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## Toward a Genealogy of the Aesthetic: The German Reading Debate of the 1790s

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History is inherent in aesthetic theory. Its categories are radically historical.

—Adorno<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of his essay on "The Pleasures of the Imagination" Joseph Addison observes that very few people "know how to be idle and innocent, or have a Relish of any Pleasures that are not Criminal; every Diversion they take is at the Expense of some one Virtue or another, and their very first Step out of Business is into Vice or Folly." Like *The Spectator* as a whole, in which it appeared in eleven installments in 1712, Addison's essay was addressed primarily to a rising class of bankers, merchants, and manufacturers who had so

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1. Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 532.

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recently achieved a modicum of the leisure enjoyed by the aristocracy that they were still in the process of developing ways to fill it. Addison aimed to influence this process and accordingly set out to instruct them in an "innocent" alternative to the drinking and gambling in which their social superiors were wont to pass their idle time:

Of this Nature are those [pleasures] of the Imagination, which do not require such a Bent of Thought as is necessary to our more serious Employments, nor, at the same time, suffer the Mind to sink into that Negligence and Remissness, which are apt to accompany our more sensual Delights, but, like a gentle Exercise to the Faculties, awaken them from Sloth and Idleness, without putting them upon any Labor or Difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, the pleasures Addison thus commends to his readers are such as are afforded by paintings and statues, musical and architectural works, by the "prospects" with which nature herself has endowed humankind, and above all by (polite) literature. Addison uses the subsequent installments of the essay to take his readers on a guided tour through one after another of these "several sources" of "innocent recreation," exploring with them in each case the merits of exemplary instances. Accordingly, "The Pleasures of the Imagination" itself exemplifies the new leisure activity Addison recommends: the kind of amateur occupation with objects of "fine" art that would come to be known as connoisseurship.

Germany responded comparatively late to Addison's call to explore the products of the various arts simply for the sake of their inherent interest and pleasurable-ness. To focus on the progress of *reading*, the art he considered best suited "to fill up [Life's] empty Spaces:"<sup>3</sup> in 1740, when England and France could already boast of flourishing literary cultures produced by and for the middle classes, the average German family still owned only a Bible, a hymnal and a catechism, perhaps some popular religious book, and a calendar or almanac. By the end of the century, however, the situation had changed dramatically,

2. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (No. 411), ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. 3, 538-39.

3. *Ibid.*, (No. 93), vol. 1, 397.

and Germany had become "a nation of readers."<sup>4</sup>

The way was paved by the "moral weeklies" which began appearing in great abundance in the forties.<sup>5</sup> Like the English *Spectator* on which they were modeled, these weekly periodicals helped break down the deep distrust that the pious and hard-working middle classes in Germany still harbored for profane literature by presenting, in an entertaining form, the kind of moral and practical instruction they had come to expect from the few books to which they had access. Their appetites whetted by the stories, dialogues, and letters they found there, the German middle classes leaped headlong into the pleasures of reading. In 1799 the popular philosopher Johann Adam Bergk could exclaim: "Never has there been as much reading in Germany as today!" However, Bergk then goes on to complain:

But the majority of readers devour the most wretched and tasteless novels with a voracious appetite that spoils head and heart. By reading such worthless material people get used to idleness that only the greatest exertion can overcome again. People say they read to kill time, but what are the consequences of this kind of reading? Since they choose only works that do not require much reflection and that are full of improbabilities and unnatural events and are worthless and tasteless, they forget the laws of nature . . . and fall prey to countless errors and transgressions because they can no longer hear their own inner warnings. They make demands on people that cannot be met . . . ; they want positions in life which morality forbids us to aspire to; they kill all desire for activity

4. So, at least, it seemed to contemporary observers, for while it is estimated that only some twenty-five percent of the population at most was literate in 1800, this figure is nearly double what it had been only a generation earlier (Wolfgang Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe, 1770-1910* [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1970], 444). On the spread of the reading habit in Germany, see Rolf Engelsing, "Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit," *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 10 (1970), cols. 945-1002; and *Der Bürger als Leser. Lesegeschichte in Deutschland, 1500-1800* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 1974). The best English study is Albert Ward's *Book Production, Fiction, and the German Reading Public, 1740-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). Of particular relevance to the present problematic is John A. McCarthy, "The Art of Reading and the Goals of the German Enlightenment," *Lessing Yearbook* 16 (1984): 79-94.

5. For a comprehensive study of the German moral weeklies, see Wolfgang Martens, *Die Botschaft der Tugend. Die Aufklärung im Spiegel der deutschen Moralschen Wochenschriften* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 1968).

and work and all love of freedom. They become moody, peevish, presumptuous, impatient. They become extraordinarily susceptible to every impression, which they are unable to muster inner powers to oppose. . . . The consequences of such tasteless and mindless reading are thus senseless waste, an insurmountable fear of any kind of exertion, a boundless bent for luxury, repression of the voices of conscience, ennui, and an early death.<sup>6</sup>

Addison undoubtedly would have been gratified to learn what a great success his campaign to promote polite reading had been. But it is doubtful whether he would have known what to make of Bergk's statement, so sharply does it diverge from Addison's own estimation of the value of the pastime. For, as described by Bergk, it clearly has none of the innocence he had ascribed to it. Indeed, to Bergk's way of thinking, it is dissipating readers every bit as thoroughly as the "more sensual Delights" of drinking and gambling that Addison had intended reading to replace.

This spirited repudiation of the claims Addison had made for reading is but one of the countless statements that were fired in the veritable war on reading that was waged in Germany in the final decade of the eighteenth century. So alarmed were contemporary observers by the "reading epidemic" [*Lesesucht*] they perceived to be sweeping their country in the wake of Addison's campaign that they took up their pens in large numbers and, in an effort to come to grips with it, generated a voluminous body of writing about reading. It is this "reading debate" [*Lesedebatte*] that I propose to explore here.<sup>7</sup> I will be able to touch on only a fraction of the wealth of information it contains about contemporary reading practices because I want to concentrate on the light the debate sheds on

the evolution of aesthetics. My thesis, briefly, is that by exposing the limitations of the project launched in Addison's essay, the debate helps explain the direction the philosophy of art took in the hands of his successors in Germany especially, where, with the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, aesthetics achieved the status of a discipline.

Common to all of this writing on reading is the conviction that too many readers were reading too many of the wrong books for the wrong reasons and with altogether the wrong results. But on the specifics of just what was wrong in each instance critics were divided. Certainly all of the critics of reading shared Bergk's alarm at the way readers were turning from works that demanded a modicum of mental exertion—a modicum of reflection and meditation—to ever lighter forms of entertainment and diversion. Instead of reading and re-reading the writings of Gellert, Klopstock, Lessing, Goethe, or Wieland, they preferred to "flit like butterflies" from one mindless, new publication to the next—from sickly sentimental love stories and "edifying" family novels to tales of ghost seers and a purely escapist literature of adventure and intrigue.<sup>8</sup> Readers' interests ranged from titles like *Karl von Kismar, or Love Without Lust, Marriage without Jealousy, Parting without Tears*, and *The Sad Consequences of Precipitate Betrothal, a True Story Told as a Warning to Parents, Young Men and Girls*, to a novel with the promising subtitle, *A Family Novel, Containing Various Seductions and Sea-Fights with Pirates*; from spin-offs of Schiller's *Geisterscherer* like *Die Geisterscherer* and *Der Geisterbanner* to adventure literature designed to capitalize on the French revolution like *Marki von Gebrian, or Tricks and Pranks of a French Emigré*—to name only a few of the more than five hundred works of polite literature brought to market in 1800 alone.<sup>9</sup>

6. Johann Adam Bergk, *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen. Nebst Bemerkungen über Schriften und Schriftsteller* (Jena: In der Hempelschen Buchhandlung, 1799), 411-12. Translations are my own.

7. Of the growing number of studies of this body of writing, I have profited most from Jochen Schulte-Sasse, *Die Kritik an der Trivialliteratur seit der Aufklärung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971), 52 ff. and Helmut Kreuzer, "Gefährliche Lesesucht? Bemerkungen zu politischer Lektürekritik im ausgehenden 18. Jahrhundert," in *Lesen und Lesen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1977), 62-75. See also Dominik von König, "Lesesucht und Lesewut," in *Buch und Leser*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Hamburg: Ernst Hauswedell and Co., 1977), 89-112; and Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch*, 40 ff. Patrick Braninger pursues this controversy over the value of popular forms of entertainment into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in *Bread and Crumbs: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

8. Johann Rudolph Gottlieb Beyer, *Ueber das Buchlesen, in so fern es zum Luxus unserer Zeiten gehört*. Acta Academiae Elektorialis Moguntinae Scientiarum Utilium Quae Erfurti (Erfurt: Sumtibus Georg. Adam. Keyser, 1796), 5. See also Johann Gottfried Hoche, *Vertraute Briefe über die jetzige abentheuerliche Lesesucht und über den Einfluß derselben auf die Verminderung des häuslichen und öffentlichen Glücks* (Hannover: In Commission bei Chr. Ritscher, 1794).

9. In his pioneering study of the catalogues of books to be traded at the semiannual fairs in Leipzig, Rudolf Jentsch estimates that by 1800 polite literature had captured 21.45% of the book market, up from 16.43% in 1770, and a mere 5.83% in 1740 (*Der deutsch-lateinische Buchmarkt nach den Leipziger Ostermeß-Katalogen von 1740, 1770 und 1800 in seiner Gliederung und Wandlung* [Leipzig: R. Voigtländer Verlag, 1912], 241ff. and tables). See also Ward, *Book Production*, 29-58, 163-65. On the popular fiction of the period, see Marion Beaudeau, *Der Trivialroman in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn: H. Bouvier and Co., 1969).

Nothing so vexed the German ideologues as the habit their contemporaries had acquired of devouring greedily one after another of these new titles, forgetting the last one the moment they turned to its replacement. In his five hundred and forty-six page "address to the nation," *On the Plague of German Literature* (1795), the Swiss publicist Johann Georg Heinemann compares this extensive mode of reading<sup>10</sup> to cruising or philandering [*herumschweifendes Bücherlesen*] to distinguish it from the "safer" and, to his mind, ultimately more satisfying kind of intercourse with texts which involves "getting to know a few good books full of healthy principles and tested truths, reading them repeatedly and nourishing one's soul with them."<sup>11</sup>

But if the German ideologues were unanimous in their disapproval of the whats and hows of contemporary reading, they diverged sharply over the long-term consequences of these new reading practices and over the measures that ought to be taken to counteract them. To the conservative majority, extensive reading represented a threat to the established moral and social order. It was not just that readers shirked their responsibilities in the home and in the work place, we are told; their passions inflamed and their minds filled with the half-truths generated by the books they read, avid readers even began to question the justice of the order that dictated such responsibilities. Thus the arch conservative pastor J. R. G. Beyer advocates systematic regulation of reading because he imagines that if

the reader fills his or her soul with a host of overheated, fanciful, romantic ideas that cannot be realized in this sublunary world, learns about the world not from the world itself but from books, dreams of a world not as it is but as it should be, judges human beings not according to the actual history of humanity but according to the fictional stories of the world of novels: such reading produces a creature who is always dissatisfied with the creator and his creation; whose exaggerated complaints and reproaches make

10. The term is Engelings's. See his distinction between extensive and intensive modes of reading in "Die Perioden der Lese-geschichte in der Neuzeit."

11. Johann Georg Heinemann, *Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur: Appell an meine Nation über Aufklärung und Aufklärung, über Gelehrsamkeit und Schriftsteller; über Buchmanufakturisten, Rezensionen, Buchhändler; über moderne Philosophen und Menschenentzieher; auch über mancherley anderes, was Menschseigheit und Menschenrechte betrifft* (Bern: Auf Kosten des Verfassers, 1795), 397.

him intolerable, who criticizes now the authorities and the government, now legislation and law enforcement, now the manners and mores of the country and its citizens, and would like to reform and reshape everything in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Beyer is afraid that readers who have glimpsed an other, better world in books will rise up and forcibly attempt to impose their vision on the real world. His fears were widely shared. So alarming was the spectre of revolutionary France that, much as in England at this time, many one-time advocates of literacy had begun to have second thoughts.

These defenders of the status quo advocated systematic regulation of supply—that is, various forms of state intervention to restrict the flow of literature. In his address to the nation the reactionary Heinemann, for example, demonstrates that he is not altogether oblivious to the dangers of censorship. If it were not for the freedom of the press, he writes, Luther and Calvin would not have had the impact they did, and we should still be living under the "scepter of the clergy." But he does not think this freedom ought to be extended to "scoundrels": "A good police force ought to watch over the spiritual and moral welfare of its constituency no less than their physical well-being. We incarcerate enthusiasts and simpletons who disturb the peace," so why should we not ban "wanton" authors?<sup>13</sup> The equally conservative pastor Beyer, on the other hand, though he sympathizes with Heinemann's goals, does not favor such extreme measures because he thinks they too often backfire. The slogan "Banned in Vienna" had already proved to be an effective form of advertising! Nor does Beyer favor outlawing the reading societies, the circulating and lending libraries that were emerging to make books accessible at modest prices—as did most of his compatriots on the right. Instead he urges that these organs of distribution simply be, as he puts it, "organized and administered" so that they can better look out for the interests of consumers. Among his concrete proposals, therefore, is the suggestion that the chief suppliers for women and the working classes, the lending libraries, which were then in the hands of entrepreneurs, be "nationalized" so that right-thinking

12. Beyer, *Ueber das Bücherlesen*, 16. For a fanatical expression of the same ideas, see Heinemann's chapter on "Folgen aus der heutigen Schriftstellerei" (*Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur*, 441-62).

13. Heinemann, *Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur*, 296ff.

civil servants might be placed in charge of acquisitions.<sup>14</sup>

So much for the "supply-side" ideologies of reading. Although they were fewer in number, there were also more progressive contributors to the reading debate, like the popular philosopher Bergk, whom I quoted at the outset, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who criticized contemporary reading habits on just the opposite grounds from their counterparts on the right. To these critics it was ridiculous to imagine that the kind of illusory escape into a fictional world that the right so feared could ever result in political action. As they saw it, all that the reading maniac desires is to prolong his escape or to repeat it as often as possible. "Anyone who has tasted this sweet oblivion," Fichte writes, "wants to continue enjoying it, and ceases to want to do anything else in life; he begins to read without any regard whatsoever for keeping up with the literature or the times, simply in order to read and in reading to live. . . ."<sup>15</sup> Such "pure readers" [*reine Leser*], as Fichte terms them, far from presenting a threat to the established order, will in Bergk's words "put up with anything as long as they are not disturbed in their inertia. . . . They will bear the most dishonorable fetters of slavery with patience. . . . and watch the freedom of thought and the freedom of the press being murdered without even grumbling or showing the least sign of indignation."<sup>16</sup>

The corrective measures proposed by these left-leaning contributors to the reading debate are more interesting than those advocated by the right, for while no less manipulative, they are considerably more subtle. Targeted at *demand* rather than supply, they are designed to influence the way people read. Here I shall examine only one such scheme—as set forth by Bergk in *The Art of Reading Books* (1799). Though its length makes it doubtful that many of them read it, this four-hundred-and-sixteen page tome was designed to instruct the same predominantly middle-class readers, for whom Addison had written, in an art of literary connoisseurship for the "modern" age—in a craft of reading, that is, which would serve to direct them through the vast sea of literary

14. Beyer, *Ueber das Bücherlesen*, 24ff.

15. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Grundsätze des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (1804-05), ed. Fritz Mendicus (Leipzig: Fritz Meiner Verlag, 1908), 99-100.

16. Bergk, *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen*, 413-14. See also Bergk's essay, "Bewirkt die Aufklärung Revolutionen?", in *Aufklärung und Gedankenfreiheit. Fünfzehn Anregungen, aus der Geschichte zu lernen*, ed. Zwi Batscha (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 206-14.

offerings and steer them to the relatively small number of works which, to Bergk's way of thinking, genuinely merit their attention. As such, *The Art of Reading Books* may be regarded as an effort to carry forward Addison's project under the radically altered conditions of literature in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century.

To this end Bergk dips liberally into contemporary art theory—above all, that of Kant, whose *Critique of Judgement* furnishes him with most of his key terms and concepts. On the premise that an art of reading ought to be derived from the function of reading in human life, Bergk began, with characteristic German thoroughness, "from the beginning" by exploring with his readers the nature of that entity which is at once the source and end of books, the human mind.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Kant, he divided the mind into a number of distinct faculties and modes of operation—sense, fantasy and imagination, understanding, reason (both speculative and practical), and judgment (teleological and aesthetic). We must strive to cultivate all of these faculties, he writes, "because only through the independent exertion [*Selbstthätigkeit*] of all of one's powers is a person in a position to fulfill his responsibilities as a human being and a citizen" (107). Bergk recognizes the difficulty of achieving such a goal in an age which favors specialization. He gives lively expression to Schiller's ironic comment that the division of labor has so progressed that the various faculties are beginning to appear "as separate in practice as they are distinguished by the psychologist in theory."<sup>18</sup> Nowadays, he observes,

the poet worships the imagination, the philosopher reason, the businessman healthy understanding, and the epicurean sensuality. The merchant looks down on the scholar, who despises the artist; among themselves the scholars wallow in self pity; and everybody considers himself far above everybody else in rank, dignity, and utility. The mathematician has no taste for poetics, the poet for mathematics, the lawyer for religious ethics, the theologian for jurisprudence; and the guildsmen among the scholars ply their science like a trade and view philosophy and the arts as superfluous. (105-6)

17. Bergk, *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen*, 73. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

18. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a series of Letters*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 33.

With the institutionalization of the faculties as distinct ways of life, the fragmentation of the psyche is complete. However, where Schiller had taken the visionary line that only "a higher Art" can restore "the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed,"<sup>19</sup> Bergk makes the modest suggestion that we combat the effects of specialization by undergoing a rigorous course in liberal reading. The arts and sciences offer us a variety of distinct types of writing—historical, philosophical, literary, scientific, and so forth—which, because they are themselves the product of the one or the other faculty, are uniquely equipped to aid us as readers in cultivating these same faculties in ourselves.

For each of the arts and sciences there is a particular human pre-disposition or faculty, to which the art or science owes its existence and on which it in turn exerts an impact by breathing vitality into and helping to perfect that faculty. However we must be familiar not only with the human predispositions and powers and the material with which they may be occupied and trained, but also with the function each science is particularly adapted to serve in [the economy of] the human spirit. (74)

Accordingly, Bergk proceeds to examine each of the faculties in turn to determine what kind of writing is best suited to cultivate it. In each instance it seems that while polite literature (or, *die schöne Kunst*, under which he subsumes novels, poems, plays, and speeches) can contribute in important ways to the development of the faculty in question, it is not as well designed to do so as some other type of writing—until, by a process of elimination, he arrives at aesthetic judgment, or taste. And here it turns out that literature is uniquely equipped. "The function of polite literature is thus not to increase our knowledge, for this it would share with the sciences, but to cultivate our taste." And what is taste? It is, he continues, "an ability to judge nature and art so as to become acquainted with these in terms of the feelings they inspire in us. It manifests itself when an object pleases or displeases. To it we owe the feelings of beauty and sublimity" (176).

By assigning literature a specific function in the economy of the human psyche, Bergk narrows significantly the canon of legitimate literature—to writing designed to cultivate taste. Prudently, he does not leave it to his

readers to apply this principle of selection, but goes on to spell out the implications for them. It follows, he writes, that we should concentrate on "classical" authors. Read with care and understanding, classical authors initiate in us a "free play" of the imagination and understanding.

The play of these two faculties produces a pleasure that is distinct not only from the good but from the merely pleasant and useful.

If we repeat this occupation frequently and nourish both our imagination and our understanding, we shall achieve a special proficiency of judgment that is termed taste. (156)

It does not, however, appear that the two faculties are brought into this kind of play by the most popular literary forms—by the sundry robber, ghost, and horror novels, the historical and political novels, the edifying moral tales, the sentimental and lascivious novels and tales of the supernatural in which readers were then indulging with such abandon. Bergk devotes a separate chapter of his tome to each of these forms, showing in each instance how they either stimulate the wrong faculties or stimulate the right faculties in the wrong way. Thus, for example, he indicts moralizing fiction on the grounds that instruction should be left to the sciences, reform to ethics and religion. The task of the poet is to "arouse aesthetic feelings"—not to teach or to preach, but to "dramatize" ideas:

If he weaves long-winded moral exhortations and reflections into his stories, then he is attempting to clarify concepts and awaken practical reason, not to cultivate sensitivity to beauty and sublimity. He is taking the understanding and heart to school, whereas his vocation dictates that he animate and cultivate aesthetic feelings and, in this way, develop taste. (258)

In his discussion of the political novels spawned by the French Revolution Bergk takes a similar tack, except that he condemns these on the grounds that they

excite our passions, whereas works of fine art should only set our feelings in motion: the former thus can never give us such pure and disinterested pleasure nor such gentle and pleasant instruction as the latter. Political subjects are not appropriate, therefore, for treatment in works of fine art, because they are not capable of arousing unselfish satisfaction. (257)

19. Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, 43.

In this passage, so reminiscent of Kant's derogation of oratory for attempting to affect our emotions and actions,<sup>20</sup> Bergk bans the historically-political novel categorically and, in this way, approaches the position of the reactionary pastor Beyer, whose anxiety about literature's capacity to disturb the status quo, even to foment revolution, I cited earlier. However, in contrast to Beyer, armed with a *theory* of literature, the "liberal" Bergk does not need to advocate any such overtly repressive measures as curtailing the freedom of the press. All that is necessary is to "show" that a given work or genre fails to satisfy literature's proper function in the economy of the psyche—either because it brings the wrong faculties into play or, as is here the case, because it stimulates the right faculties too vigorously, producing a satisfaction that is distinctly *interested*. A more concrete interpretation of the *Critique of Judgement* would be hard to find. Bergk liberates the prescription couched in Kant's ostensibly pure, philosophical analysis in order to rule out as illegitimate the better part of contemporary literary output:<sup>21</sup> "Works which bear the stamp of genius and taste are rare, to be sure, however our literature contains enough of them to enable us to cultivate our taste and occupy our minds pleasantly and instructively. The following passages from Wieland's *Agathon* and Goethe's *Werther* will serve to demonstrate these propositions" (236).

It is fortunate that deductive argument is not Bergk's only instrument of persuasion, for learning that their favorite forms of diversion do not "follow" from the definition of the mind is not likely to have convinced many readers to give them up. More promising, because if

20. It is in opposition to the "treacherous art" of oratory that Kant elaborates his definition of (genuine) poetry as discourse in which "everything proceeds with honesty and candor. It declares itself to be a mere entertaining play of the imagination, which wishes to proceed as regards form in harmony with the laws of the understanding; and it does not desire to steal upon and ensnare the understanding by the aid of sensible presentation" (*Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard [New York: Hafner Press, 1951], 172).

21. For the fashioning of the concept of "disinterested appreciation of an object for its own sake" into a weapon against popular entertainment, see my "The Interests in Disinterestedness: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Emergence of the Theory of Aesthetic Autonomy in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *MLQ*, 45, no. 1 (March 1984): 22-47. For some of the ways in which "philosophical" method is deployed in the *Critique of Judgement* to empower these same aesthetic preferences, and a penetrating analysis of their social implications, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 485-500.

successful it would obviate the need for any such argument, is the approach to literature he teaches simultaneously. This approach, or reading methodology, set forth most succinctly in a chapter entitled "How Must One Read Literary Works to Cultivate One's Taste?" is designed to influence his readers' choices, indirectly, by reforming the way they read.

Bergk presents the ability to read literature as a special application of the ability to read.<sup>22</sup> The art he sketches thus anticipates the handbooks and treatises in which theoreticians from Cleanth Brooks to Roland Barthes have endeavored to make explicit the interpretive operations and strategies which give literary texts the meanings they have for "competent" readers like themselves. Bergk terms these strategies the "rules" which anyone who wishes to "master" the craft of reading must learn to deploy appropriately (72-73). The dominating "rule" of the craft, which the other strategies he discusses serve to articulate, instructs us to become "active" readers. This critical concept derives its meaning in opposition to the intellectual passivity Bergk associates with the readers of novels, "who devour one insipid dish after another in an effort to escape an intolerable mental vacuum. They watch events appear and disappear as in a magic mirror, each one more absurd than the last one. . . . All mental activity is stifled by the mass of impressions" (64-65).<sup>23</sup>

To this "passive" mode of *consumption* Bergk opposes a highly *reflective* mode of reading which involves several distinct operations. One must first seek to discover the writer's "purpose"—the basic idea presented in the work. Every literary work has "a central subject to which everything in it is related, and all have a guiding idea which animates and maintains the whole" (181). Having discovered this idea, one must next seek to relate to it all of the work's details. Known today as "taking a poem to pieces," this step in reading involves exploring the writer's way of handling characterization, description, and tone, his use of language, and so forth. Finally, the reader must attempt to put all of these

22. Bergk associates distinct reading strategies with each different type of writing. See, for example, the strategies of "resistance" he recommends to readers of philosophical works (338ff.). The term was coined by Mortimer Adler, whose best-seller, *How to Read a Book* (1940, rev. 1972) reads like an up-date of Bergk's *The Art of Reading Books*.

23. See, for example, Fichte's extended analogy between reading and taking narcotics (*Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, 99-100).



elements back together: "Now it is not the individual part that we consider, rather the whole is the object of our attention. We do not want to see this or that feature of a scene or a character placed in relief but to present to our minds as a single unity everything that before stood isolated" (82). This final act of synthesis is the most important, according to Bergk, because it produces the special "play of the imagination and understanding" characteristic of a "legitimate" literary experience.

Through this synthesis of the individual parts into a whole the imagination prevails over the material and can amply nourish the understanding. . . . No image, no remark, no facet of an expression will go unnoticed once we have achieved sovereignty over the whole. What we now regard is neither the dead letter nor the lifeless thought, but the ever vital breath, the creative spirit that permeates the whole. This comprehension and judgment of the whole results in a pleasure which is a product of taste. (183)

The pleasure he promises is a highly intellectual pleasure, to say the least, for Bergk has transformed reading into a form of explication.<sup>24</sup>

Readers accustomed to devouring new publications are herewith administered what may well be the first course in the kind of "close reading" that would be introduced into classrooms by twentieth-century formalists. Indeed, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the anthology-cum-commentary which revolutionized the teaching of English literature by displacing literary history and establishing the "new criticism" as the language of instruction in American classrooms, simply picks up where Bergk left off, refining and elaborating the art of reading he adumbrated. This textbook was able to achieve the tremendous influence it did because, like Bergk's self-help manual, it presupposed little prior knowledge on the part of students and taught a body of transferable skills. It thus proved an efficient means of "broadening and refining the taste"—as Brooks and Warren put it in

the sequel, *Understanding Fiction* (1943)—of the multitude of new students of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds whom the GI Bill of Rights (1944) enabled to enter American colleges at the end of World War II. The similarity of Brooks and Warren's goal to that of Bergk is underscored by their observation in the preface to *Understanding Fiction* that as "most students read some kind of fiction of their own free will and for pleasure," the teacher will "not have to 'make' the student read fiction, . . . as he has to 'make' the student read poetry," but instead faces the somewhat "easier problem of persuading the student that some stories or novels which are called 'good' from the literary point of view, or which are important in the history of literature, are also interesting in themselves."<sup>25</sup>

Although he lacks the categories by which to achieve the subtle and detailed analyses Brooks and Warren have taught us to expect, Bergk demonstrates how the rules he sets forth are to be applied in model readings of his own—a poem by Mathison, a passage from *Tristram Shandy*, and a scene from *Miss Sara Sampson*. He concludes his examination of this last item with the soon-to-be-obligatory bow to the norm of a total unity: "No adjective, no image, no thought is superfluous . . . ; everything contributes to increase the effect of the whole; everything intermeshes and intensifies the impression such an unnatural mother [Marwood] makes on us" (199). So that they will be in a better position to survey the whole and to consider the parts in relation to it, Bergk urges his readers to read works more than once (199). But to be able to devote so much time to a single work, he writes, it is necessary to limit ourselves to just a few works:

We must be extremely selective in our reading and read only works that are distinguished by richness and originality of thought and beauty and liveliness of presentation. . . . It enhances our culture and our learning more to read an original and thoughtful writer several times than to read many common and empty books. (409)

In short, Bergk attacks the problem of literary philandering by teaching an *intensive* mode of reading. In support of his project he enlists the

24. On the efforts of other writers of the period to impose a reflexive mode of reception on readers, see my "Die poetologische Debatte um Bürgers *Lenore*," in *Verlorene Klassik?*, ed. Wolfgang Witkowski (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 237-49. See also Aleida Assmann, "Die Domestikation des Lesens. Drei historische Beispiele," *Lit* 57/58 (1985): 95-110; and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Das Konzept bürgerlich-literarischer Öffentlichkeit und die historischen Gründe seines Zerfalls," in *Aufklärung und literarische Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Christa Bürger (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), esp. 108ff.

25. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943), vii.



authority of Rousseau, citing on the title page of *The Art of Reading Books* the lines from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: "To read little and meditate a great deal upon our reading, or to talk it over extensively among ourselves, that is the way to thoroughly digest it."<sup>26</sup>

Bergk's campaign to intensify reading would have been unnecessary at the beginning of the eighteenth century. For to the extent that they read at all, the grandparents and great-grandparents of Bergk's readers had little choice but to return again and again to the handful of sacred and devotional texts available to them, to read and re-read these and on each new reading attempt to cull some new food for reflection, some new kernel of wisdom to guide them down the path of life. The goal of Bergk's *The Art of Reading Books* is to revive these older reading strategies in order to direct them toward a limited body of secular texts capable of playing the same role in the lives of his readers that the sacred texts had once played. Thus, where formerly the reader's aim in pouring over the scriptures had been to discern the intentions of God the creator, Bergk specifies that the goal of reading ought to be to penetrate the creative intentions of great authors. If we read a literary "work of art" as he prescribes, Bergk writes,

we come to a point where it places our minds in the same state as that of its creator when he brought the work into being. This is the real purpose of reading and the frame of mind that contributes most to the training and perfection of a faculty. (200)

In this injunction to make reading a kind of creation in reverse, the object of which is to re-experience what an author originally thought and felt, Bergk gathers together the various strategies he seeks to inculcate to oppose the "passive receptivity" [*bloß leidendes Verhalten*] of the new novel readers (64).<sup>27</sup>

26. If the "intensive" mode of reading Rousseau is advocating had still been as entrenched at the end of the eighteenth century, as Robert Darnton has recently argued (*The Great Cat Massacre* [New York: Basic Books, 1984], esp. 249ff.), then it would be difficult to understand why people like Bergk would have felt compelled to write so vehemently in its defense.

27. In thus describing the goal of reading, Bergk anticipates, and I believe also helps to explain, the romantic turn that the "science" of interpretation was shortly to take in the hands of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Herder appears to have been the first to suggest that reading ought to involve "divination into the soul of the creator" in "Vom

His hope is that readers who have learned to read thus creatively will automatically make the "right" choices: too sophisticated to derive much pleasure from the growing literature of sheer diversion, they will demand for their leisure the "classical" authors on whom he draws throughout his book for his illustrations—authors like Lessing, Wieland, Goethe, Schiller, and Klopstock. For only *difficult* authors like these will be able to sustain and reward the reflexive mode of reading he has taught. Indeed, these authors require such a mode of reading, for as Bergk himself observes, they are virtually inaccessible to readers who have developed the passive reading habits he so deplors: "Anyone who does not enjoy thinking for himself"—and "who [thus] reads the current novels of Cramer or Spiess with pleasure"—"will not be stimulated by the writings of Wieland and Goethe" (35, 41-42).

To return to "The Pleasures of the Imagination," I believe that we are now in a better position to understand why the philosophy of art developed as it did in the hands of Addison's German successors. As the leisure activity he had commended to his readers in 1712 caught on and polite reading became more and more widespread, the limitations of his propagandistic became evident. Indeed, it began to look dangerously equivocal. For nowhere in his essay had Addison deemed it necessary to lay down explicit principles to guide his readers in the hows and whats of literary connoisseurship. He had simply taken it for granted that they would emulate his own procedure, selecting for their leisure classic works—Homer, Vergil, Ovid, and Shakespeare—rather than the kind of fare that would later so vex the German ideologues.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as part of his strategy to promote polite reading among them, Addison had singled out advantages of the activity which the popular fare could ensure far more readily than these classics. First, in addition to pointing out how much more "refined" the pleasures of the imagination are than "those of sense," it will be recalled that Addison drew on Locke's theory of cognition to emphasize the extreme *ease* with which they could be acquired:

Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele" (1778), in *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), vol. 8, 208. See my "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *ECS* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 446ff.

28. In his essay on taste Addison exhibits equal confidence that his readers will make the "right" choices (*The Spectator* [No. 409], vol. 3, 527-31).

It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters. The Colours paint themselves on the Fancy, with very little Attention of Thought or Application of Mind in the Beholder. We are struck, we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object, without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.<sup>29</sup>

Not only is it easy to perform because it requires very little mental exertion, connoisseurship also results in highly pleasing sensations. Indeed, it is equally on the grounds of the myriad of sensations it ensures participants that Addison had promoted this new form of recreation among his readers. Thus, for example, when he came to recommend "*the Fairie way of Writing*," in which "*Shakespear* has incomparably excelled all others," it was in terms of the "pleasing kind of Horror" such writing "raise[s] . . . in the Mind of the Reader."<sup>30</sup> But if all that is required is "opening the Eye" to receive such effects, how much easier to receive the effects contained in the Gothic fantasies that were appearing in such abundance in the 1790s! Addison could not have intended latter-day readers to waste their idle hours on the likes of these, but nowhere did he lay down principles that would discourage them. By the end of the eighteenth century this type of light reading matter had so proliferated that some such principles were urgently called for. They were provided by the intense philosophizing about the arts on which Bergk drew in order to elaborate a reading propaedeutic which would drive his middle-class readers to classical authors by turning them into classical readers.

Official history presents the *Critique of Judgement* as the fruit of a century of pure philosophical reflection on the arts. While such purely intellectual, philosophical factors undoubtedly played an important role in the evolution of aesthetics, the German reading debate calls our attention to the broader, cultural-political impulses that helped to foster it. As my comments on "The Pleasures of the Imagination" suggest, I view aesthetics as an essentially pedagogical project from its very inception. Accordingly, I view it as the task of a new history of aesthetics to carry the investigation I offer here back to Britain and, in addition, to practice the kind of rhetorical analysis to which I have subjected Addison on other

well-known members of the British school, to undertake archival archaeology to recover the voices, like Bergk's, that have been repressed by official history.<sup>31</sup> By thus investigating the cultural politics in which our aesthetic concepts originally functioned, we may begin to understand why the aesthetic discipline that came to maturity in the *Critique of Judgement* should have seemed necessary.

31. For a recent rehearsal of the official line, see Arnold Berleant, "The Historicity of Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 101-11; 26, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 195-203. One of the causes of the blindness of official history to the prescriptive aims of the theories it sets out to explain is discernible in Berleant's assumption, on which the argument of his paper as a whole rests, that the proper aim of theory is to "account for" (i.e., to reflect and explain) artistic practice, which is necessarily prior to theory.

29. Ibid., (No. 411), 538.

30. Ibid., (No. 419), 570-73.