

## Practices of friendship and therapeutic writing in the German civic enlightenment

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**ABSTRACT:** The eighteenth century has long been acknowledged as the century of friendship. More recently, scholars have drawn attention to the emergence of a civic ideal of authentic, intimate and sensible friendship in the mid-eighteenth century. In this article I further explore this context by focusing on two key actors: the theologian Samuel Gotthold Lange and the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier.

While earlier studies have primarily analyzed the civic ideal of friendship as a broad cultural and literary phenomenon, in this paper I approach it in terms of practices of friendship and therapeutic writing. More specifically, I analyze the ways in which Lange and Meier presented and taught ways of practicing and maintaining friendship through correspondence and other forms of writing. In doing this they used their own friendship and correspondence as an example—in a way that soon made their own relation indistinguishable from the ideal—communicated and spread in published collections of letters, moral weeklies and biographical writings. As such, their undertaking reflected the emerging public sphere and the German civic Enlightenment at large. Overall, the article contributes to the history of friendship, to the historical analysis of philosophical, scientific and social practices, and to media and material history.

**Keywords:** friendship; therapeutic writing; spiritual exercise; early modern period; German civic Enlightenment; public sphere

### Introduction

The eighteenth century has long been acknowledged as the century of friendship (Pott, 2004; Meyer-Krentler, 1991; Rasch, 1936). One early study thus argued that a new culture of friendship emerged in the wake of German Pietism and the early German Enlightenment (Rasch, 1936). More recently, historians have focused on the role of a specific group of German intellectuals—the so-called Anacreontic poets. Using poems,

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collections of letters and periodicals known as moral weeklies, the Anacreontic poets presented a civic Epicurean “carpe diem” lifestyle characterized by authentic, intimate and sensual friendship (Anger, 1962; Beetz and Kertscher, 2005; Borries and Borries, 1991; Jacob, 1997; Kemper, 1991; Kertscher, 1994).

While earlier studies have primarily analyzed Anacreontic friendship as a broad cultural and literary phenomenon, in this paper I approach it in terms of practices of friendship. Theoretically I draw on P. E. Digeser’s account of friendship as a family of practices as well as social constructivist approaches to identity formation (Digeser, 2016, 2013; Dongen and Paul, 2017; Condren et al., 2006; Daston and Sibum, 2003). Combining these perspectives, I conceive of friendship as a large number of partly distinct, partly overlapping, historically contingent and context-specific practices. Against this background, the historical task becomes to analyze specific historical practices. In this article I do this by focusing on the intriguing and complex case of the theologian Samuel Gotthold Lange and the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier.

Beginning in the 1740s, Lange and Meier collaborated in presenting a civic practice of friendship to the German people. In the following decades they publicized this practice through the production of collections of letters, moral weeklies, and biographical writings. In doing this, often using their own letters as examples, their friendship became intimately entangled with and indistinguishable from the ideal and practice that they promoted. In 1764, however, the course of events took an unexpected turn as Lange lost his wife and only son to disease. Struck by disaster the written communication of their own relationship—at the same time private and public—shifted towards what I refer to as therapeutic writing, that is, writing for the purpose of alleviating, comforting, and curing a soul devastated by grief, sorrow, and suffering. As we will see, however, this form of writing was also communicated publicly, through some of the key media of the public sphere.

The article is divided into five sections. The first outlines what seems to be a rather ordinary friendship between eighteenth-century male intellectuals. In the second I

complicate this picture by showing how their relationship became integral to the project of introducing ways of practising and maintaining friendship through writing and particularly through correspondence. The third zooms out even further to situate Lange and Meier's friendship in the context of the emerging public sphere, arguing that media forms such as published collections of letters and moral weeklies were pivotal to the communication of the civic practice of friendship. In the fourth and fifth sections I return to Lange and Meier, and more specifically to the tragic events of 1764. By highlighting and analyzing the practice of therapeutic writing, I engage with recent readings of early modern philosophy and science as a spiritual or therapeutic exercise.

### **An unlikely friendship in the German civic Enlightenment**

In the last two decades of the seventeenth century the Prussian town of Halle changed from a country town with a flourishing salt-mining industry ruled by a small patriciate, to a leading university town with a broad middle class of craftsmen and academics (Freitag, 2006; Zaunstöck, 2001). The foundation of the new university in the early 1690s was the result of ongoing educational reform that went hand in hand with the growing demand for Prussian state officials (Hammerstein, 1994; Hinrichs, 1971; Mühlfordt, 2011, 1994). Led by intellectuals such as Christian Thomasius, Friedrich Hoffmann and August Hermann Francke, the curriculum incorporated the teachings of the new natural and experimental philosophy at the same time as Pietist theology challenged orthodox Lutheranism. The latter development was due to Francke, who in the late 1690s founded what was first intended to be a regular orphanage but soon developed into a comprehensive institution with intimate connections to the university (Hinrichs, 1971; Obst, 2013; Whitmer, 2015).

While the new intellectual elite shared a common vision of educational reform, the opening decades of the eighteenth century were marked by increasing tensions and, from the 1720s, by the events of the so-called Wolff affair (Bronisch, 2010; Beutel, 2001;

Hinrichs, 1971; Holloran, 2007; Wundt, 1964). The philosopher Christian Wolff was an adherent of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and had come to Halle to teach mathematics in 1706. Drawing on Leibniz, and on the new philosophy and science more broadly, Wolff advocated a vision of a system wherein the use of a universal and rational method would lead to more and more perfect knowledge. Wolff's growing popularity in combination with his emphasis on reason over faith soon brought him onto a collision course with the Pietists. In the early 1720s the tensions burst into open conflict, and the Pietists, with Joachim Lange in the lead, eventually managed to persuade King Friedrich Wilhelm I to expel Wolff from Prussia in 1723. Rather than ending the conflict, the expulsion gave rise to a prolonged struggle in which both sides published hundreds of propagandistic texts. While the Wolffians were first pushed back, the tide gradually turned in the 1730s. In 1736 a royal commission cleared Wolff of all charges. The new king, Frederick the Great, was a friend of the early German Enlightenment, and as he ascended the throne in 1740, one of his first actions was to call Wolff back to Halle and reinstall him as professor (Bronisch, 2010, pp. 72–122; Beutel, 2001; Hinrichs, 1971, pp. 434–41).

Given the events of the Wolff affair, a friendship between Lange and Meier may seem rather unlikely. Lange was the son of the Pietist theologian and sworn enemy of Wolff, Joachim Lange. As such he was enrolled at the Orphanage in the early 1720s, when still only a child, to be prepared for a career as a theologian in his father's footsteps. Meier, who was seven years younger than Lange, was sent to the Orphanage by his father in 1727 at the age of about nine (Schenk, 1994, p. 14).<sup>1</sup>

There he stayed a few years before moving into the house of the mathematician Christoph Semler. In Semler's house, which has been described as something of a mechanical factory, Meier became acquainted with Wolff's mathematics. "So I developed very early a love of the scientific way of thinking, and in my thirteenth year I could demonstrate all the propositions in Wolff's excerpt of the mathematical sciences, which regarded arithmetic, geometry, and trigonometry" (Lange, 1778, p. 27).<sup>2</sup> Fostered in different and partly opposed intellectual traditions, the two young men thus seem to have had little in common. And yet, as we will see, rather than living in the shadow of the Wolff

affair, they both belonged to a new generation of Halleian intellectuals who sought to combine Pietist and early German Enlightenment strands of thought into a new theory and practice of the beautiful and sublime (Kertscher, 2015). It was this endeavor that first joined the lives of Lange and Meier.

Meier took his master's degree in 1739, and soon started to lecture on metaphysics, logic and mathematics at the university. Attending these lectures, Lange was intrigued by some of the Wolffian doctrines they described and decided to write to Meier. As Lange comments in his biography of Meier, this became the starting point of a friendship that was to last for almost four decades. "From this eventually ensued the friendly correspondence, before we learned to know each other, and thus started one of the most cordial spiritual relations that had ever existed between friends, and from that time it continued uninterrupted for thirty-eight years" (Lange, 1778, p. 12). The surviving part of this long-running correspondence bears witness to what appears to be a thriving friendship.<sup>3</sup> In a letter from 1745 Meier thus wrote that "I have hitherto not experienced, except with a father, mother, sister and brother, what a bosom friend is, and you can therefore easily understand how enchanting your friendship is for me" (Lange, 1770, pp. 188–189). In another, later letter, Meier again proclaimed how happy he was over their friendship. "If you only knew with what amusement I have read your letters. If you only knew through sympathy or magic, how often I think of you, and what I think of you, then I would seem to you a terrible time waster" (Lange, 1770, p. 204). Touching as they may be, these tender words were in fact part of a deliberate attempt to promote what some scholars have referred to as a specific German civic culture of friendship.

### **Promoting a civic practice of friendship**

In his pioneering work from 1936, Wolfdietrich Rasch argued that German Pietism drew on an ascetic ideal of a personal relation to God cultivated in solitude at the same time as this very condition fueled a desire to share and discuss matters of faith with others

(Rasch, 1936, pp. 36–62). Out of this intrinsic paradox developed specific ways of articulating the intimate and private, and in the longer run, a specific culture of friendship that contrasted sharply to the upper-class view of such relationships as highly ritualized and goal oriented. Drawing partly on Rasch's hypothesis, later scholars have emphasized the role of the new generation of Halleian intellectuals to which Lange belonged (Barner, 1991; Meyer-Krentler, 1991). Already in 1733, Lange, together with his friend Immanuel Jakob Pyra, founded the Society for the Preservation of the German Language. At the core of this society was a new kind of sensual and pious poetry that sought to capture the immediacy of God's presence. Towards the end of the 1730s, the pious bent was gradually replaced by an equally sensual Anacreontic "carpe diem" poetry where relations of friendship painted in as vivid colors as possible served to capture the simple but pure happiness of the present moment.<sup>4</sup> It was in this context that Pyra and Lange published *Thirsis and Damon's Friendly Songs* (*Thirsis und Damons freundschaftliche Lieder*) (Pyra and Lange, 1745). In the introduction to this poem, which featured a touching declaration of friendship between Thirsis (Pyra) and Damon (Lange), the author declared that he knew that readers would "recognize their own feelings in the sensitive friendship between my two poets" (Pyra and Lange, 1745). If he thus invited readers to reflect on friendship, the deliberate attempt to teach how to practice and maintain friendship would be much more outspoken in another work published one year later. In 1746, Lange and his friend and colleague Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim—who was one of the inventors of the new Anacreontic poetry—published anonymously a collection of letters titled *Friendly Letters* (*Freundschaftliche Briefe*) (Lange and Gleim, 1746). In the introduction one of the authors described how he had come to appreciate and cultivate friendship as the highest good, and how such friendship could be maintained either directly by socializing with friends or indirectly through correspondence. He then continued by drawing attention to the larger task at hand.

If we manage to contribute to introducing the language of the hearts and affection, instead of the language of coercion and flattery, among the correspondents of our Fatherland; if we thus reach our goal, to our common satisfaction, then we will never

regret the pleasure we felt when making [this collection] public. It contains many letters that are only parts of the originals since we have omitted everything that does not contribute to our commitment (Lange and Gleim, 1746).

The aim of the collection was nothing less than to introduce to the German people a sincere, honest and intimate language of the heart. In order to accomplish this the authors had deliberately edited the letters to reinforce this particularly expressive and intimate idiom. In the letters themselves, the writers often accentuated the intense feelings of friendship and love by depicting in detail how they had met, what they had thought and felt during their time together and how departure had eventually given way to dark feelings of loneliness and grief.

Now, at the same time as Lange was occupied with the *Friendly Songs* and the *Friendly Letters*, he corresponded frequently with his friend Meier. In addition to the passages confirming their own friendship, the correspondence revolved around Lange's forthcoming *Horatian Odes* (*Horatzische Oden*), a compilation of odes written by a number of authors on various topics of which friendship was one (Lange, 1747). Meier and Gleim served as advisors and editors during the process of writing and publishing, and when the work was eventually published in 1747 it was with a long preface written by Meier in 1746, in which he praised the writings of his "dearest friend" (Lange, 1747). The friendship and collaboration between Lange and Meier were now well established, and the latter became increasingly involved in Lange's plan for a new way of writing what they referred to as "friendly letters." In a letter from January 1748 Meier thus wrote:

You have startled me with your letter of January 12. You write that some of my letters are worth considering for inclusion in a collection that Mr. Sulzer will publish. I did not expect this news. You will be responsible if it turns out that the letters that you have kept defile the collection. You want me to write more such letters, that you could add to the collection, and that is a hard task to fulfil.... I will meanwhile strive to fulfil your wish.... It is thus a praiseworthy endeavor to publish a collection of letters because we Germans are lacking such, and our Germans are not able, when one speaks of them generally, to write a good letter (Lange, 1770, pp. 204–205).

Meier's astonishment indicates that it was about this time that he became involved in Lange's plans to introduce and spread a civic practice of friendship by publishing another collection of ideal "friendly letters."

If the letter of January 1748 indicates that Meier had been introduced to Lange's plans, the general collaboration between the two was certainly deepened through the shared project of editing and publishing the moral weekly *The Sociable* (*Der Gesellige*) (1748–50). At this time moral weeklies—compilations of short texts on various topics written on a weekly basis for a morally educational purpose—were a popular genre among middle-class intellectuals. The first volume of *The Sociable*, published in June 1748, contained one contribution on friendship. While the text mainly reproduced ancient and Christian conceptions of virtuous and pious friendship, the second volume, also published in 1748, contained what is for my purposes a highly interesting piece on how to conduct a long-distance friendship (Lange and Meier, 1748, pp. 583–592). Friendship between physically separated persons can be conducted either through "friendly travels" (*freundschaftlichen Reisen*) or "friendly letters" (*freundschaftliche Briefe*). While friendly travels have the obvious advantage of leading to actual social interaction, longer periods of separation could easily lead to awkward deadlocks in which no one knows what to say because of the many strong emotions that have accumulated over time. Even more awkward were the situations where a friend suddenly showed up without having announced the arrival in advance. In contrast, to conduct a friendship through correspondence was easier and smoother, at the same time as it required practical writing skills. So far, the author claimed, attempts to establish such skills on a broader front had mostly been lacking in Germany. "We do not yet have the like in the German language, apart from the few pieces that emerged a while ago in Berlin under the title *Friendly Letters*, and that contain everything that this honorable title deserves" (Lange and Meier, 1748, p. 589).<sup>5</sup> The author, who was almost certainly Lange or Meier, continued by emphasizing that such collections of exemplary letters constituted a key to establishing sound correspondence and in the longer run to maintaining distant friendships.<sup>6</sup>



To summarize so far, in the 1740s Lange, Meier and some of the other Anacreontic poets undertook to introduce and teach ways of practising and maintaining friendship. While this is of course not something new in itself—the Anacreontic poets in fact relied heavily on Cicero and other ancient writers—their undertaking nevertheless reflected the specific vision of the Epicurean *carpe diem* lifestyle, as well as the larger *bürgerliche Gefühlskultur* of which it was part (Aurnhammer et al., 2004).<sup>7</sup> As such it revolved around passionate expressions of authentic, intimate and sensible friendship practised and maintained particularly through correspondence and other forms of writing. Since one could not expect the Germans to know this in advance, it was crucial to teach them by providing instruction and examples, especially in how to practice friendship by writing letters of friendship. The focus on written communication, in turn, reflects the larger context of the German civic Enlightenment and the emergence of the public sphere.

### **Friendship, middle-class identity and the public sphere**

In his 1936 work Rasch connected the culture of friendship to the emerging middle class (Rasch, 1936, pp. 31–43). On this account it was a class-specific phenomenon that took form as the new intellectual middle class sought to carve out its own identity. The culture of friendship provided a framework for socializing and relating to oneself as a cultivated and educated social individual. In this role, German middle-class intellectuals distanced themselves from the nobility at the same time as the nobility dismissed the new lower-class culture (Rasch, 1936, pp. 81–111). While Rasch's analysis made little impact at the time, interest in the new middle class has increased in the wake of the publication in 1961 of Jürgen Habermas's highly influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989). As Habermas convincingly argued, the identity of the growing middle class was inseparable from the emergence of the public sphere as the new domain where educated intellectuals shared ideas and knowledge beyond the immediate control of the state. Constituting the public sphere were new social institutions such as coffee houses, reading societies and salons, as well as new media such as moral weeklies and other

periodicals. Drawing on Habermas, a host of historians have explored many aspects of the emergence of the public sphere, including its social institutions, media forms and material culture. This, in turn, has inspired a new cultural history of the enlightenment wherein institutions and communication and exchange between large groups of people have replaced classical intellectual histories (Chartier, 1991; Goldgar, 1995; Goodman, 1996).

Rasch's hypothesis of a specific culture of friendship in fact complements Habermas's thesis in interesting ways. In addition to highlighting correspondence as an institution connected to the public sphere and to the Enlightenment at large, historians have singled out the moral weekly as a particularly important media form. Helga Brandes has thus remarked that the moral weekly was pivotal to the transformation of the public sphere and that it was a crucial element of Enlightenment culture (Brandes, 1999, p. 225). Similar revaluations of the traditionally despised moral weekly have been made by Elke Maar and by Wolfgang Martens (Maar, 1995; Martens, 1968). Just as Rasch had done before him, Martens argued that the moral weekly explored and articulated the identity of the new middle class. As a genre, the moral weekly featured shorter texts in which fictional characters addressed various morally educational topics. Sometimes, the texts incorporated supposed readers' letters that were in fact most often fictional compositions. The occurrence of fictional letters is of course relevant in this context as it brings to the fore the fluidity of the genre and practice of letter writing. Media historians have pointed out that it was in the early modern age that published collections of letters emerged (Arto-Haumacher, 1995, pp. 276–311; Daybell, 2012, pp. 175–216). These collections could feature authentic letters, sometimes heavily edited, or even fictional letters written to display various ideals. In the case of Lange and Meier, there is no reason to question that they were engaged in a long-running correspondence or that the collection of learned letters published by Lange in 1769–70 contained more or less authentic letters from the 1740s (Lange, 1770, 1769). What is equally clear, however, is that Lange also engaged in the writing and publication of heavily edited and fictional letters intended to introduce ways of practising friendship through correspondence (Lange and Gleim, 1746). In

addition, just two years later Lange and Meier launched *The Sociable*, which was the first of four moral weeklies that they would produce.<sup>8</sup>

Situated in the context of the public sphere, the apparently private nature of the friendship between Lange and Meier in fact turns out to be a public affair. That is, despite the apparently private topic, whatever they said about friendship they said in texts written to be published and distributed to the reading public. In addition to Rasch's hypothesis that the specific German culture of friendship emerged as a result of the paradoxical need to communicate the private and incommunicable, we can therefore add that there was another paradox in the attempt to teach and spread the practice of intimate and private friendship by making it public.

The potential tension between private and public raises the question of how we should understand the relation between the practice Lange and Meier promoted and their own friendship. It might be tempting to conclude that this was all a diligently edited theater for the reading middle class that concealed the underlying authentic selves. Instead, drawing on recent historical research, the self must itself be understood as a historical product shaped through mechanisms of subjectivation whereby beliefs and behaviors are internalized in relation to historically specific social norms and ideals (Dongen and Paul, 2017; Condren et al., 2006; Daston and Sibum, 2003).<sup>9</sup> There is no real self behind the social self. In other words, Lange and Meier's friendship might be said to have developed as an integral and indistinguishable—at the same time private and public—part of their own ideal practice of friendship. If this was the case already in the 1740s, it became all the clearer through the events of 1764.

### **A friend in need is a friend indeed**

Whatever plans and expectations Lange and Meier had for the establishment of a new practice of friendship, or for their own friendship for that matter, they certainly did not expect the tragedy that struck in 1764. In one and the same year Lange lost his beloved

wife, Doris, or Dorothea, in a sudden stroke, and then, after a four-month-long struggle with disease, his only son, Ludolph. Not only did the catastrophe turn Lange into a broken man, but it also affected his relationship with Meier and their approach to friendship more generally. One of the more direct consequences was that it triggered a series of events that would eventually lead Lange to write his biography of Meier. In it he tells the story in his own words.

I now come to the reason why I wrote this biography. This is something very moving for me. I cannot touch this point without vividly presenting my friend, with all his merits... This very best of friends, who did not try to avoid [my] sad circumstances..., but who, if I may say so, aided me—in the year 1764, when I lost my wife and then sixteen weeks later, my only son, my only child of hope, whom he loved tenderly—in the most comforting manner by publishing two elegies that had the most positive effect on my heart, and when I thanked him for doing this for me and for comforting me then he pressed my hand smiling his typical tender and warm smile. He said with tears, embracing me: My dear friend, do not thank me, but let us come to an agreement that reminds us of our mortality and that stipulates that the one of us who survives the other should write a memorial to the deceased and describe his life (Lange, 1778, pp. 10–11).

To this Lange replied with melancholy that there could hardly be any doubt of who would write about whom. After all, was he not eight years older, and had he not already been drained of life by sorrow and grief? And who knows how much more suffering that awaited him in the time to come, a time that he had to endure alone deprived of his closest family? On this count, however, time would in fact prove him wrong and enable him to pay his debt to his friend by honoring the agreement. These events too were carefully and colorfully depicted in the biography.

In the beginning of February love and duty drove me to visit him for a few days.... Oh, I should see and speak with him a last time, he whose love was so sweet to me, and with whom my soul was so precisely united as the souls of two friends had ever been! From his mouth I heard the request to compose his biography, for which purpose he referred me to a short text prepared by him (Lange, 1778, p. 69).

After having received these instructions, Lange stayed for a few more days with Meier. During one of the conversations they had, Meier again asked his friend to take up his pen, this time to write a few words of love after his departure.

Friend, will you again, can you again saddle your Pegasus, and write me something of love? ... I asked him, on what occasion I should ride, and to whom. With a relaxed but very eloquent manner worthy of an angel, he answered: I mean, when I die. A sudden and touching silence arose at this moment. The eyes of those present shone with moisture (Lange, 1778, p. 70).

Again, Lange obeyed the wish of his friend by including in the biography the same kind of elegy that Meier had once composed in honor of his wife and son. Among the contributions was a poem in several verses written by Lange.

Also you are leaving, my Meier, and I live  
Yet with an old man's cane!  
And with every breath I wear a sigh,  
In what is for me a deserted world!....

My old age turned into youth through Meier's love,  
I was given strength through his laughter,  
Strong and brave did he support me during the storms,  
That raged around me (Lange, 1778, pp. 171–173).

On the one hand, the biography seems to continue and further elaborate an already established discourse on friendship. This discourse combined the classical ideal of friendship as a mutual relation of virtue with the new Anacreontic ideal of intimate and sensible friendship (Classen, 2010; Garrioch, 2009). On the other hand, and as we will soon see, 1764 also marked a shift in the writing on friendship.

The loss of Lange's wife and son affected the discourse on friendship that he and Meier elaborated on two levels. First, it had the concrete effect of leading to new publications. Not only did it trigger the chain of events that led to the biography, but it also prompted the printing of a number of elegies. Meier thus wrote two elegies on Doris and Ludolph that were published separately in 1764 (Meier, 1764a, 1764b). The following year the elegy on Doris was published as an integral part of a larger tribute to her, which included contributions by a number of his friends (Lange, 1765). Second, these events also changed the focus and function of the discourse and practice of friendship. It is this second change that I will now discuss.

### **Friendship and therapeutic writing**

To clarify, we can hypothesize two opposing ways in which Lange could have reacted to these deaths. Either he could have turned against the discourse of intimate friendship that he had himself been advocating, a discourse that now appeared as artificial and false in the light of what turned out to be real suffering. Or he could instead have embraced and used it in his own grieving process. Although there are a few remarks that can be interpreted in favor of the first, most evidence seems to point to the second. Lange was indeed supported by his friends, and his particular relationship with Meier now became emblematic of the ideal of intimate friendship between middle-class intellectuals. That said, his loss nevertheless changed their discourse on friendship. The change did not so much reside in the shift from Epicurean declarations of joyful friendship to themes of loyalty and hardship. After all, these topics had existed side by side all along. Instead, it consisted in a shift towards what I refer to as therapeutic writing.<sup>10</sup>

Running all through the writings published after 1764 is a stoic melancholy keynote, sometimes explicit, sometimes interwoven and underlying. The voice was that of a broken and deprived man who was yet forced to remain in this "deserted world." While this voice marks the elegies as well as the biography, it can be traced also in the moral weekly with what is in this context a cruel title: *The Blissful (Der Glückselige)* (1763–1768).

What is interesting here is that the contributions from 1763, most probably written by Lange, aired an optimism fitted to the title that partly disappeared as the fourth part was published in 1764.<sup>11</sup> In a particularly gloomy piece the author effectively shattered the dreams of the happy life by drawing attention to the brevity and futility of human existence (Lange and Meier, 1764, p. 49). Having set the scene of the short span and hardship of life, the author asked the rhetorical question of whether it made sense to cultivate such an attitude towards existence. By way of answering, he discussed two perspectives that did not deny but rather profited from life's difficulties. "First, one can use this moment in an excellent way to weaken the fear of death" (Lange and Meier, 1764, p. 58). More specifically, the author suggested that actively imagining the hardships and suffering of life leads to the conclusion that there is not much to lose in death. "Second, we can use these situations to strengthen the conviction of the immortality of the soul" (Lange and Meier, 1764, p. 59). Far from being some vain hope, the immortality of the soul was a deeper truth that nonetheless could be strengthened by contemplating the suffering of this life. To this advice was added a third reflection in a sequel where the author emphasized the reckless waste of time that marked most human lives. The moral was here that awareness of the short span of life—which despite the suffering also contains moments of joy and happiness—can help people to actually value and make good use of their time (Lange and Meier, 1764, p. 86).

Although we cannot know for sure that the contributions discussed above were actually written by Lange, evidence seems to suggest that they were and that he might have written them in the midst of his own grieving process. Regardless of their authorship, these texts serve as a good entry point into the topic of therapeutic writing. As the passages above might indicate, this writing was marked by an ongoing effort to understand and cope with loss and suffering. In the preface to the elegy on his wife written by his friends Lange himself observed that the feelings that he was now able to write about were not the same as those that had stunned him at the immediate moment of loss.

These are indescribable. A storm of melancholy passions, reinforced by terror, stunned me, and struck me to the ground. They have now disappeared. These, that I have described, they remain. They are not the inventions of a poet. I'm clearly aware of them. Since they are the true feelings of my heart: so they will be righteous for anyone who feels tenderness, and who is capable of true love. (Lange, 1765).

The point is not that the Epicurean discourse was replaced by its opposite, but that we here see a therapeutic way of writing about difficult feelings and experiences. This approach was adopted by Lange but also by his friend Meier. In the elegies we thus see how Meier situated the death of Lange's wife and son in exactly the kind of therapeutic contexts that were discussed in *The Blissful*. Their lives had unfolded as a long path of hardship and suffering, with small glimpses of happiness and joy, that had now come to an end. In the elegy to Doris, Meier thus explicitly tried to alleviate his friend's pain by emphasizing that Doris had lived a pious life that now enabled her to enjoy the kingdom of God (Meier, 1764a, pp. 4–6). In a similar vein, he emphasized how Ludolph was now infinitely happier than he could ever have been in this world (Meier, 1764b, p. 4). In both cases, Meier made heavy use of the topic of the brevity and hardship of life.

As we have seen, the deaths of Doris and Ludolph led Lange and Meier to partially shift the direction of their public relationship from the general celebration of loyal and intimate friendship to what can be referred to as therapeutic writing. The texts reveal a grieving process organized around exercises with roots deep in ancient philosophy. What makes things even more interesting, however, is the explicit acknowledgement of writing itself as a therapeutic practice. The role of writing itself is something that Lange came back to over and over again. In the biography Lange thus confirmed that the elegies "had the most positive effect on my heart" (Lange, 1778, p. 11). In the introduction to the elegy on his wife, Doris, Lange told his readers about the purpose the text had served for him. "So it was my greatest, my tormenting anxiety day and night, that I was not able to thank her for her fidelity and love with a single word, that I was not able to bid her farewell. It is these thanks that I hereby send to her" (Lange, 1765). To be able to write, and to have his friends writing, was for Lange a crucial part of the grieving process. In a similar way, writing



and correspondence served a mainly therapeutic function in alleviating pain by recalling and preserving memories of happy times or simply by seeing things from a larger, vanitas perspective. In the introduction to the collection of letters that was published by Lange in 1769–70 and that contained the surviving correspondence between him and Meier, he described in his now-typical melancholy voice, how letters had comforted him in the hardest of times. “These letters have aided me during the hardest times of my life. I have comforted myself, at certain points in life, that these and so many worthy men have honored me. The small number of friends who remain are for me a sanctuary” (Lange, 1769). Although Lange still advocated intimate and sensual friendship as a way of life, he now seemed to have discovered another value that he now felt obliged to convey to his readers. “Many readers must learn from these letters the sensations that they mediate, and strive to make them last” (Lange, 1769). In a special preface to the reader Lange described how he, “a man who will die without children,” had been asked over and over again to share these letters, “this treasure of the world,” and how he eventually had chosen to do so despite the risk of pride (Lange, 1769). In the end, he did not publish them to make himself immortal but to aid his readers by teaching them about sincere and honest friendship.

In addition to Lange’s acknowledgment of the therapeutic function of writing in connection to his own process of grief, therapeutic writing also marked the final phase of his friendship with Meier. Recall here that Meier did not ask his friend to provide for his family or to help out with any practicalities. What he asked was instead to saddle the Pegasus and write a few words of friendship and love, something that Lange did by composing the biography and by organizing and contributing to the elegy on Meier. The practice thus went in both directions in the sense that Lange eventually had the opportunity to assist his friend through a final instance of writing.

As we have seen, Lange and Meier’s discourse on friendship unfolded in ways that must be understood within the larger context of the emerging public sphere. As such the ideals that they advanced were shaped in relation to the ideals of the intellectual middle

class that they were themselves part of. Until 1764 there is something almost predictable in the way in which they contributed to the spread of a new ideal and practice of friendship. What the deaths of Doris and Ludolph illustrate, however, is the way in which a sudden and unexpected tragedy changed the direction and focus of the discourse. In the case of Lange and Meier, rather than turning things upside down, the events of 1764 redirected the focus towards what I have referred to as therapeutic writing. While this form of writing was in a sense both private and intimate, it was nevertheless made public by being offered to the new middle class of reading men and women.

How should we understand the turn towards therapeutic writing? Did the events of 1764 simply force Lange and Meier into unexplored territory, or did they in fact connect with an already existing discourse and practice? At least to some extent, the turn to therapeutic writing can be understood in the larger context of what scholars have referred to as philosophy as a way of life. It was in the 1980s that the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot argued that ancient philosophy, far from being an abstract theory of knowledge, constituted a way of life marked by spiritual and often therapeutic exercises conducted to transform the subject cognitively as well as morally (Hadot, 1995).<sup>12</sup> Hadot's interpretation definitely struck a chord, and in the following decades a number of inspired readings were made first of the ancient case and then also of early modern philosophers such as René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and others (Nussbaum, 1996; Annas, 1993; Corneanu, 2011; Zenker, 2007; Jones, 2006; Gaukroger, 2001; Hunter, 2001; Hatfield, 1986). Situated in this context, Lange and Meier's remarks on how to deal with the hardships of life by adopting certain attitudes come into view as part of a larger tradition. Compare for instance the reflections on the brevity of life in *The Blissful* with a famous passage in Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*.

The rising regions of joy appear only from a distance and recede from view easily as the palatial formations of the clouds in the azure blue heavens.... These days pass before us with flying haste, these short days during which we breathe despair and from which we soon sink. Barely do we bloom as young roses and discover the illusory, magical feeling of joy before we sink down (Lange and Meier, 1764, p. 49).

Of man's life, his time is a point, his existence a flux, his sensation clouded, his body's entire composition corruptible, his vital spirit an eddy of breath, his fortune hard to predict, his fame uncertain. Briefly, all the things of the body, a river; all the things of the spirit, dream and delirium; his life a warfare and a sojourn in a strange land, his after-fame oblivion. (Aurelius, 1998, p. II:17)

As Hadot has pointed out, the *vanitas* perspective constituted an exercise of imagination pursued to foster specific stoic attitudes and courses of action. In order for this effect to take place it was crucial to constantly invent and formulate new variations on the same topic, rather than just mechanically learning and applying the dogmas. "In order to reawaken it, it is not enough to reread what has already been written.... What counts is the reformulation: the act of writing or talking to oneself, right now, in the very moment when one needs to write" (Hadot, 2001, p. 51). Despite the many differences regarding time and context, it is striking how Lange and Meier present their own *vanitas* perspective not as a pessimistic truth but as a positive exercise comforting and curing a tormented soul. If we accept that philosophy as a way of life provides an important context for understanding Lange and Meier's approach to the loss of Doris and Ludolph, there is also a striking difference that recoils back on this very perspective. Despite scrupulous scholarly work with sources and interpretations, the Hadotian reading has remained strangely detached from contexts such as the public sphere. As a consequence, spiritual and therapeutic exercises have come to the fore as an individual project, or even as a solitary project that required confinement from the world. While such readings make sense in some instances, I suggest that the analysis has much to gain by taking a more collective approach, for instance by adopting and integrating some of the results and perspectives developed within the field of friendship studies (Digeser, 2016, 2013; Schwarzenbach, 2015; Caine, 2009). The case of Lange and Meier is here but one example of how the historical analysis of spiritual and therapeutic exercises and friendship studies could mutually benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration.

## Concluding remarks

This study contributes to the history of friendship but also to the history of philosophical, scientific and social practices and to media and material history by focusing on Lange and Meier's attempt to present and communicate ways of practicing and maintaining friendship, particularly through correspondence but also through other forms of writing. The analysis draws on Digeser's account of friendship as a family of practices but adapts the analytical apparatus to better fit historical analysis. As such it adopts a social constructivist approach in understanding friendship as a large number of partly distinct, partly overlapping, historically contingent and context-specific practices. Thus seen, the point is not to claim that friendship somehow became a practice first in eighteenth century Germany, but to analyze specific historical discourses and practices. What was specific to this context was that the practice of friendship was intimately bound to the Anacreontic poetry and to the German civic Enlightenment and the emerging public sphere at large. As such friendship revolved around the cultivation of intimate and sensible relations maintained through correspondence and other forms of writing. Furthermore, Lange and Meier did not just teach and communicate this ideal way of practicing friendship in published collections of letters and moral weeklies, but by incorporating their own correspondence, poems, elegies and biographies in the corpus, they turned their own relationship into a public example. Rather than seeing this as a carefully directed theater, I argue that we ought to approach their own friendship as being co-constructed together with and indistinguishable from their ideal of friendship. In the 1760s, however, the course of events took an unexpected turn as Lange lost his wife and only son, and as a direct result their friendship shifted focus from the happy Epicurean life to what I refer to as therapeutic writing. Marking this way of writing was the explicit emphasis on the ways in which correspondence and other forms of writing could alleviate, comfort and heal a soul perturbed and consumed by negative passions of grief, sorrow and suffering. In highlighting this function of writing, Lange and Meier connected to the tradition of philosophy as a spiritual and therapeutic exercise pursued to cure a soul perceived as diseased. While one might hypothesize that the events of 1764 would make

the relationship more private, especially in the case of Lange, it instead remained a highly public affair where Lange's suffering as well as his friendship with Meier was communicated through elegies, the publication of letters, and Lange's biography of Meier. By communicating loss and suffering, but also hope, in published writings Lange and Meier effectively turned their own fate into a public example. Given that they spearheaded and mastered the key media of the emerging public sphere one should not underestimate the impact that the communication of their own ideal friendship might have had on the ideals and practices of friendship in the German civic Enlightenment.

### About the author

Andreas Rydberg is a researcher at the Department of History of Science and Ideas at Uppsala University, Sweden. He defended his doctoral dissertation on scientific experience at the intersection between early modern German philosophy, theology and medicine in June 2017. Since then he has been working on various topics connected with the process of identity formation in historical context. In spring 2019 he began a larger project on self-knowledge and objectivity in eighteenth-century Germany, which has, somewhat unexpectedly, led to a study of how practices of friendship and gender fueled and shaped a new middle-class moral self in the German civic Enlightenment.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Schenk's work is the only modern biography of Meier. As such it is heavily indebted to Samuel Gotthold Lange's biography from 1778, which will be discussed in detail throughout this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> All translations from German are my own.
- <sup>3</sup> One dimension that deserves attention but that has been too complex to integrate and account for in this study is the question of gender. That the Anacreontic ideal of friendship or the specific friendship between Lange and Meier was gendered needs hardly be pointed out. For the gendered aspects of German eighteenth-century discourses on friendship see: Kagel, 2007; Mauser and Becker-Cantarino, 1991.
- <sup>4</sup> Rococo or Anacreontic poetry has attracted scholarly interest for many decades. For an overview see: Borries and Borries, 1991. For more initiated discussions of the state of the art see: Anger, 1962; Beetz, 2005; Kemper, 1991, pp. 1–16; Kertscher, 1994, pp. 7–15; Sauder, 1974, pp. 12–45.
- <sup>5</sup> It is worth noticing that Lange and Meier's work came before Christian Fürchtegott Geller's popular and influential *Briefe, nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung vom dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen* (1751), which provided detailed instructions in how to write letters. See: Helgason, 2007, pp. 52–56.

- <sup>6</sup> As Martens has pointed out, the moral weeklies were typically written by one or a few authors contracted by a publisher. These authors composed essays and letters (of which most but not all were fictional) to give the readers the impression of a lively debate among several writers (Martens, 1968, pp. 123–141).
- <sup>7</sup> The ways in which Lange and Meier connected to and used canonical discourses on friendship would have required a separate study. In this article I have played down these features in order to focus on what I consider to be more interesting contexts. For the *longue durée* history of friendship see: Caine, 2009; Classen and Sandidge, 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> The others were *Man (Der Mensch, 1751–1756)*, *The Realm of Nature and Moral (Das Reich der Natur und der Sitten, 1757–1762)* and *The Blissful (Der Glückselige, 1763–1768)*. See also: Martens, 1995; Zenker, 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> It is well known that letter writing in the eighteenth century was subordinated to and regulated by genre conventions, and that expressions of tender feelings of love did not necessarily reflect actual feelings. While this must of course be taken into account, the point here is not to try to reconstruct a friendship beyond the layer of genre conventions, but rather to see such conventions as integral parts of the social construction of friendship. That is, from a social constructivist perspective the Anacreontic practice of friendship produced not only behavior but also feelings, values and identities. In other words, expression of feelings of intimate and sensual friendship in words and writing potentially also produces such feelings. Without pushing this into absurdity the social constructivist approach is especially suitable for analyzing the case of Lange and Meier. For the genre conventions governing letter writing in the German civic Enlightenment see especially Helgason, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Although the reading of philosophy as a therapy of the soul has by now become fairly established, relatively little has been written about therapeutic writing in the early modern period. Perhaps the most thorough study so far is Markus Zenker's *Therapie im literarischen Text: Johann Georg Zimmermanns Werk "Über die Einsamkeit" in seiner Zeit* (Zenker, 2007; see also Ceron, 2016).
- <sup>11</sup> According to a letter that Lange wrote to the publishing house Gebauer in 1762, Lange was the sole author behind *The Blissful* in the start-up phase of the project (Conrad, 2015, p. 47).
- <sup>12</sup> Whereas Hadot typically refers to *spiritual exercises*, Nussbaum focuses especially on *therapies* and *therapeutic exercises*. This said, both would agree that in ancient philosophy spiritual exercises served as a form of therapeutic for a soul perceived as diseased and perturbed by passions due to misconceptions and ignorance. In this article I use "spiritual exercises" and "therapeutic exercises" synonymously, as different names of one and the same phenomenon.

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