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# Sounding the Literary Market in Prerevolutionary France

ROBERT DARNTON

**I**F INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY ever combine in an attack on a common problem, they could not find a better subject than the literary marketplace of the Old Regime. By 1750 a *grand public* was clamoring for books in France, and printers were producing more of them than ever. But how did supply meet demand? In an era of elaborate censorship and underdeveloped marketing, publishers had to find ways not only to get books to their customers but also to discover what their customers wanted. They lived with a problem that has subsequently become a major concern in the social history of ideas: what was the nature of literary demand in the past and how can it be investigated?

Of course publishers may not be any better than sociologists in assessing cultural consumption. But they make it their business to satisfy the consumers of books, and if they fail they go bankrupt. They developed primitive techniques of market research several centuries ago. So their papers provide a rich source of information about literature as a social and economic phenomenon. By studying the way publishers studied their markets in the eighteenth century, historians may be able to understand how cultural intermediaries operated and how books became a force under the Old Regime.

The most important publisher's archives from that era are the papers of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), a major printer and wholesale book dealer, which furnished books to readers in every corner of France from 1768 to 1789. By operating beyond France's borders, in the small Swiss principality of Neuchâtel, the STN acted outside French law. It did not submit its books to censors

or open its stockrooms to the police, but rather produced whatever it thought would sell, both in France and in French-reading Europe. Its archives—50,000 letters in addition to all sorts of account books and inventories—therefore provided the first close-up view of the literary marketplace in France.

Of course any view may be distorted. The directors of the STN saw their affairs from the peculiar perspective of Neuchâtel. The two most active of them, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald and Abram Bosset De-Luze, were important figures in the community. Ostervald held the position of *banneret*, or captain of the civil guard. He devoted himself to the literary side of the business, for he was a man of letters himself, the author of several works on geography. After years of observing the machinations of booksellers, he came to look upon the publishing industry with disabused urbanity: “One must never promise more butter than bread, never believe anything except that which one sees, and never count on anything except that which one can hold with four fingers and the thumb.” Bosset was a wealthy businessman, who directed the financial side of the enterprise. He, too, harbored no illusions about fair play and altruism among his clients across the border, and he tried to extract as much profit from them as possible by cleaving to “calculation, a demonstrable science.” Both men were Protestants, but the fierce Calvinism of their ancestors had worn off sufficiently for them to joke with their French correspondents, “You don’t have any scruples about doing business with heretics like us.” They showed some sympathy for the Enlightenment. They knew Voltaire and Rousseau, and published some of their books. But they did not go into publishing for ideological reasons. Above all, they wanted to make money, which Bosset declared to be “the great driving force of everything.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This text has been adapted from an essay originally written in French for a volume to be published by La Baconnière in Neuchâtel under the title *Aspects du livre neuchâtelois* (Neuchâtel, 1984). The aforementioned quotations, in the order of their appearance in the text, come from the letters that Ostervald and Bosset sent to the home office during a business trip on 15 February, 20 February, and 10 April 1780, and from STN to P. J. Duplain, 10 April 1773. These and the other documents cited here come from the papers of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel in the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire de Neuchâtel, Switzerland. The papers are arranged in dossiers corresponding to the names of the STN’s correspondents and are filed in boxes in alphabetical order.

By remaining faithful to the profit motive, the Swiss publishers developed a businesslike view of literary demand. They kept track of that demand by gathering information from three kinds of sources: literary agents in Paris, traveling salesmen in the provinces, and booksellers scattered everywhere throughout the kingdom.



The most informative and astute of the many agents (“hommes de confiance”) that the STN employed in Paris was a certain Nicolas-Guillaume Quandet de Lachenal. Although he called himself a “merchant” in his letters, Quandet did not have any particular vocation. He lived by his wits, doing whatever odd jobs needed to be done for book dealers located outside the capital. He collected bills. He steered manuscripts through the bureaucracy in charge of dispensing approvals and privileges (a kind of copyright that protected publishers). He kept an eye on the back rooms of bookstores, while chatting with the booksellers’ wives, who also provided tidbits of information—thus Mme Froulé, “a sharp old girl,” and Mme Cugnet, who had “big, blue eyes just like the kind that Mohammed promises in paradise.” If a book dealer needed to slip some illegal books past the customs, Quandet was his man: “I have a place just outside the wall where I stock everything that arrives from other countries and from which I bring in everything I need, either by myself or with others in my house, while pretending to take walks in the countryside.” If a publisher wanted to negotiate with an author, Quandet could do the job. He had dealt with Raynal, Morrellet, Marmontel, and Nageon. He had sparred over editions of *Philosophie de la nature* with Delisle de Salles, softening up the adversary with bottles of his uncle’s good burgundy. And he had learned to be skeptical when a writer reached into his portfolio and came up with promises of a best seller: “An author’s certainty is dubious indeed.” In short, Quandet knew his way around the book trade, and so he was an excellent source of information when the STN wanted to sound the market in the capital. He sent regular reports on what was selling, what could best be pirated, and what new enterprises seemed to be most promising.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Quandet to STN, 6 October 1780; 14 February, 7 March 1781; 4 December 1780; 6 April 1781.

For example, in 1781, the STN sent Quandet a prospectus that Marmontel had written for an edition of his complete works, and instructed him as follows: “This writer wants a pretty price for his stuff [*vend cher ses coquilles*]; so the important thing is to take soundings with some key booksellers in order to be sure that they will order a certain number of copies in advance.” The Neuchâtelois calculated that they would have to sell at least 3,000 copies in order to cover costs and clear a minimal profit. But after consulting their regular customers in the provinces and outside France, they doubted that they could sell more than 2,000. The fate of the enterprise hung on the demand in Paris. So Quandet went round the book shops in the Latin Quarter, trying to sell Marmontel. The edition would have to be bought for every serious library, he argued. Marmontel occupied a crucial place in the Republic of Letters. He was perpetual secretary of the Académie française. His *Poétique* alone was certain to be required reading in all secondary schools. But the seller Saugrain would not listen, even though he claimed to admire the author. Another dealer, Froulé, promised to take a shipment, but only on commission. And no other bookseller wanted to negotiate, even when Quandet dangled the possibility of an exclusive right to sell the book in Paris. Quandet deplored the lack of literary appreciation among the “mercenaries” of the trade, but he knew better than to question their judgment. The professionals had pronounced. The Marmontel was dead.<sup>3</sup>

Quandet sounded the market systematically. In December 1780 he went over one of the STN’s catalogues, assigning each title a score—“fairly good,” “good,” “excellent”—according to his estimate of the demand for it in Paris. Then he sent back a list of potential best sellers, which included remarks such as the following:<sup>4</sup>

Anecdotes de Mme la comtesse Du Barry  
Collection complète des oeuvres de  
J. J. Rousseau, in-12 et in-4°

Good demand.  
*Good demand* [underlined],  
don’t neglect these two items.

<sup>3</sup>STN to Quandet, 22 February, 11 March 1781; Quandet to STN, 19 March, 21 January 1781.

<sup>4</sup>Quandet to STN, 4 December 1780.

Oeuvres de M. de Voltaire	Excellent demand.
Supplément aux Oeuvres de Jean Jacques Rousseau	I know where I can sell some of this for sure.
De l'Homme et de la femme dans le mariage	Fairly good demand.
L'Onanisme	I can sell several copies of this work right away.
Dictionnaire historique et politique de la Suisse	Good demand, I have an outlet for it.
L'Intolérance ecclésiastique	Excellent demand.

Quandet also reported on the state of the market whenever he made his rounds. He usually found that illegal books sold best, especially if they had been condemned by the King's Council or the Parlement of Paris. The title that stood out above all others was *Histoire philosophique et politique de l'établissement et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes* by the abbé Raynal. Even before the Parlement condemned it, Quandet wrote that "it is creating a great stir here, because it is rumored that the government doesn't want to allow it into the kingdom." Once it had been burned by the public hangman, the booksellers begged for copies and the publishers outside France scrambled desperately to get new editions to the Parisian market. Quandet reported that the bookseller Esprit had sold 400 copies of a clandestine edition in ten days at 75 livres each, an extraordinary price. He sent a copy to Neuchâtel, urging the STN to pirate it. But the Neuchâtelois decided against the project, because they were too slow off the mark and they had heard that too many other publishers already had editions under way.<sup>5</sup>

While Raynal's stock soared, that of other writers dropped. "The authors who have received the harshest treatment from the public are MM. de Cubières and de Boissy, especially the latter," Quandet wrote. "Judging from the scorn that has been heaped upon him, he seems likely to be the biggest flop of the century. No journal will have anything to do with him any more." Personal rivalry probably clouded that judgment, because Quandet suspected Laus de Boissy, an obscure journalist, of trying to replace him as the STN's agent. When his own interests were at stake, Quandet's letters could be as distorted as the *Correspondance littéraire* of Grimm or the *Mémoires secrets* of Bachaumont. They did not record the shifting

<sup>5</sup>Quandet to STN, 4 December 1780.

fortunes of the literary scene with absolute accuracy, because he had preferences and prejudices of his own. He declared an open hatred of religious bigotry and sympathy for the *philosophes*: “I admire them and do everything I can to make their works appreciated and to assure their sale. If I do not enlighten by myself, I am happy to carry the torch for others.” Yet Quandet seemed to hold his ideology in check when it came to exercising professional judgment. He never advised the STN to reprint Enlightenment treatises but rather to favor the genres that were most in vogue during the 1780s: light novels (the sentimental tales of Baculard d’Arnaud and Marmontel and especially the works of Mme Riccoboni, who may have been the most popular novelist of the century, judging from other letters in the STN papers); travel literature (Cook of course, and also Bougainville and accounts of journeys through Switzerland); some of the more popular writings of the *philosophes* (the deaths of Voltaire and Rousseau in 1778 touched off a new wave of interest in their works); and political tracts.<sup>6</sup>

Quandet’s emphasis on politics indicates the way the ideological atmosphere was heating up during the 1780s. He noted that the debate provoked by Necker’s public exposure of government expenditure in 1781 raised the possibility of a publishing coup: an anthology of pamphlets for and against Necker would sell like hotcakes. The STN also should take advantage of the passions aroused by the American war. It should reprint the *Recherches philosophiques sur les américains* by Cornelius de Pauw and an anonymous pamphlet about the comte d’Estaing and the French troops sent to assist the rebels: “The general excitement over the events of the present war, the curiosity and concern of everyone you meet, of those who are always asking, ‘What is the latest news?’—all this makes me certain that such a pamphlet would have the greatest possible sale.” The best sellers in this kind of literature tended to be *chroniques scandaleuses*, sensational accounts of corruption at the top of society. Quandet urged the STN to hit the Parisian market with shipments of *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* and *L’Espion anglois*, “a delicious morsel, which deserves your utmost attention. It has sold well here and has not declined in popularity.” Parisians had an inexhaustible appetite for political libel: “I would

<sup>6</sup>Quandet to STN, 12 March 1781; 4 December 1780.

be delighted, for your sake and for mine, if we could stock up on *Vie privée de Louis XV* and other works of that kind. They would certainly sell very well.”<sup>7</sup>

The authors whom Quandet especially recommended were those who did most to perpetuate the myth that France had degenerated into a despotism—Linguet, Mirabeau, and Mercier. Quandet may have been unusually sensitive to books about *lettres de cachet* and the Bastille, because he experienced those themes as hazards of his trade. At the beginning of his correspondence he remarked that his activities cast him in the company of “those who live in fear of waking up in prison after going to bed in their homes.” At the end he had fallen into deep trouble with the police. He posted his last letters from a secret hiding place in the provinces, “where I am bored to tears.” In one of them, he asked to be remembered to Mercier, who had left Paris in order to publish his books from the safety of Neuchâtel: “Please give my fond regards to the honest and lovable M. Mercier. I congratulate him for having escaped from the long arm of the Bastille. Is it any better to be running away from a *lettre de cachet*?” Those last words could have served as an epitaph for many of the literary agents in prerevolutionary Paris.<sup>8</sup>



Paris was a peculiarly difficult and dangerous place for the Swiss to sell books. They did far better in the provinces, where they found allies among book dealers who were eager to import cheap, pirated editions and to undercut the attempts of the big Parisian houses to monopolize the trade. In order to explore the provincial market, the STN relied on agents, who combined the functions of traveling salesman, bill collector, industrial spy, and market researcher. In 1778 it sent one of its clerks, Jean-François Favarger, on an enormous literary *tour de France*. He plied the principal circuits of the book trade for five months, noting everything he discovered in a diary and in a steady stream of letters to Neuchâtel. They are extraordinary documents, which reveal a great deal about the diffusion of literature in some of the remotest corners of the kingdom.

<sup>7</sup>Quandet to STN, 11 October, 20 June 1781.

<sup>8</sup>Quandet to STN, 3 January 1781; 31 March 1783.

Favarger's reports also provide a vivid picture of the life of a *commis voyageur*. After leaving Neuchâtel in July, he passed through Pontarlier, Bourg-en-Bresse, Lyon, Grenoble, Avignon, Nîmes, Marseille, Toulon, Montpellier, Carcassonne, Toulouse, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Poitiers, Tours, Orléans, Dijon, Dôle, and Besançon. He covered all that ground on horseback, and the going was not easy. In Aix-en-Provence he was warned to be on his guard against thieves, because unemployment in the silk trade had meant that the routes were swarming with desperate men. By Nîmes he had developed such terrible saddle sores that he fell ill: "I must have myself bled one day and purged the other." Bad weather set in from the beginning of October. At Montpellier, the horse began to limp. By Toulouse it was vomiting and falling to the ground, and by La Rochelle man and beast were soaked to the bones from two weeks of steady rain: "The paths were so bad that I could hardly do seven leagues a day, especially as the poor animal was so weak that it was ready to collapse at any moment." Favarger finally got rid of the horse at Loudun. Having developed swellings and fissures all along its legs, it fetched only four louis. He bought a sturdier animal for twice that sum, and made it back to Neuchâtel in early December, covered with mud and dropping with fatigue.<sup>9</sup>

It was a hard trip but a great education, for Favarger returned with an intimate knowledge of the provincial world of books. He had learned to steer clear of the inspector of the book trade in Marseille, "a very bad man, one of those who would eat his brother in order to fill his plate." In Lyon, by contrast, he found out how to ship huge crates of forbidden books right through the offices of the authorities. Dijon was another great capital of the clandestine trade, but Toulouse, "a center of bigotry," was to be avoided. Only one of its booksellers, La Porte, would carry Protestant works. "They even go through all the binderies in order to confiscate anything that isn't perfectly orthodox. They have the strictest guild imaginable, and the booksellers themselves made it that way by denouncing one another with a vindictiveness that can hardly be believed." Toulon and Bordeaux were also disappointments, but for economic rather than political reasons, because their commerce had suffered

<sup>9</sup>Favarger to STN, 15 August, 8 August, 21 October, 28 October 1778; STN to Favarger, 17 November 1778.

terribly from the American war. The fair of Beaucaire had gone into decline as a center of exchange, and the smaller cities turned out to be surprisingly underequipped with book stores. Carpentras, Viviers, and Montélimar did not have a single dealer. "Orange has only one, a wig maker named Touit, who merely sells a few devotional works as a sideline. Calamel, who is listed in the booksellers' almanach, is a draper who used to sell books but doesn't deal in them any more." Thus, city by city, Favarger noted the kind of books that circulated and the cast of characters who handled them.<sup>10</sup>

In order to get a clearer idea of the demand, he had to confront the dealers in their dens. But he found them difficult to corner: "When you have made your offer, they say to you that they will examine your catalogue etc. and that you should come back. You return three or four times, and each time the boss is out. If you find him in, he has not had time to consider your propositions. So you must come back once again, and for what? For nothing most of the time. Almost all of them are like that. They make a stranger run from one end of town to the other and conduct all his business in the morning, for it is rare to find any of these gentlemen in their shops after dinner. I wish I could proceed faster, but the people I have to deal with are too fond of taking it easy, even though their business hardly amounts to anything. They can never find time to make things easier for a foreigner."<sup>11</sup>

Cultural middlemen operated everywhere in scenes such as this, sorting out supply and demand, filtering the flow of literature before it took the form of books loaded on wagons traveling toward readers at the final stop of a distribution system. The traveling salesmen kept the system going, but the going got harder as they pushed further into it. Favarger found that Swiss efficiency made little headway against the bazaar style of barter in the Mediterranean. But even when he failed to sell his wares to Buchet in Nîmes and Mossy in Marseille, he left their shops with a richer knowledge of the marketplace. He often picked up tips about what would be best to pirate. In Bourg-en-Bresse, for example, Vernarel urged him to recommend a reprint of "*Lois et constitutions de Pensilvanie, traduit de l'anglais, dédié au docteur Franklin, chez Jombert et Cellot.*"

<sup>10</sup>Favarger to STN, 15 August, 13 September, 2 August 1778.

<sup>11</sup>Favarger to STN, 1 October 1778.

Vernarel promised to take fifty copies if the STN produced an edition. When he arrived at his next stop, Lyon, Favarger dangled the proposition alongside a project for a new edition of the works of Condillac. But no bookseller would bite: "No one here thinks that the Condillac would be a good work to reprint. They say that Barret still has copies of his edition. Instead they favor the works of Riccoboni. A new edition would surely sell, if copied from the edition of Paris. The demand for that item has never let up. As to the book proposed by Vernarel, no one has heard of it here and no one is interested in it." Favarger received the same response farther down the road, in the bookshop of Brette in Grenoble: "I saw the *Lois de Pensilvanie* in his shop; he says that no one cares for it here. It is just a compilation of regulations and such, . . . the kind of thing that only sells when it first appears. What he thinks we should reprint is the *Dictionnaire de chimie*."<sup>12</sup>

Opinions varied, and the demand looked different in different places. But a few works seemed destined to be best sellers everywhere—above all, the *Confessions* of Rousseau. They had not yet been published, but all the booksellers were convinced quite rightly that publishers were secretly bidding for the manuscript and all were clamoring for copies. Having consulted the grapevine in Lyon, Valence, Orange, Avignon, Nîmes, and Marseille, Favarger reported, "Everyone asks me for the memoirs of J. J. Rousseau, and everyone firmly believes that they exist, if not in Paris, most likely in Holland. It would be a book to print at 3000, if we could get it early enough." The dialogue continued in this fashion over a vast stretch of the kingdom. When he returned to Neuchâtel, Favarger had become as accomplished in the preprofessional sociology of literature as Quandet was in Paris.<sup>13</sup>



Those two unknown pioneers of market research provided only a tiny proportion of the information that reached Neuchâtel. Most of it arrived in letters sent by the booksellers themselves—thousands of letters, which came in by the dozen every day from every im-

<sup>12</sup>Favarger to STN, 11 July, 21 July, 26 July 1778.

<sup>13</sup>Favarger to STN, 15 August 1778.

portant town in France. This business correspondence was very businesslike. Most letters contained only a few stylized phrases—“Thanking you for yours of the . . . , we would like to order the following, to be sent via . . . , as quickly as possible, payment to be due within . . . months of receipt”—and a list of titles. But sometimes the booksellers commented on the STN’s list of its own publications or suggested books for it to reprint. “Please forgive me, Messieurs, if I take the liberty of pronouncing on the nature of your enterprises,” wrote Henry of Lille. “I write only as a bookseller, who is bound to make mistakes in his calculations.” Henry was modest, but he observed the market in the north of France with considerable care. He generally read a book before ordering it in bulk, and he consulted his customers on their reading. Thus he was able to detect a general decline in the demand for geography and a rise in natural history: “It seems to me that you could do with some books whose sale would be more certain. . . . The *Spectacle de la nature* is a mediocre work but a classic that has gone through many editions and still needs to be reprinted; it cannot be had in the provincial trade. The *Dictionnaire de l’histoire naturelle* will be out of print soon. It would be a good thing to reprint, if you could put out an edition in small type and not in twelve volumes, like the edition of Yverdon.”<sup>14</sup>

Perisse of Lyon went further. He proposed entering into “special agreements to buy large numbers of certain books that we would advise you to reprint according to the demand for them in France.” As an example, he said that he wanted to place a large advance order for Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique*: “It seems to us that you could easily sell out an edition of the *Histoire philosophique*. . . . We are surprised that you have not already published this excellent work. You print many others that are inferior to it.” The STN replied that it had been considering the Raynal for a long while (as mentioned, it eventually abandoned that project because so many other pirate publishers were pursuing it) and that it would be glad to coordinate its publishing with Perisse’s marketing. It already worked in this fashion with a few other major houses, notably Gosse et Pinet of The Hague. The Dutch firm sometimes bought up large proportions of the STN’s editions (as many as 250 of 1,500 copies) in

<sup>14</sup>Henry to STN, 21 August 1770.

exchange for a discount and the exclusive rights to the North European market. In the early years of their business, the Neuchâtelois cleared most of their projects with The Hague. "We do not undertake anything without asking your advice," they wrote in confidence to Gosse et Pinet.<sup>15</sup>

Thus booksellers sometimes collaborated with publishers in the decision-making process. Before undertaking any major speculation, the STN "felt the pulse of the public" by sounding out the dealers. It sent them prospectuses, sample title pages, or circular letters announcing a work. If the response was favorable enough, it went ahead with the printing. If not, it tried something else. "We gather in the votes before we settle down to work," it explained to Gosse et Pinet. Less regular customers were left to assume that an "announcement" of a book in a journal or flier meant that the book actually existed, whereas the publisher would simply be testing the demand, while trying to frighten away competitors who might be considering the same work. Of course it was more difficult to predict the success of a new work than of a reprint. But important new enterprises could be launched through subscriptions—and abandoned if the public failed to respond.<sup>16</sup>

The STN published only about a dozen books a year, but it sold many thousands, because it developed an enormous business as a wholesale dealer and it dealt in almost everything produced in the fertile crescent of printing houses that arched around France from Amsterdam to Avignon. These publishers operated in the same way as the STN and sometimes formed alliances with it. They traded considerable proportions of their editions against "assortments" of books in the stock of their allies. So they built up large and varied inventories, which they sold through their own networks of customers among the retail book dealers. Moreover, the retailers often sent in orders of fifty or more titles, expecting their supplier to procure from its neighbors the books that it did not already have in its warehouses. The orders received by the STN therefore provide a continuous index to demand across a broad spectrum of French literature. By tabulating them from the letters and account books, one can form a clear picture of what the French wanted to read

<sup>15</sup>Perisse to STN, 21 September, 18 October 1776; STN to Gosse and Pinet, 4 October 1770.

<sup>16</sup>STN to Gosset and Pinet, 20 August 1770.

and what reached them during the twenty years before the Revolution.

That requires a great deal of counting, however. At this prestatistical stage, it is possible to form some notion of the literary marketplace by following the dialogue between supplier and customer, especially as the customers were retail booksellers in close contact with clients of their own. What general themes stand out from this vast exchange of letters?

Despite the relative failure of the *Lois de Pensilvanie*, the reading public clearly wanted great quantities of books about America during the 1780s. In Lyon, Perisse ordered copies of William Robertson's *Histoire de l'Amérique* again and again, while urging the STN to put out its own edition. In Bordeaux, Bergeret sent in an order for fifty copies, then canceled it after delays in the shipment and concern about "the prodigious quantity of copies sold here from the Parisian edition," and finally ordered a dozen anyway, even though a pirated edition had just arrived from Machuel's presses in Rouen. Meanwhile in Marseille, Mossy shot off an order for a dozen *Histoire de l'Amérique*, and he was an unusually cautious customer, who did not often ask for more than two or three copies of new publications: "As to new works, I prefer to be very circumspect. They do not all succeed; and unless I know them well, I never take them in quantity. I find my way by groping, and that procedure suits me well." But in 1774, when he sensed a swell of interest in politics, Mossy was ready to accept almost any new political tract that he could get, sight unseen: "In case you have anything new about the affairs of our parlements or anything on the new reign [of Louis XVI] by Voltaire, you can send six of each."<sup>17</sup>

Such *nouveautés* sold best at certain hot points, like Rennes, where Blouet supplied the deputies to the Estates of Brittany with the seditious pamphlets of Linguet, and Caen, where Manoury furnished his customers with *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* and *Journal historique de la révolution opérée dans la constitution de la monarchie française par M. de Maupeou*. When he glimpsed a chance to strike it rich, Manoury took far greater chances than did Mossy: "N. B. When you have some good, spicy *nouveauté*, you can send me a hundred copies, especially if it is fresh and if it is

<sup>17</sup>Bergeret to STN, 8 September 1778; Mossy to STN, 21 November 1774.

suitable for this region, where dissident writing goes over very well.” Poinçot, a shrewd dealer in Versailles, was of the same opinion: “Better something that will sell than a lengthy treatise. The time for reflective works has passed. Now we want hot items. I wish you had reprinted the *Vie privée de Louis XV*. We need another edition.”<sup>18</sup>

Booksellers did not always agree about which items were “hot”—“les choses qui vont,” in their jargon. Gerlache in Metz thought that a new edition of Bayle’s dictionary “would sell quite well,” while Mossy in Marseille did not want to consider “that miserable rhapsody,” and Barret pronounced it dead in Lyon: “That book no longer sells in France; it is only good for the foreign market.” But a few books were recognized as best sellers everywhere. Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* and *L’An deux mille quatre cent quarante*, Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique*, and Linguet’s *Mémoires sur la Bastille* reappeared regularly at the head of the orders. The works of Voltaire and Rousseau did, too, especially after 1778, when the deaths of the two *philosophes* set off a war among the publishers who wanted to produce posthumous editions of their books. The STN battled mightily against competitors in Geneva, Amsterdam, and Brussels in order to capture the manuscript of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, because it knew from its correspondence that the book would create a sensation. Even after the Société typographique de Genève won the prize and began putting out its edition of Rousseau’s complete works in 1782, the Neuchâtelois received letters like the following, from Poinçot of Versailles: “I wish you could pirate the Genevan *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, edition of the widow [Rousseau’s widow had sold his manuscripts to the Genevan publishers]. A shipment is already en route to Paris, and the bookseller who is expecting it ordered 5000 copies. You mustn’t wait an instant. It is a work in two volumes octavo, which everyone is dying to have. I would take 1200 copies.” The demand for Enlightenment works complemented the demand for political “nouveau-tés.” Each contributed in its own way to the radicalization of public opinion.<sup>19</sup>

Of course the opinion(s) of the reading public(s) do not show up clearly in the letters of the booksellers. Each dealer brought his

<sup>18</sup>Manoury to STN, 18 September 1778; Poinçot to STN, 14 April 1782.

<sup>19</sup>Gerlache to STN, 6 June 1772; Mossy to STN, 10 July 1776; Barret to STN, 13 August 1779; Poinçot to STN, 5 March 1782.

own bias to his business. Yet the retailers, like the publishers, seem to have handled their affairs in a nonideological manner. Nowhere among the many hundreds of STN correspondents does one encounter a committed bookseller, who used his position to further the Enlightenment or any other cause. If political and religious considerations influenced the orders, they probably acted as a brake on the spread of unorthodox ideas instead of as a stimulant. The booksellers do not appear to have felt any special loyalty to church and king, but they wanted to stay out of trouble. Although he considered himself a Voltairean, Henry of Lille refused to order the works of Voltaire: "I do not want to compromise our firm," he explained. "The danger, the loss, and the harassment one experiences by dealing in certain books have made me renounce that kind of commerce, even though it conforms with my way of thinking. A well-established house should prefer tranquility to risky profit-taking. You, Sirs, inhabit a land where they do not bridle men; it is a happiness that you enjoy along with many others." In his entire journey through France, Favarger met only one bookseller who conducted his business according to his philosophical principles: "Arles. Gaudion is pure gold, but he is a curious character. When I spoke to him about the Bible and the *Encyclopédie*, he replied that he was too good a Catholic to try to spread two such impious works." Everywhere else, the booksellers seemed to transmit demand as they perceived it among their customers. Some took risks and pushed new works aggressively. Some merely waited for the clients to walk in the door. But all seemed to live by the supreme principle of the book trade: make money. It was the profit motive, "the great driving force of everything," that kept them fairly neutral in the role of cultural broker. André of Versailles expressed their general orientation: "I do not neglect the sale of books that I would never read myself. That is because I must live with the general run of men and because the best book for a bookseller is a book that sells."<sup>20</sup>



In looking back over these attempts to sound the literary marketplace, it seems important to make allowances for the variety of

<sup>20</sup>Henry to STN, 15 January 1770; Favarger to STN, 15 August 1778; André to STN, 22 August 1784.

markets in prerevolutionary France. Paris was not the same as the provinces, and the provinces were not the same among themselves. But some tendencies stand out in the testimony that arrived from all the publishers' informants. The demand that Quandet observed in Paris did not differ in essentials from the demand recorded by Favarger in his notebook, or from that expressed in the letters of the booksellers. Wherever they pursued their quarry, the middlemen of the book trade caught the same scent. They learned that readers required some serious literature, notably in natural history; that they wanted to be entertained and moved, especially by sentimental novels; that they remained interested in the Enlightenment, above all in the writing of Voltaire, Raynal, and Rousseau; and that they clamored for political works, which provided horrifying glimpses of the Bastille and scandalous accounts of private lives in public places. There is much to be learned by studying the cultural intermediaries of eighteenth-century France, even if the main lesson already looks familiar: ideological currents had eroded the foundation of the Old Regime long before the fall of the Bastille.

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