volume of production after 1760 shows the remarkable growth in a public hungry for reading matter. In 1765 the book fair catalogue recorded 1,384 titles; in 1775, 1,892 titles; in 1785, 2,713; in 1790, 3,222; in 1795, 3,257; and in 1800, 3,906 titles. Total annual production may have comprised almost double that number around 1800. The growth in the number of new publications was matched by the rapid decline in Latin, which for centuries had been the dominant language among scholars. At the book fairs the proportion of titles written in Latin fell from 27.7 per cent in 1740 to 3.97 per cent in 1800. Similarly there was a change in the hierarchy of subject areas: the overwhelming superiority of theology and religion rapidly diminished, indicating both the secularization of learning and the disaffection of the Protestant reading public with the edifying literature of the time. At the same time, there was an increase in the percentage of modern subjects like geography, natural history, politics, education and above all *belles-lettres*. The latter, which in 1740 had constituted only 6 per cent of the book supply at the fairs, had increased to 16.5 per cent by 1770, and to 21.45 per cent by 1800, reaching the highest position of all subjects. This increase was mostly attributable to the novel, whose market share more than quadrupled from 2.6 per cent of the book supply in 1740 to 11.7 per cent in 1800.

It was not only the number of titles that increased, but also the number of copies. Of course, average print runs did not increase to the same extent, owing to the reprinting of titles and the growth of lending libraries. Far larger print runs were achieved by newspapers than by books at the very end of the century, following the trauma of the French Revolution: the renowned *Hamburgischer Correspondent* reached 25,000 copies in 1798, rising to as many as 51,000 copies in 1801. At an average of ten readers per copy, this would have amounted to half a million readers. The print runs for more sophisticated literary journals, on the other hand, were lower by far (for instance, Wieland's *Teutscher Merkur*, with its 1,500 copies).

In the last third of the eighteenth century, book prices proved to be an obstacle to the rapid expansion of the reading public, especially the prices of the much sought-after *belles-lettres*. During this period, prices increased around eight- or ninefold, which was attributable to bookseller's practices, net retailing and low break-even quantities, but also to ever-increasing demand. For the price of one novel, a family in Germany (like Britain) could afford to feed itself for two weeks. For this reason most people among the newly emerging reading public, including the ranks of the bourgeois middle classes, switched to the lending libraries and reading societies in order to satisfy their reading requirements, or at least bought the reprinted editions that were produced in the south of the Empire and were far cheaper than the original editions printed in northern and central Germany. In this way the reprint has played a central role in the expansion of the reading public, and in the spread of new reading tastes even in Catholic upper Germany – in fact, especially there.

Of course, the book as an object also changed. In an effort to promote an extensive and quick form of reading, progressive publishers tried in vain to introduce the elegant roman type in place of Gothic print, those 'ghastly runes' and that 'angular, scroll-filled monks' script' (as J. J. Bertuch described it). Such attempts to modernize largely failed, making the readers of *belles-lettres* all the more eager for the texts to have an elegant and pleasing appearance. They had to be provided with a number of copper plates and vignettes, decorations and tailpieces. An integral part of the gripping novel was the illustration, best of all those by Daniel Chodowiecki, the incomparably talented portrayer of bourgeois life. The aversion to thick tomes grew: 'books create scholars, pamphlets create human beings' went the new motto.

The beginning of the bourgeois culture of reading in the age of Enlightenment also saw the introduction of the octavo format. Throughout the following decades, books became slimmer and slimmer, and the octavo, duodecimo and even the dainty sextodecimo grew to be the preferred formats for readers of *belles-lettres*. The content matched the dainty exterior most perfectly in the case of almanacs. The poetry chapbook was the medium of a literary culture that, in line with the French model, gave rise to over 2,000 of these often pleasantly, even luxuriously, produced little volumes: literary chapbooks, scientific ones

for the popular and specialist markets, and political and satirical ones. Jean Paul, a favourite writer of the late eighteenth century, commented on this change:

> Heavens! If I think of the old folios weighing many pounds, covered in boards, leather or brass bindings and clips, the fireside armchairs, upholstered in leather and fitted with nails of brass, in which the scholar spent his sedentary life; and if I now compare these to the little pocket books: one really cannot complain. Pigskin has been replaced by moroccan leather; the edges are now of gold, not brass; the clips and clasps have made way for silk-cloth cases; and instead of the chain tied to the old tomes in libraries, there is now a little silk instruction book for stamping.[35]

It was not the educative and informative literature of 'real facts', the travelogues and works of natural history, that occupied the highest position in the public taste and simultaneously constituted the main objects of the critics of the reading mania; it was rather the principal new genres of 'extensive' reading, the periodicals and novels. The latter in particular encouraged a 'rapid, inattentive, almost unconscious kind of reading habit'.[36] However, it may seem paradoxical that 'the most powerful vicarious identification of readers with the feelings of fictional characters that literature had seen should be produced by exploiting the qualities of print, the most impersonal, objective, and public of the media of communication'.[37]

As is well known, the polemic against the reading of novels has a long tradition stretching back to the *Amadis de Gaule*, though it is always described as a perversion confined to a privileged minority. However, with the multiplication of the production and reception of the novel in the late eighteenth century, the mania for reading novels assumed a sociopolitical dimension for the first time. In Germany the Easter trade fair of 1803 alone launched no fewer than 276 new novels, a figure that neither France nor Britain could come near. The deluge of novels covered all nuances of taste. In 1805 the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* took stock of the main trends in the production of novels in Germany since 1775, the year Johann Martin Miller's *Siegwart* was published: the sentimental, the comical, the psychological, the era of the passion novel, the chivalric or visionary romance, the ghost story, the magic novel, the novel of secret orders and courtly cabals, the domestic era, the era of the brigand, the thief and the rogue. A substantial proportion (around 40 per cent) of these new publications consisted of translations, primarily from English. An entire generation seemed to have caught the 'reading bug', that very generation that was meant to be continuing the struggle for bourgeois emancipation, yet was spending its time indulging in the narcotic habit of reading. Moral criticism

thus acquired an eminently political dimension. Some progressive authors deplored the fact that, in the case of young students and men, such reading material destroyed the autonomy of reason and the desire for emancipation – 'and without the slightest indignation they watch the murdering of freedom of thought and the press'. By exciting and unleashing the power of the imagination, reading released the reader from concrete sensory perception and the world of experience, at the risk of total disillusionment, even nihilism. Women with a passion for novels were reproached for escaping into passive and sentimental pleasures at the very moment when the bourgeois family was assigning a new and important range of duties to them. Complaints were also heard from conservative quarters in innumerable variations that such novels stimulated the reader's imagination, corrupted his sense of morality, and distracted him from his work. Immanuel Kant stated it succinctly: 'Besides causing many other upsets to a person's nature, reading novels also makes a habit of diversion.'

Besides novels, the reading matter preferred by the new reading public was periodicals. There had already been complaints about the 'untimely new newspaper craze' since the end of the seventeenth century, but even this now assumed a new dimension. The desire for daily news, for journalistic information about topical political and ecclesiastical, literary and economic events, spread far beyond the bourgeois classes. This was also true of pamphlets, in so far as the barriers of censorship gave way. When the reforming emperor Joseph II introduced press freedom in Austria, the consequence was a unique 'thaw', due to more than 1,200 brochures, pamphlets and loose sheets that were published in the years 1781 and 1782 alone. By the end of the century, the absolute dominance of politics united all strata of readers according to the conditions specific to each group. The lower classes had the sensational new publications read to them in the markets and the inns, while the upper classes devoured them at the commercial notice stalls, or else discussed them in a well-mannered way at reading societies. Evidently, however, the 'reading mania' had not taken hold of an entire generation, but seemed to have reached a new stage, as the masonic clergyman K. A. Ragotzky reported in 1792:

> But now it really is the case that a new, universal and far more powerful reading fashion than any before it has spread not just throughout Germany but over the whole of Europe too, attracting all classes and strata of society, and suppressing almost every other kind of reading matter. This is the reading of newspapers and political pamphlets. It is at present certainly the most widespread reading fashion there has ever been . . . From the regent and the minister down to the woodcutter on the street and the peasant in the village tavern, from the lady at her toilet to the

> cleaning maid in the kitchen, everyone is now reading newspapers. They calculate the hour when the mail will arrive, and besiege the post office in order to be the first there when the mailbag is opened . . . A lady of taste must have read at least the latest pages in the *Moniteur* the *Journal de Paris* or the *Gazette de Leide* before she goes to her tea circle, and with the company of gentlemen whom this common spirit assembles more assiduously around the tea table and who exchange news in the *Chronique du mois*, the *London Chronicle*, the *Morning Post*, or the two Hamburg newspapers, and those of Frankfurt or Bayreuth; while the smith sits on his anvil and the cobbler on his stool, temporarily laying down his hammer or his awl to read the *Strassburger Kriegsbothen*, the *Brünner Bauern-Zeitung* or the *Staats-Courrier*, or has his wife read them to him.[38]

In Germany the revolution in reading literature did not prevent the formation of a political consciousness. On the contrary, it promoted anti-feudal, anti-Church and altogether anti-authoritarian tendencies that manifested themselves in fashionable *belles-lettres* just as frequently as they did in the political commentaries. Unfortunately the role played by clandestine reading in Germany has not yet been fully explored. As Robert Darnton has shown, using the rich sources of the *Société typographique* in Neuchâtel, obscene and irreligious books were particularly sought after in France, even among the middle class of officials and administrators.

Lending Libraries and Reading Societies

The new mode of reading also assumed new forms of organization. Facing the highly organized market was not only the mass of anonymous book buyers, but also the institutionalized reader. This form of organization was characteristic of the bourgeoisie on the road to emancipation in the eighteenth century, and took two parallel directions: on the one hand, the commercial *lending library* and, on the other, the non-commercial *reading societies*. In Germany as well as Britain and France both forms of organization were vehicles for the reading revolution.[39] Nevertheless, the public libraries, the libraries of monastery, town, court and most universities (with the exception of Göttingen) played next to no part in satisfying this new desire for reading. On the contrary, in so far as it was possible, they even checked its progression. The Ducal Library Decree in the Thuringian town of Gotha held that 'Anyone wanting to take a closer look at a book must request it from the librarian who will then show it to him and, should the need arise, authorize him to read it'.

If we leave aside one or two precursors, the heyday of the lending

library everywhere in Europe began in 1750. In Britain, their number increased to 'not less than one thousand' by 1801, according to *Monthly Magazine*. In 1761 the bookseller Quillan founded the first French lending library in the Parisian rue Christine. The *loueurs de livres* multiplied very rapidly during the 1770s and 1780s. Following several precursors in Berlin, there is evidence in the German-speaking area that the first lending libraries were established in Frankfurt-am-Main and Karlsruhe in the 1750s. In the majority of towns and markets, even the smaller ones, there was at least one lending library in operation by the 1780s and 1790s. Around 1800 Leipzig had nine such establishments, Bremen ten and Frankfurt-am-Main as many as eighteen. But even in a small town like Prussian Oranienburg the postmaster lent more than 12,000 volumes, and allowed readers to consult around 100 newspapers for a charge. The lending libraries were the ideal partners for the extensive consumption of reading material that was spreading among the middle classes. Anyone who, for social, financial or local reasons had no opportunity to join a reading society was here able to satisfy his need for literature of all kinds, even with only a limited purchasing power and motivation. This applied especially to those large sections of the public to whom the reading societies essentially remained closed, although it was precisely they who were the worst affected by the 'reading mania': students and craftsmen's apprentices, young girls and women, socially marginal groups who had in part benefited from a university education, such as private tutors, common soldiers and clerks.

The same contemporary voices that were raised against the fatal reading epidemic began to attack the lending libraries that they considered to be the main breeding grounds of this vice. They were regarded as 'brothels and houses of moral perdition' that infected everyone – the young and the old, the upper classes and the lower – with their 'spiritual poison'. Lending libraries with a stock of predominantly *belles-lettres*, including chivalric romances, stories of brigands or ghosts, along with sentimental love stories and family novels, were often disparagingly called *Winkeletablissements* ('backstreet establishments'). Often their stocks were outdated, and ranged from a few dozen titles to over a thousand volumes. This early type of purely entertaining consumer library was frequently run by antiquarian booksellers, bookbinders or complete newcomers to the trade; but many serious booksellers in the smaller towns felt the need to bring their supplies into line with the prevailing taste. In Württemburg in 1809, nine-tenths of all lending libraries in the small market towns were this kind of humble establishment, with stocks of between 100 and 600 volumes. But even in the larger towns, reading tastes were by no means superior.

However, in the early history of the institution, this widely decried type of library can be contrasted with another type, modelled on the reading societies, which competed with them and occasionally even evolved from one of them. The stocks kept by these *Lesekabinette* or 'museums' betray encyclopaedic aspirations. The entire range of the contemporary book market was represented here, including specialist science publications, editions of the works of major writers, even foreign-language publications. In addition, a frequently affiliated journal-reading circle would supply periodicals from home and abroad. These firms displayed a self-understanding that was characteristic of the late Enlightenment, despite their otherwise commercial motives, and could more than stand up against the few inadequate public and university libraries. In the main cities of trade and education – Vienna, Frankfurt or Dresden, for instance – these institutions added reading rooms, where reference books could be consulted, exhibition rooms for displaying news publications, and in some cases for *objets d'art* and crafts, and music rooms and salons where refreshments were offered.

In spite of these 'lofty' institutions, the calls to have these 'dens of political and moral perdition' supervised grew even louder, particularly in the wake of the French Revolution. Around 1800, in all the German states, either a total ban was enforced on all lending libraries (as happened in Austria between 1799 and 1811), or at least a set of strict controls (the Wöllner Edict of 1788 in Prussia, and of 1803 in Bavaria).

From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, the lending libraries overtook the reading societies everywhere. This development testifies to the individualization and simultaneous anonymity of literary reception. Literary discussions conducted within a familiar circles of friends were succeeded by an individual form of reading practised in isolation, partly escapist and partly devoted to social climbing, that required commercial mediation.

In contrast to the lending libraries, the reading societies were self-managed organizations set up for the purpose of making reading material available to their members at a low cost and without commercial interests. A particular section of the bourgeoisie of the late Enlightenment who, in its criticism of the reading mania, deplored the anti-social practice of reading in solitude as an idle and socially harmful habit, saw in these clubs a centre for the achievement of emancipation, but also doubtless for mutual discipline and control. Here, a supervised form of reading based on common standards was practised, a collective assimilation and appropriation of reading matter. Evidently the reading societies were at the intersection of two decisive achievements along the way to bourgeois emancipation: on the one hand, extensive reading (in general the financial wherewithal of an individual did not extend to satisfying his desire for reading) and, on the other, the aspiration to create a social organization of this new reading public of private individuals in a comparably autonomous form.

Reading societies first began to evolve in the seventeenth century, with joint subscriptions to newspapers and later on to journals as well. These reading circles served to satisfy the craving for political information, and often continued until well into the nineteenth century, in the absence of any other institutions. With this mode of circulation, each member remained in his own private world, without regulated communication of what they read. From the 1770s onwards, more tightly run forms of organization became prominent: *Lesebibliotheken* ('reading libraries') emerged, in which the procured reading materials were collected in a single room and made available for use – periodicals and also an increasing number of books. For the purposes of acquiring and issuing books on loan, for finances and administration, guidelines needed to be drawn up, and a managerial committee had to be appointed; it was in this way that the first associative structures began to emerge. The place where the books were kept soon became a place where they were collected, and readers came together there to discuss what they had read and to form their opinions. A clearly widespread need for such places of communication about and through reading matter led to a boom in new institutions, particularly in the commercial towns of Protestant Germany. By 1770 thirteen reading societies were established, but by 1780 around fifty new ones had emerged, as many as 170 between 1780 and 1790, reaching 200 new societies in the last decade of the century. By 1810 another 130 were added, but by 1820 only a further 34. Unfortunately, these impressive statistics are not matched by corresponding data on the life-span of these societies.

Undoubtedly, their special appeal at the end of the eighteenth century was associated with the expansion in their stock of entertaining literature. A growing number of *Lesebibliotheken* and *cabinets littéraires* had other rooms added to their reading rooms, so that people could chat and smoke, and servants could serve refreshments, and it was not uncommon for other club rooms to be added for honourable diversions such as billiards and other games. Although there was mostly no reference in the statutes of these reading societies to class restrictions, nevertheless social homogeneity was guaranteed by the fact that a majority decision was needed before a new member could be accepted. On this evidence at least, the often proclaimed 'equality of all classes' was a mere fiction.

These readings societies, often called 'Harmonie', 'Societät', 'Museum',

'Ressource' or 'Kasino', helped the property-owning and educated bourgeoisie, as well as aristocratic officials, to broaden their social contacts. Reading soon became a secondary consideration in these carefully selected meeting places. Membership figures could range from two dozen in the case of the smaller societies, through 100 (in Bonn or Worms), 180 (in Frankfurt-am-Main), to 400 in Hamburg, or as many as 452 in the case of the particularly active people of Mainz.

Similarly, there was considerable variation in the size and composition of their stocks of reading materials. To begin with, edifying, moralistic and didactic texts predominated, as well as periodicals and works of popular science. In the specialist reading societies – those of doctors and lawyers, preachers, teachers and economists – there were mainly publications specific to their professions. Towards the end of the century, entertaining reading matter, and novels in particular, became increasingly popular within the more gregarious reading societies. Many societies entertained the ambition of owning a particularly wide stock of topical publications, ranging from almanacs, the major review organs, and the latest travelogues, to the political dailies, including those published in French and English.

If we take as our average a membership of 100, the reading societies altogether gained an audience of around 50,000 people between 1770 and 1820, and had great significance for both the political education and the reading culture of this élite. This seems to be an almost ideal exemplification of Habermas's model – in its discussions about reading matter, a public consisting of educated private individuals had managed to reach a consensus about its cultural and political interests. This élite may have constituted 7 per cent of all readers, but only a thousandth of the total population. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the authorities from regarding these autonomous circles with a certain suspicion. The war against the 'reading mania' also turned its attention to the reading societies as places where extensive reading was learned through practice. They were licensed, and their stocks of books were placed under supervision. The Catholic territories had a particularly suspicious attitude towards organized reading. The dioceses of Mainz, Trier and Würzburg issued prohibitions, especially from 1789 onwards; in Bavaria, reading societies had already been accused of harbouring *illuminati*, and were dissolved in 1786; in Austria, after a long period of surveillance, the authorities eventually came to the same decision in 1789. The justification used in Hanover in 1799 to put all reading societies under police supervision was significant. Once again, they constituted a moral and political danger, specifically the danger that

disorder, slovenliness, and probably diseases of the cornea and other illnesses arise in some families if the first-form schoolboy can study his *Portier des chartreux*, inexpensively and in complete tranquillity, if the girl of marriageable age can do the same with her *Sopha* and *Ecumoire*, and the young housewife with her *Liaisons dangereuses*. As one has been able to procure these and similar writings in our native language since the time of the 'Great Enlightenment' in Germany, so they can be easily made available to all classes and at all levels through the libraries and the reading societies, if these 'factories of the Enlightenment' remain outside public supervision.

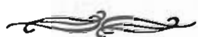
It is still unclear whether the reading societies really did play such an essential role in forming bourgeois public opinion, as the opponents of the Enlightenment maintained at the time, and as researchers believe today. The fact that their appearance changed around 1800 was due not only to acts of repression by the authorities, but to the new status of reading which did not in the least develop that comprehensive and explosive social force that many feared. Instead, reading became a cultural activity like others – in accordance with the situation, oriented toward education, diversion, information or as the last bastion against the demands of the outside world. The reading societies had been the site of social discourse; they had now become centres of sociability. In this new form some of them survived for the whole of the nineteenth century, and some of them have even persisted until the present day.

Was there a reading revolution at the end of the eighteenth century? In this rough outline I have attempted to show that, in spite of all limitations, the answer to this question is yes. The development of individual and communal reading during this time testifies to the ambivalent role played by the book and by print in social discipline and rationalization in the early modern period. On the one hand, knowledge of the cultural practice of reading was able massively to support this process of social formation, but on the other hand, it also offered the most seductive means individually to escape the unreasonable demands of society. Bourgeois rationalists were convinced that the way to immanent and transcendent well-being could be followed by reading. Their tireless propaganda on behalf of a useful form of reading acquainted the rising bourgeoisie with this cultural practice, which they regarded as an original form of communication. Its opponents, married to tradition, attacked reading with the same vehemence, because in their view it was synonymous with original sin: he who read ate from the forbidden tree of knowledge.

However, within a few decades, both of them were completely overtaken by events. Around 1800, the public was largely anonymous, unhomogeneous and fragmented – in short, modern – and an education

in reading had long ceased to have a hold on the public. Readers did not read whatever was recommended to them by the authorities and the ideologues, but whatever satisfied their intellectual, social and private needs. The genie had irretrievably escaped from the bottle.

12



New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers

Martyn Lyons

In the nineteenth century, the reading public of the Western world achieved mass literacy. The advances made towards general literacy in the age of Enlightenment were continued, to create a rapidly expanding number of new readers, especially for newspapers and cheap fiction. In revolutionary France, about half the male population could read, and about 30 per cent of women.[1] In Britain, where literacy rates were higher, male literacy was about 70 per cent in 1850, and 55 per cent of females could read.[2] The German Reich was 88 per cent literate in 1871.[3]

These figures hide considerable variations between town and country, and between the highly literate capital cities and the rest of the country. In Paris, for example, on the eve of the French Revolution, 90 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women were able to sign their wills; and in 1792, two out of three inhabitants of the popular *faubourg* St Marcel could read and write.[4] Such high levels of literacy, however, were found only in the largest western European cities before the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless by the 1890s, 90 per cent literacy had been almost uniformly reached, and the old discrepancy between men and women had disappeared. This was the 'golden age' of the book in the West: the first generation which acceded to mass literacy was also the last to see the book unchallenged as a communications medium, by either the radio or the electronic media of the twentieth century.

This expansion of the reading public was accompanied by the spread

Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie: Jacques-Louis Ménétra, compagnon vitrier au XVIIIe siècle*, presented by Daniel Roche (Paris: Montalba, 1982); trans. into English by Arthur Goldhammer, with a foreword by Robert Darnton and an introduction and commentary by Daniel Roche, as *Journal of My Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Anne Fillon, 'Louis Simon, étaminier (1741–1820) dans son village du Haut Maine au siècle des Lumières', thèse de troisième cycle, Université du Maine, 1982.

46 Silvana Seidel Menchi, *Erasmo in Italia 1520–1580* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987), pp. 286–321.

47 See Francis Goyet, *Le Sublime du 'lieu commun': L'invention rhétorique dans l'Antiquité et à la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 1996).

48 Jardine and Grafton, ' "Studied for action" ', p. 73, n. 148.

49 See Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters, The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Chapter 11 Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?

1 J. G. Heinzmann, *Appel an meine Nation: Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur* (Bern, 1795; repr. Hildesheim: Olm, 1977), p. 139.

2 Quoted from W. Krauss, 'Über den Anteil der Buchgeschichte an der Entfaltung der Aufklärung', in *Zur Dichtungsgeschichte der romanischen Völker* (Leipzig, 1965), pp. 194–312.

3 J. G. Beyer, 'Über das Lesen, insofern es zum Luxus unserer Zeiten gehört', in *Acta Academiae Electoralis Moguntinae Scientiarum Utilium*, vol. 12 (Erfurt, 1794), p. 7.

4 In France there is a predominance of quantitative analyses of posthumous inventories and library catalogues which permit only relatively global conclusions to be drawn. They often record what was collected, but not what was read. Well-thumbed and suspicious material was often not singled out, and frequently catalogues represent an obsolete stock accumulated by generations, awarding space to the traditional agents of culture and cultural context in preference to innovative materials. In Germany, however, even these limited findings are not widely available, and the mostly theoretical models lack empirical substantiation.

5 I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 174.

6 Cf. R. Engelsing, *Analphabetentum und Lektüre* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1973), pp. 62ff.

7 R. Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der popularen Lesestoffe 1770–1910* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1970), p. 445.

8 H. Kiesel and P. Münch, *Gesellschaft und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Beck, 1977), p. 160.

9 Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch*, p. 88.

10 B. Haug, *Das gelehrte Wirtemberg* (Stuttgart, 1790), pp. 26–32.

11 A. Martino, *Die deutsche Leihbibliothek: Geschichte einer literarischen Institution (1756–1914)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990), p. 52.

12 R. Chartier, 'The Bibliothèque bleue and popular reading', in Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 251f.

13 Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 52.

14 J. J. Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, p. 695.

15 R. Chartier, 'Du livre au lire', in *Pratiques de la lecture*, ed. Chartier (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1993), p. 91.

16 J. A. Wiessenbach, *Vorstellungen über den Krieg, den man itzt gefährlichen Schriften anzukündigen hat; an alle so wohl geistliche, als weltliche Oberkeiten* (Augsburg: Joh. Nep. Styx, 1793), pp. 7f.

17 R. Darnton, 'Readers respond to Rousseau: the fabrication of romantic sensitivity', in Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 226.

18 Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 196.

19 Darnton, 'Readers respond to Rousseau', p. 226.

20 Ibid., p. 234.

21 Ibid., p. 244.

22 R. Engelsing, 'Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit', *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 10 (1970): 143.

23 E. Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit oder die Verwandlungen des Lesers: Mentalitätswandel um 1800* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), p. 327.

24 L. Mejer, letter to H. C. Boie of 1 January 1784; quoted in Ilse Schreiber (ed.), *Ich war wohl klug, daß ich dich fand. H. C. Boies Briefwechsel mit Luise Mejer 1777–1785* (Munich, 1961), p. 275.

25 Cf. Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit*, p. 326.

26 J. A. Bergk, *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen: Nebst Bemerkungen über Schiften und Schriftsteller* (Jena: Hempel, 1799), p. 69.

27 Cf. Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit*, p. 328.

28 Cf. Eva Maria Hanebutt-Benz, ed., *Die Kunst des lesens: Lesemöbel und Leseverhalten vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, exhibition catalogue (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), pp. 109ff.

29 Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 213.

30 Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit*, p. 167.

31 Jean Paul, *Briefe und bevorstehender Lebenslauf: Konjektural-Biographie, sechste poetische Epistel*; quoted from Jean Paul, *Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller, vol. 4 (Munich: Hanser, 1962), p. 1070.

32 Karl G. Bauer, *Über die Mittel, dem Geschlechtstrieb eine unschädliche Richtung zu geben* (Leipzig, 1791), p. 190.

33 Bergk, *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen*, p. 59.

34 Ibid., p. 407.

35 Jean Paul, *Kleine Nachschule zu ästhetischen Vorschule*, vol. 1: *Miserkordias-Vorlesung*; quoted from Jean Paul, *Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller, vol. 5 (Munich: Hanser, 1963), p. 495.

36 Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 54.

37 Ibid., p. 234.

38 'Über Mode-Epoken in der Teutschen Lektüre', *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (November 1972): 549–58.

39 Cf. Martino, *Die deutsche Leihbibliothek*, p. 57.