The phrase ‘the rise of the novel’ suggests an uncomplicated trajectory: it goes onwards and upwards from its early shaky beginnings to its current sophisticated nature. This simplicity demands some complication. Admittedly, the novel is now, arguably, the most popular literary form. Admittedly, it would have been unrecognisable to a reader before the late seventeenth century. However, there is no easy line to be drawn which links these two facts. An exploration of the early history of the novel reveals the social and political pressures which formed a new genre and made it popular, a revelation which also allows us to question the idea of a rise.

Defining the new

In the late seventeenth century, writers began to attempt to define what they meant by ‘novel’, a word which literally means something ‘new’. These tentative attempts at definition are our first sources of novel criticism, although the word is not used with any stability or surety. Early examples of the novel range from Aphra Behn’s Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister (1684), which retells a contemporary political scandal, to more famous works like Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719). The later eighteenth century is often defined as the period which sees the true rise of the novel, with the earlier writers dismissed as ‘protonovelists’. This argument tends to be somewhat circular: the first practitioners of the ‘true’ novel are taken to be the mid-eighteenth century writers, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, which means that all the features of the true novel are defined by appeals to these masters of the genre. Nevertheless we can claim with some certainty that by the mid-eighteenth century, a novel-reading public was firmly established, and the nineteenth century is dominated by the great industrial novel.

So what was ‘new’ about the novel? To begin with, it had to be differentiated from the romance, a genre which existed from Ancient Greece onwards. In 1692, William Congreve published a short fiction about a young couple who fall in love at a masquerade called Incognita: or, Love and Duty Reconciled. A Novel, which he prefaced with a discussion of the separate ideas of romance and novel. The history of novel criticism seems to spring from his definition of the genre. He suggested that the romance deals with the unbelievable stories of kings and queens, heroes and heroines, whose lofty language and behaviour allow them to seduce readers into a haze of ‘giddy delight’, which inevitably leads to a disappointed fall once they have to return to the real world. Novels, on the other hand, in his definition:

are of a more familiar nature, come near us and represent to us intrigues in practice, delight us with accidents and odd events, but not such as are wholly unusual and unpresidented, such which not being so distant from our belief bring also the pleasure nearer us.

In 1957, a book by Ian Watt called The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Richardson, Fielding...