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Nicholas D. Paige, *Before Fiction: The Ancien Régime of the Novel.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 304 pp. Notes, index, table of contents. $59.95 U.S. (cl, ebk). ISBN 978-0812243550.

Review by Thomas DiPiero, University of Rochester.

In this highly learned, intellectually ambitious, and refreshingly innovative study of the novel, Nicholas D. Paige attempts a history of the ever-elusive genre from a new perspective. In most recent studies of the early modern European novel, we find a justifiable suspicion of "firsts" or origins as well as of narratives of development that always seem to culminate in the high realism of the nineteenth century. Paige, perhaps more suspicious than many of such narratives, is committed to eschewing the presentism of other studies of the novel that injects contemporary critical thought into the cultural productions of the past. There is little discussion in this book of techniques of realism or of the social or historical causes that may have facilitated the rise of imaginative prose fiction as a genre. There are, however, a number of beautifully researched and wonderfully astute readings of standout writers from Madame de Lafayette to Jacques Cazotte, all from the perspective of their works' relationship to the phenomenon of fiction. Paige relates the history of this phenomenon as a history of form, restricting his critical efforts to the formal and defining features of one of the novel's most fundamental components: its imaginative invention of people and events. Specifically, and in many ways an exhaustive inquiry into what Paige calls "Coleridge's unfortunately proverbial 'willing suspension of disbelief'" (p. xiii), this book looks at the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels so frequently and tenaciously claimed ties to historical reality.

Such claims occur largely "before fiction" and help constitute the "Ancien Régime of the novel." Here we are dealing with works that are not completely fictional, in the sense that readers are asked, with or without irony, to pretend that the works are tied in some way--through keys, editorial prefaces, et cetera--to the real world. Paige carefully distinguishes fiction from work that is "pseudofactual," a term he borrows from Barbara Foley and a concept that will be the principal focus of the six chapters of his book. In her work on documentary fiction, Foley calls "pseudofactual" any novel in which "the reader is asked to accept the text's characters and situations as invented....At the same time, however, the writer asks the reader to approach the text as if it were a nonfictional text...."[1] Foley argues that readers of pseudofactual novels are asked not to view works as being without referent, but rather to seek those referents in relations instead of things. For Paige, the pseudofactual mode "asserts literal truth so as to lay claim to other sorts of truth (moral, emotional, and so on)," whereas fiction, which is simultaneously "real and not real," makes oblique propositions about the world and "operates analogically or hypothetically" (pp. 17-18). When fiction is coming into being, Paige argues in his discussion of Cazotte's *Diable amoureux*, "people are realizing that their novels can seem true even when they are literally unbelievable" (p. 187).

The individual chapters of *Before Fiction* are dedicated either to proving that something or someone represented in a novel is impossible (and perhaps thereby unbelievable) or that a way of understanding that person or thing functions analogously to something the reader already knows (such as him- or herself). The formation of analogical models of reality, as we have seen in such seminal critical works as

Timothy J. Reiss' *Discourse of Modernism* or Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, was key to the growth of modern subjectivity and reason, and Paige shows how pseudofactual works encouraged readers to find themselves in contemporary novels and expand their realities.

In the book's truly brilliant first chapter, Paige provides a fresh take on Madame de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*, no mean feat given the abundance of scholarship surrounding that work. Through close reading of the novel and of the contemporary buzz it generated--principally through the work of Jean-Baptiste-Henri de Valincour and Jean-Antoine de Charnes--Paige reconsiders the historicity of this work frequently labeled the first novel in French and finds that not only is the Princess herself the only of the work's principal characters who did not exist in history, she *could not* exist. That is because, as Paige's painstaking research shows, it is not simply the case that there was no such person as the Princess (it is difficult to prove the negative, after all). Rather, each time the Princess figures in a scene that depicts a genuine historical moment, "the place the Princess occupies in the novel is already occupied in history by someone else" (p. 42). That is, the different historical personages who actually participated in the historical events depicted block the possibility that the Princess as a unique, historically real individual could have existed.

Calling the Princess "what may be literature's first deliberately counterfactual heroine" (p. 43), Paige shows that the Princess' idiosyncratic behavior and lack of historical referent not only put *La Princesse de Clèves* into direct contradistinction to romance; they also point to an anti-tragic inadequation between intimate feelings and public actions, which Paige maintains gives readers their identificatory pleasure. The conclusion Paige draws from Madame de Lafayette's invention is succinct yet decisive: "Since the Princess refers to no one but readers themselves, the novel's grounding in reality undergoes a seismic shift: its truth lies not in its correspondence to real historical actors but in its uncanny resemblance to the reader's psychic reality. The radical effect of *La Princesse de Clèves* is to demonstrate that it makes no difference at all that the Princess never existed and never could have, provided that you read with one new thing in mind: its real subject is you" (p. 53). Here the form that fiction--or the pseudofactual--takes appears to exercise a profound effect on the new kinds of identification that can animate readers.

Subsequent chapters deal with Subligny, Crébillon, Rousseau, Diderot, Cazotte, and others, but each interrogates the unique tension between types and generalities that sustains individual works and generates in readers the urge to understand--not only the world these works depict, but their own interiorities that would help make sense of that world. In the chapters on Crébillon and Rousseau, for example, Paige similarly finds that readerly identification, which consists not "in becoming what you are not...but in recognizing what you already are" (p. 127), derives from narrators and characters who occupy impossible positions and who nevertheless return to us the reassuring consideration that there are other people who think like us. And it is precisely the act of harnessing people who think like us that constitutes fiction--whatever that is--in the end. That is because "there is no 'first' work of fiction, no rupture in practice that follows a revolution in the meaning of History or a mutation in human identity. Instead, it seems to me [writes Paige] very likely that fiction in my restrained sense is little more than a nebula of writing practices and ideas about writing--techniques invented and modified, sometimes quickly and sometimes not, through a difficult-to-specify dialectical relationship with what people think literature can and should do" (p. 205). Paige addresses the question of the origins of fiction by stipulating that such a phenomenon arises, or at least can be said to exist, not when a given writer produces what we retrospectively recognize as what fiction will have become, but when producing imaginative literature in this way more or less supplants its previous manifestations.

Paige's investigation of pseudofactual works is comprised of two principal components: well-researched and ingenious close reading of individual works, and meditation on whether the authors of those works, whom we have traditionally taken to be the principal shapers of our literary canons, have really influenced literary history as much as we have believed. Generally speaking, this latter query begins with the question of whether a given author can be said to have produced a genuine work of fiction, or

whether his or her work is still tethered to the pseudofactual regime. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the authors Paige treats appear to have accomplished the unlikely feat of producing what at least appears to be fictional work, despite writing in a pseudofactual context.

What will surprise many readers of *Before Fiction*, however, is Paige's contention that with regards to fiction, at least, none of these writers had much of an effect at all. Describing *La Princesse de Clèves*, for example, he writes that "the novel was an isolated manipulation of longstanding conventions and local practices that changed precisely nothing" (p. 36). Paige concludes most of his sustained discussions of individual authors in similar fashion. Regarding Cazotte's *Diable amoureux*, for example, he notes that the novel, in its handling of the supernatural, is new. "But to what does this newness really amount? The typical way of pursuing the problem is simply to agree to see in this one novel a sign that some deep cultural and conceptual substrate is shifting: fiction is coming into existence, people are realizing that their novels can seem true even when they are literally unbelievable. It's quick and convenient, because the substrate is invisible and can contain whatever we need it to" (p. 187).

For a book of such intellectual richness and density, this seems a little dismissive. Paige relates on more than one occasion that he is interested in the history of fiction as the history of form, yet he is less interested in the significance of that form than he is in its composition. Early in the book he argues that "the way people write novels follows from the way they think; it is because the way they think changes that the novel changes" (p. 24). One might thus be prepared to believe that, if the way people think changes, so, too, might "deep cultural and conceptual substrates," and it would not seem like much of a stretch to imagine that it is the way *people* think--and not individual thinkers--that has an effect on novels. Throughout his book, Paige argues that individual thinking does not make fiction or cause it to evolve. Fiction, much like language, cannot exist as a one-off, but must reside, instead, in common practice. It would seem, then, that the substrate cannot contain "whatever we need it to," at least not in serious literary or intellectual history.

Fiction, as Paige reminds us repeatedly, is a special use of language, and even in the last sentence of his book--which one might read as a hint toward a much-welcomed sequel--he writes that "what is fictional about modern fiction may be much less its contents than its modes of narration" (p. 206). And one might add that because it is a specialized form of language, literature knows in a way that discursive language does not; it does not seem at all surprising to suggest that what contemporaries may have been feeling or experiencing at a non-discursive level might reflect itself in language that relies more on evocative, even vague suggestion than statement. Nor does it seem surprising that dozens or even hundreds of years later, scholars, equipped with historical and cultural data contemporaries lacked, might be able to tease out and articulate such meanings based on the consistency, cohesiveness, and coherence with which they expressed themselves in particular texts. And it is precisely those measures of the reliability of our theories that ought to keep us from making our literature or the thought that underpins it contain "whatever we need it to."

Whether such substrates exist in reality or only in the critical imagination, Paige's principal enterprise is both ambitious and theoretically provocative. While his readings of individual novels are standout examples of close reading, one might ask for a more sustained discussion of what amounts to Paige proving the negative. In other words, it would be very instructive to have a more sustained discussion of what it means that these writers produced works that at least verge on the fictional, even if they changed "precisely nothing." Paige argues that these are works that challenge our theories, but understanding his views on the nature of that challenge would be welcomed.

Nonetheless, this book establishes a new formal and literary historical model for analyzing the novel, while in the process engaging some long-standing critical conundrums, in many ways summed up in one of the book's final questions: "At what moment does fiction 'exist?'" (p. 196). Paige contends that it exists not when a single writer accomplishes the apparently anachronistic feat of producing a one-off

that later authors will imitate, but when shared writerly practices and their attendant justifications coalesce to produce works that resemble one another in what we can recognize as a persisting mode. Early individual works may produce the illusion that they influenced the direction fiction would take, but that is merely a coincidence produced by apparent similarities in the various data points that overly ingenious critics fabricate to produce a cogent narrative of development.

And this is where some enduring critical problems confront Paige's work on fiction: What, in fact, constitutes our data when we are dealing with the novel? When does resemblance between or among works become identity? What, in fact, constitutes resemblance in the first place, and what are the conditions necessary for it to appear? How, finally, do we draw a line between critical insight and excessive ingenuity? Paige doesn't answer these--and he doesn't need to, really--but sometimes, despite the fact that it would appear he has some concrete answers to offer, he allows his rigorous, data-based analyses to bathe in the analogic power of the novel. In his reading of the power of fiction in *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* he suggests how we might perceive the answers to these larger questions: "It is because Meilcour and Lursay are not real that they become, for the space of this novel, human beings" (p. 110). That might be, after all, when fiction becomes fiction.

NOTE

[1] Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 107.

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