

ELAINE SHOWALTER

The Evolution  
of the French  
Novel, 1641-1782



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*The Evolution of the French Novel*  
1641-1782



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OF THE  
French Novel

1641-1782

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ENGLISH SHOWALTER, JR.

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## Preface

Any subject as elusive as evolutionary processes in the novel is bound to be controversial. I am certain that many readers will be unconvinced by one or another of my arguments, and others will disagree with my emphases, and wonder why I have neglected their favorite author. No single work could explore fully the vast and amorphous field of French fiction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but I believe that I have covered enough to show what I wanted to show: the basic mechanism underlying the evolutionary development of realistic techniques in fiction. I will welcome the criticism of those who disagree; the study of literature will always be a matter of judgment and interpretation, not rigorous logical proof, and our understanding can be deepened as much by an intelligent debate as by a flawless demonstration. It is in this spirit that I have taken issue with some of my predecessors, while admiring their work.

The problems of critical methodology I have encountered, and the solutions I have adopted, are discussed in the Introduction. There are also a few problems of presentation. After some hesitation, I have decided not to include a formal bibliography. Full bibliographical information on most works is supplied at the first citation in a footnote; by using the index, readers can trace back any author or title that reappears later on. The exceptions are novels published in French from 1700 to 1750. Since my own bibliography is derived essentially from S. Paul Jones's *A List of French Prose Fiction 1700-1750*, it seemed wasteful to give more than the author's last name, the short title, and the date of first publication. Needless to say, I have supplied fuller information whenever I quoted from a later edition or found Jones in error. So far as I can tell, the only disadvantage of this procedure is that readers have no way of knowing what I read without quoting from it, that is, of knowing exactly how extensive my information is. That seemed to me a small price to pay for the elimination of a list that would have run to at least five hundred

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items, without having any pretensions to completeness or originality.

Some readers will no doubt wish that I had modernized the spelling and punctuation in quotations, all of which are given exactly as I found them. While I admit that this method is largely a matter of personal preference, it seemed to me that several factors argued in favor of a literal transcription: many modern editions reproduce in whole or in part the archaic forms, and I would be reluctant to tamper with the text supplied by Antoine Adam or Frédéric Deloffre; a consistent style of modernization would be hard to devise and apply, with so wide a range of authors and texts; finally, the chances of error or misreading are minimized by strict fidelity to the original.

This study has taken me several years to bring to its final form, and in that time I have incurred many debts of gratitude for assistance, advice, and encouragement. I would like to take this occasion to thank particularly Princeton University and the American Council of Learned Societies for financial aid enabling me to work in Europe for a summer; my students, both graduate and undergraduate, whose ideas and questions have been extremely helpful to me over the years; and my colleagues, especially Albert Sonnenfeld and Karl Uitti, who read the manuscript and gave me useful criticism and support.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this study to Professor Georges May of Yale University. It is to him that I owe my original enthusiasm for the eighteenth-century French novel, and his continued guidance and encouragement have helped me on many occasions since then. Despite his duties as Dean of Yale College, he found time to read the manuscript of this work and make many constructive comments on it. One of my colleagues who also read it remarked that my method and style resemble Georges May's; nothing would please me more than for others to form the same opinion.

*English Showalter, Jr.*

Princeton, July 1971

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*The Evolution of the French Novel*  
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## Introduction

Everyone seems to be agreed that the early years of the eighteenth century were crucial for the novel, but there is much debate about what happened then, and how it happened. Many literary historians contend that the novel was born at this time, the offspring of the right intellectual climate, a bourgeois social system, and individual genius, brought together by chance or by historical determinants.<sup>1</sup> Those who hold to this view usually read English better than other languages, and they have some difficulty explaining away the large body of French and Spanish fiction of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> A Francophone scholar is much more disposed to see a continuous evolution in fiction, with varying rates of change.

Such is my own belief; and in denying that Defoe, or Richardson, or Fielding, was the first novelist, I do not wish to nominate anyone else for the title, which seems to me devoid of meaning. It is plain that Richardson, Fielding, Defoe, Challe, Mme de Lafayette, and Cervantes wrote within certain traditions at the same time they made great original contributions to an emerging genre, now identified as "the novel." In order to pinpoint its first appearance, others have attempted to formulate a precise definition of "novel"; I will not. Most of the works I shall discuss share elements that are undeniably novelistic with others that come from the romance tradition. As tendencies, or as critical rather than historical terms, novel and romance may be defined and contrasted with no difficulty. The novel tends to be believable, to deal with ordinary people in familiar settings, to be contemporary or nearly so, to show how things really are. The romance tends

<sup>1</sup> See for example Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1965), p. 9; or Walter Ernest Allen, *The English Novel* (1954; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 30; or Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, Harper Torchbooks (1951; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 30.

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to appeal to the imagination, to deal with archetypal or allegorical or idealized characters, to show them in remote settings, to show how things might be.

Even as critical categories, however, such enumerations make the two genres seem more opposite than they are. The novel's believability depends on the imagination quite as much as the romance's appeal to fantasy or idealism. The characteristics of neither genre appear pure in most cases, of whatever date; many romance heroes have realistic ambiguity about them, while many novel heroes approach the status of type. The same can be said of the settings, and it is perhaps more the amount of detail, than the site, that distinguishes the novel from the romance. Finally, the difference between how things are and how they might be is very tenuous, when in both cases the "things" themselves are fictional. The serious romancer sought to show reality in its essence, stripped of its transient and irrelevant circumstances; the novelist came to feel that the only way to approach essential reality was by way of the circumstances. But in no single element of their respective attitudes was there a clean break between the novelist and the romancer, and during the centuries of evolution the different elements frequently progressed at different speeds, and indeed often regressed temporarily.

French scholars have seemed less interested in a general definition of the novel; for them, a more common approach has been to take some recent classic—by Zola or George Sand or Balzac—as the definitive form of the novel, and then trace its most noticeable features in a direct line all the way back to Furetière, Scarron, Sorel, Rabelais, and the tale-tellers of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> I do not believe that this gives any truer a picture of the situation in the early eighteenth century. Evolution goes forward, not backward, and none of the early novelists had foreknowledge of what would happen

<sup>3</sup> See for example André Le Breton, *Le Roman au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Paris: Société Française d'Imprimerie et de Librairie, 1898); or Frederick Charles Green, "Realism in the French Novel in the First Half of the XVIIIth Century," *MLN*, 38 (1923), 321-29, and "Further Evidence of Realism in the French Novel of the XVIIIth Century," *MLN*, 40 (1925), 257-70.

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next. Although this method preserves the sense of continuity, which is very real in some areas, it has also led to some anachronistic misinterpretations, as I shall show in discussing comic fiction and the problems of the narrator.

It is easier to comprehend how the genre emerged if we place ourselves in the position of a writer in about 1700. He did not know, except perhaps in an intuitive sort of way, that the bourgeoisie were rising or that the European mind had just undergone a fearful crisis. What he did know was that certain works—*La Princesse de Clèves*, *Le Roman comique*, *Don Quixote*, and *Hippolyte, comte de Douglas*, for instance—had been successful. If he was more than a hack, he had something that he wanted to communicate to his readers. Often, the “message” had a conscious formulation, which modern readers find woefully inadequate to the actual achievement. For example, Cervantes evidently did more than ridicule the chivalric romances, and Richardson did something other than preach sentimental virtue. Each author then brought to the moment of composition a more or less clearly defined purpose, a literary background made up of his readings, a natural gift for observing and rendering in words the experiences chance had provided him, and a literary situation constituted in part by what he expected his public to want and in part by what they actually did want. The potential diversity of the product was enormous, and the actual product realized much of that potential. Just to list the various forms of fiction at this era gives some idea: letters, memoirs, histories, epics, chronicles, plays, poems, travel accounts, satires, folk tales—the novel tried to incorporate them all.

The evolutionary analogy describes quite well how progress emerged from such chaos. Given the literary situation, ranging from the tastes of potential readers to the mechanics of publishing, certain elements had greater fitness for survival than others. Whenever such an element occurred, it naturally seemed outstandingly successful, and was therefore imitated by subsequent writers, most of whom added nothing to it, but a few of whom perhaps advanced the genre one more evolu-

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tionary step by some new idea or device. During these pre-historic days, many offshoots of the original genre were headed for extinction; the gigantic romances of the seventeenth century resemble dinosaurs in more ways than one. At the same time, the early ancestors of the modern novel were toiling away in obscurity, profiting from their insignificance to adapt better and faster to new conditions.

It would be a monumental undertaking to give a full account of the evolution, even for a short period; indeed, it is probably impossible, for many of the relevant factors seem to be unknowable with present means of research and analysis. In trying nonetheless to respect what I consider to be the reality of the situation, I have devised a combination of methods, some of which, without being startlingly original, have never been applied to the subject before. I have singled out for intensive study the rather brief span from 1700 to 1720, generally regarded as a critical moment in European intellectual history. Although the novel did not figure prominently in this crisis, a significant redirection seems to have begun then, evidenced in part by the first works of several important novelists, notably Challe, Lesage, and Marivaux. Moreover, these two decades fall in the middle of the period I am studying, which coincides roughly with the age of French Classicism, and this central position seemed a promising place to examine a genre actively changing and adjusting to the various conflicting forces that characterize the period. Finally, the early eighteenth century has the incidental advantage that a reasonably complete and reliable bibliography exists. Thus I can say with some assurance that I have read or examined more than three-fourths of all the fiction published in French between 1700 and 1720, thereby approximating the experience of a reader or writer of that period; and while any analysis must organize and simplify, I have tried never to lose sight of the complex and confused totality. Of course, the works of those twenty years do not make sense unless they are compared to the works that preceded and followed; I have not isolated those years from the others, but

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merely used them to gain knowledge of the complete situation at what I consider a critical moment.

The result of this method is to some degree a demolition. It is apparent that, despite an ample quantity of writing on the subject, no clear and useful definitions of any of the sub-genres of fiction had been widely accepted; it is equally clear that there was no significant agreement among novelists or critics about the purposes of fiction or its relation to reality. One can find almost any point of view represented, and some statements sound impressively forward-looking; but as often as not, the same author can be quoted in support of an exactly opposite argument. Sometimes this confusion can be ascribed to vagueness in terminology, but not always; in many cases, the authors of 1700 apparently perceived no inconsistency in places where we do. In any event, it seems clear that one cannot profitably trace the early evolution of the genre through self-conscious changes in the critical perceptions of its nature and functions.

Progress, slow and irregular as it was, was going on inside the novels. Second, then, a method had to be found to study the evolution of techniques within the works. Since we have hindsight, we know that in the long run fiction was becoming more realistic, that is, more and more preoccupied with elements from the world in which the writers and readers lived, presented so as to convince readers that they were real, or at least that they could very well be real. But even Ian Watt, whose *The Rise of the Novel* is the best study of the early novel's relation to reality, still does not offer much more than his own subjective impressions of what is "real" in a novel. In order to discuss the techniques by which reality is rendered in a novel, one must arrive at a useful definition of reality. I have sought a solution in taking five elements common to almost all human existence and to almost all novels, and susceptible furthermore of fairly precise measurement or definition. These elements are chronology, geography, money, names, and the narrator. Each belongs to a systematic order of existence, such that it can be tested for consistency within a work

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of fiction and also for compatibility with the world outside the fiction. By tracing the treatments of these five elements from the mid seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, including the very broad sample from the two decades in the middle of the period, I have been able to show in part *how* romances became novels. The same analysis also leads to significant insight into the reasons *why* the romance tended toward the novel, and why it tended toward the particular forms that it assumed in the eighteenth century.

This study of techniques must of necessity give a very partial and fragmented view of any given work; the conditions of verifiability exclude the most interesting parts of a novel, such as plot and character. I have therefore adopted yet a third, very traditional method to supplement the study of techniques and compensate for its limitations, and have devoted many pages to the analysis of one novel, Robert Challe's *Les Illustres Françaises*, first published in 1713. It offers several peculiar advantages. First, it has been undeservedly neglected for two hundred and fifty years. In the past decade, several French scholars, notably Frédéric Deloffre, have rescued it from oblivion; but it remains almost totally unknown in the English-speaking world. Second, Challe left exceptionally good clues to what his literary formation had been; in particular, his links to earlier fiction writers can be fairly easily determined. Third, his influence on later writers, or at least his anticipation of them, was significant. Prévost, Marivaux, and Richardson all appear to have borrowed from Challe, if not directly, at least in the sense that Challe prepared the public for them. In other words, it is uncommonly easy to position this work in the continuum, to see how Challe responded to the various ideas circulating in his time, and how he combined the five elements with more personal, more substantial, and ultimately more significant "real" materials.

Challe stands out among novelists of his day because of his effective combination of techniques to develop his themes. In any novel, the themes, which I am using in a broad sense, constitute the vital element. The development of new tech-

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niques is interesting only to the degree that it affects the themes in some way, permitting new ones to be treated, for example, or old ones to be treated with new depth. The fourth method I have used, again a traditional form of criticism, is to pursue one important theme through a dozen or so of the major novels of the eighteenth century. My purpose is to demonstrate the affinities between these works, and to show at the same time how the technical problems imposed certain restrictions on the genre. The theme in question, the individual in conflict with society, is especially well suited to the forms and methods available to the eighteenth-century author. As a result, an author working with that theme had a better than average chance of success, and an author sensitive to his craft would doubtless be drawn to the theme. Thus the evolutionary process works even on the subject in some measure.

The series of brief analyses of major novels does not of course give a full picture either of the individual novels or of the fictional themes of the century. Just as I selected elements of reality for purposes of my argument, I have selected a theme that facilitates what I want to show. Both the individual and society have given rise to numerous other significant themes, some of them already frequent in the eighteenth century. The study of individual psychology, for example, obviously attracted both Diderot and Rousseau, while in the other direction, a whole series of novels examined the political organization of society. These themes, however, strain the genre too much; *Emile*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *Les Lettres persanes*, the most successful works on these subjects, are only partly novels. The lyrical expression of passionate love, a strong current in the novel from *Les Lettres portugaises* to Mme Riccoboni, does not strain the genre enough; the first-person devices of the eighteenth century are perfectly adapted to such themes, and are still being used to treat them. The philosophical tale, a genre that includes most of Voltaire's fiction, remained aloof from most of the forces I have discussed; it always relied on wit and novelty rather than an effort to create the illusion of reality.

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For the period from 1700 to 1720, I tried to give a complete account of the French novel, including all the themes and all the forms. Coming out of this period, however, I have deliberately restricted the field of inquiry to the realistic school, which posterity showed to be the mainstream. All the works I do discuss seem to me to belong within it to a significant degree. The perspective from which I analyze them, however, does not reveal their full depth and complexity to a modern reader. I believe that in several cases the point of view is new and therefore instructive in and of itself; but in all cases, I hope primarily to show the unexpected similarities that link these diverse novels.

Finally, concentration on the theme of the individual against society makes it clear that the authors' ambitions often exceeded the means at their disposal. To go beyond the public and rather superficial aspects of the theme meant giving a wrench to the forms in vogue. By the end of the eighteenth century, it is clear, novelists were doing so more and more often, and in particular, struggling to find new modes of narration. Thus the evolution does not end where I leave off, but goes on directly to produce the third-person narrator of the nineteenth century.

## Romans, Romances, *Nouvelles*, and Novels

In the introduction to his thirty-year-old but still highly regarded *List of French Prose Fiction 1700-1750*, S. Paul Jones observed: "It is noteworthy that the word *roman* which was frequently used in the titles of works of fiction of the seventeenth century has almost disappeared in the eighteenth century. Only four or five works bear the word in the title or subtitle."<sup>1</sup> More recent scholars echo the remark: "Le souvenir du roman baroque et de ses formes abâtardies hante si continuellement les esprits que le terme de roman n'est presque jamais employé par les romanciers pour désigner leurs œuvres. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Thus it would appear that in France, as in England, the emergence of a new genre led to a change in terminology, at least temporarily. This in turn implies considerable self-consciousness on the part of the novelists, and supports the argument that a sharp break occurs between the romance and the novel.

Unfortunately, Jones' remark is misleading and even inaccurate. It is true that his list of some 950 works contains only four indisputable instances of the word *roman* in a title or subtitle. There are, however, four more questionable works, and seven others in which some variant such as *romanesque* or *Romancie* occurs.<sup>3</sup> For the seventeenth century, R. C. Wil-

<sup>1</sup> S. Paul Jones, *A List of French Prose Fiction 1700-1750* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1939), p. xv. Hereafter cited as Jones.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution*, tome 1, Collection U (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1967), p. 319; see also Georges May, *Le Dilemme du roman au XVIIIe siècle* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, and Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), p. 43; Philip R. Stewart, *Imitation and Illusion in the French Memoir-Novel, 1700-1750* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> The indisputable cases are: 1718 [Thibault], *La Vie de Pedrille del Campo, roman comique*; 1725 Anon., *Le Roman tartare*; 1729 Anon., *Rhadamiste et Ozalie. Roman héroïque*; 1746, *Recueil de romans historiques*. Dubious cases are: 1741 M. de \*\*\*, *Roman*; 1745 [Mme le Prieur de Blainvillers], *Orphélie, roman traduit de l'anglais*; 1746

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Williams gives, in a bibliography of some six hundred novels, twenty-four titles which begin with the word *roman* or *romant*, plus nineteen in which the word is used in the subtitle. Many of these, however, are not fiction; R. W. Baldner's later revision rejects nine of the fifteen which are titled *roman*, on miscellaneous grounds. Since Baldner's work is not very reliable, it might be preferable in comparing to use Williams' figure; even so, there are just twenty-two instances per half-century between 1600 and 1700, as opposed to fifteen from 1700 to 1750.<sup>4</sup> This is a relatively trifling difference, at best; the term was not so frequent in the seventeenth century as Jones claimed, nor so rare in the eighteenth.

It is dangerous to rely on statistical evidence in such matters, in any event. Probably none of the bibliographies is complete, and there are numerous inaccuracies. Even if there were neither omissions nor errors, a mere count of titles equates books of vastly differing worth.

The most famous *romans* of the seventeenth century do not in fact use the term; generally, the title simply names the hero: *Cassandre*; *Cléopâtre*; *Almahide, ou l'esclave Reine*;

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Beauchamps, *Imitation du roman grec de Theodore Prodomus*; 1749 Anon., *Le Roman de garnison*. Works with variant forms are: 1706 B . . . , Mr. l'abbé de, *La Fourbe découverte et le trompeur trompé, romance*; 1732 Marivaux, *Pharsamond, ou les nouvelles folies romanesques*; 1735 [Bougeant], *Voyage merveilleux du prince Fan-Férédin dans la Romancie*; 1745 [d'Arnaud], *Theresa, histoire italienne. Avec un discours sur le roman*; 1745 [Laffichard], *Caprices romanesques*; 1747 [Mouhy], *Le Masque de fer, . . . romance*; n.d. [Belin de La Faye], *Nouvelles romanesques et galantes*.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Coplestone Williams' *Bibliography of the Seventeenth Century Novel in France* (London: Holland Press) was first published in 1931; Ralph W. Baldner's *Bibliography of Seventeenth-Century French Prose Fiction* (New York: for the MLA Index Committee by Columbia Univ. Press) came out in 1967. The latter purports to correct the former, and one of its objectives was "to eliminate those works which definitely did not fall into the category of novels or prose fiction in general" (p. xiii). Unfortunately, Baldner's work is even less reliable than Williams' original list; see Frédéric Deloffre's review in *Dis-septième Siècle*, no. 79 (1968), 105-107. In preferring Williams here, I am assuming that both are untrustworthy, and making my case against the one that raises the most difficulties on this point.