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Why people read:
Jean-Jacques Rousseau
on the love of reading

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Introduction

How can we discover why people read in the past? Several methods are used in the history of reading to piece together the reality of the act and experience of reading, reading styles, the genres and quantities read etc. This kind of research faces serious problems the farther we go into history, because the act or experience of reading leaves meagre concrete traces. One possibility is to study the ways in which reading is spoken about, the discourse on reading. Great amounts of discourse on reading are available for research (today available everywhere by the grace of Europeana, Google Books and other digital services).

In my doctoral thesis (1997) I studied how one of the central concepts connected with reading, namely the *love of reading* (in Finnish *lukuhalu*, in Swedish *läselust*), was adopted in the discourse on reading in Finland during the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a presupposition in the concept of the love of reading that reading behaviour is guided by a spontaneous impulse, which can by different actions be enhanced or influenced, but which in the end is an unexplained force or drive in the human being. It is not important whether this is psychologically true or not, but it is important whether people believed it to be so.

In this article I present one historical explanation for the intensification of the European discourse on reading at the end of the 18th century. The pedagogical theory presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Émile* and the ways he tells about reading in his other works were influential in convincing Europeans that the love of reading can be a positive force, even if it cannot always be legitimated with dry rational reasons.

The intensification of the European discourse on reading

Reading behaviour and motivation is described in the major European languages with phrases and terms that refer to crystallised concepts. The most frequently used terms that refer to a spontaneous motivation for reading are in French, *goût de la lecture*; in English, *the love of reading*, *the habit of reading*, *the desire to read*; and in German, *Leselust*.

By studying the frequency of the terms in printed texts it is possible to follow the quantitative development of the discourse on reading. Google Books provides millions of books for such a study.

Of course, other kinds of reading motivations exist as well, such as a rational interest in gaining knowledge and educating oneself. Work, status and the salvation of the soul are strong incentives for reading, and they are naturally present often when there is talk about reading. The love of reading as an alleged motivation for reading differs from other incentives in the fact that it has no other clear goal or legitimation for reading than personal desire, pleasure and entertainment. This aroused suspicions.¹

A new, spontaneous, self-sustaining and extensive reading style seemed to spread like an infection over social and geographic boundaries during the 18th century. In some cases the popularity of the habit of reading took such dramatic forms that it made the establishment nervous. This happened especially in Germany at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, when a feverish debate sprung up in the press and literature on the potential dangers of reading as new groups of people, such as women, the youth and the lower classes, seemed abruptly to start to read actively and daily. At its worst the phenomenon looked pathological, and many alarming words were used to describe it, such as *Lesewut* (reading rage), *Lesesucht* (reading lust) and *Leserei* (reading mania).

Reinhardt Wittmann describes the rapid diffusion of reading as a contagious disease that was spread by a reading bug starting from a single infection that “quickly escalated into a collective ‘reading epidemic’”. Other terms used by Wittmann are “reading mania”, “reading fashion” and a “new desire for reading”.²

In this chapter I am not so much interested in a discussion on the malignant forms of reading, but about the discussion in which a general and positive legitimation was sought to explain reading. The diffusion of reading among the broad layers of the population was a remarkable phenomenon which called for explanatory concepts and suitable terms.

Because I have in another article described more thoroughly the background of the European discourse on the love of reading as well as the methods and results of this research,³ I shall only present here the general results needed for the understanding of this article.

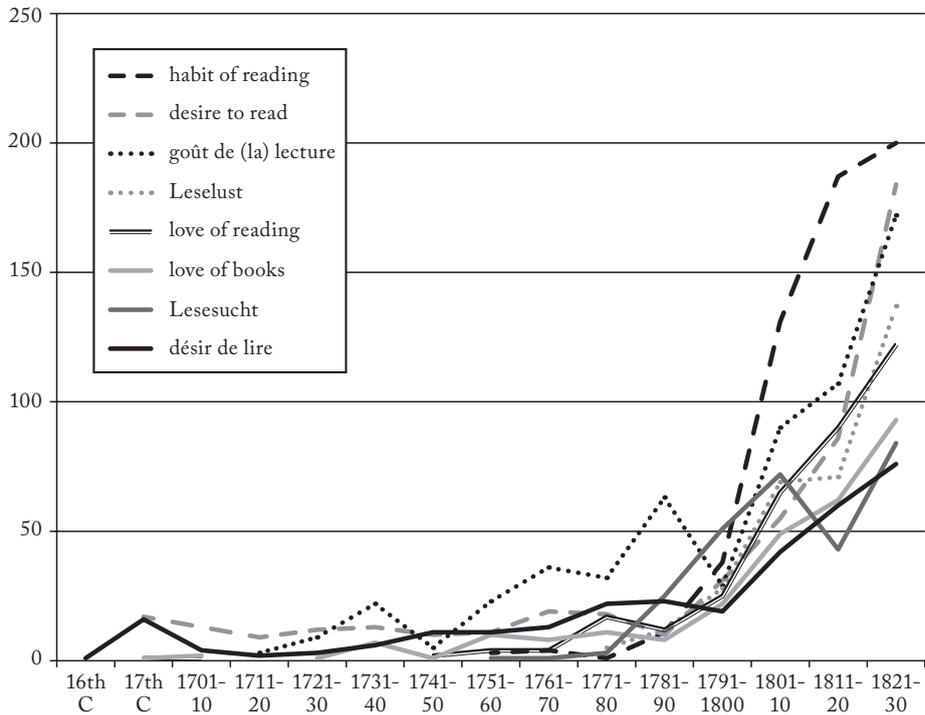


Figure 1. The occurrence of the French, English and German phrases meaning the love of reading (and equivalents) from 1500 to 1830. Data from Google Books.

The debate on the love of reading was enormously intensified during the last decades of the 18th century. The discussion seems to have intensified first in France. The steep growth in the use of the phrase *goût de (la) lecture* started in France already during the 1780s, even though the revolutionary decade, the 1790s, temporarily stalled this development. A similar intensification did not start in English and German literature until the 1790s. An exception is the German term *Lesesucht*, which became eagerly debated as early as the 1780s. Wittmann mentions that the reading epidemic started to spread in the 1780s in Central and North Germany, especially among juvenile and female readers.

My quantitative study cannot, of course, be the final word. Books have been counted, now they must be read. The material at hand is so massive that it takes time to do a qualitative analysis. However, even a superficial glance at the material brings forth central themes in the discourse on the love of reading:

1. The love of reading can be awakened in propitious circumstances, but it cannot be forced. Once the love of reading is awakened, it is difficult to control. It is like a force of nature. This presumption can partly stem from the mechanism of desires and emotions sketched by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Émile* (1762).
2. Already during the 18th century the level of the love of reading was used to evaluate the degree of education of a nation, region or group of people. One of the first observations of this kind appears in Rousseau's novel *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) in the éloge of the refined taste for reading among the people of Geneva.
3. The love of reading during the 18th century was almost completely a quality of the thin upper layer of society. At the end of the century some people started tentatively to discuss whether there could be a love of reading in the lower classes. Rousseau's reminiscence in the first part of his *Confessions* (1782) about his own love of reading during his apprenticeship would be suitable to inspire this kind of interest. Abbé Grégoire, an active figure of the French Revolution, organised one of the first sociological surveys among the French peasantry in the 1790s. One of the questions he wrote was: "Is there love of reading [goût de lecture] in the peasants?"⁴ The same question was posed in the Finnish newspaper discussion in the 1840s in exactly the same way.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a catalyst of the discourse on the love of reading

The discourse on the love of reading, like other historical discourses, developed collectively, but sometimes it is possible to indicate probable sources that have provided inspiration for the development of a discourse.

Part of the terminology referring to the love of reading stems from Antiquity and the Latin literature of the Middle Ages, but it was used quite seldom before the beginning of the 18th century. A new historical context can increase the use of certain terminology and also redirect the discussion. In early modern times, when the modern world-view was emerging, the context of the discourse on reading and the love of reading changed radically.

According to Heikki Kirkinen, mechanistic theories on passions and will spread strongly in France after 1670. Animistic notions and theories were chased from psychology and were substituted with an understanding of man, in principle, as a machine. Newton's mechanistic laws, where theories of temperaments and the mechanistic unity of the soul and the body were added, explained the birth of emotions and passions. Locke and

his followers claimed that the objects outside of the mind mechanistically produce thoughts. The main goal of thoughts and desires is the aspiration to fulfil one's own good or pleasure.⁵

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) presented an influential formulation for the mechanistic view of desires and passions in his *Émile* (1762).⁶ According to Rousseau, "man's only natural passion is the love of oneself, or self-love in a wide sense". Following Spinoza, Rousseau postulates that from this starting point an individual evolves through a natural process into a personality who loves other people and justice. Furthermore, Rousseau says about early education: "The first education must, therefore, be purely negative. Its task is, not to teach virtue or the truth, but to protect the heart against vice and the spirit of error." The most important thing is to protect the child from the negative influence of other children and disturbing elements. Rousseau says quite drastically that the child is "like a senseless creature, like an automat".⁷

Rousseau emphasises that a child should not be compelled to learn to read and start reading at too early an age, at least not before the age of ten, and preferably first at fifteen. The child should learn to read by himself, when he feels the need for it. When the need is felt, the desire to read and to learn comes by itself:

” *Thus, by suppressing the several duties of children, I remove the instruments of their greatest misery, which are books. Reading is the scourge of infants, and almost their only employ. Scarce shall Emilius know what a book is, at the age of twelve. But I shall be told, he ought at least to know how to read; I agree; but he must learn to read, when reading will be of service to him; before that time, it will only fill him with disgust. [...] Some have given themselves a great deal of trouble, in inquiring after the best methods to learn to read: lotteries and cards have been rendered conducive to this purpose; and a child's apartment has been converted into a printer's shop. Mr Locke is for having children learn to read with dice. Is not this a very clever contrivance? What a fad mistake! A surer method than all these, but a method always neglected, is the desire of learning. Instil this into a child, and lay aside your lotteries and dice; any thing will do for him.*⁸

It may, of course, appear paradoxical that one of the things that launched the discourse on the love of reading would be certain thoughts in Rousseau's *Émile*, when he, after all, warned against teaching the ability to read too early and called books the "scourge of infants". What is essential here is the way Rousseau sketched the relationship between man's inner desires and

the impulses of the outer world. The educator should not manipulate this relationship too much. Rousseau formulated the concept as it appears in the discussion at the end of the 18th century: the love of reading is a spontaneous desire that is adopted when the individual, in propitious circumstances and at a suitable age, is exposed to reading material. This process should not be hastened by force.

The taste for reading among the people of Geneva

Rousseau did not use the phrase *goût de la lecture* in *Émile*. He, however, used it in many of his other works. In the epistolary novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), which Darnton considers one of the greatest bestsellers of the century, there is an analysis of the great taste for reading, *goût de lecture*, among the people of Geneva:

” *But to return to that taste for reading, which makes the people of Geneva think. It extends to all ranks and degrees amongst them, and is of advantage to all. The French read a great deal; but they read only new books; or rather they run them over less for the sake of knowing what they contain, than to have it to say they have read them. On the contrary, the readers at Geneva peruse only books of merit; they read and digest what they read; making it their business to understand, not to criticise upon, them. Criticisms and the choice of books are made at Paris; while choice books are almost the only ones that are read at Geneva. By this means their reading has less variety and is more profitable. The women, on their part, employ a good deal of their time also in reading; and their conversation is affected by it, but in a different manner.*⁹

The taste for reading among the people of Geneva that was so admired by Rousseau is one of the many cases where the level of education of a country, region or a group of people is evaluated by the degree of its taste for, or love of, reading. The Genevans were Calvinists, and already during the 18th century Protestantism started to be regarded as one of the explanations for the widespread love of reading among the peoples of North Europe. The level of education of the Finnish parishes has been evaluated by the same measure since the 1850s.

Rousseau uses the phrase *goût de lecture* more to describe the style than the quantity of reading. In this case the translation *taste for reading* may be the right one, even though *goût de la lecture* is often translated as *the love of reading*.

The love of reading as medicine against depravity

Reading is again spoken about in another of Rousseau's books, *Les Confessions de J. J. Rousseau*, published posthumously in the years 1782–1789. The Confessions contain many stories about reading and the love of reading. According to Robert Darnton, the fact that there is so much talk about reading in Rousseau's books shows that he was possessed by it.¹⁰

Darnton is most interested in the beginning of Rousseau's career as reader, when he started with his father to read books inherited from his deceased mother, and then progressed to other books. This common reading interest of father and son developed into a discussing and ruminating way of reading that Rousseau seems to recommend in the Genevan episode. Rousseau continued this same kind of reading with his benefactor Madame de Warens.

Darnton, however, ignores one of Rousseau's stories of his reading, where reading appears more as unselective devouring. Rousseau tells about a period in his youth, when he was an apprentice of a tyrannical engraver. His situation was so wretched that he adopted vices such as pilfering, but his regained taste for reading prevented him from stooping deeper into decay:

“ *Though I entered into most of the vices of my situation, I had no relish for its pleasures; the amusements of my companions were displeasing, and when too much restraint had made my business wearisome, I had nothing to amuse me: this renewed my taste for reading, which had long been neglected. I now ran into a sesh[?] inconvenience, books made me neglect my work, and brought on additional punishment, while inclination, strengthened by constraint, became an unconquerable passion. La Tribu, famous for lending out books, furnished me with all kinds: good or bad, I perused them with avidity. [...] Reading was my object; my heart beat with impatience to run over the new book I carried in my pocket; the first moment I was alone, I seized the opportunity to draw it out, and thought no longer of rummaging my master's closet.*¹¹

Reading became such a commanding passion that Rousseau stopped pilfering. This description of the taste for, or love of, reading is a typical case of the phenomenon that troubled his contemporaries. What is exceptional is that, even though Rousseau's description is painted in rather negative colours, the effects of his passion were positive in a broader sense. He was not the only one of his contemporaries who regarded the love of reading to be at least as strong as many ordinary vices.

Rousseau originated from a petty bourgeois background, and thus the example he gives about the positive effects of spontaneous reading was

suitable for the encouragement of a favourable attitude towards reading in general. The love of, even a passion for, reading may lead to a good result, even without the reader being fully educated, polished and trained as a reader in the manner of the upper classes.

Conclusion and beyond

The great increase in the occurrence of terms referring to the love of reading at the end of the 18th century shows that reading became more visible in society than before, and thus people probably also read more. In the light of the data of this article, we can speak of a reading revolution. It could also be called a revolution of the love of reading.

Discourses not only reflect reality, but also mould it. How reading is talked about does make a difference. If the discourse employs terms with negative connotations, such as reading rage (*rage de lire*, *Lesewut*), the picture that is produced of reading is more negative than when neutral or positive terms, such as the love of reading, *goût de la lecture*, *Leselust*, are used. Even though in the history of reading it is the agitated and dramatic testimonies that are often used to illustrate the situation, the picture that my research presents is more balanced and positive.

Did the positively felt concepts, such as the love of reading, become the cornerstones in the discourse on reading, and did this help in the democratisation of reading in the 19th century? In Finland the love of reading was considered a positive factor in the mid-19th century, even though the dangers attached to reading were well known. Why was the love of reading a positive concept overall in Finland? It is not surprising if the new conception of a nation introduced by nationalism was part of the explanation. If the negative and too rigid views on reading had been left as the dominant voice, it would have been harder to use the promotion of reading as an element of popular education.

The love of reading was a useful postulate that legitimised popular education and the establishment of libraries for the common people. The love of reading was discussed long before there were any chances of detecting its existence in the common people.

The discourse on the love of reading can be traced through the whole modern era until our own time. The media upheavals of recent decades have given birth to a concern that the love of reading is weakening or even disappearing. This concern is the root of the revival of the discussion on the love of reading. This is exemplified by the Finnish Lukuinto–Läslust Project, the name of which contains the term love of reading both in Finnish and Swedish. The goal of the project is to “strengthen the interest

and ability for the versatile reading and writing of children and juveniles” (<http://www.lukuinto.fi/>). Another example is the European project ADORE – Teaching Struggling Adolescent Readers in European Countries, which includes Finnish pedagogical scholars. The goal of ADORE is to find ways to support weak and struggling readers’ reading motivation. It is essential to understand that reading is not successful if there is no personal desire to read, if the person does not feel a love of reading in him- or herself.¹² In the background there are, e.g., theories on “engaging reading”. Reading is not only a cognitive operation, but to a large degree affective as well.¹³ The emergence of the love of reading can be enhanced with propitious actions and in suitable circumstances, but there always remains at the bottom some unexplained residue – or is it a question of a calculable dialogue between the inner impulses of the homme-machine and the stimuli of the outside world?

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