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## "Romans Divers": The Novel, Its Earliest Classifications, and the Early Modern Peripheries of the Genre

**Abstract:** The first classifications of the novel date back to the early 18th century. Then, the novel was still a new genre and was defined in relation to ancient Latin or Hellenistic models and to their narrative variations from the 17th century. By analyzing the first works that try to trace a history of the new genre and a taxonomy of the various types of novels, penned by authors such as Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy, James Beattie and Clara Reeve, this paper argues that the works seen as peripheral in relation to a canonical, archetypal narration, which is typical of the novel, are in themselves illustrative of a wider phenomenon – the marginalization of those narratives which do not fit a current and implicit definition of a genre. Using Corin Braga's concept of "anarchetypal narrative", this paper discusses the works to be found at the peripheries of the novel in the 18th century and the explicit and implicit reasons for their theoretical dismissal.

**Keywords:** Novel; Utopian Narrative; Anarchetypal Narrative; Periphery; Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy; James Beattie; Clara Reeve.

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As Jean Sgard convincingly argues<sup>1</sup>, the proliferation of the word "roman", as the French denomination for the novel, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, happened in a context in which several other labels for the then-new literary genre ("histoire", "mémoire", "récit", "lettres") seemed to be preferred by the erudite authors of the age. In fact, the more the word "roman" was used, the more it seems to have been contested as an appropriate denomination for the lengthy imitations of classic Hellenistic or Medieval romances that had been published since the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in France. Hence, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, hard as it may be to imagine today, it appears that the label "roman", contested as it was, would before long be out of use.

On the other hand, the overall debate concerning the appropriate label for the new genre is symptomatic for the slow process of delineation of the generally agreed traits of the novel. A symbolic threshold in this process was the publication, in 1670, of Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Lettre sur l'origine des romans* (*Letter on the Origin of Novels*)<sup>2</sup>. In his essay, Huet proposed a number of delimitations that would become

commonplaces for almost a century: the novel (“roman”) was a narration in prose (narrations in verse are excluded<sup>3</sup>), plausible in its subject matter (as opposed to poetry, which can apply itself to more marvelous themes), concerned mostly with romance and private, romantic affairs of the characters (and, hence, less with history or heroic endeavors – although Huet conciliatorily admitted that, outside the norms of the “romans réguliers”, that is, of the typical novel, there were novels that were concerned with historical subject matters). A further and important distinction, made towards the end of the 17th century, separated “roman” from “nouvelle”. The former was usually an exemplary tale, featuring exemplary heroes, set in spaces and times removed from everyday experience, while the latter was concerned with more mundane stories and characters and was set in fictional worlds that more closely resembled the mundane life; in the English debates concerning the novel, this distinction would create the later opposition between *romance* and *novel*<sup>4</sup>. As this last separation of terms makes clear, the literary category of the novel slowly shifted, during the 18th century, from its ancient and medieval models towards the more modern sense of the word.

It is no wonder then that the first lengthy attempt at categorizing the various types of novel, due to Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy, in his *De l’usage des romans* (1734), is still caught between old and new definitions of the genre. Du Fresnoy begins by defending the novel (“le roman”) from its various critics. For the French historian, the novel – in its classical versions, but also in its more modern embodiments – is a work of imagination and can be a useful pastime.

Nevertheless, in his effort to rescue from critics novels both ancient and modern, Du Fresnoy eventually establishes as a model for the genre a typical narration that seems to be equally indebted to ancient and medieval literary works (exemplary heroes, extraordinary circumstances) and to the more recent *romans galants*, such as Madame de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). In order to achieve this synthesis, he states in one of the very first chapters of his treatise that one of the necessary elements for the novel is its romantic plot or subplot<sup>5</sup>. Hence, in the second volume of the book, which is largely an organized and annotated list of novels, divided into fourteen categories, the second chapter – the first being a survey of ancient Greek and Latin novels – is dedicated to romances (“romans d’amour”). Next, Du Fresnoy proposes labels for the remaining types of novels: heroic novels (“romans héroïques”), historical novels (“romans historiques”), morality tales (“romans de spiritualité & morale”), chivalrous novels (“romans de chevalerie”), novels in verse (“romans antiques en vers”), satirical novels (“romans satiriques”), political novels (“romans de politique”), fairy tales (“contes de fées & autres contes merveilleux”), comic novels (“romans comiques”) and, lastly, in a final chapter, a number of novels which do not fit any of the previous categories (“romans divers qui ne se rapportent à aucune des classes précédentes”). As the titles of the categories chosen by Du Fresnoy suggest, the novel is still largely defined in relation to its ancient and medieval models. To the types of literary genres which have an ample and canonized tradition – the comical novel, the heroic tale, the chivalrous romance, the morality tale, the novel in verse –, Du Fresnoy adds very few that can be

seen as modern: the political novel, the satirical novel, the romance. Meanwhile, the works listed in the fourteenth and last category, “*romans divers*”, while not all modern (in the sense of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century debate between the ancients and the moderns), delineate a periphery of the genre that includes not only the occasional eccentric literary work, but also, revealingly, novels that fall outside the taxonomy of the novel assembled by Du Fresnoy.

It is these diverse novels (“*romans divers*”) that constitute the subject of this article. Why were they seen – by Du Fresnoy and by other erudite authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – as peripheral in relation to the more canonical types of novels? In order to answer this question, a couple of preliminary observations are in order.

Firstly, most of these novels – Du Fresnoy lists around ninety in the final section of his treatise – could have fitted categories already mentioned by the French erudite. Some of them are – to use Du Fresnoy’s taxonomy – political novels, that is, literary texts that have been subsequently placed by literary historians in the ample category of utopian novels. Indeed, some of them are to be found, in translation, in the famous collection of *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions et romans cabalistiques*, edited by Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Other titles mentioned by Du Fresnoy in this final section could have fitted other categories, such as the comic novel or the satirical novel. By their mere placement in a different category, one deduces their perceived incongruity with the implied definition of various subgenres of the novel.

Secondly, rarely are the literary taxonomies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as it is the case

nowadays, based on preliminary definitions of the various genres or subgenres. Instead, in most cases, the used criterion is that of thematic similarity. For instance, Du Fresnoy does not even list the novels in the various subgenres alphabetically – in the preface of his treatise, as a matter of fact, he confesses that he compiled most of his examples from memory. In the case of the political novels, he mentions typical texts, such as Thomas Morus’ *Utopia* or Fénelon’s *Télémaque*, then continues the list with various imitations of Fénelon’s book, such as Pierre Lesconvel’s *Voyage du prince de Montberaud dans l’Île de Naudely* or Andrew Michael Ramsay’s *The Travels of Cyrus* and ends it – by association with the settings in Ramsay’s novel – with *abbé* Jean Terrasson’s fantasy novel *Séthos*. Du Fresnoy is not alone in compiling this sort of list of similar texts. As a matter of fact, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this seems to be the norm, at least when dealing with narrations which do not fit a pre-established genre. Utopian narratives, for instance, are usually mentioned in association with other similar narratives, in brief lists that Georges Benrekassa has labeled “*séries utopiques*”<sup>6</sup>. From these lists, which usually include a small number of examples (as in Du Fresnoy’s case, they will probably include works such as Morus’ *Utopia* or Fénelon’s *Télémaque*, alongside a few other derivative writings), one can deduce that, even if a clear definition for such and such subgenre of the novel does not exist, a recognition of the affinities between such similar texts already exists.

Many of the texts listed by Du Fresnoy in the last chapter of his treatise are utopian narrations. They might not be the best-known works of the genre written in

the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but they are nevertheless concerned with issues that have defined utopian writings since Morus's *Utopia* – political issues (can there be other types of political institutions than those found in France or in other countries in Western Europe?) and ethnographic issues (what are those features that separate the Western European typical inhabitant from the inhabitants of faraway countries and places?). In this later aspect, many of the works listed by Du Fresnoy under the label “*romans divers*” address this ethnographic specificity and are, as such, works about the pseudo-scientific differences between different European nations and various other ethnicities. Even if nations pictured in these works are often imagined nations, one can always find in these narrations a sketched version of the non-European Other. Furthermore, Du Fresnoy delineates his main model for the novel by distinguishing it from various types of non-European narrations. In a whole chapter of his treatise, he theorizes that different nations can have different affinities for various types of novels. Persians, for instance, according to Du Fresnoy, are not keen on the romances favored by Western cultivated readers; instead, they prefer political novels, or moral tales, or fabulous historical narrations<sup>7</sup>. As a result, works of imagination that resemble the kind of narrations similar to those preferred by the non-Europeans are more likely to be placed in that periphery of the genre, to be found in the last chapter of Du Fresnoy's book, under the label “*romans divers*”. Peripheral in relation to the implied traits of the Western romance, as theorized by Du Fresnoy, these narrations often are literally concerned with the peripheries of the imagined or the known world.

If every age or every century has its models for its own literary genres, there must be, by opposition, marginal genres and peripheral works waiting to be discovered and reevaluated after the main model for a genre is no longer valid. Du Fresnoy's taxonomy is a relevant example for this kind of tension between a central model and its peripheries. What separates the main model from its peripheral variations are unusual narrative patterns or unusual themes or issues addressed by various literary works belonging to the same genre; nevertheless, various cultural implications, as the one discussed above, can contribute to the resulting taxonomy. If we refer to the typical narrative pattern of a canonical work as an *archetypal* narrative, then, following a distinction suggested by Corin Braga<sup>8</sup>, we ought to label the peripheral narrative patterns usually isolated in a manner similar to Du Fresnoy's taxonomy *anarchetypal* narrative. These *anarchetypal* narratives are in some respects similar to the canonical texts of a genre in a given period, but they are also seen, on account of their perceived dissimilar structure or different textual conventions, as deviations from the norm.

For instance, in his chapter dedicated to political novels, as we have pointed out earlier, Du Fresnoy mentions some of the most known works of utopian fiction, but also some of the most recent works known to him. There is no clear reason given for excluding from this canonical list the works he places in the last chapter of his treatise. We can only infer from his list what are the implied criteria he uses in order to separate them. It is worth mentioning that not all the literary works in this final list belong to the same genre. Carefully separating them

by country of origin, Du Fresnoy still manages to throw together works as various as Fernando de Rojas' proto-novel *La Celestina* (also known as *The Tragicomedy of Calisto and Melibea*), Lope de Vega's pastoral novel *Arcadia*, Jacopo Sannazaro's pastoral poem *Arcadia*, several French *romans galants* and various fictional travels in faraway exotic places. On the other hand, many of the works Du Fresnoy mentions (especially the ones written in French or the ones he might have read in French translations) are some of the most extravagant utopian writings of the previous decades and even centuries – Barthélémy Aneau's *Alector ou le coq* (1560), Joseph Hall's *Mundus alter et idem* (1605), Béroalde de Verville's *Le voyage des princes fortunez* (1610), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des États et Empires de la Lune* (1657), Gabriel de Foigny's *La Terre australe connue* (1676), Denis Vairasse's *L'Histoire des Sévarambes* (1677), Gabriel Daniel's *Voyage du monde de Descartes* (1690), Simon Tyssot de Patot's *Voyages et aventures de Jaques Massé* (1710), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Pierre Desfontaines unauthorized sequel to Swift's work, *Le Nouveau Gulliver* (1730). As one can determine from Du Fresnoy's lists, while Fénelon's *Télémaque* is integrated, as a canonical work, in the chapter dedicated to political novels, the then-more recently published *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*, despite their immediate success, are still placed in the last chapter of the treatise. Furthermore, even older and established works, such as Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des États et Empires de la Lune*, are still relegated to the same peripheral position. What seems to distinguish many

of these peripheral works – arguably, the ones penned by the likes of Aneau, Hall, Cyrano, Daniel, Swift and Desfontaines – is their allegorical stance. Indeed, later in the century, Garnier himself will edit these works in his series of imaginary voyages (*Voyages imaginaires...*) in a specific category, *miraculous imaginary voyages* (“*voyages imaginaires merveilleux*”), distinguishing them from those texts which more closely resemble the assumed definition of the novel (“*voyages romanesques*”), while some of the works mentioned in passing by Du Fresnoy, such as abbé Bordelon's *L'histoire des imaginations extravagantes de Monsieur Oufle*, will be left for the final volumes of the series, gathered under the label *dreams and visions* (“*songes et visions*”). It seems, then, that the closer the definition of the novel gets during the 18th century to its more modern meaning – a narrative in prose, plausible in its subject matter, set in fictional worlds that more closely resembles the mundane life –, the more likely it is that those works of fiction in prose that use allegory and similar narrative devices are going to be seen as peripheral in relation to the acknowledged, archetypal narrative of the novel.

As more emphasis is put on the realistic aspects of the novel and its plot, fewer and fewer utopian narratives are mentioned as pertinent examples of novels. If Du Fresnoy was still treating several utopian narratives as novels, albeit peripheral in his taxonomy, very few of the titles gathered by the French author in the final chapter of his treatise, as “*romans divers*”, are mentioned in later taxonomies. For instance, one of the most coherent and influential taxonomy of the late 18th century, to be found in James Beattie's essay, “On

Fable and Romance”, first published in 1783, barely mentions more than a handful of utopian narratives. Beattie carefully distinguishes between two main types of narrations in prose, the *allegorical* and the *poetical*:

Modern prose fable [...] may be divided into two kinds, which, for the sake of distinction, I shall call the *allegorical* and the *poetical*. The allegorical part of modern prose fable may be subdivided into two species, the historical, and the moral; and the poetical part I shall also subdivide into two sorts, the serious, and the comick. Thus the prose fable of the moderns may be distributed into four species, whereof I shall speak in their order: 1. The historical allegory; 2. The moral allegory; 3. The poetical and serious fable; 4. The poetical and comick fable. These two last I comprehend under the general term *romance*.<sup>9</sup>

It may not be obvious at first that these carefully delineated categories are intended to systematize works of fiction that are mostly seen as proto-novels. For the kind of novels that are more aligned to the taste of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century readers, such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Alain-René Lesage’s *Gil Blas* or Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Beattie reserves a special label: *new romances*. These new romances become, in Beattie’s taxonomy, the new canonical models for the genre: “The rise and progress of the *modern romance*, or *poetical prose fable*, is connected with many topicks of importance, which would throw (if fully illustrated) great light upon the history and politicks, the manners, and the literature,

of these latter ages. Observe, that I call this sort of fable *poetical*, from the nature of the invention; and prose, because it is not in verse.”<sup>10</sup> By contrast, in the category of the old romances, Beattie now and then mentions, as an example, a few utopian narratives, such as John Barclay’s *Argenis* (as an example for the fabulous historical allegory<sup>11</sup>) or Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (as an example for the moral allegory<sup>12</sup>). There is very little explicit criticism of these novels, insofar as they represent for Beattie an older model for the genre, but we can infer in what way they are no longer seen as canonical from two extended commentaries made by Beattie regarding other types of novels. On the one hand, a half a century after Du Fresnoy, Beattie is less inclined to consider some of the most known French novels of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as novels *per se*. Instead, he regards Georges de Scudéry’s *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* or Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Clélie* as less coherent and narratively composite, criticizing their length and their incoherent flights of fancy:

... it is proper just to mention a species of romantick narrative, which cannot be called either old or new, but is a strange mixture of both. Of this kind are the *Grand Cyrus*, *Clelia*, and *Cleopatra*, each consisting of ten or a dozen large volumes, and pretending to have a foundation in ancient history. In them, all facts and characters, real and fabulous, and all systems of policy and manners, the Greek, the Roman, the feudal and the modern, are jumbled together and confounded, as if a painter should represent Julius Cesar drinking tea with queen

Elizabeth, Jupiter, and Dulcinea del Toboso, and having on his head the laurel wreath of ancient Rome, a suit of Gothick armour on his shoulders, laced ruffles at his wrist, a pipe of tobacco in his mouth, and a pistol and tomahawk stuck in his belt.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, Beattie is as inclined as Du Fresnoy to explicitly define the modern novel in relation to the perceived incoherence of the non-European narratives. As a matter of fact, alongside a criticism of the ancient medieval romances, this quasi-satirical account of the excesses of the non-European narratives is a commonplace argument among those writers which try to define the modern novel during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The adjectives Beattie uses to describe the Persian narratives in a brief account of Antoine Galland's translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*, such as "astonishing" or "extravagant", are telling. In very few phrases, Beattie manages to criticize both the style and content of the Oriental tales. We can assume that the kind of criticism he reserves for *One Thousand and One Nights* and for Antoine Galland's manner of translating them could have been used for assessing some of the most extravagant utopian narratives, which he barely mentions by name: "There is in it great luxury of description, without any elegance, and great variety of invention, but nothing that elevates the mind, or touches the heart. All is wonderful and incredible, and the astonishment of the reader is more aimed at, than his improvement either in morality or in the knowledge of nature."<sup>14</sup> By defining the new modern novel using criteria such as its verisimilitude, its coherence and its adherence to everyday reality,

writers such as Beattie ignore or place at the peripheries of the genre many works which in the previous century could have been perceived as possible examples of the genre.

One final example of such distinctions between the modern novel and peripheral variations of the genre is to be found in Clara Reeve's commentary on the novel, *The Progress of Romance*, written in erudite fashion as a series of dialogues between fictional characters and first published in 1785. It is one of the rare works of literary criticism written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the dialogue form and, as the author explicitly states through one of the characters, it is a sort of reply to Beattie's essay. Reeve follows Beattie in distinguishing between romance and novel, based, as is to be expected, on their degree of verisimilitude and realism: "The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance, in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened, nor is likely to happen."<sup>15</sup> In a manner similar to Beattie, Reeve distinguishes between modern novels and their generic predecessors. In this respect, she mentions works that Du Fresnoy was labeling as political novels, such as Fénelon's *Télémaque* and Ramsay's *The Travels of Cyrus*, but in her dialogue they are merely examples of the ancient types of novels, no longer fitting the current definition of the genre ("I mention both these charming books rather out of time, because they are of a different species from the modern stories or Novels"<sup>16</sup>). As for the non-European narratives, represented in the dialogue by *One Thousand and One Nights* and their European imitations, labeled by Reeve "Eastern tales", they are predictably acclaimed for their

extravagance and originality, while being treated as peculiar and somewhat reprehensible: “There is a kind of fascination in them – when once we begin a volume, we cannot lay it aside, but drive through to the end of it, and yet upon reflection we despise and reject them.”<sup>17</sup> One of the remarkable things about Reeve’s survey of the novel is that, as Du Fresnoy taxonomy, it contains a separate brief list of recommended works of fiction which do not fit the definition of the modern novel. This list includes several utopian narratives, such as Cyrano de Bergerac’s *Histoire comique*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Simon Berington’s *The Memoirs of Sign. Gaudentio di Lucca* or Robert Paltock’s *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins*, alongside such odd companions as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* or Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*<sup>18</sup>. The works in this list are described in Reeve’s dialogue as a mixed genre, meaning they are neither romances nor novels. In order to fit into Reeve’s taxonomy, they are given a specific label: “stories original and uncommon.”<sup>19</sup>

In the long process of defining the modern novel during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a plausible and realistic narrative, using

rational, aesthetic criteria, one can notice the formation of canonical taxonomies which do include examples of novels that deviate from the acknowledged norm, but which are also relegated to the periphery of the genre. For Du Fresnoy, they are plainly and simply different. For later writers, such as Beattie or Reeve, they belong to a mixed genre, since they do not belong to either of the two main categories, the romance and the novel. What distinguishes them and gains them their peripheral status is their perceived formal irregularity or even formal incoherence, their use of allegory and their lack of plausibility – in brief, all the traits that the modern novel is defined against. In a manner similar to the non-European narratives which catch the attention of these writers, they are seen, in relation to the canonical modern novel, as extravagant and original, but also as mildly reprehensible.

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## NOTES

1. Jean Sgard, "Le mot 'roman'", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, nos. 2-3 (13), Jan.-Apr. 2001, pp. 183-195.
2. For an overall discussion concerning this important moment in the conceptualization of the genre, see Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, translated by Zakiya Hanafi, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 79-85.
3. "Je ne parle donc point icy des Romans en Vers, et moins encore des Poëmes Epiques...", Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Lettre sur l'origine des romans*, facsimile of the 1670 and 1682 editions, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzlersche, 1966, p. 6.
4. See Guido Mazzoni, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.
5. "Mais dans toutes les conditions nécessaires à la structure d'un Roman, je n'ai rien dit de l'Amour qui en est la baze, & sans lequel cette sorte d'ouvrage manqueroit ce qui lui est essentiel pour figurer dans le monde en qualité de Roman...", Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy, *De l'usage des romans, où l'on fait voir leur utilité & leurs differens caracteres. Avec une bibliotheque des Romans, accompagnée de Remarques critiques sur leur choix & leurs Editions*, Amsterdam, Chez la veuve de Poilras, 1734, vol. I, p. 221.
6. See Georges Benrekassa, "Le savoir de la fable et l'utopie du savoir: Textes utopiques et recueils politiques, 1764-1788", in *Le concentrique et l'excentrique: Marges des Lumières*, Paris, Payot, 1980, pp. 125-153
7. "... je sçay que les Orientaux ne donnent pas moins que nous dans les narrations extraordinaires; que souvent le naturel, quoique beau, les dégoûte, qu'il leur fait mal au cœur. Ils aiment donc les Romans, mais ce ne sont pas, comme les nôtres, des Romans d'amour. // C'est ou de la politique, ou de la morale, ou même de l'histoire romancée; & s'il faut le dire, ils s'en servent même pour trouver leur religion...", Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 304-305.
8. See, for instance, Corin Braga, *Archétypologie postmoderne. D'Œdipe à Umberto Eco*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2019.
9. James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, vol. III, Philadelphia, Hopkins and Earle, 1809, pp. 11-12.
10. *Ibidem*, pp. 22-23.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 97.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 18.
15. Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance and The History of Charoba, Queen of Aegypt*, New York, The Facsimile Text Society, 1930, p. 111.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 87.
17. *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 58-59.
18. *Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.
19. *Ibidem*.