

H-France Forum Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, #3

Jeffrey N. Peters, *The Written World. Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. vii + 272 pp. Figures, notes, and Copyright index. \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3697-7; \$99.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8101-3698-4; \$34.95 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0-8101-3699-1.

Review Essay by David L. Sedley, Haverford College

The Written World has on its cover an image from *La Manière universelle de M. Desargues, pour pratiquer la perspective* (1648). This book, written and illustrated by Abraham Bosse and based on the projective geometry of Girard Desargues, extends the theories of perspective codified by Leon Battista Alberti and his followers. [1] Alberti directed painters to pose a central point at the apparent conjunction of parallel lines in order to lend depth and coherence to their compositions. Desargues reinterpreted and renamed Alberti's central point (and other points like it) as a point at infinity. Consequently, the convergent lines of a visual representation could be taken to indicate the infinite more emphatically than before.

As an illustration of the art of putting objects in a perspective that emphasizes their connection to infinity, Bosse's image suits Peters' book to a T. Peters represents his objects of study—mainly a series of works of seventeenth-century French literature—with an eye to showing their affinity with the infinite. He frequently discusses infinity through *chora*, the Ancient Greek term used by Plato and adopted by Jacques Derrida to denote the space underlying all finite places and place-based thought. Because *chora* is imperceptible as well as infinite, references to it must be indirect and so require the close readings that Peters applies to his chosen texts. *Chora* functions as both the precondition of philosophy and its by-product. Following Plato and Derrida, Peters associates it with what makes philosophy possible in the first place, while conceiving it as the source of the literary, in particular of the “likely stories”—in contrast to strictly logical or certain discourses—that are the stuff of literature.

Although I have not engaged *chora* in my own work, I am quite sympathetic to Peters' argument. I agree that infinity plays a key role in literary experience and in accounts of its value, and I concur that early modern culture offers an especially rich terrain for exploring relations between the literary and the infinite. I therefore welcome *The Written World* as an accurate, significant, and timely assessment of the literature of the *Grand Siècle*.

I will say something more about its timeliness, but first I want to make a caveat about its accuracy. Whenever something is put in perspective some of its elements get smaller while others get bigger. This observation is particularly true of perspectival schemes in the tradition of Alberti and Desargues, where the dimensionality of a picture stems from the relative shrinking or enlarging of objects along the lines leading toward the central point, point at infinity, vanishing point, or whatever the point or points are called. Peters' picture of literary texts as infinity-oriented or -based obeys this rule: the persuasiveness of his picture of various texts all pointing one way or another to the infinite requires emphasizing some things and minimizing others. Ideally, the

downplayed aspects seem unimportant, but more often than not some of them appear significant enough to demand notice in a review such as this one.

From my point of view, one such aspect is Peters' treatment of relations between literature and science. The science of cosmology in particular plays a major role in his argument. He takes for granted the thesis, proposed most famously by Alexandre Koyré, that early modern cosmology went from representing a "closed world" to representing an "infinite universe." [2] Peters transfers this claim that cosmology assimilates the idea of infinity to literature and literary reflection. In doing so, he sometimes assumes that cosmology gets to infinity first: literature avails itself of it only after cosmology has made it available.

For example, in his chapter on "Racine and the Geography of Becoming," Peters dissents from the prevailing view of geography as marginal to Racinian theater. It seems marginal, he argues, only when one fails to realize that in the seventeenth century "the notion of indefinite, or even infinite, 'space' dislodged the tightly fitting 'places' that had earlier described the Aristotelian understanding of cosmic being" (114). Peters interprets the figures of Astyanax and Antiochus (in *Andromaque* and *Bérénice*, respectively) as manifesting this shift. Antiochus, for instance, "gives voice to a more accurate, contemporaneous notion of space: the imperceptible void which creates dimension and location for the ideas and bodies that become there" (140). One gathers that Racine's creation exhibits the new kind of space only after cosmological progress has furnished it.

The adoption by literature of a space invented first by science also appears across two chapters, "Landscape and Poetic Event in Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*" and "The World Written Out: Space and Description from Madeleine de Scudéry to the *Princesse de Clèves*." Peters says that *L'Astrée* "perfectly captures[...]the historical and epistemological conditions surrounding geographic technologies in the early years of seventeenth-century France" (163). The lavish place descriptions of Urfé's novel hark back to the verbal techniques favored by sixteenth-century cosmographers, as opposed to the "new, forward-looking techniques of visual representation" increasingly adopted by seventeenth-century cartographers (164). By the time of *La Princesse de Clèves*, this shift has decisively occurred. Therefore, rather than describe places verbally as Urfé did, Lafayette withholds their verbal description in favor of a mimesis where space hangs as an invisible background to the actions and emotions of the plot. As Peters says, "Like the radical reconceptualizations of cosmic space as infinite and real, but also imperceptible[...]the world of material space in the novel falls away" (195). On the whole, therefore, it is assumed that the difference between the kinds of imitation at work in Urfé's and Lafayette's novels follows the path of cosmological progress toward an acceptance of space as infinite, invisible, and potentially void.

Such lines of argument in *The Written World* seem to reflect the view, buttressed by Koyré, according to which "Space in the early modern period was no longer described in terms of presence and absence but of proximity and distance, plenum and void. It did not account for the location of things but rather expressed the principle of their located becoming" (114-5). While I admire Koyré's thesis, I doubt that the cosmological shift that he describes happened as neatly as he says it did, and I am fairly certain that, with respect to infinity, relations between science and literature were more complex and tense than Koyré or even Peters let on. The reasons for my sentiments have to do with my own research, which demonstrates not that literature echoes a scientific shift toward infinity but rather that the shift occurs through science and literature working both in

tandem and against one another. [3] I would now like to consider briefly a passage in *The Written World* where the kind of complexity and tension that concerns me tends to drop out of the picture painted by Peters, and then to suggest more briefly still why putting it back in the picture is a good idea.

With respect to La Fontaine's *Fables*, Peters turns first to "Les frelons et les mouches à miel," which he reads as evidence of an "aesthetic insight" that "derives from [La Fontaine's] related interest in Epicurean physics, which proposed an alternative to the Cartesian conception of the material world" (69). Epicurean physics, which La Fontaine knew largely through Gassendi, posited the existence apart from and in between spans of matter, and it is in this "interstitial space" where La Fontaine situates the origin of poetic creation (70). As evidence of this hypothesis, Peters turns to another fable, "Un animal dans la lune," where a "Gassendian interstice" again provides a source of inspiration, here to both poetic and scientific endeavors (70).

As Peters describes the fable, it begins by stating "rationalist and empiricist versions of knowledge" and offering a "third option" between them (70). While the rationalist holds that our senses always dupe us, and while the empiricist counters that they never do, La Fontaine proposes that our senses "deceive only when they are unadjusted by the active work of the mind" (70). He then tells the story of an English scientist of the Royal Society who mistakes a mouse caught between the lenses of a telescope for an elephant on the moon. This story implies that "the source of error lay neither with the senses nor with the mind but in the device itself" (71).

So far so good. However, when Peters moves to conclude his account of the fable, the substance of the account moves too: "The mind intervenes like the telescope between perception and its object[....]the work of abstraction in natural philosophy is associated with the creative force of the creative work" (71). In following what "Un animal dans la lune" implies about creativity, Peters goes from saying that the mind intervenes to correct an error generated inside a scientific instrument to saying that the mind intervenes between the senses and their objects. In the first description, the mind corrects the telescope; in the second description, the mind imitates the telescope. It is the latter (and not the former) that supports the notion that the "abstraction" of science and "creative force" of poetry are compatible with one another.

The swerve in Peters' argument may look slight, but it occludes something that is big yet routinely ignored about how early modern science and literature relate to one another: the fact that to an important extent they do not relate, but separate. This fact applies to La Fontaine as well as to the seventeenth century as a whole. In the *Préface* to the *Fables*, he describes them as a literary counterpart to the basic operating system of science, geometry: "Ces badineries ne sont telles qu'en apparence; car dans le fond elles portent un sens très solide. Et comme, par la définition du point, de la ligne, de la surface, et par d'autres principes très familiers, nous parvenons à des connaissances qui mesurent enfin le ciel et la terre, de même aussi, par les raisonnements et conséquences que l'on peut tirer de ces fables, on se forme le jugement et les mœurs, on se rend capable des grandes choses." [4] La Fontaine finds his fables comparable to a work such as Euclid's *Elements*, but he also finds them unlike geometry in that they involve different kinds of knowledge and enable different kinds of activity.

It is of course true that as science and literature developed into distinct sets of fields, they exchanged ideas, methods, and materials across permeable boundaries. Books like Frédérique Aït-Touati's *Fictions of the Cosmos* (to which Peters refers) make this point abundantly. [5] But in doing so, such accounts seem to render themselves incapable of explaining how science and literature came apart. [6] The interest of keeping an eye on this question has become urgent in the context of efforts to reintegrate the literary and the scientific through digital studies. Such studies attempt to irradiate literary objects quantitatively and algorithmically. As they do, they can inadvertently strip their objects of the qualities that make them literary. In order to prevent that from happening, it is necessary to recognize the extent to which those qualities reflected—and resisted—the Scientific Revolution that laid the foundation for the ongoing Digital one.

In descending into a few of the finer details of *The Written World*, I have meant to suggest not just how it has absorbed me, but also how it should absorb anyone concerned with the values of seventeenth-century French literature, of early modern literature, and of literature itself.

NOTES

[1] The author of Bosse's book is misidentified by Peters (or his editor) as Desargues himself.

[2] Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957).

[3] My piece on La Fayette has appeared as “A Mathematical key to *La Princesse de Clèves*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 74 (2013): 493-516, and an extension to it is forthcoming in the online *Etudes Epistémè*. Another piece, on Montaigne and Bacon, will appear shortly in *Romanic Review*.

[4] La Fontaine, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 8.

[5] *Fictions of the Cosmos: Science and Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[6] Aït-Touati herself remarks that “the bifurcation between what are today called ‘science’ and ‘literature’ took place precisely at the height of their exchanges. This is a paradox that merits exploration” (6).

David L. Sedley
Haverford College
dsedley@haverford.edu

© 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the

H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, #3