

INTRODUCTION

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Part 1 – A minor art seeking legitimacy

Good morning and welcome to the Princess' Salon of the hotel of Soubise. We will now turn to the most inventive and prolific literary genre of the 18th century, the novel.

Today, it goes without saying that the novel is a major genre. When we go to the literature department of a large bookstore, we mainly find novelistic production. 18th-century men would have been astonished to see the importance we attach to the novel. At the beginning of the 18th century, it is still considered a minor genre. It does not really have any classical models. It doesn't belong in the traditional hierarchy of literary genres. It is scorned by scholars, who regard it as easy entertainment for an audience that isn't classically educated, and who criticise its lack of credibility, taste for the extraordinary, unbelievable twists, implausible coincidences, lack of verisimilitude and crudeness in both subjects and language.

Novels can depict the bourgeois life, as for example when Marianne, in *The Life of Marianne* by Marivaux, is placed with a linen maid. Marivaux amuses himself by describing the exchanges of invectives between the maid and a coachman. On the other hand, the novel is viewed with suspicion by civil and religious authorities who begrudge its immorality. By describing passions, and especially love passions, the novel might inspire a longing for love in young people and especially girls and teach them the language of love. "No chaste girl has ever read novels," exclaims Rousseau himself in *The New Heloise's* foreword, paradoxically one of the most successful novels of the 18th century.

Religious authorities regularly alerted public authorities about the novel's dangers and denounced it as poison for the soul, worried about secularised moral standards conveyed by private reading and so escaping their magisterium. This campaign achieves some success in 1737 with what has been called the proscription of novels, that is to say the Chancellery no longer giving permission to publish novels in France. As they are then published by foreign printers and circulate just as well, the proscription obviously does not last.

The history of the novel in the 18th century is that of the conquest of legitimacy but also the story of the creation of a genre itself. And that's exactly what is interesting. The 18th century is a great period of invention of styles and novelistic contents, which leads the novel to become the dominant literary form from the 19th century onwards.

Part 2 – A new literature for a new audience

It must be said that this literary shift first responds to society changes. Historians testify that from the second half of the 17th century, more and more people learned to read. And this number increases, slowly at first but continuously throughout the following centuries. A new public is formed, including more and more women, bourgeois, artisans, inhabitants of the cities and wealthy peasants and soldiers.

All these readers haven't received a classical education based on Latin humanities, given in universities, and are the driving force behind the success of entertainment literature, which does not presuppose a preliminary culture. Hence the rise of the novel and the scholars' contempt. And as

more and more people read, more and more novels are being published, in an exponential progression.

Part 3 – The moral world exploration

The rise of the novel isn't only a matter of quantity, it is also a shift in the genre itself, in its forms and in its ambitions. We see examples of this articulated very clearly and under different formulas by the century's greatest authors. Lesage, Montesquieu, Crébillon, Marivaux, Rousseau, Diderot, Laclos or Sade will all at one time or another say what Prevost summarises in the foreword of his latest novel *Le Monde moral*. The novelist, he says, has become an analyst of the moral world in the way a physicist like Descartes is an interpreter of the physical world. He reveals its nature, its deeper recesses and its unnoticed mechanics.

Beyond the entertainment it provides, because the novel never gives up on extraordinary adventures and great emotions, it is looking for a form of psychological truth in the description of feelings and passions. It develops a reflexive dimension, never hesitating to dissert on any subject. It endeavours to explore the characters' interiority. But it also offers a relatively new description of the social world in comparison to the heroic adventures of the great protagonists of the 17th-century Baroque novel. It seeks to explore the difference of circumstances and the effects they produce. It opposes passions to society's frozen frameworks, true love to family's demands, inner identities to social identities.

Conclusion – New literary forms

This new aspiration of profound truth in the philosophy of passions or in the analysis of psychological relations is accompanied by the development of new novelistic forms that favour the narrative's reflective dimensions. The first-person narrative, so dominant today in fictional production, flourishes in the memoir-novel, a genre which peaks in the 1730s with Marivaux, Crébillon and Prevost. The epistolary novel, which allows the confrontation of subjectivities, sees a tremendous expansion in the second half of the century, after the translation of the British Richardson's novels and the publication of *The New Heloise* by Rousseau in 1762.

But these two dominant forms and a few great authors should not hide the diversity and richness of novels in the 18th century, a genre increasingly abundant over the century that will range, depending on the book, from serious to satire, from sentimental to libertine, and from fantasy to philosophical. So many beautiful discoveries and beautiful readings to look forward to.