CHAPTER 2

For the Laity, as Well as for the Learned: Some Themes and Structures in the System of Early Modern Learned Periodicals

Ingemar Oscarsson

The history of the learned press is generally recognized as having begun in the year 1665, when the reading public saw the almost simultaneous emergence of two journals, the *Journal des Savants* in Paris and the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society of London. These two journals also mark the two fundamental types or categories of learned periodicals, with *Journal des Savants* as the first ‘derivative’ (or reviewing) journal and *Philosophical Transactions* standing out as the prime ‘substantive’ (or original-transferring) one. Throughout many stages of the history of the learned press, with the gradual elimination of periodicals in Latin and the successive change from ‘universal’ (or all-subject) journals to more and more specialized ones, this essential dichotomy endured, despite the fact that many journals had elements of both kinds of publication (as was, in fact, the case with both *Journal des Savants* and *Philosophical Transactions*).

In the *respublica literaria* itself, the rise of learned periodicals (first and foremost of substantive journals) had a profound impact upon working conditions for scholars. In these journals new ideas and findings could travel faster and farther than before, creating an acute awareness of scholarship as an ongoing process of discovery and analysis. From now on, scholars were confronted with the need to stay abreast of developments in various fields of learning while also keeping up with and participating in the debates and polemics that were becoming an important feature of the substantive journals. In these, it was relatively rare for authors to appear anonymously (in contrast to the usage in several other branches of periodical literature), which made contributions and exchanges public and transparent to an unprecedented degree and established journals as a part of the historical record of science. Parallel to this development in the substantive journals, an increasing number of derivative periodicals was contributing to gradual changes in the audience for scholarly works, busily reviewing, abstracting, summarizing, and popularizing the products of the learned world that were appearing in books and substantive periodicals. The dissemination of new knowledge and theories was reaching not only scholars but also what can be called the laity, a curious and reasonably educated,
but essentially non-scholarly audience. But this development was by no means uncontroversial; on the contrary, it met with various forms of rejecting and critical attitudes, as already the founder of *Journal des Savants*, Denis de Sallo, could certainly testify. One aspect of this criticism on which I want to focus is the view that reviewing or derivative periodicals were an inferior and unnecessary by-product—even a degenerate outgrowth—of true erudition and scholarship. Those who shared this perception often used rhetoric that presented these journals in a negative light or exaggerated their number and influence, implying that they far outnumbered but were certainly inferior to the ‘truly learned’, substantive journals.

Whether there was any measure of truth to such assessments is an issue that cannot be settled here, and in fact, any attempt to evaluate them or even quantify the number of review journals would run up against the lack of satisfactory bibliographical resources. But I will touch briefly on the matter in the next pages, giving some historical examples and rounding off with the help of a micro-corpus of publications, namely the Swedish stock of eighteenth-century learned journals. This fairly contained yet impressively manifold set of periodicals supplies, to begin with, an example of quantitative relationships between different types of publications in a setting that is clearly defined, both chronologically and culturally. Secondly, these periodicals illustrate how, within this setting, diverse editorial and commercial interests stood beside and against each other, sometimes paradoxically intertwined and contradictory. Thus the epoch’s most prolific free-market publisher in Sweden, Carl Christoffer Gjörwell (1731–1811), seems to inadvertently reinforce the critics’ arguments against the derivative press when he launches his monthly *Den Swenska Mercurius*, in 1755. Here Gjörwell praises the variety of content found in the review periodicals but also (despite being himself a book-seller and book-publisher as well as a journalist) lowers his guard against a typical criticism, stressing that the lengthy book reviews in the journals ‘make it often possible to renounce the book itself’.1

The Formula of Denis de Sallo

Already in the very first issue of *Journal des Savants*, the editor Denis de Sallo articulated the characteristic formula of the review journal. It is notable how he directly takes his reader into an already existing literary and scientific arena,

---