True Fictions and False Histories

The Secret Rise of the Roman à Clef

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Abstract and Keywords
A history of the roman à clef’s slow rise and abrupt decline, this chapter explores its invention in the 17th and 18th centuries, where it at once contested and facilitated the emergent novel’s claim to moral authority and aesthetic autonomy. Both narrative forms developed unique yet interrelated strategies for negotiating the expanding divide between history and fiction. The novel’s eventual rise, in fact, came to depend precisely on its ability to suppress and eventually supplant the far more disruptive—and innovative—energies of the roman à clef. This chapter first explores the ways in which the two genres became intertwined with one another in texts like *Moll Flanders* and *Clarissa*. It then traces the subtle ways in which the novel eventually managed to incorporate elements of its shadowy double, which was, in turn, roundly denigrated as inartistic and insipid. The earlier genre did not disappear entirely, however, but continued to stalk the novel in works like Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Disraeli’s *Coningsby*. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the anarchic and innovative potential of the roman à clef, a genre whose energies had only been temporarily constrained rather than fully controlled.

**Keywords:** genre, theory of novel, roman à clef, novel, realism, rise of novel, literary history
Can a novel be true? Answering this simple question is anything but easy since it is structured around an obvious paradox. On the one hand, it is in the very nature of a novel to be fundamentally untrue, to be, in other words, a work of fiction. Thus are reader and author alike freed from a crude forensic adherence to the truth as the text unfolds in the parallel yet autonomous realm of the imagination. This is not to say novels cannot contain facts about the world, only that these facts are themselves always secondary to a special kind of truth—about the nature of love, for example, or the complexity of personal relationships. Even in a historical novel like Scott’s *Waverley*, which places particular emphasis on its fidelity to the Jacobite Rebellion, this alternative kind of truth emerges outside of a verifiable past in the eponymous hero’s relationship with Flora Mac-Ivor. Similarly, the worlds constructed in the social-problem novels of the nineteenth century, like Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, may have been drawn extensively from Parliamentary blue books, but nevertheless are populated with invented characters. We have no doubt learned to love this nebulous relationship between the novel and the truth, but it also continues to bedevil us. Where, after all, does fiction stop and fact begin when reading any work of fiction? Modernist texts tackle this question aggressively in their experiments with the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality,” but its roots run deep into the novel’s eighteenth-century origins.
Daniel Defoe in his 1719 “Preface” to *Robinson Crusoe*, arguably the first English novel, claims he is not an author but an editor, and that he has collected “a just history of facts; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it.”\(^1\) Everything in the book—from that eerie footprint in the sand to the mariner’s incredible luck in securing the cargo of a wrecked ship—is plainly designated as historical truth. His “Preface” to *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published only four months after the success of the first volume, mounts an even stronger claim for the text’s absolute veracity: “All the endeavours of envious people to reproach it with being a romance, to search it for errors in geography, inconsistency in the relation, and contradictions in the fact, have proved abortive, and as impotent as malicious.”\(^2\) Lightly dismissing the critics, Defoe reassures his readers that the text is indeed a history rooted in strict adherence to facts he has diligently gathered rather than simply invented.

Surprisingly, this same concern with preserving the proper distinction between fact and fiction is apparent two centuries later in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, although the valence of these two terms has shifted radically. Terence Hewett, one of the book’s central figures, describes his desire to write something fundamentally new, “a novel about Silence.” He attributes the difficulty and even the impossibility of such a project precisely to the uncertain boundary between fiction and history exploited equally by novelists and their audiences: “Nobody cares. All you read a novel for is to see what sort of person the writer is, and, if you know him, which of his friends he has put in.”\(^3\) Like Defoe, Woolf’s Hewett insists on drawing a sharp distinction between fiction and history and implicitly excoriates the maliciousness of any reader brash enough to confuse the two.
In the two hundred years that separate Defoe’s and Woolf’s first forays into the novel, the moral weight of fiction clearly changed, though the novel’s epistemological instability persisted. Struggling unconsciously to create a fundamentally new genre of writing, Defoe felt compelled to stake his work on a claim to truth so absolute that even his own role as author was minimized, reducing him to an editor of testamentary documents. He would, in fact, keep up this practice throughout his career, lamenting in the 1722 “Preface” to *Moll Flanders* that “the World is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances, that it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine, where the Names and other Circumstances of the Person are concealed; and on this Account we must be content to leave the Reader to pass his own Opinion upon the ensuing Sheets, and take it just as he pleases.” Poor Daniel Defoe: no one will believe that he is merely a journalist or an editor, trying to protect his confidential sources through the simple expedience of changing a few key names. Woolf’s Terence Hewett has an identical yet isomorphic problem: everyone reading his imagined novel about “Silence” will nevertheless believe that he is little more than a journalist or an editor who is protecting his sources by changing a few key names. Indeed, the very fact that readers so often treat Hewett and Rachel Vinrace as ciphers for Woolf herself only makes this confusion that much more pressing. On the one hand, therefore, it is obvious that the networks of reception through which imaginative texts move underwent a radical change soon after the novel’s invention, so that Hewett (and through him, perhaps Woolf) seeks to claim the freedom of his work from the very world of factual events to which Defoe tied his narrative star. On the other hand, both Hewett and Defoe remain embedded in the same fundamental struggle to prevent the infection of fact with fiction. Defoe assures his readers that his works are essentially romans à clef and that he holds the interpretive key, while Hewett laments the fact that his novel will always be mistaken for a roman à clef to which his own private relationships provide a hidden key.
Both writers are enmeshed in a troubling bind that, over the course of its long history, the novel has been able to suppress but never quite resolve. “One question that novels repeatedly ask,” J. Paul Hunter argues, is “How do you know? Most novels seem to begin in epistemology; certainly most address issues in ways that suggest urgent involvement.”

But is it not simply novels that engage this question—so too do the legal and aesthetic institutions that both shape and are themselves shaped by their production and reception. The Scots-Frenchman John Barclay deliberately exploited the ambiguous relationship between truth and fiction in his 1621 work *Argenis*. Published in France and written in Latin, this book is arguably the first roman à clef, and though written in a language guaranteed to secure only an elite and educated audience, it enjoyed enormous popularity when first published.

In his “Preface,” Barclay does not attempt to draw any clear distinction between fact and fiction, but instead assures his readers that the two have been delightfully mingled so that moral virtue and decorum can take precedence over a purely factual adherence to the truth. This mannered approach nevertheless has a sting:

>[N]o man’s character shall be simply set down: I shall find many things to conceal them which would not well agree with them if they were made known. For I, that bind not myself religiously to the writing of a true history, may take this liberty. So shall the vices, not the men, be struck; neither can any man take exception, but such as shall with a most shameful confession discover his own naughtiness. Besides, I will have here and there imaginary names, to signify several vices and virtues, so that he may be as much deceived, that would draw all in my writing, as he that would nothing, to the truth of any late or present passage of state.
Barclay here acknowledges all the central elements of a roman à clef: its “conditional fictionality,” its devious manipulation of seemingly insignificant details, and even (p.24) its infectiousness. After all, he brazenly concludes by daring his readers to (mis)recognize themselves and thereby admit their own scandalous behavior. Similarly, Osbert Sitwell in his “Author’s Preface” to a 1914 collection of stories entitled Triple Fugue exploits these very same conventions. “In humbly presenting the following tales of the Old and New worlds,” he coyly writes, “I would at the same time wish to warn my readers that any character failing to recognize himself will immediately be prosecuted for libel.” Sitwell is confident that his readers will mistake his fictions for facts, and like Barclay he dares them to recognize themselves, knowing that to do so is to admit the essential veracity of his caustic portraits. If the novel, as Hunter contends, begins in epistemology, then we can likewise say that it remains haunted by a productive and entertaining doubt about the kind of knowledge it produces and the uses to which it might be put by both authors and readers.
Such ambiguity is not merely the stuff of literary theory or delicious gossip since, as Sitwell implies, there is always the possibility that these uncertainties will be resolved by juries called to courts of law. Here, where the novel enters into the realm of ethical and legal debate, the coy games of the roman à clef become potentially criminal and civil offenses. While this issue will be considered in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3, one more parallel between the fictions of the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries proves revealing. John Richetti notes that “in terms of numbers, at least, the market for fiction in the first forty years or so of the eighteenth century was clearly dominated by amatory fiction, narratives (mostly short, novella length) often subtitled histories or secret histories of memoirs.”

Among the most famous of these was Mary Delarivier Manley’s 1709 roman à clef, *The New Atalantis*, a scandalous account of the Whig government and its insidious influence on Queen Anne. For her troubles, the Earl of Sutherland ordered Manley’s arrest and trial for seditious libel. On the stand, at least according to her autobiography (itself published as a roman à clef), she claimed to have defeated the charge by invoking both her gender and her ability to preserve some vital sense of doubt about the veracity of her work. Thus, she is uncertain “Whether the Persons in Power were ashamed to bring a Woman to her Trial for writing a few amorous Trifles purely for her own Amusement, or that our Laws are defective, as most Persons conceiv’d, because she had serv’d her self with Romantick Names, and a feign’d Scene of Action.”

The text’s delicate ambiguity and “conditional fictionality” effectively stymied the legal system itself, exposing “defective” laws that would continue to founder in their often tortured attempts definitively to separate fact from fiction. In 1895, in an event that marks at least one point of origin for literary modernism, Oscar Wilde also found himself in a courtroom struggling to manipulate these same juridical defects for rather different ends. His libel trial eventually led to his prosecution for indecency, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was introduced as evidence of his crimes by prosecutors who claimed that characters in the text were thinly disguised stand-ins for Wilde and his lovers. He would, of course, famously be condemned to hard labor on the basis of soiled sheets, but as was the case in the Manley trial, the book entered into evidence remained an obdurate object, its status as either a novel or a roman à clef never fully resolved.
The parallels I have drawn here—between Defoe and Hewett, between Barclay and Sitwell, and between Manley and Wilde—all reveal a surprising affinity between the fictional practices that contributed to the rise of the novel in the early eighteenth century and the series of often radical innovations that transformed the genre in the aesthetic crucible of twentieth-century modernism. This chapter unravels from the history of the novel one surprisingly resilient thread linking these otherwise disparate cultural moments: the strange and persistent social life of the roman à clef as the novel’s troubling and disruptive double. The more totalizing any history of the novel claims to be, as William Warner argues, the more gaps and fissure inevitably open in an edifice unable to account fully for “what is contingent and arbitrary in the ideological confrontation of early modern culture.” One such contingent artifact is the roman à clef, a genre that has received only intermittent attention from critics and historians who typically collapse it into a hodgepodge that expands or contracts to include such archaic forms as the chronique scandaleuse, the true history, and the histoire amoureuse. The roman à clef, however, is not just an ancestor to the novel that long ago withered on the genealogical tree; it is instead a creative and stubbornly persistent counter-form to the novel. As we will see, its resurgence in the last decade of the nineteenth century disrupts the novel’s narrow claims to authority by reviving the set of legal, ethical, and aesthetic contradictions that the realist novel managed only temporarily to suspend rather than resolve. Rather than attempting to provide an alternative or corrective history of the novel, therefore, this chapter will instead outline briefly the roman à clef’s shadowy and discontinuous history as it too emerged in the eighteenth century and interwove itself through the novel’s rise and consolidation in Victorian realism.

The Rise of the Novel and the Fall of the Roman à Clef
Unlike the roman à clef, the novel's historical rise depended on its apparent ability to resolve the sort of opposition between fact and fiction that so troubled Defoe; its great genius, theorists generally agree, resides in its singular ability to generate (p. 26) an aesthetic solution to an interdependent set of legal, ethical, and epistemological problems. Yet as it first took shape in the eighteenth century, this distinctive compromise remained vague and inchoate. Such instability is readily evident, for example, in Charles Gildon's 1719 “Epistle to Daniel Defoe” published just after Robinson Crusoe appeared. Declaring himself no “Enemy to the Writers of Fables,” Gildon disputes the book’s claim to be merely an edited factual history and takes its author to task for “throwing in needless Absurdities to make the Truth of your Story still more doubted.”\(^{14}\) The urge to preserve the moral priority of fact is evident here, and he concedes that there is nothing wrong with composing an entirely fanciful story. Indeed, in a postscript to the letter added after The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe appeared, Gildon claims suddenly to understand that the “Book is nothing but a Romance.” In shifting the debate over genre away from both fable and history, he resolves his uneasiness by realizing that Defoe has been writing fiction all along while dishonestly trying to pass it off as something morally serious and ethically legitimate. The befuddled Gildon, however, continues to be worried by a paradox that also troubled a wide array of seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers and critics: the ability of such fanciful narratives nevertheless to tell a distinctive kind of truth. Defoe himself confesses that he has altered parts of the story, but only with the intention of providing such sound moral instruction that “all the Part that may be call’d Invention, or Parable in the Story” can be legitimated.\(^{15}\) Gildon seizes on this apparent confusion about genre, contending that “the Publication of this Book was not sufficient to justify and make Truth of what you allow to be Fiction and Fable … unless you would have us think, that the Manner of your telling a Lie will make it a Truth.”\(^{16}\) For modern readers, of course, Gildon seems delightfully naïve since we now so readily accept the irony that fiction’s lies can indeed be made to tell certain kinds of truths.
J. Paul Hunter argues in *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* that, like Gildon, “readers, writers, and arbiters of taste remained nervous about fictitiousness for more than a century and into the nineteenth century novelists remained defensive about their invented worlds, even while always insisting that mimetic accuracy was less important than the uses a story was put to.” Hunter implies that by the twentieth century the problem of fictitiousness had somehow abated, facilitated perhaps by a combination of habituation, an Eliotic insistence on impersonality, and the sometimes subtle and sometimes overt operations of the intentional fallacy. The abrupt return of the roman à clef in the 1890s, however, deeply troubles this narrative about the novel’s success, reminding us that the ability to sort fact from fiction in imaginative texts is no more stable now than it ever has been. “Fictionality,” Brett Bourbon argues, is ultimately a “metaconceptual judgment or stance that is specifically descriptive not of some special relation between the world and the fiction, but of how we understand ourselves relative to these words.” Readers, in other words, may find themselves constrained at any given historical moment by particular legal and critical institutions seeking to police proper modes of reading, but these forces ultimately command a very weak power at best. Thus does the roman à clef continue to stalk the novel, providing an alternative yet still largely invisible way of negotiating the boundary between history and fiction. Indeed, its infectiousness suggests just how tenuous the novel remains, subject as it is to changing habits of reading and reception.
The roman à clef, unlike the novel, does not insist on the full autonomy of its characters from the world of historical fact. This not only produces a series of ethical and interpretive quandaries, but also disrupts the mystifying pleasures of identification. Many such works, in fact, are often narrated by a magical voyeur able to move invisibly in and out of private settings while commenting (often, though not always, satirically) on the events recorded. The reader is thus consistently made aware of him or herself as a self-conscious yet “secret observer of a hidden scene”\textsuperscript{19} rather than undergoing what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the process of “recentering” the consciousness in “non-actual possible worlds.”\textsuperscript{20} The novel rises so quickly to prominence, Deirdre Lynch argues, because it dwells “on the notion that it is (as Sterne puts it) ‘nonsensical minutiae’ and ‘the small sweet courtesies of life’ that exhibit the truth of character most tellingly.”\textsuperscript{21} When confronting the roman à clef, readers certainly attend to the same “nonsensical minutiae” associated with characterization and individuality in novels, but they do so in a sleuthlike effort to decode the identity of the historical antecedents for the constructs on the page. This idiosyncratic mode of reading is thus based on spectacle and speculation rather than identification and interpellation. What I call throughout this book the “aesthetics of detail” is essential to both the novel and the roman à clef—indeed, that’s why one can so easily pass for the other. This mechanism, however, is deployed for starkly different ends in the two genres, one leading inward toward an autonomous fictional space and the other beyond the diegesis to the historical world. Tracing the roman à clef’s often obscure social life as well as the unique kind of reading practices it generates reveals the strange persistence of a form that competes with the novel by challenging its legal and aesthetic stability.

Ian Watt’s influential 1957 \textit{The Rise of the Novel} established a remarkably durable set of terms for explaining the abrupt emergence and consolidation of this genre, linking it to a series of sweeping technological and sociological changes intertwined with the rise of the middle-class in eighteenth-century England. As the title suggests, it tells a heroic story and contains within its scintillating title (p.28) a sense of inevitability, what Lennard Davis calls “a signification of destiny and power.”\textsuperscript{22} At the center of this story is the bourgeois individual, a historically contingent figure that
requires a new set of narrative forms to legitimate its expansive economic and political power. In its simplest form, what Hunter calls the “triple-rise thesis,” Watt’s narrative explains that the expansion of an affluent English middle-class produced rising literacy rates and a concomitant demand for new kinds of reading material. In this model, the roman à clef fades from existence both because it is associated with aristocratic coteries and because its claims to truth remain too explicit. By turning to the historical archive, Hunter’s *Before Novels* challenges key elements of Watt’s theory, effectively mining the foundations upon which the novel’s rise had been based. “There is serious difficulty,” he writes, “for the triple-rise thesis in the matter of timing: the quantitative information we now have suggests that the steepest acceleration in literacy occurred early on in the seventeenth century, at least three generations before the novel began in any meaningful sense to emerge.” This unexpectedly wide gap clearly disallows any easy correlation of the rise of middle-class literacy with the creation of the novel. The challenge for the literary historian thus resides in the need to explain why this particular genre among the many other kinds of writing being avidly produced and widely disseminated achieved cultural dominance by the end of the eighteenth century. Hunter surveys a welter of published and private work in order to contend that the novel did not arise heroically with the rapid ascent of the English middle classes, but was instead generated from a relatively slow accretion of various reading and writing practices. Moving deftly between primary documents, cultural history, and literary sociology, this analysis demonstrates the ways in which biographies, diaries, sermons, travel narratives, journalism, and other literary modes all eventually succumbed to “the novel’s imperialism.” Among the most potent of these narrative precursors were those works claiming to penetrate the private realms of individual lives. Emphasizing the vogue for diary writing in the late 1600s, for example, Hunter argues that a “cultural climate receptive to issues of privacy” arose and that “revelations that would have caused profound embarrassment—even shame—a generation earlier began to find their way into print.” This fascination with privacy clearly feeds into many of the discursive dynamics a critic like Nancy Armstrong identifies in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, but it does not explain why such accounts must necessarily be fictional. Though few private diaries were actually published, the
widespread practice of “lifewriting” itself generated a kind of curiosity about what others might be recording. Hunter notes that although the novel sought to provide such a peep into another’s life, it nevertheless “seemed to preserve a cloak of decency by keeping human secrets (p.29) in private places and times.” This protective cloak, of course, was generated by the curious power of fiction itself to tell truths about subjective experience that nevertheless did not impinge upon the historical world of real people. Even when more deeply imbricated in the textual productions of the late seventeenth century, therefore, the novel’s distinctive power continues to reside in its ability to police a firm boundary between fictional and historical worlds, between Robinson Crusoe, for example, and Daniel Defoe.
As Hunter reveals in his account of this complex historical moment, however, the public trade in private life was thriving well beyond the writing of Richardson, Smollett, and Fielding. In fact, the rise of the novel was both accompanied and contested by the roman à clef and other similar kinds of texts that Lennard Davis calls “factual fictions.” Such works deliberately erect a “covert frame,” creating for the reader an “ambivalent reaction—an uncertainty as to the factual or fictional reality of the work.” Defoe provides only the most famous example of this when he insists that nearly all his long works are based in fact; and in doing so he was merely following what had become a relatively familiar convention. Barclay’s Satyricon also explicitly deployed this kind of frame and by the late seventeenth century the scandalous and infectious appeal of such ambiguous readings prompted a surprising renovation of the original classical satire by Petronius. As David Fleming argues, few commentators sought to link specific characters in the original Satyricon to particular characters in Nero’s Rome. Yet by 1694 numerous keys suddenly appeared in print and essentially transformed the ancient text from fiction into fact. The very earliest romans à clef, like the Satyricon, first emerged in France, and Barclay’s work was later followed by the even more scandalous works of Roger de Bussy-Rabutin, whose 1660 Histoire amoureuse des Gaules cloaked explicit political attacks behind lightly disguised classical pseudonyms. Indeed, the key in this case proved too easy to decipher, and Bussy was first imprisoned in the Bastille then exiled from Paris. Later writers sought to navigate these risks more carefully, though Grandchamp’s 1701 Telemaque moderne explicitly evokes a similar kind of frame. “Les Heros qui va paroistre ici masque sur la Scene,” he writes in the preface, “sous le nom de Telemaque Moderne, a fait tant de bruit dans le monde par ses Intrigues, que le Public n’aura pas de peine a le reconnoiestre: Il ne faut pas mesme de Clef pour l’intelligence de cet Ouvrage.” He goes on to note, however, that “le respect qu’on doit aux Augustes Peronnes, qui sont les principaux Acteurs de cette Scene, ne permettoit de les nominer.”
Perhaps the most famous of the French authors to exploit the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality” and infectious appeal was Mlle. de Scudéry, whose 1664 work, *Artamene ou Le Grand Cyrus*, became a sensation in both France and England. In its pages the increasingly transparent insistence that an apparently fictional work is, in fact, based upon genuine historical sources is enfolded with the ambiguous frame of the work and then satirized. She writes that if her assurance of the text’s historical authenticity “does not fully satisfy the scrupulous, they have only to imagine—to put their minds at rest—that my work is taken from an old Greek manuscript in the Vatican Library—but one so precious and rare that it has never been printed and never will be.” Such misdirection transforms the work into a maddening yet pleasurable hall of mirrors in which no clear boundary between fact and fiction can be discerned. Initially, it appears to be a kind of fiction rooted in the heroic tradition of the romance. Its preface, however, undermines this claim by asserting its historicity even while ironically invoking that fanciful Vatican document. This is similar to Defoe’s prefaces, which also claim (albeit with a good deal less obvious irony) that his works are historical accounts of real events. The popularity of de Scudéry’s book, however, lay precisely in the fact that it was a roman à clef in which the “lineaments of her most renowned contemporaries and the salient lines of their careers may be traced, and were easily traced by her readers, in the figures of ancient conquerors, princes, and incomparable queens.” In other words, *Artamene* does indeed describe real people and real events, drawn not from secret Vatican documents, but from the lives of de Scudéry’s famous contemporaries. Yet the preface wittily critiques those texts claiming to provide an historical ground for otherwise obvious fictions, again frustrating any attempt decisively to separate fact from fiction.
In his history of the novel, Davis emphasizes de Scudéry’s mockery, attributing to it what would become one of the dominant novelistic practices of the early eighteenth century. Her joke about secret Vatican papers, he argues, “becomes over the next hundred years the insistent convention of the novel.” Indeed, English and French writers alike increasingly claimed their works were essentially true, their stories generated from found documents, first-person accounts, or private diaries. Seen from this vantage, the roman à clef again becomes less a form in its own right than a mere precursor to the novel, functioning in this model to resolve what Davis describes as a Puritan bias against fiction. This moralistic anxiety, in fact, generates a temporary paradox in which a literary work (such as a roman à clef) that wanted to comment on the public sphere “had to adjure that it was fiction, while for a pure fiction to appear in print it had to claim to be true.” Thus, Defoe’s prefaces claiming their historicity are balanced against an alternative narrative mode exemplified in the period by the work of Mary Delarivier Manley, whose wildly popular *Secret History of Queen Zarah* (1705) seemed deliberately to invoke the same ironies evident in de Scudéry’s work by claiming in its subtitle to be “Faithfully (p.31) Transcribed From the Italian Copy Now Lodged in the Vatican at Rome, and Never Before Printed in Any Language.” A precursor to the later *New Atalantis* narratives that would land her in jail, this too is a roman à clef whose key was later printed and often bound with the original book. Davis claims that this text and others like it were essentially pieces of political journalism, part of what he calls a “news/novels discourse,” that made some slight claim to fictionality only to protect its author from imprisonment for sedition. Over the next hundred years or so, he concludes, this discourse would eventually resolve itself into two distinct forms: factual political narratives on the one hand and fictional works on the other.
This otherwise neat history, however, neglects Mrs. Manley’s troublesome subtitle, which does not stake any claim to fictional autonomy. Instead, just as de Scudéry did, she generates another interpretive hall of mirrors in which no firm boundary between fact and fiction can be established. The very fact that Manley would later be found innocent of libel by a court only reinforces the difficulties facing both her contemporary readers and later critics. Ros Ballaster contends that such writing is far more troublesome to the history of the novel than even Davis allows: “Manley’s fiction stands perpetually on the borders of what are perceived as discrete discursive territories. The political and the personal, the erotic and the pathetic, the real and the fictive, scandal and satire, all undergo a series of inversions and re-articulations until their supposed exclusivity is undermined.” It is not simply a matter, as Davis would have it, of two emergent discourses becoming only temporarily entangled before emerging in orderly opposition as “news” and novels.” This assumes, like most histories of the novel, that the roman à clef simply disappears into the widening gap between fact and fiction after catalyzing their differentiation. Like Hunter and Watt then, Davis too constructs a history of the novel that treats the roman à clef as historically and generically retrograde. Its “conditional fictionality” and its thinly veiled revelation of private scandals are thus resolved when “by virtue of abandoning such devices as authorial disavowal and the ‘found’ document, Fielding can shift his median past tense closer to contemporary reality.” The novel, in such a model, essentially suppresses the readerly and writerly anxieties generated by the roman à clef, allowing it to claim a now familiar autonomy from the world of politics and history. By cutting itself free from any direct association with real historical people and events, the novel thus insists on the resolution of that key ambiguity Davis identifies in the very concept of a “factual fiction.”
Despite the novel’s fragile claims to a new kind of truth that is neither empirical nor historical, the roman à clef does not simply disappear, nor do the kinds of reading practices upon which it depends. Most narratives of the novel’s rise to prominence as an objective and autonomous aesthetic object nevertheless seek to exorcise this counter-form and thus immunize the emergent genre from the ambiguities teasingly exploited by Manley, de Scudéry, and even Defoe. As Michael McKeon argues in *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*, for such fictional realism to emerge “the quality of being history-like must become separable from the fact of being a history and acquire a validity of its own.” In McKeon’s account, the roman à clef plays an instrumental rather than a contingent or accretive role in this process, acting as a textual catalyst that eventually helps precipitate the novel from the otherwise inert mixture of idealistic romances and classical histories. Eighteenth-century narrative texts, he claims, were caught in the moral and aesthetic discourse of the period “between the traditional, Augustinian strategy of mediating an essential truth by contingent means, and the historicist identification of truth with historical truth.” The romance, in particular, was strongly condemned for its failure to preserve truth of any kind, so that it was neither an allegorical expression of timeless values nor an authentic documentation of real events. Within this context, the roman à clef emerges in France as part of “the romance attempt to internalize a modestly historicizing self-critique.” Drawing as it does on the public secret that it is an only slightly fictionalized account of real events, it recuperates the romance through “a pronounced claim to historicity,” adopting the posture of “autobiographical memoir; secret history, or authenticated document.” The roman à clef, McKeon claims, possesses a distinct social life of its own that nevertheless sets in motion a historical dialectic capable of sublating eighteenth-century anxieties about the ambiguous relationship between fiction and fact in the novel. This new genre is thoroughly infused with the language and structures of history and thus overcomes the idealism of romance; yet preserved as an autonomous fiction, it simultaneously insists that the people and events it describes have no existence prior to or beyond the text. A charmed object, the novel squares the circle that Defoe, Manley, and others tried to resolve by insisting that their fictional works were supported by documentary evidence or first-person confessions.
McKeon’s dialectical account of the novel has provoked a good deal of often heated debate, in part because it is so totalizing that “it seems that nothing could get lost or lose its way, least of all the dialectic, which guides history toward one culmination in the novel.”

The roman à clef, despite the singularly instrumental role McKeon assigns to it, is again a casualty of this irresistible drive toward the novel; and it must be sacrificed to effect the larger epistemological synthesis. As was the case in the work of Watt, Hunter, and Davis, this conditionally fictional form is first suppressed then erased—as if the roman à clef simply ceased to exist. (p.33) Were it to survive, after all, the dialectical synthesis would collapse, exposing once again the paradoxical truth-telling lies of the novel while arresting the march of literary history toward an apparently inevitable realism. McKeon himself seems to sense this problem when he positions the novel as a necessary bulwark against what he calls the “extreme skepticism” about fiction that prompted writers to authenticate their works by asserting that they were derived from genuine historical documents. Were the novel to fail in this historical role, then the roman à clef’s ambiguities would again become infectious, fomenting what he can only imagine as a disastrous collapse of generic and epistemological categories: “Extreme skepticism,” he writes, “can easily seem not the final, teleological triumph of the revolt against romance idealism that was crudely engendered by naïve empiricism, but the untenably negative midpoint between these two opposed positions, in constant danger of becoming each of them by turns.”

The problem with McKeon’s model is not simply that its dialectic proves so incredibly totalizing—a fault that archival critics like Hunter and Davis labor to correct—but that it depends on the eventual arrest and stabilization of the very skepticism that initially set it in motion. The roman à clef becomes, he argues, an untenable genre precisely because it swerves too wildly between idealism and empiricism, leaving the reader uncertain about where to draw the line between the text and the world. Thus, it drops out of his account altogether, so that the novel can proceed apace to its idealized (and apparently final) embodiment in the great works of nineteenth-century realism.
The parallels between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries I briefly drew at the beginning of this chapter, however, suggest that the roman à clef did not go so very gently into the good night of literary history. Indeed, that “untenably negative midpoint” McKeon dismisses as a kind of nightmarish space of cynicism, doubt, and anxiety could serve reasonably well as a compelling definition of the modernist novel. In the intervening period between, say the publication of *Tom Jones* (1749) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), the novel alleviated only temporarily the “epistemological squeeze” experienced by early eighteenth-century readers. The line between fact and fiction was increasingly policed by legal and aesthetico-moral sets of injunctions that distanced the novel from history by confining it to a relatively autonomous aesthetic realm. In the process, the roman à clef and the ambiguities it deliberately exploits necessarily became either archival artifacts or simply bad art: a blind narrative alley in some accounts, a precursor to the novel, in others, and in some cases just a fashionable continental import whose vogue quickly passed. The fact that we still use the French term, roman à clef, for such texts further compounds this sense of obsolescence, as if the genre is entirely (p.34) outside the English-speaking tradition and is, at best, an accidental import from the continent.

Despite their often striking differences, Hunter, Davis, McKeon, Lynch, and many other leading theorists of the novel all agree that this genre follows a particular historical trajectory and reaches its apotheosis in nineteenth-century realism. Here, it seems, the novel reaches its logical end. Pushing the historical horizon for analysis into the twentieth century, however, exposes the ever-present fault lines that led so abruptly to the collapse of the consensus underpinning the novel’s success. The roman à clef, after all, did not wither away with the rise of the novel nor was it sublated in the dialectics of literary history. Widely reviled throughout the nineteenth century, it became a kind of monster locked in the novel’s basement: an ugly, scandalous, and even illegal form consistently dismissed as amateurish and vulgar. Nevertheless, it emerges in the twentieth century to initiate a radical series of narrative innovations every bit as disruptive as those that first set the novel in motion.

The Rumbling Monster
The loudest rumbles issued by the roman à clef in the nineteenth century tended to echo around books that exploited the genre’s “conditional fictionality” and its obsession with apparently insignificant detail in order to win some measure of profit from a celebrity culture still in its nascent stages. The most remarkable of these emerged as passing and historically delimited vogues in both Great Britain and the United States. The “silver-fork” novels of the 1820s and 1830s, for example, not only helped develop the figure of the English dandy, but also drew on the same voyeuristic qualities of the seventeenth-century roman à clef to provide readers a glimpse into the lives of Regency aristocrats. In “The Dandy School,” William Hazlitt rails against what he considers this deliberately archaic mode of writing that does not seek “to enlarge the bounds of knowledge and feeling.” Such books, he continues, narrow human sympathy “to a single point, the admiration of the folly, caprice, insolence, and affectation of a certain class;—so that with the exception of people who ride in their carriages, you are taught to look down upon the rest of the species with indifference, abhorrence, or contempt.”44 Although these novels rarely contained recognizable portraits of real people, their often titled authors—including Benjamin Disraeli and Edward Bulwer Lytton—traded on the idea that their unique access to the most exclusive social circles might indeed mean readers could extract some delicious yet skilfully concealed facts.
In other cases, writers drew even more explicitly on the duplicity of the roman à clef. Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon*, for example, appeared anonymously in 1816 and began to sell quickly after it became clear that the eponymous hero was, in fact, a satiric portrait of Byron. The poet himself tellingly dismissed the book as a poorly executed romance rather than a novel: “If the authoress had written the truth, and nothing but the truth—the whole truth—the romance would not only have been more romantic, but more entertaining. As for the likeness, the picture can’t be good—I did not sit long enough.” With characteristic wit, Byron manages here to assert both the factual and fictional accuracy of the book, lodging it successfully in the still unstable gap between the novel and biography. Indeed, according to John Clubbe, it was regularly treated as a “fictional biography” that might itself “reveal the mysterious author of *Childe Harold I* and *II*.” The instability proliferating around the dissonance between Byron’s public persona and his private life, in fact, points not only to *Glenarvon*’s ambiguous truth claims, but to the roman à clef’s potential infectiousness—what Barbara Judson calls the “predations” of a form “that imbricates romance and reportage.” Its creation and success were largely products of Byron’s own fame since the key that unlocked the text’s secrets was not itself published, but instead constituted as an open secret made available through an increasingly sophisticated array of both private channels and mass-mediated networks. These are the same networks, in fact, on which a writer like Thomas Love Peacock depended, so that his own satirical portraits (including the 1818 *Nightmare Abbey*, which also contained a portrait of Byron) could gain purchase as direct interventions in the public sphere rather than as autonomous works of art.
An emergent celebrity culture in the United States also led to periodic eruptions of the roman à clef, its infectious threat held only partially in check by the compromises implicit in the realist novel. Two such books appeared in the 1850s, one looking back to the eighteenth century while the other anticipated the ability of celebrity culture to undermine the novel’s presumed autonomy. The first of these was Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1852 *The Blithedale Romance*, which offered an often caustic description of his experiences in the Fourier community at Brook Farm. Its preface refers directly to these events and enigmatically claims the story itself is “essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact—and thus offer[s] an available foothold between fiction and reality.” Even while starkly confessing the text’s lack of autonomy, Hawthorne nevertheless then immediately asserts that the “characters … are entirely fictitious” and he deems it a “grievous wrong … were the author to allow it to be supposed that he has been sketching any of their likenesses.” Such claims may be disingenuous, but in making them Hawthorne (like Byron) turns explicitly away from the “aesthetics of detail” characteristic of both the novel and the roman à clef and insists instead that his book is an eighteenth-century romance: a moral tale centered on ideal types rather than a mimetic representation of the world.
So mannered a frame may have helped lend the text a kind of dignity in the author’s mind, but the fine generic distinction he sought to draw was largely lost on an audience that eagerly received the book explicitly as a roman à clef. Like Byron and his circle, the Brook Farm group had gained enough celebrity that serious profits could be won by the marketing of their private lives. Indeed, two years later, in 1854, *The Blithedale Romance* was followed by an even more wildly popular book that abandoned entirely any pretense to romance. Fanny Fern (a pseudonym for Sarah Willis Eldridge Parton) released *Ruth Hall* with the aid of what Debby Applegate calls “an entirely new marketing form (the first modern ‘blockbuster’ campaign), based on new principles of motivation.” Her innovative publishers circulated flyers at once heralding the book as a best-selling novel and posing the question “IS RUTH HALL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?” Unlike *Glenarvon* and *The Blithedale Romance*, however, Fern’s book does not actually point to any easily recognizable historical figures beyond the obscure (indeed fictional) author herself; instead it simply trades on the potential scandal of its “conditional fictionality.” Deliberately routed through the institutions of celebrity culture, it exploited the roman à clef’s infectiousness, inculcating reading habits of the sort novelists like Herman Melville struggled at the same moment to escape.

*Ruth Hall, Glenarvon*, and *The Blithedale Romance* reveal the novel’s instability amid the growing energies of celebrity culture, but they are nevertheless relatively exceptional works. The fault-lines they reveal, however, are still faintly evident even in those nineteenth-century texts that otherwise mark the realist novel’s apothesis. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, for example, begins with the words, “Letter I,” its gothic excesses carefully framed in an authenticating epistolary format. Like Defoe’s insistence that he is only an editor rather than an author, so too Shelley here implicitly casts her narrative as an unmediated relation of true, historical events. By 1818, of course, this had become merely a convention, but its stubborn survival suggests that the consensus underpinning the novel remained fragile. Similarly, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* contains a framing narrative, this one filtering the text’s events through an eyewitness account rather than through found letters. The anomalous date that begins the work’s first sentence heightens this effect, making Lockwood’s narrative read either as a diary entry or as a personal confession: “1801.
—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbor that I shall be troubled with.” Even her sister’s less gothic *Jane Eyre* describes itself (p.37) on the title page as “an autobiography” rather than a novel, a generic marker that again seems by 1848 to be little more than an archaic remnant of the genre’s origins. After mid-century, even these vestigial textual elements began to disappear so that works of long fiction could simply begin *in medias res*, without the need for epistolary frames or eyewitness narratives. What Garrett Stewart calls “conscripted reading,” in which the reader is addressed directly either in a preface or by the narrative voice, instead gives way to “impressed attention.” Readers, that is, no longer had to be reassured about their relationship to the text, but were instead interpellated into a mimetic world possessed of an autonomy no longer rooted in found documents or personal diaries. In his 1929 history of the English novel, Ford Madox Ford reveals just how pervasive this erasure of eighteenth-century anxieties had become when he explains to his audience the quirky nature of Defoe’s “Preface” to *Robinson Crusoe*: “Whether you set out to hypnotize the public into believing for the time being that they have attended at a scene or trick them into believing that they have read real memoirs when the memoirs are fictitious the artistic, if not the ethical, results are nearly equal.” The potential problem of the text’s fidelity to historical fact is here dismissed out of hand as a nagging question that has nothing to do with the work’s aesthetic integrity.
The heroic arc theorized by Watt, Davis, and McKeon thus reaches its apogee in a nineteenth-century realism finally able to divest itself of any lingering skepticism about fiction’s entanglement with fact. As prefaces, letters, and framing narratives began to disappear, novels themselves became closed off into their own complex mimetic world and could not be mistaken for “a straightforward assertion by the author.” The roman à clef stubbornly persisted, however, as a mode of reception capable of sometimes surprising writers who found their works accruing an unpredictable and sometimes even libelous factitiousness. Even Charles Dickens, whose canon of work helps establish the high-water mark of the novel in English, found himself accused of Paul’s “literary misdemeanor” when numerous critics claimed that the character of Skimpole in *Bleak House* was a portrait of Leigh Hunt. In letters both public and private Dickens ardently decried this charge, defending the integrity of his art and dismissing any suggestion that he was engaged in mere literary portraiture. Writing in *All the Year Round*, Dickens (referring to himself in the third person) says that he yielded to the temptation of too often making the character SPEAK like his old friend. He no more thought, God forgive him! that the admired original would ever be charged with the imaginary vices of the fictitious creature, than he has himself ever thought of charging the blood of Desdemona (p.38) and Othello, on the innocent Academy model who sat for Iago’s leg in the picture. Even as to the mere occasional manner, he meant to be so cautious and conscientious, that he privately referred the proof sheets of the first number of that book to two intimate literary friends of Leigh Hunt (both still living), and altered the whole of that part of the text on their discovering too strong a resemblance to his “way.”

He draws a telling distinction here, in fact, between an “aesthetics of detail” pointing beyond the text and what one critic calls instead a novelistic “type of writing that tendered the deepest, truest knowledge of character.” Taking great pains to distance himself from the suggestion that one of his greatest works may, in fact, be a roman à clef, Dickens goes so far as to fault his own artistry rather than admit that one of his characters has a historical correlate.
Jane Austen’s works also neatly embody the novel’s cathartic release from discourses of history, news, and autobiography. Originally, both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* had been drafted as epistolary texts, their vibrant prose still deeply embedded in an increasingly outmoded form bearing all the anxieties of the novel’s origins. Austen, however, abandoned these early drafts and instead produced two magnificent works that continue to exemplify the novel’s aesthetic potential. As Deirdre Lynch argues, it is writers like Austen and her near contemporaries who “first succeed in prompting their readers to conceive of them as beings who take on lives of their own and who thereby escape their social as well as their textual contexts.”

In striking out the epistolary content of her work Austen simultaneously claimed a complete autonomy for her invented world and shut it off from the authority of historical or autobiographical witness. Her books thereby generated an image of the real world, but they did so only by suppressing the generic and narrative markers that might literally ground them in the existence of real individuals.

This transformation of the novel from an epistolary form to a realist one both within and beyond the works of Austen constitutes part of the genre’s distinct power of incorporation, its ability—as Terry Eagleton colorfully puts it—to “cannibalize other literary modes.” Rather than the carefully tailored structure of older narrative forms such as epic and tragedy, the novel is youthful, vigorous, and “anarchic,” engaged in a struggle to convert “its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them.” This essentially Bakhtinian model transforms the novel from simply one narrative form among many into the form to end all forms, the “sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted.” Breathlessly modern, it appears to defy definition since it can always become something more. It is, Bakhtin argues, “plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality.” This proximity to reality may grant the novel its distinct incorporative power, but it is a curiously circumscribed one, premised on its isolation from other narrative modes such as journalism, history, and autobiography. The novel can and does continue to
develop, but it does so within the closed circuit of a purified fiction that can generate an almost perfect reproduction of historical reality that is not to be mistaken for a factual account of the world. Writers like Austen, Dickens, and the Brontës deliberately attempt to cut their texts off from the historical world, confining their characters to a simulacrum that everywhere resembles but nowhere impinges on the reality beyond the text. Even historical novels, like Waverley and A Tale of Two Cities, may describe actual places and events, but the line between fact and fiction remains clearly marked. Dickens, for example, may give us a powerful image of London that accords with our perception of the city, but by no means do we expect to meet Oliver Twist or Paul Dombey on its streets. These novels do, however, work diligently to make us see those avenues, to absorb us in the text so completely that we are transported through the medium of language from our armchairs to the city itself. In attempting to produce an image of the world, in other words, the nineteenth-century novel does indeed become anarchic and vigorous, absorbing not only particular descriptive details about the geography of London, for example, but fragments of plays, poems, tragedies, and other traditional genres. 66
In appropriating these other types of writing, the novel appears gradually to slough off eighteenth-century anxieties about its unstable relationship to fact and history, developing instead along its own increasingly autonomous and institutionalized trajectory. The “extreme skepticism” McKeon argues was so essential to its creation gives way to the confidence of the Victorian realists who became increasingly absorbed not with the generic identity of the novel but with its ability to produce intricately detailed and powerfully immersive reading experiences. The epistemological unease so potently encoded in the roman à clef was thereby temporarily displaced onto a much narrower concern with the relationship between word and world. Novelists unquestionably remained anxious about their craft, but these worries were essentially linguistic and increasingly abstract as they struggled to forge a realism that George Levine defines as “a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself.”\(^{67}\) This is a subtle yet profound shift in emphasis, \((p.40)\) as Defoe’s factual fictions give way to the immersive worlds of Dickens. The old anxieties surrounding the novel’s ability to produce genuine knowledge about the world remained firmly in place, as is evident in Levine’s description of the genre’s continuing commitment to “some moral enterprise of truth telling.” The realist novel, however, does not attempt to tell historical truths about the world; at best, as Bourbon puts its, “a sentence about some posited possible world could only mean about that fictional world.”\(^{68}\)
The realist aesthetic of the nineteenth-century novel requires the preservation of an essential critical distance between the simulacrum on the page and the historical world that the reader and writer share. Marie-Laure Ryan in her study of immersion describes the gap this way: “The difference between fiction and nonfiction is not a matter of displaying the image of a world versus displaying the world itself, since both project a world image, but a matter of the function ascribed to the image: in one case, contemplating the textual world is an end in itself, while in the other, the textual world must be evaluated in terms of its accuracy with respect to an external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information.” This distance, in fact, generates the uniquely anarchic and appropriative powers Bakhtin describes while simultaneously generating a relatively constrained space in which McKeon’s “extreme skepticism” becomes narrowly focused on the limitations of language. As Caroline Levine argues in *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*, realism was far from a confident aesthetic, but its anxieties remained confined essentially to the space of the page: “The realists worked, first, to gesture to the radical otherness of the world, and they did so by pointing to the failures of representation. But this effort to acknowledge alterity slowly yielded to a sense of the impossibility of getting at an otherness outside the languages of representation—and the realist experiment turned inward, to investigate its own rhetorical practices.” This agonistic encounter between language and world has become part of a familiar story about the development of modernism, which seized on these ambiguities and transformed them into a radical series of textual experiments. Levine compellingly argues that the Victorian novelists themselves realized the troubling failure of signification, tracing the aesthetic crisis of the twentieth century back into these earlier works. The disruptive potential of this linguistic turn, however, is essentially delimited by the autonomous nature of the novel as an institution, for while such skepticism may be evident in the works of, say, George Eliot, it does not appear to extend to a larger culture in which knowledge was being increasingly aggregated in distinct intellectual disciplines. Thus, even the severely limited skepticism that helped drive the creation of the novel was, by the nineteenth century, not only narrowed to a problem of language and representation, but simultaneously confined to an isolated aesthetic space largely cut off from the discourses of science, history, and law.
The consolidation of the realist novel’s power as, in Bakhtin’s words, the “sole genre that continues to develop,” requires that the roman à clef be suppressed. This would appear to be an odd, even paradoxical outcome, if only because the roman à clef offers even more direct contact with a developing reality of the kind Eagleton encourages and admires. Precisely because of its ability to link explicitly its narrative to the historical world beyond the text, the roman à clef is uniquely able to provide some needed relief from the developing agon between word and world. Defoe’s insistence, after all, that there is a real figure behind Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders means that the signifier does indeed have a referent, that it can come to rest in the very historical reality shared by the reader and author rather than floating in the uncertain void Caroline Levine describes. The problem, however, emerges from the roman à clef’s conditionality, its teasing ability to conceal as fiction its scandalous and sometimes even illegal historical claims. Eagleton implicitly rules the genre out of bounds as he attempts to stake his own charged history of the novel on a crude distinction between fiction and history. “It is not fiction which leads to madness,” he writes, “but forgetting the fictionality of fiction … A fiction which knows itself to be a fiction is perfectly sane.”

By this standard, of course, the roman à clef is an insane genre, and it was precisely this sort of logic that essentially led to its long confinement throughout the nineteenth century. It trades, after all, on the inability to distinguish fact from fiction and thereby disrupts the aesthetic autonomy through which the realist novel develops. Lodged at the intersection between history and fiction, the roman à clef opens the otherwise closed circuit of realism, unleashing the “extreme skepticism” the novel had tenuously constrained by the end of the eighteenth century.
As we will see, the roman à clef so effectively challenges the novel’s epistemological and aesthetic autonomy because its aesthetic of detail produces its own distinctive realist mode. The novel, which traces its developmental arc from the epistolary works of Richardson to its Victorian apex in Dickens, Gaskell, and Eliot, lays claim to an authority that, as Lynch contends, rests on the creation of intricately described characters with whom we can identify, but who do not lead lives beyond the page. Profoundly shaped by critical accounts refracted through the work of Michel Foucault, this image of the novel as a laboratory for the creation and disciplining of modern subjects has placed particular emphasis on modes of realism that shape discourses of privacy, identification, and immersion. An alternative and competing realism, however, more typically characteristic of the roman à clef, finds its telos not in the emotionally wrought realism of the nineteenth-century novel, but in the conditionally fictional works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Jean Rhys, Wyndham Lewis, and many of their contemporaries. Such texts offer an alternative concept of realism derived less from the special truths of an invented character than from publicly authenticated historical and biographical fact. They emphasize spectacle rather than immersion, voyeurism rather than identification, and celebrity rather than privacy. The full blossoming of celebrity culture—first facilitated by the expansion of print culture in the eighteenth century and later expanded through the multiplying media of the nineteenth century—helps sustain this counter-form to the traditional novel. As texts increasingly circulated through an intricately networked marketplace, the roman à clef’s infectious powers gained new vectors of dissemination in the early decades of the twentieth century. Reviewers, gossip columnists, and enterprising cultural producers of all types used these mechanisms to reap considerable profits by rendering all kinds of fiction intensely realistic, yet suddenly conditional. Like the enterprising advertisers who asked “IS RUTH HALL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?” they developed new and often legally fraught strategies for marketing private lives to a public audience no longer dependent upon the fragile ethical compromises that underwrote the novel’s invention. These experiments, furthermore, often unexpectedly exceeded the control of their creators, as the roman à clef pursued its own strange social life amidst complex new networks of circulation and reception.
Notes:


(2) Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, vol. 2 (London: John Stockdale, 1790), iii. Defoe’s tone here is complex and his extensive defense of the book’s veracity may well have an ironic element to it. For many of the book’s early readers and critics, however, the invocation of this convention was taken quite seriously and helped stave off charges of romantic excess.


(7) As Ernest M. Baker notes in *The History of the English Novel*, v. 3 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1924; rpt. 1950), the book “had immediate and enormous vogue,” leading to the publication of its key or “clavis” in 1623–21. In addition to being translated into numerous languages, it was the source for several dramas and became the model for several subsequent romans à clef.


(9) Osbert Sitwell, *Triple Fugue* (London: Duckworth, 1914), n.p. Chapter 3 provides a lengthier discussion of this preface in the context of modern libel law, since one of Sitwell’s targets did indeed recognize herself and threatened a libel suit that promptly led to a hasty withdrawal and redaction of one of his collections.

(11) For a detailed account of the politics of Manley’s novels and her attempt to use them to enter the public sphere see Ruth Herman, The Business of a Woman: The Political Writings of Delarivier Manley (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).


(14) Ion Williams, 62.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid., 67.

(17) Hunter, 84.

(18) Bourbon, 62.

(19) Ballaster, 127, citing April London.


(23) Hunter, 66.

(24) Ibid., 67.

(25) Ibid., 58.

(26) Ibid., 303, 316.
(27) Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Armstrong relies heavily on a detailed and revealing analysis of the ways in which eighteenth-century domestic manuals were essentially incorporated into novels as part of the fictional lives of exemplary characters rather than as direct interpellations.

(28) Hunter, 303.

(29) Davis, 21, 24.


(32) Cited in Davis, 35.


(34) Davis, 35.

(35) Ibid., 115.

(36) Ballaster, 151.

(37) Davis, 211.

(38) McKeon, 93.

(39) Ibid., 59.

(40) Ibid.

(41) Ibid., 60.

(42) Warner, 71.

(43) McKeon, 119.

(45) This is one of only several romans à clef penned about Byron. Samuel C. Chew in *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924) lists six others, including works by Shelley, Peacock, and others.


(48) Barbara Judson, “*Roman à clef* and the Dynamics of Betrayal: The Case of *Glenarvon*,” *Genre* 33 (2000): 153. This extremely useful study of the roman à clef makes an important case for recovering Lamb’s work from the margins of Byron’s biography. Judson’s definition of the genre itself, however, differs from my own, particularly since she focuses primarily on the effects of anonymous authorship and treats the roman à clef as a sub-genre of the novel rather than a narrative mode in its own right.

(49) Similarly, Thomas Henry Lister’s 1826 *Granby: A Novel* (London: H. Colburn, 1826) drew heavily on the celebrity of Beau Brummel in articulating its own figure of a dandy.


(51) Ibid.


(54) As Applegate notes, “Melville was haunted by the relation of fiction to his personal life, from his early battles to establish the ‘sober veracity’ of *Omoo* and *Typee,* to his later efforts to throw off his reputation as Mr. Omoo and Typee Melville, to public questioning of his sanity in the critical reception of *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man*”(155).

(56) Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 12. He goes on to describe this curious dynamic and the odd syntactic structures it creates: “The impulse of classic fiction is to address your attention even when no second-person grammar gets in the way of story, as well as to narrate your place in its discourse even when no one (else)—no character—is made to read” (20).


(58) Bourbon, 53.


(60) Lynch, 28.

(61) Ibid., 8.


(63) Eagleton, 2, 1.


(65) Ibid., 39.
For a fascinating account of the ways in which the novel’s synthetic powers grew from its deft manipulation of the anthology, see Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Following the anthology through the various subgenres of the nineteenth century, she claims that nearly all “borrowed the discontinuous structure of the anthology—and made a bid, at least, for its social functions. Some took on its ambition to compile a national literary memory, others its project of disciplining narrative greed, others its campaign against solipsistic reading.” The roman à clef, in fact, may have been so deeply suppressed during this period precisely because its sources are narrower and it thus cannot perform this assimilative function as efficiently as the novel.


Bourbon, 53.

Marie-Laure Ryan, 92.


Alan Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), insists on the novel’s power to generate a system of knowledge capable of almost entirely suppressing the stubborn distinction between word and world: “Novels establish elaborate guidelines of knowledge to direct the reader through the system; the narrative thread that emerges from comparisons with the ‘real’ or from gaps in the knowledge-structure relies on the confusion that exists (if only briefly) between fact and fiction” (17).

Eagleton, 4.