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Oregon Trails-Fact From Fiction

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The arrangement for newly received books at my public library is straightforward, fiction on one side and non-fiction on the other. I start with the fiction even though I almost never find anything of interest save for the occasional Library of America volumes. I recognize the usual suspects from the New York Times bestseller lists and am ready to move to the other side when a title catches my eye — Bibliophilia (by N. John Hall, David R. Godine, 2016). I take it from the shelf and open it randomly. It’s an epistolary novel and not a good sign. But wait, it is not just a series of letters, they are all email letters. Despite the intriguing title, I put the book back on the shelf and continue my usual routine.

The next day, I was back. How could I not read a novel called Bibliophilia? I am glad that I did. It’s an interesting book on several levels. Saying that it is interesting is damming it with faint praise but what frustrated me about the book is also what held my interest. And although it is pitched as a novel, it is a kind of mystery novel, too, in that there are clues although it is pitched as a novel, it is a kind of mystery novel, too, in that there are clues that would not be the misleading tale that un

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but have been set in perfect alignment by God. Bayle provides eight numbered objections to the theory, each of which is several paragraphs in length, yet he concludes with his typical good humor and says that he is convinced that Leibniz will “smooth out the rough places in his theory” because “no one is able to travel more usefully or more surely in the intelligible world than he.”

Bayle’s arguments and criticisms in the Dictionary did not go unnoticed by those whom he discussed. For example, Bayle’s comments in “Rorarius” as well as in other entries discussing the problem of evil, i.e., the question of how an omniscient and omnipotent God could allow for evil in the world, prompted a response from Leibniz in his Theodicy, the only philosophical work published during his lifetime. Bayle also influenced future generations of philosophers. David Hume shared his skepticism about the limits of reason, and his depiction of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities was taken up by both Hume and Bishop George Berkeley.

One of the most fascinating things about Bayle as a philosopher is that even though he introduced a lot of himself in his Dictionary, discerning his actual philosophical and theological positions is notoriously difficult. At various points, he has been described as an atheist, a skeptic, a secret adherent to Judaism, and a fideist, i.e., one who thinks that faith is incompatible with reason. Enlightenment thinkers saw him as an early ally to Bayle as a skeptic whose to Bayle’s Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering his Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections. Translated and edited by Richard Popkin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, 339.*
9. Bayle, Historical. 10. Ibid., 213.
11. Ibid., 254.
18. Rex, Essays.
20. Lennion and Hickson, “Pierre Bayle.”

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.

Endnotes
10. Ibid., 213.
11. Ibid., 254.
18. Rex, Essays.
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