**Pseudofactuality**

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As part of her study of what she called the documentary novel, Barbara Foley used the word pseudofactual to describe the oft-remarked truth pretense accompanying many novels published before 1800 in England and France (Foley 1986). In her understanding, pseudofactual insistence that novels were literally true corresponded to a historical stage in the evolution of the novel, specifically, its break with respect to romance: "If writers wished to be taken seriously as interpreters of social reality," she writes, "they were constrained to simulate familiar modes of nonfictional discourse" – notably journalistic reports, letter collections, and autobiographies (115). This simulation was not a dissimulation: the pseudofactual posture was inherently ironic, and spuriously asserting literal truth was in fact a way of asserting a more general truth (128). By the nineteenth century, the ironic posture had been superseded by "unabashedly fictional" realism, grounded on the assumption that that the propositional value of novels lay in the *analogy* they offered with respect to historical actuality (144).

Though "pseudofactual" was Foley's own coinage, scholarly interest in the phenomenon dates at least to the early twentieth century (Tieje 1913). In the wake of Ian Watt's work on "formal realism" (1957), a number of studies of both the English and French traditions suggested that the truth affirmations Foley called pseudofactual constituted a stage in realism (May 1963; Mylne 1981; Showalter 1972; Day 1987). Foley's argument, however, was distinct, part of a growing interest in *fictionality* as a development within the history of the novel. These studies include Lennard J. Davis (1983), Michael McKeon (1987), Catherine Gallagher (1994, 2006; Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000) and Jan Herman et al. (2008). Generally speaking, this group of critics insists that the novel's maturation can be better described as an overcoming of literal reference – after the empiricist revolution that encouraged novelists to claim it (McKeon 1987; 🡪 Detering and Meierhofer.) – and an embrace of fictionality. According to Gallagher whose accounts, with McKeon's, have been the most influential, the early novel's pseudofactuality was the site of a type of collective conceptual work, through which the culture developed representations that could train readers in the "cognitive provisionality" necessary for modern life (Gallagher 2006, 347).

If the early novel's truth pretense has been the subject of much scholarship, "pseudofactuality" as a term has been taken up only by Paige (2011).[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, available accounts have been primarily interpretive in nature – they seek to elucidate what the truth pretense *means*, historically speaking – and thus leave us well short of a systematic description of pseudofactuality as a historical phenomenon or artifact. How did its truth assertions differ from those long made by poets about their sources? How widely was it used in the early modern period? Was it given up, or does it persist to this day? Was the pseudofactual posture inherently ironic, or – as some propose – did writers at first use it seriously? What reasons can help explain the popularity of a conceit we now find so antiquated and unnecessary? In asking these questions, the present article attempts to delineate with more precision the contours and characteristics of the pseudofactual novel, which have never been described systematically. Focused on the situation in France, it does not attempt a geographical canvas. My assumption is that the phenomenon is endemic to the early European novel, even if I would also expect the details – the years of its rise and fall, the exact extent of its "market dominance" – to differ somewhat from country to country.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Novelists can have a number of things in mind when they assert the truth of their narratives. They may aim at a moral truth (advanced via fable or allegory); they may be speaking of social representivity, which is what Balzac no doubt had in mind when asserting, at the outset of *Old Man Goriot* (1835), "*All is true*" (Balzac 2011, 4, emphasis in the original). However, the truth affirmations of the early novel that have preoccupied scholars are of a more literal sort. Here too we can make some distinctions. One concerns subject matter. Poets had long written about heroes from history or legend: indeed, these were arguably the most prestigious subjects. In this understanding, which has been called Aristotelian (Paige 2011), the work of the poet was to create a compelling plot out of the coordinates provided by tradition. Though that tradition could be prefatorily adumbrated by the writer, what was at issue was less empirical truth of the work (i.e., its historical accuracy) than the writer's position with respect to a long line of authorities (in the medieval sense of *auctoritas* (Ziolkowski 2009)). Although many novelists in seventeenth-century France – the leading producer of novels at the time – followed this basic compositional model, it is still not quite what scholars of the pseudofactual have generally had in mind. For the pseudofactual work does not situate itself with respect to a received tradition: instead of telling anew a tale of known *somebodies*, it offers a narrative of *nobodies*, which is to say, protagonists of whom readers would not have heard before picking up the book.[[3]](#footnote-3) As such, and unlike the Aristotelian novel, it is invested in establishing an origin for the narrative – adducing eye-witness testimony and private source documents, as opposed to Aristotelian referencing of known authorities.

Here, I will limit the compass of the "pseudofactual" to these nobody novels with literal truth claims. Even then, however, there are complications. The pseudofactual novel's most visible formal characteristic is its use of the first person: documents purportedly produced by nobodies – chiefly, letters and memoirs – constitute the novel itself, which is then prefaced by an editorial assurance of truthfulness or an account of the documents' pedigree. At the same time, many nobody novels of the period have heterodiegetic narrators; sometimes these narrators are first-person witnesses, but more often such works are narrated in the third person, after some sort of paratextual affirmation that we are reading a "true story." While pseudofactuality is most paradigmatically associated with first-person documents, the pretense of literal truth in fact characterizes more widely the nobody novels of the early modern period.

If these distinctions are accepted, what does the career of the pseudofactual novel look like? When does it develop, and when does it flag? It is clear that the truth pretense itself is old, for Lucian's frequently-adduced second-century CE *True Story* already spoofs such claims; and in Renaissance humanist circles, hoaxes and forgeries were common (Grafton 1990). But how widespread truth claims were in very early *novels* – that is, narratives of love and valor, as opposed to the travel and historical narratives Lucian mocks – is not entirely clear. Greek novels such as the *Aethiopica* (Heliodorus, c. fifth century CE) and *Leucippe and Clitophon* (Achilles Tatius, second century CE) do not have them, whereas Chrétien de Troyes prefaces his *Cligès* (c. 1176) by carefully noting that he has found the story of his otherwise unknown hero in a patron's library. Quantitative research suggests that in the first half of the seventeenth century in France, roughly half of all nobody novels contained explicit truth claims, and that that percentage increased greatly in the second half of the century; starting around 1720, levels declined somewhat, stabilizing at around the 50-percent mark, until the closing decades of the eighteenth century, at which time the pretense recedes to minority status. In this respect, the general scholarly consensus that the eighteenth century marked the end of pseudofactuality seems justified.

The pseduofactual novel's historical trajectory becomes more complicated, however, when one considers that pseudofactuality is as much a morphological matter as a paratextual posture. Certainly, one defining feature of pseudofactual novels is the truth pretense itself; in this sense, one may consider pseudofactuality as something added on to the novel, something that at some point would be "dropped."[[4]](#footnote-4) But I have also noted that the most paradigmatically pseudofactual novels are specifically first-person document novels, in which "editors" offer letters or memoirs not written for publication. Historically speaking, these novels have a tightly circumscribed destiny. In France, they are virtually non-existent before the 1660s and remain relatively rare, as a percentage of total production, until the 1720s; from the 1740s to the 1780s, they make up roughly half of all novels; the 1790s mark the beginning of an abrupt fall-off in their popularity. It is the success of this particular morphological variant that has understandably led to the association of pseudofactuality with the eighteenth century. Yet the complication is that roughly 40 percent of document novels during the form's heyday did not contain truth claims: some were presented as fictitious creations of an author, while many others were published with no information at all on their literal truth. In the case of the former, a form associated with pseudofactuality is nonetheless being used in a manner we may want to call fully fictional: the non-identity between the author's name and that of the protagonist creates the fictional pact (Lejeune 1989, 14–15) that governs the reception of most modern first-person novels. (A second, more minor complication is that the use of the commonplace of the editor survives the period, to resurface especially in modernist and postmodernist fiction. However, these later works of *Herausgeberfiktion* – Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* – typically follow the fictional pact of modern first-person novels in general, in that they give their "editors" names that do not match the name of the author on the title page.)[[5]](#footnote-5)

As Foley indicates with the prefix *pseudo*, literary historians generally conclude that the truth pretense did not aim at securing the belief of readers.[[6]](#footnote-6) Anecdotally, this conclusion seems warranted: already in 1709, Richard Steele was warning readers of *The* *Tattler* that "memoirs" was simply French for "novel"; and in a famous letter to William Warburton, Richardson spoke in 1748 of his editorial pose as a way of keeping up the "air of genuineness" about Clarissa's letters without actually having his readers think them genuine.[[7]](#footnote-7) Whence, then, the interpretation of pseudofactuality as a type of protofictionality. More precisely, however, the typical contention is that the pseudofactual posture was initially received seriously and then at some point in the eighteenth century became tinged with unmistakable irony. It is doubtful that such a thesis can be supported by the evidence. Certainly, some texts may indeed have functioned as hoaxes (as occasional works still do): the apocryphal status of memoirs ascribed to celebrities of the day is in some cases as debatable today as it probably was at the time; Daniel Defoe may well have intended to deceive readers of at least certain of his works. It would still remain to be shown, however, that cases of intentional deception characterized the earlier part of the period, and that irony becomes visible only later. Yet the vast majority of pseudofactual novels are accompanied neither by hoax-like seriousness nor by manifest irony, but rather by more neutral affirmations of truth (Paige 2017).[[8]](#footnote-8) And this is the case at all points in the pseudofactual novel's history: notwithstanding the fact that some novelists take more pains than others to buttress their affirmations, the overall quality of the pretense does not change appreciably between 1700 and 1800.

But then why did a posture that few if any credited persist for so long? Why, even though *some* authors presented their document novels as their own creations in the 1730s, were *most* authors continuing to offer pseudofactual guarantees through the 1780s? Rather than postulating a historical progression from gullibility and credence to reflexivity and doubt, and notwithstanding (relatively rare) instances of intentional deceit, one might better understand the pseudofactual posture not semantically but pragmatically or rhetorically. That is, truth affirmations in early novels do not ask to be received or rejected (though they may be evaluated for their semantic content if the context demands it or if individual readers are so inclined). Rather, they perform a function with respect to the values of speaker and audience. (As an analogy, when public speakers choose to preface their remarks by asserting their pleasure at being able to address their audience, their statement is under normal circumstances semantically empty but performatively meaningful.)

These values doubtless relate to two key aesthetic presuppositions of the time. First, before the revolution traceable to Kant and Hegel, the value of art was typically indexed to the value of the thing represented, and just as illustrious heroes made for better subject matter than commoners (who were in turn preferable to objects from the nonhuman world), subjects that existed were deemed superior to those that were the product of the poet's fancy. Second, and relatedly, according to Aristotelian doctrine derived from the *Poetics*, things that actually happened possess a kind of automatic verisimilitude, and thus produce a greater and more reliable emotional impact on the percipient.[[9]](#footnote-9) Conversely, that which was not literally believable could have no impact, according to the ubiquitous Horacian commonplace *incredulus odi*. Novels were offered as real documents and true stories not in the hopes that readers would credit the fabrications, and not because people were as yet conceptually unequipped to process fictionality, but – much more simply – because many thought it important to respect the governing aesthetic premises of the day. Many, but certainly not all: others denounced the contrivance as absurd and unnecessary. Values, however, are notoriously resistant to argument, and indeed only late in the eighteenth century were the old suppositions about how artworks captivated our interest dislodged by new suppositions – modern aesthetics along the lines of Kant and Hegel, as well as Coleridge's now proverbial idea of the suspension of disbelief. Thus, rather than the result of an inability to conceive of fictionality, the mysterious longevity of the pseudofactual pretense more plausibly stems from the fact that for both writer and readers of this period, pretending truth was an act of allegiance to the aesthetic and moral seriousness of the novel.

Thus, data from France suggest that the pseudofactual novel was in all probability the result of a shifting valuation of literal truth within the aesthetic presuppositions of the time. Whereas most modern novelists downplay or completely occult any real-world sources for their narratives – thus enhancing the works' autonomy from workaday "referential" discourse – eighteenth-century writers on the contrary played them up by advertising the literal truth that, for them, grounded aesthetic effect. Yet such presuppositions are always and still shifting, precisely because they are presuppositions: the dropping of the pseudofactual apparatus around the end of the eighteenth century must not be taken as the discovery of the true "nature of fiction." The relation of novels to literal truth is, instead, in perpetual renegotiation. The revival of the old pseudofactual apparatus in later works of avowed fiction is probably less important in this context than the foregrounding of preparatory research that surrounds many novels since Naturalism, or the varied texts that – from the time of Truman Capote to the present – go under names such as literary journalism, creative nonfiction, and the nonfiction novel.[[10]](#footnote-10) Equally apposite are the many twentieth- and twenty-first-century works (starting perhaps with Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*) that deliberately trouble the boundary between novel and autobiography.[[11]](#footnote-11) Doubtless, such narratives help test and explore the boundary between fact and fiction. But their explorations are conditioned by historically specific preoccupations and need not be viewed as close cousins to the many pseudofactual narratives of the eighteenth century and before.

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1. Though Foley herself was responding to and building on Davis (1984), her book never drew the attention of the scholars mentioned above. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the broadly similar situation in Germany and Denmark, see Wirth (2008) and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen (2018), respectively. Quantitative information in the present article, which pertains only to France, comes from Paige (in progress); see also Paige (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I borrow (while modifying) the distinction between somebodies and nobodies from Gallagher (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Historians of the novel have shown that, as the [eighteenth] century advanced and readers learned to accept the norms of literary realism, novelists tended to drop claims to reality or factuality" (Cohn 1999, 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One notable exception – though the body of the novel is in the third person – is the editorial presentation in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, however, 🡪 Lavocat . [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Steele's remark is cited by Mylne (1981, 75). For a reading of Richardson's letter, see Paige (2011, 9–-11). For the reception history of two famous instances of pseudofactual novels – Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* and Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* – see Paige 2011 (114–138 and 189–194). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In a separate category of works, the truth pretense is advanced as a joke: this happens when the posture is parodically applied to works that on account of their subject matter (e.g., fairy tales) could not be true. Though obviously related to neutral pseudofactual affirmations, the parodic variant is not treated in the present article. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "It is what is possible that arouses conviction, and while we do not without more ado believe that what never happened is possible, what did happen is clearly possible, since it would not have happened if it were not" (Poetics 1451b, in Russell and Winterbottom 1972, 102–103). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In addition to Foley (1986), see Hollowell (1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Lejeune (1986, 37–72) and 🡪 Iverson. For two different approaches to Proust's ambiguity specifically, see Cohn (1999, 58–78) and Lucey (2006, esp. 215–49). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)