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THE READING MANIA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

Michael S. Batts

CONCERN ABOUT THE LEVEL of so-called functional illiteracy in North America, something that is likely to increase with the use of computers, if the badly spelled and ungrammatical e-mails I receive are anything to go by, should not make us forget that the ability to read and write, the great emphasis laid on the ability to read and write, is something not only relatively new, but something about which considerable concern was sometimes expressed in earlier days. Should everyone, even the “lower classes,” be taught to read and write? We are all presumably familiar with characters in Jane Austen’s or Dickens’s novels who are unable to read; there are also many examples in the works of Patrick O’Brian (seamen) and Winston Graham (miners). When I was in the army, I was occasionally asked to formulate letters on behalf of those who certainly could read and write, but somehow lacked the ability to find the appropriate words even in their own language. The vernacular was of course widely used in England and France, since both countries had a thriving metropolis as a capital city, a place where the native language had been the vehicle for literary works since Chaucer and Shakespeare or Villon and Ronsard, but there was no widespread literacy in England until the end of the nineteenth century. In the rest of Europe, however, and especially in Germany, the educated person communicated until the nineteenth century in Latin, rather than in the vernacular. A bibliography I used of the manuscripts in the library in Karlsburg (Alba Julia) was published in Latin as late as 1958. What I have to say in the following relates, it is true, to a period two hundred years ago, but the relevance for today should be obvious.



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What is nowadays known as Germany was in the eighteenth century a collection of two or three hundred tiny principalities, and the area was divided both linguistically into Low (north) and High (south) German dialects and also by religion into Lutheran (north) and Catholic (south). It is small wonder then that until the end of the seventeenth century (1691) more books were published in Latin than in German, and that in the middle of the eighteenth century the Swiss, Baron Albrecht von Haller, wrote poetry, which he did not take seriously, in German, but published his serious work in Latin (he was primarily a botanist). The language of the educated upper classes, that is, the non-intellectuals, was French, and the first person to announce that he would give his lectures in German, rather than in Latin, was Christian Thomasius at Leipzig in 1687. Since this was a Catholic institution, his decision was not appreciated, and he was soon persuaded to leave for the (Protestant) university of Halle. Dissertations were still, however, written in Latin at German universities into the nineteenth century. The philosopher Leibniz, who incidentally attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the king of Prussia to introduce into schools the binary system (as used now in computers), wrote essays about the need to use the German language more, but, since he wrote his philosophical works for scholars, he wrote these in Latin.

The original purpose of printing books was to avoid the kind of mistakes that crept into manuscripts when they were copied by hand. The (admittedly erroneous) assumption was that every copy printed would look like a manuscript and would be identical, but not have the errors which were common to manuscripts. Fortunately or unfortunately, the spread of printing coincided with the spread of humanism, and the humanists, many of them, like Erasmus, closely connected with printing, were interested primarily in works of classical antiquity. They wrote Latin themselves, and turned their names into Latin or Greek forms, for example, Melancthon was actually named Schwarzerd (black earth). Humanism was a European phenomenon, Latin was the common language, and Latin was still to some extent the common language of scholars when the movement known as the Enlightenment spread from England through France and the Low Countries to Germany by about 1700. The information explosion which was then taking place made the older habit of corresponding by letter (in Latin, of course) inadequate; in its place journals were founded, often by societies, and at least one of these journals

still exists today. However, the purpose of the Enlightenment movement, if one can call it that, was the spread of scientific rationalism, a spirit of enquiry that did not hesitate to question even religious beliefs and practices, and great emphasis was laid on, among other things, education, in particular on (educational) psychology. The main figure towards the end of the eighteenth century is of course the Swiss, Pestalozzi, but he was preceded in Germany by Johann Basedow.

Publishers had already realized by the eighteenth century that there was a greater and above all a wider demand for reading material; there was a movement, to put it succinctly, from what has been called intensive reading to extensive reading. By this I mean that the family, including the servants, no longer sat around while the paterfamilias read improving literature to them, but each had his or her own type of literature. The father went to the coffee house and read the newspaper in order to keep up with political affairs, the mother read the most recent Gothic novel, the children had their own works, and the servants read, if they could read, the latest chapbooks. In other words, publishers recognized that there was not a single public, but a multiplicity of publics willing to buy and “consume” literature. In 1690 Adrian Beier had written “his [the bookseller’s] wares are only by and for scholars.” However, in 1828 Wolfgang Menzel could write of the bookseller: “books are his wares. His aim is profit, and the means to this end is not the absolute but rather the relative quality of these wares, and that is determined by the needs of the buyers.” To what extent, for example, servants or children could actually read or were read to is not something that can easily be determined, certainly not for Europe in general and not for Germany, with its multiple principalities, in particular.

Travel was no easier in Germany in the eighteenth century than it had been in the seventeenth or the sixteenth century; in many ways it was more difficult, as there were more principalities with their complicated customs systems, but urban centres had developed and in these centres societies of one sort or another had been formed, most of them with philanthropic ideals. The Prussian academy was founded by Leibniz as early as 1700, and this was followed by two types of society, the “German Societies,” of which the first was founded in Leipzig in 1726 by Johann Christoph Gottsched, and the “Patriotic Societies” that were founded a little later. However, it should be stressed that the term patriotic was not

used as it is now; at that time it meant social rather than jingoistic commitment, the improvement of the lot of one's fellow human beings and above all the education of the masses. The aim of the society in Bremen, for example, founded in 1748 and composed almost exclusively of clerics and lawyers, was defined as the improvement of "the accuracy and purity of the German language both on the basis of linguistic rules and on models of good German writers." The aim was a reduction in the number of foreign words and an improvement in the taste of the reader. Whatever may be said about taste, one of the primary concerns in Germany in the eighteenth century, there was certainly a steady rise in book publication through the eighteenth century, a rise that cannot be accounted for by population growth or increased prosperity, but the question remains as to whether or not these were "good German writers". There was, however, a major shift in the type of book published. In 1700 nine hundred and seventy-eight books had been published, of which four hundred and thirty were listed as theological; literature accounted for only twenty-eight. In 1800, four thousand and twelve books were published, almost four times as many, but only two hundred and forty-one of these were now theological; one thousand and ninety-eight were listed as literature. Theology had therefore declined from 44% to 6%, while literature had increased from 3% to 27%. These figures are based on Gustav Schwetschke's analysis of the book fair catalogues and do not necessarily represent all that was published.

Nevertheless, by the end of the eighteenth century and despite the efforts of the various societies many voices were raised in protest against the reading mania that had seized every segment of the population, voices that included not only representatives of church and state, but people from the secular movement that had aimed to improve the lot of the "common man." In the journal *The German Museum* of 1780, for example, one reads the complaint that "there are those who read in every class, in cities and in the country; in larger cities even the musketeers have books fetched from the lending library to the guard house." Typical titles of essays published at that time are: "Confidential letters on the present strange passion for reading and its influence on the decline in domestic and public happiness" (1794) and "Is it now advisable, to enlighten the lower classes?" (1800). Improving novels, such as Pestalozzi's "Leonard and Gertrude" (1780s) had been written, but these had little effect or

were parodied, just as the supposedly improving verses that were written in England to influence small children were (later) parodied, “Twinkle, twinkle little star” becoming, for example, at the Mad Hatter’s tea party: “Twinkle, twinkle little bat.” Above all, one has to remember that 90% of the population in the German states lived on the land, and that they did not need to read. As Rudolf Schenda says: “The book remained largely unknown to peasants and workers throughout the nineteenth century.” Of forty-seven inventories of members of the lower classes who had died, thirty-two had no books at all, eight had up to five books, and only nine had more than five.

More important, perhaps, than the German Societies and the Patriotic Societies were the Reading Clubs, for there the members of the bourgeoisie who could read found information in newspapers and journals about the latest political events. Strangely enough, the small town of Wunstorf near Hanover with a population of sixteen hundred, sixty of whom could read, had two such societies, and in one of these women were accepted as members. In the society, from which women were excluded, there were various journals and practical works for the benefit of professional men. In the other, half the books were literary, but there was no Goethe, no Schiller, and no Klopstock; the main stock consisted of “popular” novels. Political literature of various kinds was common in these Reading Clubs, and it is small wonder that those clubs that did not become simply social groups, were suppressed by the states as politically dangerous, the education of the population being equated with education for revolution.

Complaints about the mania for reading and in particular about the immorality of novels came from the middle classes, but in fact only the middle classes could read. The labouring classes, most of whom lived on the land, if they could read, had their own literature, for example, almanacs. The literacy rate around 1800 was probably not greater than 15%–20% and was restricted to the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and to some of their servants. In Georg Westphal’s preface to his novel, *Wilhelm Edelwald* the author writes “one should write for the middle classes, for these are the greater part of the reading public.” However, it was argued precisely by those middle classes that reading novels was undesirable because they contributed to freedom of association between the sexes and between classes; they undermined parental authority; they encour-

aged idleness. They even contributed to crime, as Carl Müller-Frauenreuth notes in 1894, when he draws a parallel between the popular novels of 1800 and his own time: “The murderer of girls in Hamburg was under the influence of horror novels, that he read avidly and that increased his sick desires.” (sound familiar?). Over and over again, the Protestant schoolmasters who wrote histories of German literature argued that only the reading of “good” literature would foster the true traditions of the German(ic) race(s). Karl Johann Schröer, writing in German in Hungary in 1850, inveighed against the modern mania for superficial reading and for drinking coffee!

There are many reasons for the passion for reading around 1800 in Germany, and not a few grounds for seeing it as a healthy, rather than an unhealthy symptom, although I would not go as far as those who argue that it was a substitute in the German states for the revolution that took place in France. What the critics, that is, those who complained about popular novels, failed to appreciate is the innate conservatism of popular fiction. The act of reading is a very complex process that depends in a large measure on the activation of set responses to recognizable patterns. The choice of reading material reflects rather than forms the character of the reader, and this is precisely what the authors of that other great Canadian gift to the world, the Harlequin novels, have realized. When reading for pleasure, people seek confirmation of their beliefs and prejudices, not to have them called into question, which is precisely why bookshops in North America arrange their wares by subject, for example, romance, horror stories, science fiction, etc. The prophecies of calamities, the gallows’ confessions, and so forth, confirm in the reader the opinion that she or he is fortunate, that crime doesn’t pay, etc., just as the typical Harlequin novel shows that true love will triumph. Publishers in the eighteenth century, if not critics, had already grasped the two essential points of publication: to publish works that satisfy expectations and confirm existing beliefs; and also to aim for the lowest common denominator, since a reader at a higher level may turn to reading material at a lower level, rarely the other way round.

Michael S. Batts is Professor Emeritus of the Germanic Studies Department of the University of B.C. and is a longtime member of the Alcuin Society.