

H-France Review Vol. 16 (January 2016), No. 4

Zeina Hakim, *Fictions déjouées. Le récit en trompe-l'œil au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Genève: Droz, 2012. 312 pp. Bibliography and index. 42.80€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-600-01580-6.

Review by Sylvaine Guyot, Harvard University.

This ambitious book, which grew out of the author's doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, addresses the complex and most-debated question of the mechanisms of fictional belief in the eighteenth-century French novel. It proposes, more broadly, to reconsider the nature of "literary play" and the functioning of the fictional "as if." In so doing, *Fictions déjouées* inscribes itself in a currently vibrant strand of research--driven by Yves Citton, Françoise Lavocat, Thomas Pavel, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, among others--which considers afresh, from a point of view at once theoretical and historical, the construction of fictional worlds, the immersive experience of reading, and the aesthetic and political effects of the regime of truth that is peculiar to fiction. [1] Zeina Hakim's study is not only richly enhanced by an extensive apparatus of footnotes, which situate her reflection continuously in dialogue with the aforementioned constellation of critics, but it also finishes with a usefully organized bibliography, which constitutes a precious tool for future work.

*Fictions déjouées* takes as its field of investigation a disparate series of first-person genres: the pseudo-memoirs of Courtilz de Sandras published in 1687 (*Les Mémoires de M.L.C.D.R.*), several novels-memoirs published between 1715 and 1738 (*L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* by Lesage, *Manon Lescaut* and *Cleveland* by Prévost, and *La Vie de Marianne* by Marivaux), and finally the *Salons* written by Diderot between 1759 and 1781. Straddling the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, this corpus is intended to be representative in both the diversity and hybridity of the chosen texts: it reveals that the reflection on mechanisms of illusion is both "trans-générique et trans-séculaire" (p. 25), in other words, that it blurs the distinction between fictional and referential texts. More specifically, one of the interests of the book is that it explores with real precision the way in which Diderot imports, to describe aesthetic experience, techniques employed in the early eighteenth-century novel, thereby creating a new genre, that of the subjective "compte rendu."

The heart of the argument emphasizes the limits of the alternative traditionally posed between two opposing models of fiction, the mimetic model based on dissimulating the representational artifice and the metadiscursive model based on the flaunting of it. Hakim shows that, on the contrary, the texts she studies implement what Marian Hobson has called a "bimodal" reception (p. 34): they combine an illusionist paradigm--the endeavor to "make true," to give the complete illusion of truth--and a self-reflexive paradigm--the endeavor to "make false," to expose the devices used to create fiction--with this simultaneous coexistence of contradictory effects becoming a source of literary *play*.

The introduction brings to light the heuristic fecundity of the notion of *play*: on the one hand, it precludes the reduction of fiction to either a simple poetic artifact or a mere practice of fakery, and rather invites us to take into account the paradoxical dynamics of belief on which fiction is based; on the other hand, it leads to reconsidering the relationship between fiction and its antonyms--history, truth,

---

the real, reality—all categories which themselves suppose an exchange, and a tension, between a reference, a language, and a receiver.

The first two chapters explore in turn each of the inverse trends in eighteenth-century fiction writing, split between the attempt to construct fictional belief and the effort to elicit a distanced and self-conscious complicity on the part of readers. Titled after a phrase from Jean Rousset, the first chapter, “La « fiction du non-fictif ». De la vérité affichée dans les pseudos-mémoires, les romans-mémoires et les *Salons* de Diderot,” identifies the techniques by which novelists seek to give “credit” to their texts, whether by claiming the authenticity of the story or the honesty of the narrator: fiction of the genuine manuscript found by an editor, introduction of elements with historical, geographic, or everyday reference, evocation of doubt or surprise when faced with unbelievable facts, or, as in the case of Diderot, the illusion of private correspondence in which a supposedly personal and disinterested aesthetic commentary unfolds. Far from positing a gullible reader who falls for these illusionist strategies, Hakim underscores the paradoxical dimension of such *topoi*, which undeniably seek to elicit “une croyance provisoire” but at the same time also aim to provoke a clear recognition of the literary artifice and place the reader in the realm of half-belief.

The second chapter of the book, “La fiction avouée. Procédés de distanciation et appel à la reconnaissance,” points out within the same group of texts a number of prominent markers of fictionality designed to draw readers’ attention to the constructed nature of fiction and to make them reflect on their own credulity. In Courtlitz’ memoirs for example, the truth claims are undermined by narrative discontinuities and the main character’s fragmented consciousness, which overtly manifest the artificiality of the fictional structure. This narrative crumbling can be understood, Hakim proposes, in the context of the epistemological skepticism resulting from the intellectual and moral “crisis of European consciousness” that the cultural historian Paul Hazard has identified (but which has been, one must add, highly debated by historians in recent years): “la composition de ses œuvres met simultanément en lumière le besoin de Courtlitz d’effectuer un projet d’ensemble et la difficulté à le concrétiser” (p. 160). Lesage, for his part, subverts the very rhetorical “code of accreditation” that he employs, by presenting evident contradictions in the story, or by combining different literary archetypes that he parodies, such as the epic *topos* of the tempest and the pastoral *topos* of the *locus amoenus* (pp. 177-80). The breaking of mimetic illusion is also produced by the nested narrative levels encountered in Prévost’s novels, by the creation of an indeterminate temporality that is both elliptical and repetitive in Marivaux, or by the unresolved tension in Diderot’s practice of *ekphrasis* between the depiction of absorption in painting and the reconstruction of a fictional world by the narrator. Hakim’s thorough analyses elucidate the heterogeneity, the incompleteness, or even the incoherencies of ancien régime fiction. Supposing that these tensions are always deliberate, Hakim concludes that the suspended meaning of eighteenth-century texts invites “un lectorat participatif” at the same time as it discourages “un lectorat herméneute” (p. 221).

As a theoretical extension to this conclusion, the final chapter, “Le lecteur mis en jeu. Transgressions narratives et paradoxes de la représentation,” investigates, through the figure of metalepsis borrowed from Gérard Genette and Michelle Bokobza-Kahan, Umberto Eco’s notion of reader collaboration in the production of the text: “les œuvres étudiées appellent moins le lecteur à collaborer à l’écriture qu’elles ne l’appellent à abandonner la quête d’un sens univoque” (p. 226). Following the redefinition proposed by Dominique Rabaté (cited p. 233), the “suspension” that characterizes the experience of reading refers not to the doctrine of “willing suspension of disbelief” as set out by Coleridge, but rather to the interweaving and permeable relationship between referentiality and fictionality; it is a matter of “making the reader hesitate” rather than believe (p. 229). By examining the functions of this metaleptic blend, Hakim shows it to be at once a source of aesthetic pleasure, ideological reflection, and cognitive expansion. Since Descartes, the fictional detour has indeed been conceived as a fruitful means by which to arrive at new political or philosophical truths. The “literary play” thus reveals itself as an initiation into ambivalence and critical thinking, and invitation to call generalities into doubt and to question the

authority of interpretative discourses. The concluding move of the book exemplifies this method of doubt: Hakim finishes by asking if the contradictions in eighteenth-century texts, which she has interpreted as deliberate signs of facticity, could not rather be read as strategic means of accreditation, self-consciously exposing the emotion or the humanity of the scriptor. This interpretative hesitation is presented as an emblem of the “epistemic fragility” (Yves Citton, cited p. 256) of all literary criticism, and of any literary theory open to the disparate and discontinuous nature of the practice of fiction. Here, Hakim touches upon, but does not explicitly address, two thorny yet crucial questions, those of authorial intention and of reception history.

With its deliberately composite corpus and its wish not to flatten the contradictions contained in the texts, *Fictions déjouées* shows effectively how the transition from absolutism to the Enlightenment constitutes an historical “moment” marked by an acute consciousness of the complexity and paradox of fictional belief—Hakim underscores, following Aurélie Gaillard (cited p. 151), that the term “moment” connotes the ideas of fragmentary and diffuse, which the homogenizing term “period” ignores. In this respect, it would have been interesting to inscribe the analysis in the broader context of the whole of early modernity, traversed from the Renaissance onward, as certain art historians (such as Hubert Damisch, Louis Marin, and Georges Didi-Huberman) have shown, by a persistent tension between mimetic transparency and representational reflexivity. On the whole, *Fictions déjouées* invites us, in a stimulating way, to reflect on the relationships between literature and theory. The trajectory of the book posits and demonstrates the theoretical potential of fictional texts, treated as a “site of debate” (p. 206) on the nature and the powers of the novel. If the theory of fiction that emerges from eighteenth-century texts brings to light the hermeneutic openness, the referential undecidability, the interpretative suspension inherent to all fictional discourse, Hakim insists on the fact that this fundamental *play* “ne renvoie pas forcément à une clôture maximale de la fiction sur elle-même, mais peut tout au contraire être compris comme le vecteur d’une contestation de l’autonomie fictionnelle” (p. 240). Indeed, it appears from this thought-provoking study that, in the eighteenth century, the notion of “adhesion” was revised, elaborated and experienced in a series of diverse yet interconnected discourses—the discourse of novelistic fiction, the discourse of art criticism, the discourse of history—which nourished one another within a porous sociocultural space.

#### NOTES:

[1] Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987); *L’Avenir des humanités. Économie de la connaissance ou culture de l’interprétation?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010). Françoise Lavocat (dir.), *La Théorie littéraire des mondes possibles* (Paris: CNRS, 2010); *Fait et Fiction. Pour une frontière* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016 [forthcoming]). Thomas Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999) (Translated by Dorrit Cohn as *Why Fiction?* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010]); *L’Expérience esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

[2] Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du nuage. Pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) (Translated by Janet Lloyd as *Theory of Cloud. Toward a History of Painting* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002]). Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981) (Translated by Martha M. Houle as *The Portrait of the King* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988]); *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento* (Paris: Usher, 1989); *De la représentation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) (Translated by Catherine Porter as *On Representation* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001]). Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l’image. Question posée aux fins d’une histoire de l’art* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990) (Translated by John Goodman as *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* [University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005]).

Sylvaine Guyot  
Harvard University  
[guyot@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:guyot@fas.harvard.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172