

## Renato Pasta

## In Search of Books and their Readers



Renato Pasta was born in 1950. He is Associate Professor of History of early-modern Italy in the School of Letters of the University of Florence. He was trained in Italy, France and the United States and holds a Ph.D. in history from Princeton University. He held Visiting Professorships at the University of Chicago (1990) and the VI section of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (1992). His research interests lie with the social and intellectual history of Europe during the period of the Enlightenment and with the history of the book and reading, with special attention to the diffusion of the texts of the Enlightenment in France and Italy. He has coedited the correspondence of the Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria (C. Beccaria, *Carteggio, 1758-1768*, and Id., *Carteggio, 1769-1794*, Milano, Mediobanca, 1994-1996). His work includes *Scienza, politica e rivoluzione. L'opera di Giovanni Fabbroni (1752-1822) intellettuale e funzionario al servizio dei Lorena*, Firenze, Olschki, 1989, and the recently published *Editoria e cultura nel Settecento*, Firenze Olschki, 1997. He is currently working on a comparative survey of literacy, print and book diffusion in continental Europe during the eighteenth century. — Address: Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Storia, via S. allo, 10, I-50129 Firenze.

Not surprisingly, my original project for the Wissenschaftskolleg proved quite unmanageable. I came to Berlin planning some months of intensive reading on the conditions of print production and diffusion in eighteenth-century Europe. I also thought of broadening my understanding of early-modern German politics and the state, paying special attention to censorship and book culture in the age of the Enlightenment. My agenda for a year in Berlin seemed to me to meet the professional standards of the Kolleg, since it moved away from monographism and towards broader interdisciplinary topics of research. My plan was comparative in scope and dealt with printing and publishing history in France, Italy, Germany and the German-speaking areas of the Habsburg

Empire. Britain was to be surveyed only briefly, however, and Portugal and Spain were reserved for a later stage in my work. My project soon proved to be too ambitious. Despite its warmest supporters, publishing history has so far failed to acquire a fully independent methodological status. Its eclecticism is probably one of the reasons of its scholarly appeal, since the field rests at the intersection of many disciplines, such as bibliography and economic history, social and political history and the inceptive 'history of audiences', all of them pointing to what Robert Darnton has poignantly named the "history of meaning". This state of affairs is more than enough to discourage enthusiastic, but naive newcomers. Besides, I was confronted in Berlin with a huge amount of critical literature on the early-modern *Buchwesen* in Germany, such as I could hardly hope to master single-handedly. Here, the friendly, informal atmosphere at the Kolleg came to my rescue. I found a splendid mentor in Mark Lehmstedt, a former Fellow who guided me through the bush of specialized literature on the history of the book in eighteenth-century Germany. As my relationship to Mark developed into an enduring friendship, we spent hours discussing social stratification and print culture in Central and Southern Europe, concentrating on censorship and the book trade in Catholic and Protestant countries. As my understanding of the heuristic role of comparative history grew rapidly — a fact that owes a great deal to Jürgen Kocka — Mark and I decided to organize an informal seminar on the history of the book. It eventually took place on 24–25 May, 1997, at the Wissenschaftskolleg under the title *Problems in the History of the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Since we had no funding — the Kolleg generously provided lodging but travel expenses had to be met by the participants —, we contacted only a few scholars of good will and exploited to the utmost the unrivalled competence of my former mentor at Princeton, Robert Darnton. Hans Erich Bodeker joined in the seminar from Göttingen and Reinhardt Wittman from Munich, while Otto Lankhorst travelled to the German capital from Nijmegen and Jeff Friedman flew in from New York. Small as it was, the seminar fulfilled all our warmest expectations as we spent many hours passionately discussing the problems and prospects of book history research and exchanging information while Bob led the talk with consummated skill.

Meanwhile my own reading had proved somewhat inconclusive. As I waded through the piles of books that Frau Bottomley and her staff at the Weiße Villa supplied me with, week after week, it became clear that I had to scale down my project and rethink it in the light of the new information. This does not mean that my interest had faded away. But I began to see the history of the book in Italy within a wider context. My

perspective broadened as I began to read in the field of early-modern print culture concentrating on issues of literacy and education, on readership and the policing of books, and on State/Church relationships and their impact on the book market. More than ever before, I grew aware of the double-edged function of print as both an agent of change and a tool of ideological and political control. My concern for the eighteenth century gave way to a new understanding of culture in the first two centuries of print as I realized the long-term endurance of literary patterns and institutions. This new awareness is reflected in the book on publishing in eighteenth-century Italy that I completed in Berlin and that is now available in print — after some belaboured proof-correcting. The book includes six case-studies in which secularization and the consumption of goods also play a role: both topics benefited substantially from my reading at the Kolleg and profited from conversations I had with other Fellows, notably with Detlef Pollack, who introduced me to the subtleties of Niklas Luhmann's work.

I could hardly forget, however, to be first and foremost a specialist on the period of the Enlightenment. While in Berlin, I was constantly reminded of this by my previous commitment to write an outline on the history of the European Enlightenment for a textbook planned by an Italian publisher. A considerable portion of my time, then, went to this laborious task — and I quickly discovered that writing a synthesis is probably more exacting than producing a long text. The job proved nevertheless to be an opportunity to assess the state of Enlightenment studies today. During my work I received friendly encouragement from several Fellows (Jürgen Osterhammel, Mordechai Feingold and Sahotra Sarkar among them) who offered both competent advice and witty criticism. I emerged from my writing perfectly convinced of the trail-blazing role of the *philosophes* as well as of the long-lasting connection of the German *Aufklärer* with Protestantism — a fact I had previously underestimated. But what most commanded my attention were the social determinants of Enlightenment thought. The notion of public opinion proved central to my understanding of the whole period and showed itself to be instrumental in bringing together printing and intellectual history. My investigation of the book market found a new focus. In this context I discovered a splendid conversational partner in Peter von Moos, whose encyclopaedic knowledge was generously put to my use. Our talks usually developed in four languages, including my native Italian, and offered an unending source of intellectual delight. Peter shared with me his unmatched knowledge of German post-war *Mediävistik* and his concern for the public role of intellectuals — and Valentin Groebner widened the spectrum of debate by adding poignant remarks about the historical use

of cultural anthropology, social and economic history, contemporary literature and even Berlin sightseeing. On the other hand, von Moos' prose put my reading ability in German to a hard test. Some of his essays, which I read with difficulty, led one of the most talented and dedicated teachers I have ever had, Frau Eva Hund, to suggest that I switch to Nietzsche and Hegel in order to improve my understanding of classical German. I must confess I never succeeded in feeling comfortable with Nietzsche — Hegel, of course, I never tried. My gratitude, however, remains undaunted, since I have improved my command of literary German remarkably: a capacity and a pleasure I count among the most precious results of my stay in Berlin.

Meanwhile, the opportunities for social and intellectual encounter multiplied. Jürgen Kocka invited me to give a seminar at the *Arbeitsstelle für Vergleichende Gesellschaftsgeschichte* that turned out to be a very rewarding experience. Pierangelo Schiera, a former Fellow of the Kolleg, organized a presentation of the recently published correspondence of Cesare Beccaria at the Italian Kulturinstitut. In May, 1997, the *Forschungszentrum Europäische Aufklärung* in Potsdam provided an opportunity to discuss Jacobinism comparatively and invited me as a *Diskussionsleiter*. And I flew to Naples and Turin to participate in conferences and give papers. The relaxed, friendly atmosphere at the Kolleg made all this possible and encouraged my activity. I developed close ties with most Fellows, beginning with Péter Esterhazy and his family, our neighbours in the Heydenstraße. Throughout our stay, we were offered support and competent advice by the staff of the Kolleg, and when I prepared to leave in June I found out how valuable the collaboration of Frau Sanders and Frau Pertschi can be. Their kindness is not the only reason I have to regret my lost Paradise in Berlin. But the new friendships I made there will last: they add a cosmopolitan touch to my everyday life in Florence.