Roger Maioli, *Empiricism and the Early Theory of the Novel*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. xxii + 202. £79.99. ISBN 9783319398587.

Empiricism and the Early Theory of the Novel explores the impact of the empirical turn in philosophy on how imaginative writing could be justified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Empiricists undermined traditional defences of poetry (that it copied not particulars but universals) and valued history above poetry as a reliable 'repository of facts for the study of nature, mankind, and human societies' (9). If history were such a repository, however, what of imagined histories? Could a fictional account also be a source of knowledge about the world? These are central questions for eighteenth-century novelists and Maioli's study.

Maioli first explores the empiricism of David Hume and its implications for the value of fiction. Hume's attitude towards the novel must be inferred, since he rarely referred to contemporary fiction. On the other hand, 'fictional illustrations and thought experiments play an important role in his work', showing an acceptance that 'the counterfactual scenarios of fiction are just as able to yield empirical knowledge as the factual scenarios of history' (49). Literary scholars often regard Hume's epistemology as an implied theory of the novel, but Maioli cautions against such a conclusion, arguing that the literary critical tendency to see 'a mutually reinforcing relationship between empiricism and the novel' (viii) is not justified by a reading of the empiricists themselves, for whom the novel tended to be 'a vulgar peddler of misconceptions' (x).

In a brief 'Interlude', Maioli contends that while Hume's writings exposed the contradiction between 'the principles of empiricism and the novel's pedagogic mission', novelists were as 'indifferent' to Hume as he was dismissive of their works (65). They sought solutions to this contradiction not because of direct influence, but because they themselves shared these empirical principles, which became widespread as the period progressed. Most novelists before Fielding, Maioli later observes, dodged the problem of whether literary worlds afforded knowledge of reality by denying their works were fictional. Fielding, meanwhile, 'set out to write explicit fictions while renouncing neither the authority of experience nor the pedagogic mission of literature' (88). Probability offered a solution, since events could be probable or improbable regardless of whether they were factual or fictional: 'history' for Fielding could include prose fiction if it maintained probability, thus giving the reader knowledge beyond their own limited experience and a discernment of general truths about human nature.

Focusing on three quixotic novels, Maioli develops the idea that fictional worlds yield practicable propositions about the world of experience. Reconsidering Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, Maioli shows how the conversation between Arabella and the Doctor, in which she is finally 'cured' of her addiction to romances, is more effective in articulating the problems of giving fiction empirical value than it is in solving them. In *Northanger Abbey*, Maioli finds that Austen's very success in creating lifelike characters and settings blunts the edge of any moral lessons we may be able to draw from her work: 'Austen's ethical and formal commitments suggest that her local verdicts should remain local'. Faith in the educational power of fiction is examined by juxtaposing Godwin's *Caleb Williams* with his unpublished essay, 'Of History and Romance'. Godwin's 'vigorous defense of fiction' is undercut, Maioli avows, when the essay, concedes the virtual impossibility of empirically faithful fiction: 'To sketch a few bold outlines of character is no desperate undertaking; but to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine' (130)

From authors concerned to meet 'the empirical challenge', Maioli turns to an author who took a positive pleasure in subverting it. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne 'mock[s] the notion […] that exposure to the worlds of fiction is a proper replacement for the direct observation

of life' (143) and refuses, even more decisively than Austen, to signal what message or 'life lesson' the reader might draw from the novel (145). Didactic intentions are less easy to dismiss in *A Sentimental Journey*, however. Yorick's journey, Maioli suggests, offers 'emotional states that we *can* access, as they arise inwardly in us through our sympathetic engagement with imaginary others' (151). Accordingly, for Sterne, fiction 'trigger[s] sensations' rather than describes the world and these 'are *real* and potentially illuminating in their own right' (156), even as he also realised that in practice sentimental engagement was too often both self-centred and fleeting.

Maioli's conclusion demonstrates how eighteenth-century novel theory prefigures modern arguments about the value of the humanities. Eighteenth-century novelists, as he says, 'were among the first to experience the pressure of the new epistemic dispensation' (177) and a consideration of the challenges they faced speaks to the challenges we still face in justifying the worth of literary study. It is a thought-provoking end to a thoroughly engaging book.

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