THE SENTIMENTAL NOVEL

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Laurence VANOFLEN, Lecturer in Literature and Philosophy, Paris Nanterre University

---

Part 1 – A novel on private life and sentimentalism

CD: Good morning Laurence Vanoflen. The huge success of Rousseau's *New Heloise* resulted in a flourishing of novels that followed its track. What characterises those novels and how can we describe them?

LV: Good morning Colas Duflo. It is true that until the end of the century, a set of authors took up patterns of a suffering and compensated virtue, in reference to *The New Heloise* or to the subtitle of *Pamela* by Richardson, that Sade will use in *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue.* Those novels were literally recreating internal life's, sentiment in the modern sense, the novelists exploring love stories using the entire registry of sentiments. Thus, novels like *Dolbreuse, Adèle de Sénange* or *Claire d'Albe* talk about loves like Julie and Saint-Preux's, thwarted by familial choices or by social norms. Indeed, *Claire d'Albe,* Sophie Cottin's novel, involves a heroine that is already married when she meets and falls in love with her husband's nephew.

The sentimental novel questioned hierarchies based on wealth and origin, asserted the hearts' rights over social conventions. We thus understand labels put on them afterwards: "sentimental novel", neologism created from the title of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey,* in 1768, or even "sensitive novel" when emotions overwhelmed fiction in the last third of the century. For example, Loaisel de Tréogate gloated about dipping his quill in his tears. As in drama, the novel uses readers' capacity to identify to someone else. It is what the *Eulogy of Richardson* by Diderot was emphasising. It is therefore not surprising that men and women were interested, that is, cried and were moved by the ups and downs of characters made of paper.

Part 2 – The sentimental novel, a "feminine" genre?

CD: This genre is frequently, but not always, a work popular with female novelists. Laurence Vanoflen, you are interested in women's place in the Ancient Regime. You have worked on novelists like Isabelle de Charrière. How do you explain that the novel is one of the genres where women were most represented since the 18th century, and can we say that this presence evolved as the century wore on?

LV: The novel is a minor genre without rules, as you've said. It is liked by female readers. It was therefore appropriate for women deprived of academic training under the Ancient Regime and also deprived of acknowledged literary ambition. Furthermore, by the time natural aesthetic became the guarantee of fiction's truth, their fluency in conversation and letter-writing advantaged them greatly. Most of female novelists were indeed recognised letter writers.

The critic at that time highlighted this affinity between women and novels, even if Rousseau contested any genius to women using provocative terms, writing: "They don't know how to describe or feel love". But as the century went by, we see that the number of novels published by women was multiplied. The most read were those from Madame de Souza, Madame Cottin, Madame von Krüdener or Madame de Staël. Nevertheless, if the proportion of women in the overall number of authors doubled from 1784 to 1821, it still was only 4% at the beginning of the 19th century. And obviously, the readers of those novels were from both genders.

Part 3 – A few female novelists of the 18th century

CD: In any event, are there female novelists that 18th-century enthusiasts shouldn't ignore nowadays?

LV: Yes, undoubtedly. We can quote Graffigny, Riccoboni and Charrière, who now elicit unanimity. Madame de Graffigny published a single novel, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, which blends the heroine's genre with the model of the *Persian Letters* with great success. Thus, it combines an audacious critic of inequality and the fate of women, an itinerary of feminism training and a reflection on the other and on signs. Furthermore, its open-ended story can be subjected to different interpretations. Indeed, Zilia discovers at the end of the novel the infidelity of her lover, Aza, who converted to Christianity. And she refuses the hand of the gallant Deterville, to the great displeasure of many readers who had imagined endings where she married either Aza or Deterville.

We see in this novel's ending, chosen by Madame de Graffigny, a woman's access to consciousness and autonomy, because she pulls through at the end, dedicating herself to study and friendship. But there also might be a protest against patriarchy or maybe an illustration of an Enlightenment ideal, communication and trade of consciences. In a nutshell, the richness of the novel is beyond doubt.

Moving onto Madame Riccoboni, an actress then novelist who met with great success in the middle of the century. Laclos sent her his *Dangerous Liaisons* in 1757, obviously as a tribute to her success. In 1752, she spotlighted the natural aestheticism that Rousseau wrote in *The New Heloise.* Her first novel, *Letters of Mistress Fanny Butlerd*, is composed of monodic love letters published by a betrayed lover. Both a tribute to passion and the story of a deliberate error's that Fanny becomes gradually aware of, this novel is ingeniously questioning the relation between fiction and reality. The denunciation of masculine selfishness was often reported in Madame Riccoboni's writing, and some people saw in it something of narrow feminism. But it should be noticed that she also reacted to contemporary elaboration of utilitarianism.

Finally, our third example, Isabelle de Charrière, published after 1784 novels that subtly thwarted the genre's stereotypes because they generally had an open-ended story. They forced readers to understand the tale's meaning as they wished it to be. By doing so, her novels were subtly contesting the Enlightenment's optimism. Examples are the ideal maternal educations in *Letters written from Lausanne* in 1787 or the optimist relation between happiness and virtue in *Caliste's History* in 1787. Likewise, *Letters of Mistress Henley Published by Her Friend* is a counterpoint to the marital utopia of Clarens, and to *The New Heloise*, because it depicts without pathos the ordinary misfortune of a woman who marries to a reasonable husband, like if he was Wolmar's twin. Hence, the letter writer gives up on writing, pregnant, after her husband refused an important position in London without

consulting her. And the novel ends on these words: “In a year, maybe two, I hope you will learn that I am reasonable and happy or that I have passed away.” The “sentimental” novel not only was the holder but also the hub of the century’s new moral values, including humanity. To historians, it was by the identifying to fictional characters that the bourgeoisie became a private entity in the 18th century.

CD: Laurence Vanoflen, thank you very much.

LV: Thank you, Colas Duflo.