Necessary Luxuries

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The Appetite for Reading around 1800

Reading has always been considered dangerous by some, but rarely as dangerous as it was perceived to be in late eighteenth-century Germany. The meteoric growth of the market for books and periodicals in this period not only gave rise to a new literary public sphere; it also triggered wide-ranging and often hysterical fears among German intellectuals and other educated elites of a “reading epidemic.” These fears have attracted a fair amount of interest over the years, with more recent studies generally addressing the topic from the perspective of the history of genre, class conflict, or gender politics. Commentators like Eric Schön have made it clear how significant the discussions of Lesesucht (reading addiction) and Lesewut (reading mania) are for our understanding of the history of reading, and how our own notions of what it means to be a reader, especially a reader of novels, take shape in this period.¹ Others have emphasized eighteenth-century concerns about the politicization of readers from the lower social strata following the French Revolution or about women readers who allegedly neglect the duties of motherhood.²

2. For political and gender aspects of the reading debates, see Claire Baldwin, The Emergence of the Modern German Novel: Christopher Martin Wieland, Sophie von La Roche, and Maria Anna Sagar (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2002); Robert Bledsoe, “Harnessing Autonomous Art: Enlightenment and Aesthetic Education in Johann Adam Bergk’s Die Kunst, Bücher zu Lesen,” German Life and Letters
The Appetite for Reading

The discussion of these facets of the controversy has certainly been illuminating, but the emphasis on drawing distinctions among text genres or social groups has tended to narrow scholarly focus, whereas the scope of the controversy itself seems to demand a more comprehensive approach. Notwithstanding the frequent singling out of certain groups or genres for condemnation, one cannot help but be struck by how widespread concerns about reading and excessive textuality were throughout late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany: how many commentators expressed them (from Wieland to Friedrich Schlegel, from Mendelssohn to Fichte), how many different text genres came under suspicion (from novels to plays to newspapers and political journalism), and how many different groups were seen to be at risk (not just young people, peasants, and women, but also adult middle-class readers of both sexes).

In light of the ubiquity of these concerns, I propose that we take a step back from the approaches mentioned above in order to adopt a more holistic view, one that expands on recent scholarship emphasizing the status of books as commodities and reading as a form of consumption. As with the attempts to justify luxury editions discussed in the previous chapter, anxieties about reading are best understood against the backdrop of an emerging commercial society, in which, as we have seen, the expansion of print culture constitutes a particularly salient moment. Like the commentary on luxury editions, late eighteenth-century reflections on reading are inseparable from a more general intellectual engagement with new modes of discretionary consumption, and recognizing this shared conceptual framework can help us to grasp why Lesewut (reading mania) was a source of such distress in the period. If, however, our emphasis in the previous chapter was on the qualities of the objects themselves, as well as on their contested status in an increasingly unstable society of orders, a focus on reading returns the issue of individual subjectivity to the forefront of our inquiry—especially the equilibrium-based model of the self discussed in the introduction. To be sure, concerns about the nature of subjectivity also played a key role in the justification of luxury editions. Under consideration


in that discussion, however, was a fairly broad array of cultural contexts (comfort, hygiene, connoisseurship, scientific knowledge, and patriotism) and how these contexts helped to harmonize new opportunities for discretionary consumption with existing behavioral ideals. In this chapter, I want to move to a more abstract level of reflection on the self, one that foregrounds ideas of coherence and self-regulation in a more general sense.

What proves particularly significant about the reading controversy in this regard is how it reveals a complex intertwining of old and new notions of a normative subjectivity. A number of the attacks on excessive reading echo those fears about a decline of the traditional estate-based conception of individual identity that are still so widespread around 1800. But many of these texts also contain the germ of a more recognizably modern concern about the disintegration of a coherent sense of self. Thus, like the controversy over luxury editions, the reading debates remind us that there is more at stake in early condemnations of consumerism than the issues of social hierarchy and social differentiation that have often constituted the focus of studies on the topic.4

Moreover, because these attacks address the relation between consumption and psychology in such detail, they also demonstrate with particular clarity that such anxieties are inseparable from the spread of capitalism, albeit a variant of capitalism that needs to be grasped, along the lines described in the introduction, in its historical specificity. To be more precise, these reflections on reading show how the expansion of commodification as a result of new mechanisms of exchange posed a challenge not only to an estate-based hierarchy, but also to a conception of subjective authenticity, one based on the principle of a harmonious balance among the various actions, behaviors, and attitudes seen to constitute the exemplary individual.

Finally, and perhaps most unexpectedly, recognizing the crucial status of subjective authenticity in this context opens up a new perspective from which to consider the romantic model of textual hermeneutics that emerges around the end of the century. From this perspective, ideas about active readers or readers as authors that become so prevalent in this period appear not as the consequence of rarefied philosophical and aesthetic reflections, but as anxious attempts to come to terms with a rapidly expanding commodity culture.

As the structure of the previous paragraph suggests, my argument will proceed in three stages. The analysis begins with an elucidation of the conceptual overlap between discussions of excessive reading and those that address luxury consumption more generally. With this general framework in place, I then turn to a series of treatises on reading that illuminate the significance of an expanding market for

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understanding concerns about surplus consumption and its alleged destabilization of the individual subject. This fear of destabilization then serves, in the final section of the chapter, as the basis for a reconsideration of the late eighteenth-century ideal of the creative reader, an ideal that can be grasped as an effort to reestablish subjective agency in the face of a potentially overwhelming expansion of the sphere of material culture.

Reading as Consumption

The easiest way to link reading to consumption in late eighteenth-century Germany is on the basis of semantic overlap. References to the “ravenous devouring” of bad books are repeated in endless variations in essays on excessive reading, and they are complemented by descriptions of readers as “book gobblers” (Bücherfresser) and of books as “useful, healthy, and strengthening nourishment for the mind” or “fashionable sweets.” But a more substantive connection between the two discourses is to be found in the shared concern regarding marginalized groups, especially the lower social strata, young men, and women of all ages. In all three cases, unregulated access to new commodities is seen to pose a threat to social stability. So, for example, just as the author of the entry on luxury in D. Johann Georg Krünitz’s *Oekonomische Encyklopädie* (Economic Encyclopedia) speaks of peasants whose overconsumption of coffee and foreign spices leads to “enervation,” commentators on young male readers express their fears that self-indulgence will lead to a “reluctance toward all forms of real work.”

In the case of women as well, one finds an exact parallel between the two discursive fields, as can be seen through a juxtaposition of criticisms of women whose novel reading has made them indifferent toward their domestic duties and those rendered equally indifferent through what an author from *Der neue deutsche Zuschauer* (1789) terms “finery and splendor.” In Vienna, he writes, the desire for luxury, especially among women, has reached such proportions that “every day, many respected families are forced into bankruptcy as a result of it.” Vienna serves as the target for this attack, but in fact the article repeats a standard motif from what was by then a highly formulaic discussion of luxury consumption.

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8. Ibid.

accusations can be found in essays on Berlin, Paris, or even Warsaw luxury. More significantly in the current context, the same argumentation can also be found in a variety of contributions to the reading debates. Educator Joachim Heinrich Campe’s discussion of Lesesucht in his Allgemeine Revision des gesammten Schul- und Erziehungswesens (General Review of the Entire School and Educational System, 1785), to give just one example, decimates the growth of “literary luxury” and goes on to blame it for the “disorder in household matters, . . . decline in material prosperity, domestic tribulations, domestic dissatisfaction,” and “often even privation and misery” that one finds in an increasing number of German families.

These parallels between the condemnations of reading and luxury, which represent only a small sample of those that could be adduced, are by no means coincidental. On the contrary, they have their common root in an eighteenth-century faculty psychology that evaluates discretionary consumption not simply in socioeconomic terms but in terms of its alleged impact on the psycho-physical equilibrium of the individual. The central conceptual categories in this context, as we saw in the introduction, are sensuality (Sinnlichkeit), the imagination (Einbildungskraft or Phantasie), and reason (Vernunft)—categories that serve as organizing principles for the arguments in both discursive fields. In the case of the essays and treatises on luxury proper, the dual emphasis on sensuality and the imagination, which we saw in the work of Johann August Schlettwein (“pleasures of the eyes and the imagination”) and others, remains remarkably stable throughout the late eighteenth century. It reappears in condemnations of urban luxury, as the citation on Vienna suggests. An additional example is a 1787 essay on Berlin luxury that admonishes the “wig makers, tailors and other such craftsmen” who dress in “silken, in braided, in embroidered clothes” and imagine that they are equal to members of higher estates. It also appears in the article on luxury in the Oekonomische Encyklopädie, where the author explains the misery that results from “the strengthening and proliferation of sensual appetites.”

Anxieties regarding the overstimulation of sensuality and fantasy, however, prove equally central to the reading debates. J. R. G. Beyer, for example, follows Campe in explicitly characterizing excessive reading as a form of luxury. He bases his claim on the fact that both reading and luxury more generally involve objects that lie outside the sphere of our “necessary and natural needs,” and, even more
importantly, because in both cases these objects are a source of sensual pleasure: “If luxury as a whole has made people more sensual, softer, more pampered, more extravagant, more desirous, and more prone to excesses, then luxury in reading has faithfully contributed its share to these developments.”  

Other examples of the negative association of reading and sensuality—often conceived as seductive visuality—abound in the texts from the period. J. G. Hocke, for example, refers in an essay of 1794 to the “sumptuous depictions, the enchanting images of sensuality” that fill contemporary novels. In both the reading debates and the controversy over luxury consumption, the overindulgence in sensual pleasures, frequently described as an overstimulation of the nervous system, is seen to lead to a lack of interest in and an incapacity for serious work and a corresponding neglect of one’s duty to society.

As in the case of luxury consumption, moreover, excessive reading is linked to a runaway imagination. Just as prevalent as and in fact inseparable from the anxieties regarding books full of “sensual images” are fears of escapist reading materials that overstimulate the imagination and give rise to unrealistic expectations about the world. If concerns about sensuality tend to emphasize its psycho-physical impact, concerns about the imagination are frequently linked to anxieties about social order. Campe attributes the alleged rise in broken homes and restless youths to books that overstimulate the nerves, especially of young women, whose spirits are also “carried away from reality by poetic and romantic dream visions.” Hocke refers to the “freedom-and-equality enthusiasts” whose “imagination sets forth ideals that cannot exist as conceived.”

Johann Adam Bergk, who was introduced in the previous chapter and to whom we will return in the conclusion, admonishes those women who read novels “that agitate their feelings, cast them into a world of magic and spirits, [and] lead [them] to knightly tournaments and drunken festivals.”

In a sense, this aspect of the reading controversy hardly needs to be mentioned. Scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to the perceived threat posed by escapist reading in the eighteenth century. What has been missed is the fact that condemnations of such escapism, as well as the opposition between a fictional world of the imagination and the sometimes harsh reality of social life, are central to the broader discourse on consumption in the period. As the expressions of

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20. For a critical overview of some of the scholarship on so-called Trivialliteratur, see Wurst, Fabricating Pleasure, 117–21.
dismay regarding members of the lower and middle social strata who dress up and act like their social superiors illustrate, categories like verisimilitude and plausibility have a resonance in the period that transcends the sphere of literature. Like bad novels, new forms of consumption that blur the boundaries between estates or challenge existing conceptions of gender identity are not merely condemned; they are dismissed as unrealistic. The expanding markets for both literary and nonliterary consumer goods in the eighteenth century, in other words, are seen to create opportunities for individuals to generate fantasies of alternative selves. If we are to believe contemporary commentators, access to new fashions and exotic foods enable craftsmen’s daughters to stroll about like ladies of quality on Sundays and merchants to throw lavish public parties, even if it means that they must starve themselves at home.

The key point here is that reflections on fictionalized identities in late eighteenth-century Germany—fictional in the sense of an imaginatively invented mode of self-representation that fails to capture the “essential” reality of the referent—treat the fantasy world occupied by the addictive reader and the one occupied by the fashion-conscious tradesman as equivalent. In both cases the danger stems less from the misrepresentation itself that from the fact that a particular fiction cannot be maintained; that is, it cannot be integrated into a stable and coherent totality of life practices. Whereas some partial fictionalizations of a currently existing self can function as bridges to the realization of socially sanctioned ideals, others allegedly give rise to a radical break between the life of the imagination and the demands of practical life. The addictive reader, because his or her literary ideals simply cannot be actualized in the real world, increasingly takes refuge in the literary text. This flight from reality leads in turn to a neglect of his or her duties and ultimately ruins the individual, destroys the family, and endangers the health of the body politic. The path of the luxury consumer follows a similar trajectory: the consumption of luxury commodities fosters desires and expectations that are out of sync with the requirements and possibilities of everyday life. This disjunction leads to the consumption of more commodities in order to combat the resultant frustration, with equally disastrous results (fig. 4). Finally, one should note that the spheres of reading and of consumption more generally are seen to exist in a relationship of reciprocal reinforcement. Attempts to perform upward mobility by way of fashionable purchases may be driven in part by actual encounters with members of higher estates. If we are to believe the critics of excessive reading, however, they also owe a large debt to the “romantic dream visions” produced by popular novelists.

Identifying the shared conceptual framework behind the reading debates and the broader discourse on consumption in the period places one in a position to appreciate exactly what is at stake in the former. To characterize these debates solely in terms of categories specific to literature—such as “intensive” and “extensive” reading or “textualization” or even “mediatization”—is to neglect the larger context that lent these discussions their urgency in the period. In addition, such a
characterization attributes to the sphere of literary discourse a degree of autonomy that it does not yet possess. Criticisms of excessive reading no doubt reflect the impact of an increasingly mediatized society, where the spread of textual culture is experienced as a decline in sociability, and the consequent abstraction and derealization of personal experience. But we must not forget that the insertion of this new layer of mediation is a consequence of processes of commodification and that, as the parallels with the discourse on luxury demonstrate, it occurs as part of a more general expansion of commercial society. The apocalyptic fears that characterize the polemics against excessive reading, which are manifest in the dire consequences allegedly in store for individual, family, and state, are best understood in terms of an engagement with what Don Slater refers to as a “commercial revolution,” in which “concepts of trade, money, new financial instruments and moveable property, contracts and orientation to commercial exploitation of ever more extensive and impersonal markets generated a vast range of new notions and activities which

we deem modern.” A rapid expansion in the world of goods, in which the proliferation of textual commodities plays a crucial role, not only opens up new and potentially threatening opportunities for experiencing sensual and imaginative pleasure; it also means that those goods are no longer able to make visible and stabilize the basic categories through which individuals understand themselves and their social world.

These anxieties regarding commerce and the market bring us to the second stage of the argument I wish to present here. If the history of consumption can help us to recontextualize the reading debates, then the reverse is equally true: late eighteenth-century reflections on reading can also open up a new perspective on how the broader discourse on consumption is transformed in response to capitalist modernity. The key issue in this context is the development of a critical vocabulary of authenticity understood in terms of a harmonious coherence of behaviors and practices, and of the threat posed to the “authentic” subject by the market. Although, on the one hand, the reading debates help to corroborate the often-discussed link between new consumption patterns and status anxieties, they also shed light on an alleged threat that has received far less attention in the scholarship, one conceived by eighteenth-century commentators in terms of a universal model of individual subjectivity rather than embeddedness in a social hierarchy. In addition, when one recognizes the precise character of this threat and the extent to which it is seen to stem from an expansion of the market, it becomes possible to grasp newly developing strategies of consumption, both as they relate to reading and to commodities more generally, as equally dependent on processes of economic transformation.

**Target Markets**

A number of the essays on excessive reading, and often those written by the most conservative commentators, include remarkably sophisticated reflections on the impact of the market on literary production and on the psychological development of individual readers. This sophistication is not surprising when one considers the remarkable expansion and growing sophistication of the publishing industry itself in the period; nor is it surprising that these essays often focus on the dangers posed by the novel. The aforementioned Beyer, for example, not only laments the money wasted on the purchase of luxury editions of novels, whose lavish exterior—“beautiful paper, magnificent typography, engraving, and cover”—often has no

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24. Between 1750 and 1760, according to Marion Beaujean, 73 new novels appeared in Germany. Between 1791 and 1800, the number had increased to 1,623. Marion Beaujean, *Der Trivialroman in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1964), 178.
connection to “the inner worth of the book.” He also points out the way in which writing for an unregulated market leads to structural changes in the books themselves, as the desire to increase sales tempts authors to overload their works with “images that inflame the imagination, salacious depictions, sensual treats, apparent witticisms, etc.” These visually mesmerizing scenes and ingenious plot scenarios, according to Beyer, have a lasting sensory impact on the reader, crowding out any healthy thoughts that the book might also contain.

The market figures even more prominently in a treatise on the Leserei der Modebücher (excessive reading of fashionable books) by Ernst Brandes, the cabinet secretary in Hannover who was introduced in chapter 1. At the time of writing he was responsible for the oversight of the University of Göttingen. Today he is remembered primarily for his antirevolutionary writings, his advocacy of Burkean principles, and the influence of both of these on his longtime friend the Prussian reformer Freiherr von Stein. Brandes places a heavy emphasis on the consequences of the commodification of literature—“the mercantile spirit that has unfortunately become so dominant in all literary activitivies.” He also makes it clear that the novel is by no means the only object of scrutiny in the reading debates, a fact that has often been neglected in the relevant scholarship. On the contrary, he proves more concerned with the spread of journals and a consequent loss of intellectual depth. Even at its best the periodical genre is suspect, because of its hybrid character: “The perpetual jumping back and forth in the reading of journals, between articles on the most disparate subjects and representing the most disparate approaches, would be a great evil even for ordinary minds, and even if most of the articles were actually good.” These rapid shifts in tone and topic among articles, together with the superficial treatment necessitated by their short length, damage the reader’s ability to undertake focused, systematic reflection. The result is something like a parody of the Renaissance man, characterized by superficial Vielseitigkeit (many-sidedness) that paralyzes “the spirit and courage for action.”

Brandes is deeply concerned with the corruption of the publishing industry by commercial interests. In his account, very few readers are actually aware of the extent to which “our literature is factory produced.” This mass production is driven by the exigencies of competition and consumer demand rather than by an authentic need to communicate the truth on the part of the author, and the

26. Ibid., 197.
27. Ernst Brandes, “Über die Leserei der Modebücher und ihre Folgen in einigen Klassen der höheren Stände,” Neues Hannöversches Magazin 8 (1800): 117. The article runs over seven issues of the journal (6–12) with continuous pagination; subsequent references to this article will be cited with issue and page numbers.
29. Ibid., 10:159.
30. Ibid., 9:143.
consequence is a prostitution of the “most noble gifts of the spirit.” The profit motive, Brandes claims, systematically distorts communication between author and reader, because it forces the former to write even when s/he has nothing of value to say. Books are ordered by the dozen without any idea of what the content might be, and the editors of journals and monthlies, because they must publish on specific dates, are often forced to include whatever articles they have on hand, regardless of quality. In addition, he argues, the possibility of profit has tempted too many individuals to enter the industry, and the excessive competition among them leads some to resort to sensationalism to stay afloat.

In the case of both Beyer and Brandes, one must of course remain cognizant of the particular sociohistorical context out of which these arguments emerge. They constitute a specific response to the destabilizing impact of the French Revolution in Germany. In Beyer’s treatise this connection is made more explicit in the context of a general discussion of enlightenment and the dangers of the alleged half truths and distorted claims about church and state spread by irresponsible writers and appropriated by those not yet mature enough to recognize them for what they are. Both authors fear the emergence of a disgruntled mass of peasants and craftsmen no longer satisfied with their lot in life. Their concerns, however, by no means pertain only to these groups (Brandes’s essay actually focuses on the “higher estates”), nor do they frame their arguments in explicit opposition to social mobility. Rather, their reflections point to a general trepidation regarding commodification and unregulated consumption. Indeed, phrased in neutral terms, the precise target of Beyer’s attack can be characterized as the reduction of knowledge to the status of positional commodity. The texts that include the aforementioned distortions, according to Beyer, are especially appealing to the “book-loving layman,” because they are new, because they flatter his vanity and give him “the appearance of erudition.” Rather than being integrated into a gradual (and estate-appropriate) program of self-improvement through education, something that both authors pay lip service to, knowledge here becomes a kind of fashion accessory, a luxury good whose primary purpose is its function as a mark of distinction. The pastor J. L. Ewald, author of Gemeingeist: Ideen zu Aufregung des Gemeingeistes (Public Spirit: Ideas to Help Foster the Public Spirit, 1801), explicitly establishes the link to fashion in a comment that demonstrates the relevance of this critique for a more educated reading public. He rebukes those who browse through “Jean Paul, Kant, and Fichte . . . in order to collect a few choice phrases . . . from their works . . . and to preen themselves with these foreign quills and foreign minds.”

Beyer, Brandes, and Ewald, whose arguments owe much to orthodox Christian theology, are fairly reactionary thinkers by eighteenth-century standards. Nonetheless, their comments demonstrate that concerns about reading often reflect concerns about the market, and more specifically, I would argue, about the replacement of personalized frameworks for controlling the dissemination of knowledge and certain kinds of experiences with the anonymous mediation of market mechanisms. The precise target of their criticism is a variant of one that has accompanied processes of commodification ever since: production for the market gives rise to a homogenization of goods; in other words, goods are not tailored to a known individual but produced for an anonymous public. This homogenization means that the “genuine” needs of specific individuals become separated from the possibilities for their satisfaction. In this particular case, everybody can access the same knowledge, regardless of whether they will actually benefit from it or not. What is lost as a result of the expansion of professional journalism and the book market, according to these commentators, is the ability to match the object to the specific needs of the one who appropriates it.

Of course, in these essays, the determination of needs is undertaken in paternalistic fashion by a group of elites, and this aspect of the discussion leads us back to the specific coordinates of the eighteenth-century discourse on consumption. These authors are certainly not concerned about the manipulation of the consumer by corporate interests, as tends to be the case in twentieth-century critiques of commodity culture. Nonetheless, the threat they address entails an argument that, even though it finds articulation in the context of estate and gender politics, is based on a concept of the self that transcends this context. The self as conceived here consists of a harmoniously integrated constellation of behaviors and practices, a “whole way of life” that is also linked to certain patterns of consumption and forms of knowledge. To mix and match—a strategy that is facilitated by new opportunities for consumption—is to split the self, to perform a public identity that does not correspond to the private one.

From this perspective, these criticisms, whatever their specific target, do not simply reflect fears about social entropy. They also contain an implicit argument about individual authenticity, according to which the possession of certain kinds of fragmentary knowledge leads to a disconnect between outer and inner selves, between social performance and what is understood by these commentators to be an essential identity. The individuals targeted in these attacks are not simply condemned for their efforts at social ventriloquism; they are perceived to be out of balance. Brandes’s treatise offers another example. He ridicules those individuals who hold forth on the political topics they read about in newspapers, even though they lack the in-depth knowledge to judge these matters with any precision. Here

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again, knowledge appears as a fashion accessory. Brandes condemns such posturing because it serves no purpose other than to indulge one’s vanity (“a vain, puffed-up political arrogance”), and because it fails to reflect accurately what he considers to be the true identity of the speaker. There is no meaningful way for the speaker to integrate these social performances into his actual life practice; thus, Brandes views them as inauthentic ornamentation, what the previously mentioned Hocke refers to in another context as “borrowed glamour.” Comments like these may indeed be reactionary, but they are also representative of a general anxiety regarding the unregulated consumption made possible by the expansion of the market, and seen to give rise to individuals whose behaviors constitute an incoherent jumble rather than a harmonious totality, for whom interiority and exteriority have become detached.

While I would argue that this concern with an “authentic” or balanced self receives its most thorough treatment in the essays on reading, one should note that an identical idea constitutes a powerful subtext in direct attacks on status-driven consumption among the middle and lower social strata in Germany. The author of “Über den Luxus in Berlin” (On Luxury in Berlin, 1787), for example, juxtaposes the domestic lives and public performances of the lower estates: “Others barely scrape by in their domestic lives, purely so that they can show themselves off in clothes and finery.” In a similar fashion, the treatise Über Mode und Luxus, oder über die Armut und ihre Quellen (On Fashion and Luxury, or on Poverty and Its Origins, 1799) offers the following comment on those less well-off individuals who imitate the wealthy and powerful: “Such fools prefer to sacrifice everything, simply to enable themselves to appear to be something which, in reality, they are not.”

At issue here is not just the fact that access to new consumer goods encourages efforts to dress above one’s station and thus makes it more difficult to determine status among individuals, but that, with regard to a single individual, it leads to a situation where the parts do not add up to a coherent whole. In fact, a similar argument had already been made fifty years earlier in the article on fashion in Zedler’s Universallexicon (Universal Encyclopedia, 1739): “In a rational life everything must fit together; . . . does it not seem bizarre that some women seek to emulate noble ladies with regard to their clothing and coffee service, even as their diet and residence resemble those of the most miserable tradesmen.” As with the remarks on misguided reading practices, in these cases as well one can speak of a fetishization

38. Über Mode und Luxus oder über die Armut und ihre Quellen (Elberfeld: Comptoir für Literatur, 1799), 11.
of individual elements at the expense of the whole, the replacement of a unified framework of consumption with an inconsistent mix of practices that cannot be mapped onto any established system of social coordinates.\textsuperscript{40}

In fact, one can locate the anxiety at an even deeper level. In his analysis of consumer culture and postmodernism, the sociologist Mike Featherstone offers a set of reflections that proves remarkably germane to the situation in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany. As he points out, increased access to a broader array of commodities and commodified entertainments not only undermines the legibility of consumption practices as markers of a stable social position; it also calls into question the very distinction between reality and fiction.\textsuperscript{41} In an eighteenth-century context, if a tradesman’s daughter can pass for a lady of quality simply by changing her dress, one cannot help but wonder whether the difference between them is really as substantive as had been assumed. It is unclear which of the two individuals is actually operating under an assumed, fictional identity. Thus, as I pointed out in the introduction, although discussions of luxury certainly reflect concerns about social rank or a loss of social transparency as seen through the eyes of social elites, they are also indicative of more fundamental, existential anxieties among these elites themselves, anxieties caused by what might be termed a derealization or fictionalization of their own selves in the context of a theatricalized public sphere.\textsuperscript{42}

To be sure, recognizing the depth of these fears will not help us to grasp consumption patterns for specific commodities in the period, an aim that has been articulated in some recent studies by historians.\textsuperscript{43} An awareness of the market-induced threat to the notion of an authentic and integrated self, however, can help us to draw some conclusions about the general approaches taken by individuals to consumption, and this brings us to the third stage of the argument and back to the question of justificatory frameworks that constituted our focus in chapter 2. These approaches suggest that the expansion of the market, and more specifically, the increasing detachment of the spheres of consumption and production as a result of increasing production for the market, required a new way of thinking about the self and its relationship to material culture.\textsuperscript{44} In this context, the crucial shift
that occurs can be described as a reconception of certain kinds of consumption as productive in themselves. If the market makes available on demand goods, experiences, or knowledge that threatens to overwhelm or deform what is conceived as an essential self, then it becomes necessary to develop strategies to reassert that self.

**Productive Consumption**

We have seen how expanded access to new commodities in the eighteenth-century required the development of new cognitive and discursive frameworks, frameworks that would enable individuals either to reconcile new patterns of consumption with existing conceptions of the self and the social order, or to legitimate adjustments to these conceptions. Indeed, the entire discussion surrounding the conception of “good” luxury aims precisely to demarcate the scope of these new frameworks. Taking his cue from the work of scholars like John Brewer, Maxine Berg, and John Crowley, Woodruff Smith describes how blanket condemnations of luxury give way at this time to those more differentiated concepts like “taste,” “comfort,” and “convenience” that serve this legitimating function. Discretionary consumption is partitioned into the useful and the frivolous. For a servant to dress like his superiors is pure theatricality, a pointless and unmaintainable fiction, as the author of the previously discussed essay on Berlin argues in no uncertain terms. For a peasant to produce beyond his immediate needs and use the profits from the surplus to make his home more hygienic and comfortable, however, as J. G. Büsch suggests in his *Abhandlung vom Geldumlauf* (Treatise on the Circulation of Money, 1780), is a realistic effort at self-improvement that deserves to be encouraged.

Smith’s approach reveals both the creativity and the complexity of consumption practices in the period, and in this respect his work builds on that of a number of earlier scholars who likewise stressed the idea of consumption as a means to “construct social selves” and “reestablish a sense of both individual worth and community.” In German studies, Daniel Purdy and Karin Wurst, although approaching the topic from different perspectives, have brought such insights to bear on the constitution of middle-class identity around 1800 and have also made it clear that textuality and reading constitute a key focal point for reflecting on the societal consequences of an incipient consumer culture in Germany. Both Purdy and Wurst,

45. Smith, *Consumption*, 81–86.
46. Johann Georg Büsch, *Abhandlung von dem Geldumlauf in anhaltender Rücksicht auf die Staatswirtschaft und Handlung*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg and Kiel: Carl Ernst Bohn, 1800), 350. As cited in chapter 2, Büsch writes: “Encourage the peasant to enjoy the fruits of his industry through an affluence that is in keeping with his general circumstances and vocation.”
48. My own analysis is especially indebted to Purdy’s elucidation of the link between reading and consumption in the period. See Purdy, *Tyranny of Elegance*, esp. 22–50.
moreover, as well as a number of scholars in other fields, rightly emphasize the creative elements of reading as consumption and thus move us away from some of the more dogmatic Marxist condemnations of consumer culture as manipulation.

What has occasionally been given short shrift as a result of this scholarly emphasis on creativity, complexity, and nuance is the degree to which these expressions of creativity, however diverse they may be, can all be seen as responses to the challenge posed by the market to thinking about subjectivity. It is possible, in other words, to view the arguments of eighteenth-century advocates of strategic surplus consumption in more reactive terms—namely, as an effort to reestablish a transparent relationship between cycles of production and consumption and thereby return to the individual a sense of agency. The spread of market mechanisms thus not only shapes criticisms of discretionary consumption, but also the more positive formulations of those who wish to channel it.

Nowhere does the paradigmatic status of the book market for concerns about an uncoupling of production and consumption, and for the development of strategies to address this problem, become clearer than in a series of lectures delivered by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in 1804/5 and published in 1806 under the title Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters (The Profile of the Present Age). 49 Written several years after the high point of the reading controversy, Fichte's lectures offer something of a retrospective on the debate. They reiterate virtually all of the basic criticisms of excessive readers—criticisms, it should be noted, that exhibit a striking uniformity across the entire temporal and political range of contributions to the controversy. Fichte describes the society of his own epoch as divided into two groups, writers and readers: “Just as the former writes on and on without ceasing or pausing, so does the latter read without ceasing” (93). This division, moreover, gives rise to a new type of reader (“the pure reader”), who reads “solely for the sake of reading, and lives by reading” (93), and a new experience of reading, which allegedly places one into a state comparable to that induced by smoking tobacco (fig. 5). Fichte's fears here pertain to a mode of consumption that exists purely for its own sake and leads only to more consumption, and in this respect his argument mirrors that of the conservative commentators discussed previously. As Fichte puts it, “Whoever has tasted the sweetness of this condition even once wants only to enjoy it evermore, and no longer wishes to do anything else in life” (93).

To be sure, the basic conception of a historical dialectic that informs Fichte’s lectures already has a well-established philosophical pedigree at this point in time; moreover, the historical-philosophical framework of the lectures means that he does not present his arguments in explicitly economic terms. But Fichte is clearly responding to a new social division of labor resulting from the expansion of the book market—namely, the split between a professional class of writers and a class

49. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956); subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.
of literary consumers. The problem with this split at the societal level is that it reflects a division at the level of individual psychology—capacities that should naturally coexist within a single individual are now divvied up between individuals. What has been lost is the unity of personality. The argument finds a parallel in Schiller’s (or, for that matter, Adam Ferguson’s) reflections on the consequences of the modern division of labor, except that here the problem is not specialization but rather is conceived in the more binary framework of a division of society into producers, “the active part,” and consumers, “the receiving part” (93).

Where Fichte differs from more conservative commentators like those discussed previously is in presenting readers with a detailed plan for coming to terms with the overproduction of texts. The only appropriate response for Fichte is to transform consumption itself into a productive process. As Fichte writes, a reader’s aim must be to understand the intended meaning of the author in historical terms, but he also warns: “To do so one must not proceed by passively giving oneself up to the author” (95). Instead, one must approach the book as one would approach a scientific experiment. Fichte writes that the author, like nature, must be “subjected” or even “subjugated” (the German verb is *unterwerfen*) to a series of questions and forced to respond. If one follows the correct procedure in this regard, then one should not be surprised if “a single printed page requires one to pen twenty more” (97).

The procedure Fichte describes is designed to counter what have long been considered two of the most fundamental negative consequences of commodity culture.
First, it renders the origins of the commodity transparent, or, put somewhat differently, it reestablishes an immediate, communicative relationship between producer and consumer, or author and reader. One must study the work, Fichte writes, “[until one] can reconstruct the author’s entire system of thought for oneself, backwards and forwards, in every possible order, deriving all propositions therein from any individual one selected at will” (96). Second, Fichte also conceives his recommendations as a way for the subject to reassert his agency vis-à-vis a potentially despotic world of text-objects. Fichte’s “experimental” approach allows the reader to maintain control over himself during the reading process, which consequently becomes a source of positive surplus value: “It is evident that by way of this approach . . . one will often understand the writer even better than he understood himself” (97). Far from passively submitting to the author, the reader in this case becomes the master, a master whose level of productivity exceeds that of the author by a factor of twenty.50

This motif of understanding the author better than himself has been a frequent topic in discussions of romantic hermeneutics. These discussions have typically been intellectual-historical in their approach, often focusing on Friedrich Schleiermacher’s universalization of a concept that had its roots in theories of biblical and legal exegesis.51 Fichte’s lectures, however, by positing a close link between this motif and fears of a passive mode of consumption that threatens the autonomous subject, suggest a possible material basis for early nineteenth-century developments in the theory of interpretation. The seriousness of this threat is made all the more clear by Fichte’s rather aggressive insistence on the need to “subjugate” the text. To avoid being reduced to mere passive reception, the reader must transform the finished product of the author into raw material for his or her own production process, which can thus be seen to operate on two levels. The reader reproduces the work itself (and something more) in the act of reading, and the act of reading becomes part of the production of the rationally organized self, characterized here in terms of an absolute mastery over the artifactual world.

My aim is not to portray Fichte as the most sophisticated theorist of reading in the early nineteenth century. Because of his particular approach, however—the fact that he casts his program of active reading as a response to the problem of Lesewut and the overproduction of texts—he presents us with the possibility of viewing the development of hermeneutics in the period in conjunction with the spread of commerce rather than as a purely philosophical or linguistic phenomenon. According to this reading, the proliferation of material culture proves

50. Fichte’s terminology, both here and elsewhere in the text, implies an interesting gender aspect to this discussion that would be worth pursuing. Despite the gendered terminology, however, it would seem that Fichte (and others) intend their strategies to be employed by members of both sexes. For an insightful and relevant general discussion on the topic, see Wurst, Fabricating Pleasure, 105–16.
51. A paradigmatic example is Peter Szondi, Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik (Frankfurt/Main: Surhkamp, 1975), esp. 135–91.
crucial for the emergence of the idealist subject posited by this hermeneutics, and from this perspective, Fichte’s text might be used as evidence in support of (Marxist) analyses that view abstract thought as a consequence of the abstraction of the marketplace.\footnote{See Martin Jay, Adorno (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 67.}

Any more general arguments to this effect would require an in-depth analysis of other writings on the topic. While such an analysis is beyond the scope of the current investigation, it is possible to show that Fichte is not unique in his characterization of the reading process. Johann Adam Bergk, whose Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen (The Art of Reading Books) appeared in 1799 and whose position in the debate has often been described as that of a moderate Aufklärer, employs an identical rhetoric of submission versus self-assertion.\footnote{See Bledsoe, “Harnessing Autonomous Art,” 477–78; and Woodmansee, “Genealogy of the Aesthetic,” 215–17. Subsequent references to Bergk’s work Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen will be cited parenthetically in the text.} He argues that a book “must not treat us as a slave” and claims that “we must not allow ourselves be enslaved by the material in the book” (63). The basic problem for Bergk can be characterized as a sphere of objectivity—elsewhere he writes that “every book is a dead mass”—that threatens to overwhelm the individual subject and deform his development. As with Fichte, the solution resides in a reassertion of individual autonomy and control: “We must approach it [the material] as an independent thinker and treat it as the property of our spirit” (63). The precise strategies Bergk offers for taking possession of the text also parallel those suggested by Fichte, except that Bergk takes the emphasis on production one step further and recommends that readers practice writing their own literary texts.\footnote{Both Bledsoe and Woodmansee address Bergk’s conception of active reading, but without discussing the general context of consumer culture. Woodmansee certainly acknowledges the importance of the expansion of the literary market, and my own analysis is indebted to her insights; however, she does not address the connection of active reading to market mechanisms in any detail. Both have recourse to the ideas of extensive and intensive reading elucidated by Rolf Engelsing in Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500–1800 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974).}

The clarity with which Fichte presents the split between literary consumers and producers and the need to overcome it again suggests that texts occupy a privileged position in articulation of these concerns. But the rhetoric of enslavement and a loss of agency is certainly not limited to discussions of reading. In contributions to the controversy over luxury consumption as well, fears of passivity and a loss of agency are virtually universal. The by-now familiar entry on luxury from the Oekonomische Encyklopädie, for example, refers to “slaves of sensuality” and, in a phrase that could have been lifted from Fichte or Bergk, explains “how incapable of serious exertion they render themselves.”\footnote{Flörke, “Luxus.” But perhaps more interesting than the indication of yet another parallel between the consequences of the two “epidemics” is the extent to
which the solutions proposed by less negative commentators on luxury can also be viewed in the framework of creative, or productive, consumption.

The paradigmatic figure here is Friedrich Bertuch, whose pioneering *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (Journal of Luxury and Fashions) appeared in Germany between 1786 and 1827. On the level of political economy, Bertuch sought to encourage luxury consumption precisely in order to stimulate production and the growth of domestic industry.\(^{57}\) Explicitly borrowing his argumentation from the aforementioned J. G. Büsch, Bertuch’s introduction to the journal (written together with G. M. Craus) suggests that a healthy circulation of money will ensure that production and consumption remain synchronized. More significant in the current context, however, is the fact that this need for synchronization also pertains to the individual consumer. He or she is to be provided with a guide that will allow him or her to evaluate the newest fashions with an eye toward whether they can be integrated into a project of self-cultivation based on a domesticated version of luxury that he, like Büsch, terms *Wolleben* (living well). The journal purportedly aims to provide criteria that will help the consumer assert himself or herself in the face of an overwhelming number of new products and activities: “Our journal and future works on luxury and fashion intend not only to offer a very pleasant amusement to our readers through the interesting tableaux from these arenas with which it provides them from time to time, but also to teach them, by way of the more general overview that they receive, how to calculate more correctly and to use this tremendous ebb and flow.”\(^{58}\)

Bertuch’s remarks here invoke the venerable Horatian ideal of *prodesse et delectare*, an ideal that we will explore in some detail in the next chapter. Moreover, they betray little of the hysteria that characterizes some of the reflections on reading. Nevertheless, the promised overview is clearly framed as an effort to embed desire in a framework of rational control and thus counter the tyranny of fashion; to continue in Bertuch’s metaphorical vein, to keep the reader from drowning in a sea of fashionable goods and experiences.\(^{59}\) As with Fichte and Bergk, the emphasis is on maintaining the agency of the individual. Bertuch’s insistence on the necessity of developing a productive approach to personal consumption is also mirrored in articles from the period that purport to provide the same sort of guide for readers. In addition to the works of Fichte and Bergk one finds a number of shorter, less conspicuous texts in which the similarity to Bertuch is more immediately apparent. “Lesen oder Nichtlesen, das ist die Frage” (To Read or Not to Read, That Is the

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59. Bertuch of course had a complex and evolving agenda, as Wurst rightly explains in *Fabricating Pleasure* (129–45). My own interpretation of Bertuch differs from Wurst’s in that I think Bertuch’s basic approach to consumption has much in common with those high-cultural conceptions of *Bildung* from which she wants to distinguish it.
Necessary Luxuries

Question), for example, which appeared in the Deutsches Magazin in 1792, offers the equivalent of a flowchart for determining whether or not one should read a particular book.

Increased consumption, then, whether of books or of other commodities, is not to be condemned in toto. But such consumption must never be undertaken for its own sake. That is to say, acceptable surplus consumption, organized around principles like “taste,” “comfort,” or “convenience,” is acceptable because it contributes to a socially sanctioned, rationally pursued project of self-cultivation—it is part of a production process rather than a mere source of passive, anesthetizing, sensual pleasure. On the one hand, this perspective confirms the generally accepted view that “rational and pragmatic” consumption was central to the construction of middle-class identity in the period. Yet it also suggests that this identity took shape less as a conscious or unconscious power play on the part of that class, or even as a form of creative self-fashioning, than as part of an attempt to defuse the threat posed by an expanding world of goods and commodified experiences. Rational consumption appears here as a principle for reestablishing order and reasserting the agency of the subject.

We must certainly acknowledge the framework in which this approach is often taken—that is, the extent to which essentialized notions of gender or estate serve as the basis for the judgment of particular behaviors. The approach itself, however, is rather flexible, and it has a resonance in the period that goes beyond these essentializing categories. In the absence of a transparent referential model for consumption based on a presumptive social identity, rational consumption, understood as productive consumption, offers a strategy for maintaining self-control and negotiating increased access to new commodities. It provides the conceptual basis for reconceiving social and individual life as a coherent totality in a situation where that coherence has been undermined. It should be seen in this context as a coping mechanism, offering a formula for systematizing behavior that provides individuals with a sense of what the sociologist Anthony Giddens has characterized as “ontological security.” Giddens’s description of the modern “reflexive project of the self” as partly “a struggle against commodified influences” demonstrates the continued relevance of such strategies even today.

Given the emphasis on complexity and praxis that characterizes recent work in consumption studies, my interest in how market mechanisms shape the discourse on consumption may seem like a step backward. Many scholars have rightly sought to overcome the “productivist bias” of much economic history, the idea—especially

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60. Purdy, Tyranny of Elegance, 4.
62. Ibid., 200.
common among Marxist historians—that mass consumer culture is simply a means for industrial capitalism to eliminate excess capacity and sustain itself. Too often this approach has led to a view of consumers as passive dupes manipulated by corporate interests. The turn away from the sphere of production, however, while it has greatly enriched our understanding of the complexity of consumer behavior in the period, has been accompanied in many cases by a wholesale abandonment of capitalism as an explanatory framework for understanding consumer behavior.63 I certainly agree that we should acknowledge how consumption constitutes social power relationships, as well as how subjects transform “the anonymous products of mass production into ‘personal statements.’”64 It is equally crucial, however, not to lose sight of the dialectical relationship between the possibility or necessity of such practices and the dislocations brought about by the economic transformations of the period—even as we must be careful not to identify these transformations with the industrial capitalism that shapes the nineteenth century.

My contention has been that the reading debates in Germany offer an especially compelling case study in this regard. Here concerns about subjective authenticity emerge as a direct consequence of the commodification of certain forms of pleasure and knowledge, a process that undercuts preexisting mechanisms for the control of their dissemination and makes them widely available. If the discussion of luxury editions emphasizes the allegedly legitimate pleasures that a new range of commodities could provide, the reading debates cast the threat posed by those same objects into starker relief. When viewed in the context of consumer culture, the reading debates not only illuminate “how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves”; they also illuminate our fear that those same objects will ultimately be our undoing.65 In the remaining chapters, we will see how these two opposing possibilities are negotiated in a series of literary works, as well as how this negotiation gives rise to reflection on the particular qualities of the novel as a literary artifact, its status as an object among objects. Stage one is a consideration of two canonical novels of the German Enlightenment.

63. As Smith puts it, “The complex of developments that produced capitalism affected (and was affected by) changes in European consumption patterns. As we have seen, however, neither the changes in consumption nor the cultural patterns in which they were embedded and which gave them meaning can primarily be understood as ‘products’ of these extracultural factors.” Smith, Consumption, 223–24.