

The Travels of a Publisher's Sales Rep, 1775-1776

The commis voyageur (sales rep or commercial traveler) is a shadowy figure in French history.¹ Many agents of merchants and manufacturers circulated through the channels of trade under the Ancien Régime, but few left traces in the archives. A notable exception is Jean-François Favarger, a sales rep of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), whose diaries and correspondence fill a remarkably rich dossier in the papers of the STN, a publisher and bookseller in the Swiss principality of Neuchâtel, just across the French border at the foot of the Jura Mountains.² Favarger made several tours of France and Switzerland, selling books and negotiating deals with other publishers and booksellers. His accounts of his travels in 1775 and 1776 are especially revealing, because they show how a commis voyageur acquired the skills and experience that made him a key intermediary in the process by which books reached readers.³

Favarger was born in Saint-Blaise, a village outside Neuchâtel, on June 28, 1749 and was educated in the local collège.⁴ As he later described it, his employment with the STN began without any fuss over terms and conditions: "...M. Ostervald [the principal director of the STN] took me away from the field I was plowing by asking me to be his clerk, and I became his clerk."⁵ By 1775 Favarger had demonstrated that he had the qualities needed to succeed as a sales rep. He was young, healthy, and could handle a horse. He had received on-the-job training by mastering clerical work and other tasks within the STN, and his employers knew they could count on him to follow his instructions to the letter. But could a young man from a small Swiss town hold his own against veteran book dealers in French cities? The STN entrusted him with such a mission in 1778, but first it tried him out on several shorter sorties.

The first, in September 1775, led no farther than Lausanne and Geneva, a small distance but a great contrast with Neuchâtel, because Lausanne owed allegiance to Bern, a superpower in the small world of Swiss politics, while Geneva was an independent republic, torn by conflict between an aristocratic oligarchy and a democratic citizenry inspired in part by the ideas of Rousseau. The Lausannois publishers, especially Jean-Pierre Heubach, who joined forces with Louis Scanavin and Jean-Pierre Duplan in 1774 to form the Société typographique de Lausanne, worked closely with the STN, exchanging books and occasionally speculating together on editions. The Genevans were more difficult. The STN did not deal extensively with the great Genevan firms like the Cramer brothers, but it engaged in the exchange trade with several small publishers such as Samuel Cailler, Pierre Gallay, Jacques-Benjamin Téron, and Gabriel Grasset. These tended to specialize in printing irreligious, pornographic, and seditious works, which were known in the trade as “livres philosophiques.” (philosophical books).⁶ As many of the STN’s customers asked for those books in its orders, it stocked them in its general inventory (“livres d’assortiment”) and procured them by exchanges for its own, relatively innocent publications. When it printed 1,000 copies of a book, it frequently exchanged 100 or more against the same number in the stock of allied publishers. The swapping was calculated in sheets. Publishers usually thought in sheets, their basic unit of production (a sheet of an ordinary book printed in-octavo made 16 pages when folded into a gathering, stitched to other gatherings, trimmed, and bound). But sheets varied according to the density of the type, the quality of the paper, and in some cases the value of the text. “Philosophical” books commanded higher prices on the market, in large part because of the risks taken by those who handled them, so

they had special exchange rates: normally two or three sheets to one of an ordinary work, whether or not it was pirated.

Favarger would have picked up the basic information about the exchange trade while learning his way around the stockrooms and administrative offices of the STN. To negotiate actual exchanges, however, was a different matter: you had to know what your partner in an exchange really had in stock, what he was currently producing, and what was likely to be bought by retail book dealers. These considerations required so much professional savvy that exchanges normally took place at the highest levels, through the commercial correspondence of the publishers. Thanks to many letters that arrived every day from booksellers everywhere in Europe, the directors of the STN had a good sense of supply and demand within the publishing industry.⁷ But they could not know if another publisher was suppressing information about books in his warehouse that he was keeping to sell rather than swap, or if he had arranged to sell the STN's own books, which he hoped to procure by swapping, at a discount rate to one of its clients behind its back. Exchanges opened up endless possibilities of deception. To play his hand effectively, a publisher needed inside information about what was going on in the most active centers of the trade—not merely Paris but provincial capitals like Lyons and Rouen and in cities outside France where “sociétés typographiques” competed feverishly to supply the demand for “philosophical books” as well as their main stock in trade: cheap, pirated editions of works produced in France. No one was better suited to procure this information than a sales rep, who could make the rounds of the bookshops in a city, picking up gossip and sniffing out secrets about who was printing what.

Reconnoitering of this sort seems to have been the purpose of Favarger's tour of the Swiss shops in September 1775. It was a quick trip, which produced only two

letters, both from Geneva; so one can only guess at the full range of his activities. But Favarger reported on all the Genevan dealers, noting what they had in press and what they were prepared to exchange with the STN. He discovered, for example, that Jean-Léonard Pellet was producing “a great many philosophical articles” in cooperation with a Lyonnais dealer, who had sent a special clerk to his shop in order to facilitate their transactions. And he entered into negotiations with Gallay, who later signed a contract to supply the STN with “philosophical” works at an exchange rate of 1:2 sheets.

A year later, in August and September 1776, Favarger undertook a more ambitious trip. This time the STN supplied him with a diary (“carnet de voyage”) and filled its first pages with instructions, including an itinerary:

Route: Yverdon, Lausanne, Morges, Nyon, Geneva, Saissel, Annecy,
Chambéry, Pont-Beauvoisin, Bellay, Grenoble, Valence, Vienne,
Lyon, Trévoux, Villefranche, Bourg-en-Bresse, Mâcon, Chalon-sur-
Saône, Autun, Beaune, Dijon, Auxonne, Dôle, Salins, and Pontarlier.

He was to check out all the bookshops along this route, spreading copies of the STN’s printed catalogue and prospectuses for its pirated and augmented edition of the multi-volume Description des arts et métiers, which was then being produced by Nicolas-Léger Moutard, a powerful Parisian publisher who owned the privilege for it—that is, the exclusive right to publish it accorded by the Crown. He also would carry a manuscript catalogue of “livres philosophiques,” one that did not have any incriminating information in it, not even the name of the STN, but that would show what the STN could provide to booksellers interested in the underground trade.

Favarger was to increase the STN's stock in this genre by concluding exchanges with the Swiss specialists, notably Gallay and Cailler, who had sent notice of their readiness to supply, among other works, 100 copies of La fille de joie, the French version of Fanny Hill, and 100 copies of Voltaire's anti-Christian Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke. The STN authorized him to negotiate some new exchanges of works that he thought would sell well, keeping to its standard rate: 2 of its sheets for 1 of the livres philosophiques. (The rate could be converted directly into units of French money, as some publishers preferred, because the STN set a wholesale price of one sou per sheet for nearly all its books, and the forbidden books normally went for 2 sous per sheet, with illustrations, if any, for 4 sous.) But, probably because of Favarger's inexperience, it sounded cautious in this regard: it directed him for the most part to find out what new works were being printed and to inform it so that it could conclude the exchanges.

Having enriched the STN's stock by exchanges in Lausanne and Geneva according to the instructions, Favarger would sell off as much of it as he could on the rest of his tour. But he was not merely to be a salesman. He should represent the STN's interests in many ways: by scouting for a good binder, finding new sources of paper, and improving the STN's distribution system, especially in Lyon, where it needed a more effective shipping agent, one who knew how to handle pirated and prohibited books. Aside from these specific tasks, Favarger should help his employers expand their business—or what today would be called market share—by making contact with new retail booksellers all along his route. Each region, from Savoy and Dauphiné to Burgundy and Franche-Comté, had great potential as a market, but each hid dangers, not merely owing to the varying severity of the authorities but also because the smaller booksellers sometimes could not cover their

debts while the large ones sometimes overplayed their hand. Favarger should not simply sell books; he also should develop a precise understanding of the trade in every city that he visited. The home office needed advice about where to place its confidence, and it required regular reports of his findings, which he should also record in his diary in case any of his letters went astray.

Having explicated Favarger's general instructions, the STN then added particular directions, city by city and in some cases bookseller by bookseller. It spelled out a few entries in such detail that they read like a dialogue, which Favarger was to rehearse on his horse or after taking a room in an inn so that he would be armed with arguments and rebuttals when he confronted a bookseller in a shop. The first confrontations, in friendly territory, Lausanne, went well, as far as one can tell from Favarger's letters. Heubach revealed that Jean-Marie Barret, an important publisher and wholesale dealer in Lyon, was secretly printing a pirated edition of Condillac's great summa of Enlightenment thought, Cours d'étude pour l'instruction du prince de Parme (Paris, 1775 under the false address of Parma). According to the trade gossip—relayed from an Italian bookseller to Jules-Henri Pott, a Lausannois publisher, and from Pott to Heubach—the edition might sell well but it would not be accurate, because the original manuscript had been confiscated by the police in Italy. Favarger relayed this information to the home office and entered it in his diary in order to be prepared to negotiate an exchange with Barret in Lyons. Meanwhile, he picked up the scent of a potential best-seller, Le Partage de la Pologne ("London," 1775), attributed (wrongly) to Frederick the Great. François Grasset, a crafty but difficult Lausannois publisher who did not always get on well with the STN, had just finished a reprint (it could not be called a counterfeit or pirated edition, since no publisher could take out a privilege for such an illegal work). When Favarger had

asked what he had produced recently, Grasset replied, “Nothing new.” But when he learned of the covert reprint—probably from some workers or fellow clerks, because Grasset was always quarreling with his employees—Favarger returned to the shop and demanded 100 copies as an exchange. Unable to refuse without alienating the STN, Grasset admitted to a professional white lie and shipped the copies off to Neuchâtel.

Buoyed by this triumph, Favarger steered for the pirates of Geneva. One of the first he accosted was Grasset’s younger brother, Gabriel, a more agreeable but less reliable publisher. The younger Grasset offered cut rate livres philosophiques: 2 sheets for 3 from the STN’s inventory, and the offer included the philosophical-pornographic classic, Thérèse philosophe, which he then was printing. Even more tempting, he said he soon would have three new works by Voltaire in press. Voltaire, nearby in Ferney, often sent the anonymous pamphlets that he called his “petits pâtés” to marginal publishers like Grasset, while reserving his nobler works for the other Gabriel, “angel Gabriel” Cramer. Grasset would not leak any information about these books, not even their titles, but the prospect of more copy from the most famous writer in Europe made Favarger’s mouth water: “It will certainly sell.” Favarger also sent news about what the other specialists in livres philosophiques were preparing. Pierre Gallay would soon produce two more pornographic works, and Jacques-Benjamin Téron was about to come out with a new edition of De l’Esprit, Helvétius’s notoriously irreligious treatise, along with a more openly atheistic tract from d’Holbach’s circle, Essai sur les préjugés. Favarger did not take advantage of the authority granted to him by the STN to negotiate exchanges for these books. Instead, perhaps because of a beginner’s timidity, he relayed the information to the home office and left it to conclude the deals. He also informed it of two books that Etienne

Pestre, a more respectable Genevan bookseller, advised the STN to reprint: Jezennemours, Louis Sébastien Mercier's fictionalized indictment of religious intolerance, and L'Amour vainqueur du vice, another sentimental novel. Pestre had predicted that they would sell well, and Favarger sent copies of them by coach in order to speed up the pirating. He also took soundings, at the STN's request, about the demand for a new political libel, Mémoires de l'abbé Terray. The Genevan professionals pronounced it "not much"—wrongly, as it turned out, because the STN eventually sold large quantities of it.

Favarger continued to sound the market for potential reprints and exchanges everywhere he went, especially in Lyon, the other great publishing center that he visited. Lyon, however, was difficult territory. Many booksellers cooperated with the Swiss, their natural allies on the supply side against the Parisian houses that had dominated French publishing since the seventeenth century, when they had emerged victorious from a trade war with the provincial publishers.⁸ But the patriarchs of the trade in Lyon, wealthy publishers and wholesalers like Jean-Marie Bruysset and the Périsse brothers, Jean-André and Antoine Périsse Duluc, cooperated with the Parisian booksellers' guild and cultivated contacts in the Direction de la librairie or government authority in charge of the book trade. Some Lyonnais quarreled with others, played one Swiss house against another, or switched alliances unpredictably when trade patterns shifted. As his instructions reminded him, Favarger had to tread carefully when he entered this terrain. And if he needed any further reminder, his inexperience struck him vividly soon after he arrived, because he realized that he had forgotten to report an order for the Description des arts in Geneva: "I beg you to forgive this lack of attention on the part of a new traveler who writes with his head swimming with so many things."

When it came to negotiating exchanges with the Lyonnais, therefore, Favarger proceeded with caution. But he could not be too timid, either, and to his relief, his first skirmish ended in a victory. Armed with the information supplied by Heubach about the covert edition of Condillac's Cours d'étude that was then being printed by Barret, he marched into Barret's shop and demanded a large proportion of the edition as an exchange. Caught by surprise, Barret agreed to trade up to 250 copies for an assortment of STN books. Unfortunately, however, he had learned that the STN had printed a work that it had carefully kept off the list of its exchangeable stock that Favarger presented to him: Correspondance du pape Ganganelli, a best-seller that fascinated the French public, because it provided revealing glimpses of the mind of the pope, Clement XIV, who had suppressed the Jesuit order and had died in 1774. Barret wanted 100 copies. The STN had excluded the Correspondance from its exchange trade in order to maximize profits by selling it for cash. So Favarger had been caught hiding a desirable book at the very moment when he trapped Barret doing the same thing, and he could hardly refuse Barret's request. "This item pains me," he wrote to the home office. "But he knew that we had printed it, and I could not deny it." Still, it was a mutually beneficial deal, and there was a final twist to it, which made it even better for the STN. Favarger knew from the STN's correspondence that Hubert-Martin Cazin, an important bookseller in Reims, wanted a large shipment of the Condillac and that he insisted it be delivered to his agent in Lyons at the STN's risk and free of the shipping charges from Neuchâtel. Favarger therefore dashed off a letter to Cazin offering the copies he had just procured from Barret without mentioning their provenance.⁹ Not only did he conclude an important sale, but he also saved the STN a great deal in expenses and demonstrated the excellence of its service to an important customer. The three-cornered deal was typical of the games

played in the exchange trade and quite a coup for Favarger, who sent the home office a copy of his letter to Cazin so that it would have a record of the affair—and evidence that he was not doing badly as a beginning sales rep.

Favarger's other efforts to discover what was going on in the back rooms of the Lyonnais shops came to nothing. The publishers—that is, booksellers who also operated as printers or jobbed out printing—were especially tight-lipped about “nouveau-tés” or new works, either pirated or printed from manuscript. “Whenever I was tipped off that a printer had some [nouveau-tés] and I even knew their titles,” Favarger reported, “I would be told when I asked about a particular title that he had never heard of it. That happened to me often.” He got a particularly nasty reception in Bruysset's shop, because Bruysset had learned that the STN had pirated Jacques Christophe Valmont de Bomare's Dictionnaire raisonné universel d'histoire naturelle, a popular work which Bruysset had published with a royal privilege. But Bruysset, a syndic in the Lyonnais guild, had his enemies, including Jacquenod, a tough, down-market dealer, who welcomed the opportunity to cut into the trade of the local oligarchs by collaborating with the Swiss. Not only was Jacquenod eager to exchange books with the STN, but he also offered to clear its “scabrous” works through inspections in the guild's chambre syndicale when Bruysset was looking the other way.

Smuggling and the general improvement of the STN's shipping arrangements was Favarger's most important mission in Lyon. The STN used many routes into France--northward along the Rhine from Basel to Strasbourg; westward across the Jura mountain passes to Pontarlier and Besançon—but its most active route led southward down the Rhône. Lyon served it as a clearing house for shipments that went to Paris as well as those destined for Marseilles, Bordeaux, and the cities of the

Loire. Its Lyonnais shipping agent therefore played a key role in its commerce; and because it dealt so heavily in pirated and prohibited books, he often had to operate as a smuggler, too. A good shipping agent (“commissionnaire”) was hard to find. He knew how to handle hard-bitten wagon drivers, keep a warehouse in order, expedite shipments in a dozen directions, bargain for cheap rates, and keep on the good side of the inspectors—both the guild officers and the royal inspector from the Direction de la librairie--in the chambre syndicale.

After running through several unsatisfactory agents, the STN had settled on André Schodelli, a fairly prosperous businessman with reassuringly Swiss family connections. He had an unfortunate tendency to pad his expenses, but he worked well with Jacquenod and got all the STN’s shipments through the Chambre syndicale—until April 27, 1776, when the roof fell in. By then, Jacquenod had been replaced as syndic of the Lyonnais guild by the Périsset brothers, who had no love for Swiss pirates, and a new royal inspector, La Tourette, was going through everything that arrived in the Chambre syndicale with unaccustomed rigor. When Schodelli presented three crates from the STN, La Tourette—tipped off, perhaps by one of the Périssets--insisted on unpacking them and inspecting their contents sheet by sheet. He found the sheets of seventeen orders of “livres philosophiques”—a rich assortment of atheism (Le Système de la nature), anticlerical pornography (Vénus dans le cloître), and political libel (Mémoires authentiques de Mme la comtesse du Barry)--larded inside the sheets of innocent works. That put an end to Schodelli’s effectiveness as a shipping agent and left Favarger with the delicate task of finding a replacement for him.

Favarger’s instructions for Lyon specified that he should “gather information and get to know a good shipping agent, a friend of the chambre syndicale, and if

possible someone who could clear books through inspection, at his risk, in return for a modest supplement to the charges he would normally collect.” His choice fell on an agent named Claudet—the first names of these obscure characters are often impossible to discover—said to be highly intelligent, respected, and well versed in the tricks of his trade. Claudet charged a flat rate of 3 livres per crate “for passage”—that is, to get a shipment through the *Chambre syndicale*—but he would take less for smaller packages; and in difficult situations, he could count on help from Jaquenod, his ally inside the booksellers’ guild. For forbidden books, as opposed to anodyne pirated works, Claudet offered a further service: “assurance” (insurance) for an additional 6 livres per hundredweight. In return for this extra charge, he would guarantee to get the books through Lyon; and if they were confiscated, he would reimburse the STN or its customers for their loss. The cost of insurance normally fell on the customers, who paid for all shipping charges upon receipt of the merchandise. In order to win the trade of an important bookseller, however, the STN sometimes agreed to deliver shipments “franco”—free of all charges and sometimes free of all risks—to the warehouse of its shipping agent in Lyons. It then paid for the insurance.

“Assurance”—the term was accurate, since Claudet ran a veritable insurance service; but it also suited the euphemistic jargon favored by the professionals in the trade. Booksellers avoided terms like “*contrebande*” in their letters, which might fall into the hands of the French authorities. They spoke of smuggling as “*passage*” (or occasionally “*introduction*”), and they distinguished between the “*passage*” of illegal but relatively innocent works (usually pirated, sometimes Protestant) and truly forbidden books, “*livres philosophiques*,” which required “*assurance*.” In Claudet’s case, Favarger settled on the terms for the smuggling service in Lyons; and instead of

explaining the agreement by letter, he gave an oral report on it to the directors of the STN after he returned to Neuchâtel.¹⁰

While arranging for exchanges and smuggling, Favarger also busied himself with other tasks. At that time the STN was expanding its printing shop in order to produce its quota of volumes for the quarto edition of the Encyclopédie, an international enterprise of such size that it strained the resources of the publishing industry throughout Western Switzerland and Eastern France. Charged with procuring new presses, Favarger located a carpenter named Tardy, who was said to be the best in the city and promised to make a new press within a month for 300 livres, not including its copper platen. But Aimé de la Roche, the official printer of the king in Lyon, offered to part with three of his seventeen presses, copper platens included, for 250 livres each, and he could sell three more without platens from his shop in Trévoux for 200 each, all of them fully outfitted and ready for work. Favarger recommended the cheaper, second-hand presses. He also found four workshops that could supply the STN with candles, an important aspect of his mission, because compositors often worked by candlelight, especially during the winter months. Paper was still more important, as it represented 75 per cent of the Encyclopédie's manufacturing costs, more by far than composition and presswork combined. Having nearly exhausted the supply from the paper millers of its region, the STN charged Favarger with finding new sources. It needed a certain quality for the Encyclopédie—milky white raisin weighing 21 pounds a ream. He took samples from five of Lyons' paper merchants and carried them with him to submit to the STN's directors, even though he found them overpriced.

Pricing candles, sampling paper, inspecting presses—it was all part of the job; but the main mission for a sales rep was selling books, and that meant wooing

booksellers, town after town, and, in between towns, long hours on the road. After his negotiations in Geneva and before he arrived in Lyon, Favarger's route took him through Savoy and Dauphiné. This was mountain country, known to tourists for its beauty and to historians for its high literacy rate. Savoyards and Dauphinois spent much of their long winters reading books, especially religious books, which spoke to issues raised by two centuries of sectarian strife. Favarger followed the valleys that linked the urban centers, where the demand for books was greatest. But he encountered a string of disappointments. Annecy had four booksellers, none of them flourishing. Chambéry had only two: Dufour, old, nearly blind, and uninterested in ordering anything; and Lullin, active and intelligent but not willing to place anything more than a small order. The best bookseller in Grenoble, Brette, looked over Favarger's catalogue of "livres philosophiques" and then said that he already had nearly all of them in stock. (The prevalence of exchanges among Swiss publishers meant they often kept the same books in stock and competed for the trade of French retailers.) Veuve Giraud and her son, who published the local advertising sheet, promised to promote the Description des arts but did not order any subscriptions for it. And the other dealers—Cuchet, Faure, Robert—seemed to do a pretty good business, yet they, too, would not nibble at Favarger's offers, perhaps because the sales rep of the Société typographique de Lausanne had passed through town recently, selling many of the same books. Romans was a good city for book lovers, and it had only one dealer, so the long-term prospects looked promising there. Valence also seemed excellent: two of its three booksellers qualified as "solid" in Favarger's estimation, and he especially recommended Orel: "Solid...a very large clientele for religious books...an active man, who pays well." Pushing northward en route to Lyons, he passed through Vienne, a "big city" as he saw it, although it had only one

book store—and that tended by two women, *Veuve Verdeilhé* and her daughter. Despite the restrictions in royal edicts, bookselling was not an exclusively male occupation under the Old Regime. Many widows took over their husbands' businesses, and many wives tended the shop when their husbands peddled books through the countryside—or did the peddling themselves, as in the case of *Mme Faivre* of *Pontarlier*. After careful inspection, *Favarger* gave the shop high marks: it was well supplied; the locals spoke well of *Mme Verdeilhé*; and her daughter demonstrated a remarkable understanding of the trade, although she held out little hope for extensive relations with the STN, since she drew most of her supplies from the nearby wholesalers of *Lyon*.

When at last he reached *Lyon*—a truly big city of 152,000 inhabitants—*Favarger* negotiated with the local booksellers as already related, and he also took stock of his activities up to that point. He had covered a great deal of ground, but he had not sold many books. In a report to the home office, he took consolation from the thought that he had succeeded in part of his mission: “I pray, Messieurs, that you will not believe that it is from any lack of active effort that I have not gathered any more orders, but, as I am sure, I have made some good contacts for the future.” True enough, he had prospected in territory where the STN did relatively little business, sorting out the “solid” booksellers from the less trustworthy types. It could follow up his recommendations through its commercial correspondence. And if it could sell a few shipments in each town as effectively as its competitors from *Lausanne* and *Geneva*, it might open up a rich new market.

The last leg of the trip, from *Lyon* through *Burgundy* and the *Franche-Comté* to *Neuchâtel*, provided similar opportunities. It went through more familiar territory, but *Favarger* knew the towns only as points on the map and the booksellers only as

names that the directors of the STN had written into the instruction section of his diary. Some names came from the Almanach de la librairie, a trade manual that had appeared earlier that year, but the Almanach frequently got them wrong. How did they correspond to the people of flesh and blood located at different positions in different local economies? How would Favarger be able to find his way through the complex human landscape of the book trade in each region? Fortunately, in choosing Claudet as the shipping agent in Lyons, he had acquired a native informant with years of experience in the business. Not only did Claudet brief Favarger about the booksellers along his route, but, even better, he provided introductions to merchants and other shipping agents who could rake over the reputation of everyone in their towns. Favarger drew on other sources as well. He grilled innkeepers, set the booksellers to gossiping about one another, and learned to judge the degree of a dealer's professional competence by engaging him in shop talk. He also used his eyes. A well-ordered shop, stocked with up-to-date works was a sign of a potentially important client, whereas slovenliness suggested the likelihood of unpaid bills of exchange.

Trévoux, Villefranche, Bourg-en-Bresse, Macon, Chalon-sur-Saône, Autun, Beaune, Dijon, Auxonne—they are names that make the mouth water and that summon up happy memories for today's tourists. Favarger did not describe them in the manner of the Guide Michelin: "a little history," "gastronomic specialties," "local festivals." No: each town's name went into his diary trailing a list of booksellers, and each bookseller's name came attached to a phrase that would fix him in Favarger's memory and orient the directors of the STN when they faced a decision about filling an order or extending a debt. Unlike the short reports from the earlier leg of the trip,

Favarger's letters to the home office now took on a richness that suggested a trained eye and a new degree of expertise.

Not that they had great literary quality. Favarger remained a man of few words and those unadorned. Neither Trévoux nor Villefranche had a bookseller, he noted tersely; they depended on an itinerant dealer from Macon who showed up at their fairs. When he arrived in Macon, he learned that the dealer was a certain Garcin, who had an excellent reputation, seconded by his nephew, Courring, a more dubious character who ran his own business and favored livres philosophiques. Bourg-en-Bresse had four booksellers, but they did not amount to much. Conte was honest but old and not interested in ordering new books. Besson dealt entirely in devotional works that he printed himself, not in what he called "literary books" ("livres de littérature")." The town's main firm, built from a merger between the businesses of Jacques Robert and Pierre Gauthier, did a huge trade but sometimes failed to honor its bills of exchange, and Robert's personal conduct looked suspicious to the locals. Vernarel, the only other bookseller, was said to be impeccably behaved and always to pay his bills on time. His shop, though smaller than that of Robert & Gauthier, was very well "assorted" (fully stocked with an appealing variety of current works), and he was willing to cover all the transportation costs as far as Lyons, if the STN would assume the risk of confiscation.

Favarger described the trade in each town with this degree of detail, adding lists of titles whenever he collected orders. The flavor of his reports can be appreciated from the following passage taken from a letter that he sent to the home office from Dijon on September 4, 1776:

Chalon-sur-Saône does not have a bookseller named Bouchard [contrary to the information in Favarger's instructions.] Laurent is no good at all. M. Royer [Louis Royer, a local merchant] told me that he would not trust him with 12 sous for one hour....Lespinas hardly does anything, except in old books, but at least his shop is well stocked with them. He does not have a reputation for solidity....Mandidier also was out. I gave his son a catalogue and a prospectus [for the Description des arts]. He told me that they didn't do much business at all. Neither he nor his shop looked any better than what I said to you about Lespinas, and besides they are not considered very solid, either. Livani is more solid, according to M. Royer. At least his shop has a good look to it and is well assorted. He runs a reading society [cabinet littéraire], seems well set up, and has a good knowledge of the trade. He deals in livres philosophiques. De l'Orme is a printer as well as a bookseller. He, too, is said to be good, and he looked that way to me, since his shop is very well assorted. He and Livani don't get along...They say he does not carry livres philosophiques....Since he keeps company with the people in this town who are most likely to subscribe [to the Description des arts], he will not fail to sell some....These two do not want to run any risks in obtaining their books, and they think that if we can send shipments without an acquit à caution [a customs certificate used for preventing fraud], the route via Lons-le-Saunier would be the quickest and cheapest; but we should avoid Dijon, because Veuve Rameau and Son [shipping agents in Dijon] are known to take too large a commission.

And so on, through the main towns in Burgundy and Franche-Comté. “Solid” and “well assorted” appeared regularly after the names of trustworthy booksellers. They were code words to direct the STN in according credit, or the more ineffable moral currency known as “confidence.” The negatives, normally references to reputations for loose morals or insolvency, were equally important, because the STN needed to know whether or not to resist temptation when a lucrative order arrived in the mail. Favarger got to know the booksellers as individuals, their personal qualities as well as the character of their businesses. If, as some anthropologists claim, most knowledge is local knowledge, Favarger acquired a vast amount of it. He also gained experience in the folkways of the trade, learned about commercial routes, built up a network of contacts, and perfected his ability to read bookshops for signs of the spirit that animated them. By the time he returned to Neuchâtel, he had become an expert, the very model of a commis voyageur.

¹ For a tentative but, I believe, accurate sketch of this unfamiliar subject, see George V. Taylor, “Notes on Commercial Travelers in Eighteenth-Century France,” The Business History Review, 38 (Autumn, 1964), 346-353. See also Bill Bell, “‘Pioneers of Literature’: The Commercial Traveller in the Early Nineteenth Century,” The Reach of Print: Making, Selling, and Using Books, Peter Isaac and Barry McKay, eds. (Winchester, Delaware, 1998), 121-154.

² The archives of the STN have provided material for a great many studies since I began to work in them in 1965. For a bibliography of the resulting publications, see Michel Schlup, Robert Darnton, and Jacques Rychner, L’Edition neuchâteloise au siècle des Lumières (Neuchâtel, 2002), 305-307 and Robert Darnton and Michel Schlup, eds. Le rayonnement d’une maison d’édition dans l’Europe des Lumières: la Société typographique de Neuchâtel 1769-1789 (Neuchâtel, 2005), 609-615. Two of the best monographs published after 2005 are Jeffrey Freedman, Books without Borders in Enlightenment Europe: French Cosmopolitanism and German Literary Markets (Philadelphia, 2012) and Mark Curran, Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2012). Forthcoming publications should soon result from the research of Simon Burrows, Mark Curran, and Louise Seaward, which is available online as French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe (FBTEE): <http://fbtee.uws.edu.au>. For a list of publications by this research group, see “FBTEE bibliography” at Frenchbooktrade.wordpress.com. The growing literature on the eighteenth-century book trade includes several works that are relevant to this essay. See especially Robert L. Dawson, Confiscations at customs:

banned books and the French booktrade during the last years of the Ancien régime (Oxford, 2006); Thierry Rigogne, Between State and Market: Printing and Bookselling in Eighteenth-Century France (Oxford, 2007) and Jane McLeod, Licensing Loyalty. Printers, Patrons, and the State in Early Modern France (University Park, Pa., 2011).

³ The following account is based on Favarger's dossier, Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, ms. 1150. This and a great deal of related material can be consulted on my website, robertdarnton.org. Favarger made a much more extensive tour in 1778—so extensive, in fact, that it cannot be adequately described in a single essay. I am using it as the central thread of a book I have completed about publishing and the book trade in prerevolutionary France. The STN dispatched other commis voyageurs on tours to represent its interests. The most important were Jacob-François Bornand and Victor Durand. Bornand's dossier in the archives of the STN, ms. 1124 includes a contract for his services dated August 26, 1783, instructions for a trip he made in 1784, and 32 letters that he sent to the STN from his trips in 1784 and 1785. Durand's dossier has been used effectively by Jeffrey Freedman: Books without Borders in Enlightenment Europe.

⁴ Archives de l'Etat, Canton de Neuchâtel et Valangin, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Registre B, Saint-Blaise, EC370, p. 197, baptism of Jean-François Favarger, June 28, 1749. Despite a great deal of foraging in the notarial archives, I have not been able to discover much about Jean-François Favarger. He was married on December 6, 1779 to Marie-Elisabeth Affolter: Etat Civil de Neuchâtel, mariages, ED158.

⁵ Favarger reportedly made this remark to Jean Ranson while visiting Ranson during

his tour of 1778: Ranson to Ostervald, November 7, 1778, Archives of the STN, ms. 1204. Notarial archives refer to his father as a “bourgeois,” meaning he enjoyed full civic rights in the municipality of Neuchâtel, but they do not mention his profession: Archives de l’Etat F9, register of the notary Jean-Jacques Favarger, entry for January 28, 1780. Although he may have worked behind a plow at some point in his youth, Jean-Francois Favarger was no peasant. His mastery of French and allusions in his letters indicate that he had a good education.

⁶ The Genevan publishers have large dossiers, which reveal a great deal about how they did business, in the STN archives. On April 19, the STN wrote to two of its directors, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald and Abram Bosset de Luze, “Until now Geneva has been our warehouse of philosophical books, which in conformity to the taste of the century make up an essential part of our general stock. Cailler, G. Grasset, and Galay have supplied them to us in exchanges at [a rate of] 2 sheets against 3 of ours ” (archives of the STN, ms. 1189).

⁷ I would estimate that the STN received at least a half-dozen letters a day. On March 5, 1780, it wrote to Ostervald and Bosset, who were then on a business trip to Paris, that it sent out 10 to 20 letters a day.

⁸ On the conflict between printers and booksellers (the term “publisher” or “éditeur” did not come into general use until the nineteenth century) in Paris and the provinces, see Histoire de l’édition française, eds. Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier (Paris, 1982-86), vol. 2.

⁹ When the Condillac arrived, Cazin could not pay for it, because he was in the Bastille. His letters to the STN (STN archives, ms. 1132) show that he had been dealing heavily in livres philosophiques. On December 19, 1776 his wife wrote that he hoped to be released soon, but his imprisonment had upset his business so badly

that he could not pay the debt he owed to the STN. On January 16, 1777, Cazin, now back in Reims, thanked the STN for being lenient about collecting the debt and asked for a further delay. The police had confiscated all of his papers and 5,000 pounds worth of books. Also he had spent 3,000 livres to bribe his way out of the Bastille: “As you can imagine, one cannot penetrate into many places except with a key of gold.”

¹⁰ Many of these details appear in Claudet’s dossier in the archives of the STN, ms. 1136.