Reading Enlightenment in Melk

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Before the French Revolution led to their downfall, monasteries experienced another heyday in the 18th century. Around 1750, one-in-three-hundred Europeans was a monk or a nun, and the sumptuous Baroque buildings of the time to this very day testify to the enormous economic and cultural significance of monasteries in the Age of Enlightenment. Nonetheless, most of the contemporary historians of the period were either not aware of this significance or denied it. Till today, denominational polemics and the aftermath of anti-monastic stereotypes voiced by so many philosophers of the Enlightenment do not allow for an objective treatment of the topic.

The monasteries, however, did open up to moderate Enlightenment and to new criticism regarding even religious and secular literature. Melk Abbey, which is, according to Derek Beales, "perhaps the grandest of all Benedictine abbeys"¹ is used to demonstrate how literary reception changed in and due to the Enlightenment.

In the aftermath of the Council of Trent with its reorganisation of clerical life, Melk developed its largely self-contained monastic culture. The media and artistic activity were oriented towards the requirements of monastic life with its pastoral and scholarly tasks. Constituting a representative public image proved an important factor: The standing of Melk Abbey as a clerical institution was demonstratively put on display. Sacerdotal and church jubilees, eminent visitors, and religious holidays were celebrated with solemn masses and musical dramas, with the given sermons and the libretti being frequently published in print. The monks were writing these texts on behalf of the monasteries. The requirements of monastic life provided the conditions of authorship which was supposed to serve the promotion of faith and of the abbey’s glory. Not only did the monastery finance the prints by itself under a patronage system, the monks were also regulated by strict internal censorship. As Austrian censorship in the 18th century was still very decentralised, the abbot took absolute priority in the assessment of texts produced in Melk. He alone decided which works were to be printed and also approved the prints. There were binding rules for reading, as well as for communication among the monks.

Monasteries like Melk were provided with clerical reading texts by their own distribution network: From Augsburg there were not supplied by stationary book sellers but directly by travelling salesmen who went to the local markets. Moreover, this personal contact which the bookshop

owners-cum-publishers entertained also ensured the supply with manuscripts, for the trips to the monasteries not only served to sell books but also to recruit authors. Inofficial reading besides ritualised reading in monastic life was sanctioned. The prior checked the books owned by the friars minor conventual. It was through the parishes that also unwanted literature, for instance novels, entered into the seclusion of monastic life: Through their letters, individual monks also ensured their supply with books. The correspondence of the eminent historian in Melk, Bernhard Pez, through which he procured books, is an example of the circulation of texts in the monastic republic of letters beyond the book-selling trade.

The representativity of Baroque monasteries was reflected in the libraries’ purchasing activities, which focused on Latin books and books about divinity. Monastic libraries often invested large amounts of money in books, following an encyclopedic principle, which aimed for comprehensive book collections. Comprehensiveness was thus equated with a scholarly approach. In this manner, very significant collections were accumulated in the 18th century. A few figures to illustrate this statement: Thanks to Provost Franz Töpsl’s activities, the library of Polling comprised 80,000 volumes at the end of the 18th century, while Kremsmünster in Upper Austria had 40,000 in the middle of the century, as did Tegernsee and Benediktbeuren. Göttweig in Lower Austria counted 35,000 volumes around 1750. Melk today possesses about 24,000 volumes which date back to the times before 1800.

Counter-reformational reading practice and the accumulation practices of the libraries changed in the Age of Enlightenment. With book production rising continuously in the 18th century, the encyclopedic utopia of the complete collection of all printed matter became an illusion. This also signals a change in the libraries’ main function: The optimistic belief in progress, which preferred current new publications, entered the libraries and replaced the encyclopedic concept of a summa of human wisdom.

These Enlightenment tendencies in the clergy were supported by clerical reforms as those initiated by Maria Theresa and carried out in their most extreme form by Joseph II. When Joseph became the sole regent after his mother’s death in 1780, he strove to realise a policy that aimed for the greatest influence the state could possibly exert on the church. Monasteries that were not actively involved in pastoral care or education were dissolved, with their wealth being transferred into a religious fund (Religionsfonds), which was especially dedicated to support the many newly


established parishes. They were entirely under state supervision. Parish priests and chaplains were relatively well paid by the state, with the stipulation to act against „superstition“ and Baroque „cults“, i.e. the veneration of the saints, in the sense of an enlightened understanding of religion. At the same time, they took over administrative tasks for the state. The theological training of the monks was not supposed to be provided by the monasteries anymore but by the state-run general theological seminaries. The Josephinian state reforms, which pertained to all spheres of society, were echoed in the so-called flood of brochures (Broschürenflut), which started in 1781. One of the first measures taken by the new Emperor was to loosen censorship regulations, which was coupled to encouraging freedom of expression. The emperor wanted to win over public opinion for his reform plans. Immediately after these new censorship regulations were made known, hundreds of inexpensive brochures were put on the literary market. They dealt with current topics, above all with church reforms, in an open and satirical way. This proved a singular event in German literary history of the 18th century.

The political changes and the changes in the book market neither passed by Melk Abbey nor its library. Under the librarian Beda Schuster (1763–1779), the numbers of new acquisitions rose continuously in the second half of the 18th century. More than 70% of the newly acquired works were not older than 20 years⁴; as everywhere else in the German book market, Latin was losing its lead in the monasteries too: Of the 17th-century books in Melk, 4,500 were written in Latin, and only 430 in German. In the 18th century, the proportion was more balanced: 6,520 Latin volumes, and 6,310 in German, while the share of French books with 2,380 volumes is also noteworthy.⁵

When the conservative librarian P. Beda Schuster retired in 1779, the share of theological works among the new acquisitions declined strongly. Previously, theological books had accounted for 28%; in 1779 there were only 17%, which is the same percentage as for histories and the philologies.⁶ The shares of natural sciences and other fields, including fiction, were also rising. In 1785 the German editions of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels Pamela or Virtue Rewarded and The History of Sir Charles Grandison were acquired. Also the second edition of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (1787) was bought in 1788.

Melk with its modest financial means had to sell off old inventories in order to finance new acquisitions. It was, for instance, the financial means raised through a book auction in Vienna which enabled them to buy the indexed and forbidden *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and d’Alembert for the library in Melk. Especially inventories considered old-fashioned, like sermons, were sold.\(^7\) The affluent monastic library of Klosterneuburg bought the *Encyclopédie* as well.

In Melk, the great significance of periodicals as informational media in the Age of Enlightenment showed as well. A part of the clergy formed a reading society which took out subscriptions to relevant periodicals of the German Enlightenment. The Leipzig *Acta eruditorum* had always been among the subscriptions in Melk. In 1783, they started a subscription to the *Göttinger Gelehrten Anzeigen*, and paid in advance for the *Wiener Realzeitung*. In 1784, Wieland’s *German Mercur (Teutscher Merkur)* was added, in 1785 finally the *Jenaer Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*. From 1786 onwards the reader circle bought Johann Erich Biester’s *Berlinische Monatsschrift* and Heinrich Christian Boie’s *Deutsches Museum* each year, from 1788 on also the *Salzburg Oberdeutsche Literaturzeitung*.

As revealing as these inventory analyses may be, they of course do not tell much about the actual use of these books. Cultural orientation and re-orientation can also be demonstrated by different use of texts and not by their contents alone. Content-oriented reception history thus needs to be complemented by a history of reading, whose task according to Roger Chartier is the reconstruction of various practices which form historically and societally determined ways of text access.\(^8\)

It is often claimed that in the 18th century with its expansion and differentiation of the book market a revolution of reading practice also took place. Reinhard Wittmann defines this newly formed reading practice as the reception and soon also the consumption of a potentially infinite amount of new and varied reading matter aiming at information and entertainment.\(^9\) This revolution of reading practice did not go unnoticed in Melk, which not only shows in the procurement policies of the Melk library. Individual readers’ experience, as e.g. exhibited in the letters by the Bavarian clergyman and writer Georg Aloys Dietl to Ulrich Petrak also testify to this. Dietl was a curate in Maria Taferl, which is a parish 15 kilometers away from Melk, which was filled by the prince-bishop in Regensburg. At that time, he also started to befriend the prior of Melk Ulrich Petrak, who was also actively engaged in the letters. Dietl renders his impressions about the monastery as follows: „I was recently in the splendid Benedictine abbey...“\(^7\)

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\(^9\) Reinhard Wittmann, *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels. Ein Überblick*, Munich 1999\(^2\), p. 188.
M** [Melk]. I found a great library, and a beautiful coin and natural produce collection. The young clergymen are enlightened people and friends of the muses. They acquire the latest books in each field, and share them in their circle in a brotherly manner. One completely forgets that one is among monks with them.  

People sent each other books which were quickly read, and then communicated their opinions about novelties in the literary market. Dietl once writes to his correspondence partner: „What a slow reader I must have been to you for a long time.“ It is Sterne, Shakespeare, Herder und Muse almanacs which are read. Without hesitating, however, Dietl puts his theological reference library up for sale, when he is transferred to Perg near Landshut. Dietl actively promoted an enlightened theology, and scorned dogmatics and syllogisms.

Quietly edifying reading, and meditative and repetitive reading of devotional literature played a central role in monastic life. This intensive kind of reading paradoxically predisposed readers to reading modern novels. In contrast to a schematic delineation of extensive and intensive reading, secular reading and intensive reception by no means do exclude each other. Roger Chartier refers to intensive reception of novels, which makes the novel captivate the readers, subjugates and controls them as much as the religious text before them.  

Clergymen who preferred edifying reading were predispositioned to apply these religious reading patterns to a secular context as well. A good example of this is Dietl’s letter to Petrok where his reading impressions and his identification with his reading are demonstrated. Especially in view of Laurence Sterne’s Sentimental Journeys, from which Dietl borrowed his pseudonym „Pastor Yorick“: „They call me a bright fellow, a fickle Yorick. I cannot answer right away to the first as I do not know whether I should in the affirmative or in the negative. I like it, though, when they call me Yorick. His way of thinking is entirely mine. And if you want to follow this confession and get to know my character inside out, then you need to read the Sentimental Journeys with this in mind.“

Just as the intensive reader of edifying literature, Georg Aloys Dietl as a reader of novels always returns to the central reading passages. In the Vertrauten Briefen eines Geistlichen in Baiern an seinen Freund, (Confidential Letters by a Clergyman in Bavaria to his Friend), which Dietl published anonymously in Munich in 1786, and which caused his conflict with clerical authorities as he defended Joseph’s II clerical policies, Dietl describes his enraptured and identificatory reading practice: „As the dame has her dressing table, I have my little

reading desk, on which favourite authors sit. Whenever I feel idle, my head in a spin or my heart growing cool, I reach for one of these authors, choose a particularly uplifting passage, which I have marked for these occasions. This immediately causes a spark, my spirits lift, and I feel my gigantic strength return.¹⁴

These new dealings with the book medium do not necessarily imply a smooth transition from one type of reading to the other; Melk Abbey only shows in an exemplary manner the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous in individual reading practices and reader layers.¹⁵ The monastic community has preserved forms of edifying repetitive reading, of community reading, and of reading aloud, which were by and large replaced by extensive, quiet, and private reading in the 18th century.

Despite all necessary differentiations, a change in Catholic reading practices can be shown by way of library inventories, changes in purchasing practices, and the evidence of individual reading for Melk Abbey.

The representative monastic ceremonial culture as it existed in Melk until the end of the 18th century had irrevocably come to its end. The formation of a critical reading public had caused a change in the monastery as well. The consequences this had for a new extensive reading behaviour as well as for a new form of self-determined authorship beyond patronage and representation persisted after Joseph II’s reign had finished, and also survived the rigorous restrictions of the literary public.

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Reading Enlightenment in Melk

(Abstract)

The article discusses the changes in reading practices of monks in the Melk monastery under the impact of the Enlightenment. Melk was a famous Benedictine monastery. The author bases his conclusions on the research in the libraries and on sources related to book culture. It demonstrates that daily life and intellectual culture of the monks did not correspond with the traditional cliché of „enemies of the Enlightenment“.

KEYWORDS:
Book culture; intellectual culture; reading; Melk monastery; Benedictine monastery