

Jan Herman, Mladen Kozul, and Nathalie Kremer. *Le Roman véritable: stratégies préfacielles au XVIII^e siècle*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008. ix+335pp. £65;€90;US\$135. ISBN 978-0-7294-0947-6.

Le Roman véritable offers a new perspective on the relationship between fiction and reality in the eighteenth-century French novel. The authors question the received idea that in presenting their works as authentic documents (memoirs, collections of letters, found manuscripts, historical accounts), eighteenth-century novelists were seeking to trick their readers by creating an illusion of reality. Taking issue with George May's characterization of the credulity of eighteenth-century readers (May, *Le Dilemme du roman au XVIII^e siècle* [Paris: PUF, 1963]), the authors of *Le Roman véritable* argue that eighteenth-century prefaces served to establish a new reading pact that, paradoxically, "ne nie pas le caractère fictionnel du discours mais au contraire le met en évidence. Ce pacte est celui du 'roman véritable,' qui semble à première vue reposer sur une impossibilité logique. Il s'agit de montrer ici que cette impossibilité logique est une des 'possibilités' de la littérature" (3). The purpose of the book, then, is to offer a new interpretation of the problematic status of fiction in the eighteenth century. Although the authors build upon May's classic study, they nonetheless question his central thesis. Perhaps, they argue, the dilemma of the novel should be understood not, as May saw it, as a conflict between competing aesthetic and moral demands (realistic representation versus moral edification), but in epistemological and pragmatic terms. Did fiction present itself as such in the eighteenth century, and how did it achieve legitimacy in a cultural landscape that was largely hostile to the novel?

The book is organized not chronologically but around the different levels on which the preface operates. The first part serves as an *état présent* of relevant scholarship and as an extended introduction to the authors' argument and methodology. Mladen Kozul offers a detailed exposition of May's study and a threefold critique of his argument: first, the conflicting poetic and moral demands that for May constituted the novel's dilemma were in fact "les composantes essentielles de tout discours critique ou poétique à l'âge classique" (31); second, the neoclassical notion of *vraisemblance* had an ethical dimension and thus cannot be understood simply in terms of realistic representation; third, poetic mutations during the period were such that moral concerns were gradually subsumed to the relationship between a work and its reader (around notions such as sympathy and interest). This last claim serves as a justification for what the authors refer to as their pragmatic approach to the study of the novel.

The second part of the book focuses on the narrative dimension of the preface, which encompasses fictions pertaining to the origin of the text or the identity of its author. In chapter 4, Jan Herman addresses the problem of authorship facing eighteenth-century novelists, not only because of the fragile status of the novel as a genre, but also because of the taboos surrounding self-expression during the period. In chapter 5, he argues that the reliance on commonplaces (such as the motif of the found manuscript) in the preface was such that the claim “ceci n'est pas un roman” paradoxically became a marker of fiction. In chapters 6 and 7, Kozul shows how the novel established itself in a discursive landscape that was hostile to it, by integrating features of theological discourse and contesting the orthodox critique of the novel from within. The preface maintained a particularly complex relationship to the notion of seduction, Kozul argues, because it had to draw readers in even as it contested the orthodox accusation that the novel was a seductive genre that led readers astray.

In the third part of the book, Nathalie Kremer focuses on the self-reflexive dimension of the preface, which encompasses discussions of the verisimilitude, veracity, or moral exemplarity of the text and reflections on its potential reception. Chapters 8 through 11 are organized around four configurations of the relationship between truth, verisimilitude, and fiction: “le vrai est vraisemblable, le vrai est invraisemblable, le non-vrai (la fiction) est vraisemblable, le non-vrai (la fiction) est invraisemblable” (224). What emerges from these chapters is the tremendous elasticity of the concept of *vraisemblance* during the period; according to Kremer, the exploration of “les différentes postures que peut prendre le vraisemblable par rapport au vrai” (224) contributes to the gradual emergence of a space for fiction as a special category of truth.

Le Roman véritable is not an easy read. Terms such as “actant pivotale,” “préface demi-assomptive,” “apparat péritextuel,” and “hétéro-diégétisé” abound, and sentences such as “Le récit préfaciel inscrit dans la préface dénégative la logique de la légitimation endogène” (216) require readers to absorb the authors’ terminology in order to follow their argument. A more substantive criticism concerns the subtly teleological orientation of the argument: the *roman véritable* is viewed as “une des ‘possibilités’ de la littérature” (3) and its prefaces as “des laboratoires discursifs d’une vérité fictionnelle, ou d’une fiction véritable” (12). In other words, as I understand it, eighteenth-century prefaces laid the necessary groundwork for the emergence of a novelistic paradigm that would achieve its fullest expression “avec les grandes fresques balzaciennes, qui se passeront souvent de préface” (11). When the authors exclaim that “avant que le pacte de la feintise ludique n’établisse la gratuité de la fiction et son autonomie poétique, que de terrains à explorer” (9), one senses that these terrains

are understood not so much as historically distinct alternatives to the modern novel, but as preparatory exercises for the emergence of fiction as a possible world with its own autonomous truth value.

Like May's study, *Le Roman véritable* focuses primarily on the first half of the eighteenth century and claims to offer an account of the evolution of the novel. But the authors' periodization remains somewhat vague, and readers may be left wondering whether 1761, the date of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, marks an important outer limit for them as it did for May. This ambiguity may simply result in part from the non-chronological presentation of the book. But it left me wondering whether the authors' argument could adequately account for the epistemological status of the novel in the second half of the eighteenth century. How does the paradigm of the *roman véritable*, which is said to establish "l'autonomie d'un discours non-référentiel" (298), explain novels such as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), which was originally published as part of the author's experimental work of natural history, *Les Études de la nature* (1784–88), and which lifted many of its descriptions directly from his travel account, *Voyage à l'Île-de-France* (1773)? Here, the question of the epistemological status of the novel must be posed not in terms of the quest for legitimacy, but in terms of the deep connections between novelistic discourse and empirical writing practices in the period.

These reservations notwithstanding, *Le Roman véritable* makes an important contribution to the study of the eighteenth-century novel and is impressive in its fusion of formalist and historicist approaches. One of the great virtues of the book is that it moves us away from self-congratulatory accounts of naive eighteenth-century readers and acknowledges the sophistication of the period's aesthetic strategies (along similar lines, see Nicholas Paige, "Rousseau's Readers Revisited: The Aesthetics of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): 131–54). It is also heartening to see eighteenth-century scholars doing such fruitful collaborative work, both in this volume and in the anthologies of eighteenth-century prefaces that served as the basis for it. There is a real spirit of intellectual generosity, collective endeavour, and dialogue in *Le Roman véritable*, in keeping with the spirit of the Republic of Letters. I hope that despite the reservations expressed here, this review will be understood in the same spirit.

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