THE DAZZLING ALEXANDRINE verse continues to exert a virtual monopoly in the field of classical French literature. Once seduced by it, the reader may only reluctantly return to prose. Certain novelists, notably Mme de Lafayette, receive some attention, although this is generally limited to La Princesse de Clèves. (More students surely read Racine’s La Thébaïde, even though it is not included among the few truly famous plays, than read the lesser-known works of Mme de Lafayette: Zaïde or La Princesse de Montpensier.) As for the moralists, with the sole exception perhaps of Pascal, they are traditionally viewed as a rather homogeneous group, whose works are frequently grouped together as one body of thought, their lack of individuality signaling their failure to captivate, to entice.

Moreover, certain among these prose writers continue to be, at least on this side of the Atlantic, virtually neglected. Although Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Lafayette, and, to a lesser degree, La Bruyère do filter into the American curriculum, many other writers—the chevalier de Méré, Saint-Evremond, Nicole, Jacques Esprit—are consigned to the pejorative categories of minor or secondary. This value
judgment conveniently negates their possible worth and thus frees the student of French literature to concentrate on the brilliance of the classical theater. It is not my intention here to question the exceptional merit of that theater. Rather, in undertaking to study the moralist writers, I seek to show the extraordinary complexity of thought that permeates the individual works, a complexity that too often, in the face of demands for reduction, has disappeared, covered over by generalities.

Considerably more is at stake than a delineation, however precise, of the thought of any one writer, a self-evident fact from the selection of several writers. Nor does this study attempt to summarize the totality of these writers’ thinking, which is also obvious from the limited length of each chapter. Instead, this study proposes a “sounding” of one particular preoccupation of the age, that which years later Stendhal would call l'amour-passion. No analysis of a single text, nor of one writer, can possibly offer the multiple facets of that problem in the same way as can a study of diverse thinkers, and the question of erotic love in classical French literature suffers if posed from an overemphasis upon an isolated text or author. To counteract such a trend, the opposite tendency, equally limiting, is toward generalization, toward “relevancy.” This series of essays concertedly attempts to avoid either of those directions.

It is somewhat of a cliché to state that the preoccupation, the obsession even, with the passions dominated the classical experience. However, critics and students have long fixed upon the theater of Racine as the primary focus of their investigations; and whether the study has been couched in the heavily moralizing expression of la critique universitaire or in the deliberately evocative, provocative language of Roland Barthes, the functioning of Eros in the plays has been viewed as the undisputed center of that theater. What has been done for Racine, I seek to do here for several prose writers.

From a series of related but independent essays, what will ideally emerge is a deepened awareness of how in-
tensely the classical moralists experienced the problem of powerful emotion as a potentially destructive force—both for the individual and the society that enveloped him. The moralists’ efforts did not mirror at all the ongoing reality of the era’s sexual mores. It was, rather, the task of the memoir-writers to describe that reality; the moralists were concerned with presenting the other side of the problem: control of the erotic experience.

In what terms, then, was this desire for control expressed? What methods could ensure that passion, chaotic and unruly, would be tamed? Reading through the classical moralists’ works, one perceives a general movement toward language as one method of moderating the excesses of erotic love. This connection is a loose one, and not at all systematic. Nevertheless, from Mérè through Guilleragues (the presumed author of the *Lettres portugaises*), language becomes an active force in the suppression of Eros. Whether the writer is Mme de Sévigné, whose corpus of letters to her daughter may be viewed as an attempt to reform or restructure the love relationship into a more aesthetically, and emotionally, satisfying experience; Saint-Evremond, who cultivated an emotional distance through letters of advice, which allowed for a flirtation with questions of love and sexuality while also permitting a safety zone of escape, the boundaries of the page; or Jacques Esprit, who favored the most rigorous and repressive inner “dialogue”; in all these cases, language became the way to mastery over the undisciplined self. For La Rochefoucauld, in a work recently attributed to him, *La Justification de l’amour*, only love seen as a secret could maintain the code of l’honnêteté, the moral system so carefully developed and analyzed by the chevalier de Mérè. The fascination with l’honnête homme, which marks much of the literature of the grand siècle, and which was dependent upon the successful manipulation of form and style, in language particularly, is yet another sign of the ongoing effort to dispel the disruptive impulses of l’amour-passion.

For two of the writers studied here, the problem goes
still further. Showing the ultimate failure of language to control at all, they propose, consequently, recourse to total silence. Mme de Lafayette and *la religieuse portugaise*, in a direct negation of the hope that the "word" can successfully master erotic energy, offer bitter portrayals of exactly that failure. Language here is viewed as unable to repress successfully the spontaneous impulses of love, for the two domains persistently refuse to mix. But even when the antidote of language is shown as a failure, even when silence is viewed as the sole "out," what cannot be denied is the extraordinary awareness of language at this time. This perception was translated in the theater of the age. Hippolyte's inability to communicate, part of his Amazon heritage, shows to what degree language has been sexualized in Racine's theater. The entire tragedy of *Bérénice* is one of moral "aphasia." This strong consciousness of language should not be neglected, for it forms one of the most essential aspects of the classical literary experience. The moralist writers of the era were caught up in a persistent attempt to define—perhaps to redefine after a cataclysmic period of history—the "self," and it was the power of language that could, it was hoped, not only explicate but create. There is great attention to what can only be called the *factice* in these authors' works. They communicate an urgency to reform the raw material, to transform the private into the societal. The long introductory pages of Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* form one powerful example of the opposition of these two structures, the glittering brilliance of court society serving to mask the personal, hidden tensions of warring egos.

This study seeks wide diversity in the selection of writers. Nevertheless, it is, by necessity, limited. Although a series of related but independent essays best serves the stated purposes, a distinction should be made between what has been stressed and what has been omitted. Certain moralists are included, and others, often important, are left aside. For what reasons? This study seeks, first of all, to focus upon writers of different intellectual bents. At the same
time, I have attempted to represent various “genres”—essays, maxims, novels, letters—for the prose works of the seventeenth century are far from limited to one format. It is important, moreover, to add here that biographical information is left aside as not contributing to the subject and, in fact, possibly detracting from it; for the emphasis remains throughout not on any one writer but on his or her analysis of l’amour-passion. Furthermore, each chapter is an interpretation unto itself, related to those that precede and follow, but deliberately not through any system of comparisons. And finally, there is a recognition that each work studied can be viewed from other, different perspectives. What is really proposed here is one person’s reading and evaluation. This, I believe, is the primary task of any critic—a personal “struggle” with the text.

However, the important question of who was left out and why needs further elucidation. It is, moreover, a problem considerably more difficult to justify than the corresponding one regarding the writers who were included. To a large extent, the selection of authors was based on the period of the 1660s and 1670s. The body of writings studied here do fit largely into that time span (with Saint-Evremond’s and Méré’s works traversing a slightly more comprehensive period). Hence, moralists such as the “mystical” Saint-François de Sales, or the “libertine” La Mothe le Vayer are not studied, their works dating from earlier in the century. La Bruyère, however, has been included, despite the “generation gap,” in a chapter specifically intended as a conclusion, because his work clearly shows the limits of the preceding literary generation’s enterprise. The Caractères, published first in 1688, offer the portrait of a society less concerned with self-control than with material acquisition. Language in La Bruyère’s book no longer tames; rather, it accumulates, in a moral and spiritual vacuum.

There are factors other than time, however, that limited the selection of authors. Bossuet, for example, could easily be included in this “sounding,” as could Nicole; and if they are not, it is only because of certain artificial limits
that any study places upon itself, as well, perhaps, because of a reluctance to probe writers who demand a thorough knowledge of the subtle depths of Christian theology. In the end there was also the important recognition that certain writers could best exemplify not any specific, preformed thesis (for there is no attempt here to "prove" any formulated-in-advance, tight theory; the study remains consistently a sondage) but at least general movements and directions along which any analysis must be oriented.

There are, however, two writers who, although not included in the body of this study, deserve attention, even if of a summary nature: one, Descartes, omnipresent throughout this series of essays, though concealed; and two, Pascal, central to his age, and not included here because of a reluctance to add still more verbiage to the ancient debate over the authenticity of the Discours sur les passions de l'amour, and also because of a realization that this work, questions of authorship aside, is not all that original, repeating to a large extent many ideas exposed in several of the chapters in far more striking fashion.

But it is first Descartes who deserves, even demands, some explication, and in particular his work Les Passions de l'âme, published at the end of 1649, shortly before his death. Many of the ideas he espouses in this work had already been expressed in his correspondence, notably in that with "la princesse Elisabeth." As early as 1645, Descartes seems to have been preoccupied with defining and explaining his view of man's involvement with strong emotion, and in one letter to Elisabeth clearly posits his belief: "Je ne suis point d'opinion ... qu'on doive s'exempter d'avoir des passions; il suffit qu'on les rende sujettes à la raison, et lorsqu'on les a ainsi apprivoisées, elles sont quelquefois d'autant plus utiles qu'elles penchent plus vers l'exès." This notion of taming through reason, through self-knowledge and control, is also at the base of Les Passions de l'âme, and the work relies heavily upon a constant synthesis between emotional emptiness and untamed passions. Descartes seeks to maintain the perfect
measure, the right dosage of emotion, and though *les passions* frequently serve to fortify and maintain concepts and beliefs, they may also risk pushing too far: "Tout le mal qu’elles peuvent causer consiste en ce qu’elles fortifient et conservent ces pensées plus qu’il n’est besoin, ou bien qu’elles en fortifient et conservent d’autres auxquelles il n’est pas bon de s’arrêter." 

The “self” that Descartes creates in his work, constantly on guard against emotion that is not understood or directed by the system of will, when touched by love is involved in a process of self-perfection that becomes a goal unto itself, love serving then as only a means. This view of love demands a recognition of superiority in the chosen love object and reflects Descartes’ preoccupation with self-discipline and control. What emerges is a picture of a well-disciplined, self-knowledgeable individual, bent on seeking to maintain a controlled form of emotion in his life. Any distance from this basic principle of perfection, such as an ill conceived love, may result in a serious moral downfall: “L’amour qui est injuste nous joint à des choses qui peuvent nuire, ou du moins qui ne méritent pas d’être tant considérées par nous qu’elles sont, ce qui nous avilît et nous abaisse.” 

The theme of potential self-degradation pervades the moralist literature, reminding repeatedly that love can throw into disruption the composed, tight system of self-regulation, that it can disorient, alienate the self. This awareness, which may, as for Madame de Lafayette, translate itself by a vocabulary of “falling,” points persistently back to Descartes.

But Descartes himself admits to the possibility of failure in this attempt at “taming” passions: “J’avoue qu’il y a peu de personnes qui se soient assez préparées en cette façon contre toutes sortes de rencontres, et que ces mouvements excités dans le sang par les objets des passions suivent d’abord si promptement des seules impressions qui se font dans le cerveau et de la disposition des organes, encore que l’âme n’y contribue en aucune façon, qu’il n’y a point de sagesse humaine qui soit capable de leur résister.
lorsqu'on n'y est pas assez préparé."

Descartes proposes, then, as the definitive remedy in the battle, a constant state of self-preparation, maintained by means of the "reflective" process, by means of an interior dialogue. Thus the word is given the ultimate task of control. If moved to unreason, the sole final recourse must be to the domain of language, to la réflexion and to la résolution, hence to a temporal structure that places its greatest value upon the slow, meditative, recuperative balm of reason, rather than upon the spontaneous immediacy of emotion. The principal component is the "word," always lucid. It is above all this emphasis upon structured language to counteract the disorder and disorientation caused by les passions that makes Descartes' work significant in terms of the study proposed here.

The reasons for mentioning the Discours sur les passions de l'amour, for so long attributed to Pascal, are not unlike those for Les Passions de l'âme. Both works decidedly reflect important trends in the thinking of the age, many of which lend force to what will be studied in the body of this essay. If "Pascal's" short piece was not included there, it was for the reasons mentioned earlier: a wish to avoid adding yet more opinion to the long-standing debate over its authenticity, and secondly (and far more importantly), a developing feeling that the work does not offer the originality and richness one might anticipate. Many of the ideas expressed in the Discours, e.g., on the ties between love and ambition, are expressed with far greater force by a writer like the chevalier de Méré. However, because the work is considered a "highlight" of the age, it is necessary to indicate some of the ideas that bear most directly on this study; for whether or not the Discours properly belongs to Pascal, it is at least a part of the writings of the age, and hence deserves consideration as a reflection of general trends.

As for the debate over authorship, it is a very old one by now, going back to 1842 and to Victor Cousin's discovery of the manuscript. Cousin, like Lanson and Saulnier
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after him, was ready to accept the attribution of the work to Pascal. However, Louis Lafuma, returning to a careful and precise study of the sources, adopted another opinion, maintaining that Pascal could not have written the work, for the author apparently made use of texts that did not appear until after Pascal's death in 1662. However, the dispute, obviously unending, although M. Lafuma's conclusions have been accepted by many, is not really of interest here. Rather, it is more important to focus upon those passages of the Discours sur les passions de l'amour that reflect dominant directions and currents of the era.

As in Descartes' writings, as in so many of the classical moralists' works, there is in the Discours a decided fascination with the perfection sought from the love experience. The association of love with moral superiority, with self-development, runs through the work: "Il semble que l'on ait toute une autre âme quand l'on aime que quand on n'aime pas; on s'élève par cette passion, et on devient tout grandeur." Loving, stripped here of an erotic base, becomes a means to self-recognition, to self-recomposition, through a constant mingling with "reason," an association that the author maintains throughout the work. Love remains, within this context, a tamed force; is tamed, more precisely, within the context of the work.

Moreover, the "rules" of loving are developed in the Discours much as in the other mondain literature of the age, properly reflecting the semi-literary milieu that produced it. There is a close attention to correct form, to the certitude that the "right" language can communicate love, can thereby assure its success, and the wooing attempts of the male are viewed here as an absolutely integral part of the love situation.

But the most important part of the Discours sur les passions de l'amour, and that which forms its central premise, is the close relationship between love and boredom. The work opens with a declaration of direct hierarchy: "L'homme est né pour penser." The passions serve primarily as a stimulus in what would otherwise become a
monotony of reason. "C'est une vie unie à laquelle il ne peut s'accommoder; il lui faut du remuement et de l'action, c'est-à-dire qu'il est nécessaire qu'il soit quelquefois agité des passions, dont il sent dans son coeur des sources si vives et si profondes." Thus, from the beginning, the role of love has been relegated to second place, necessary only as a lift in an otherwise thinking universe. What stands out is the denial of spontaneity, the extreme sense of regulation, the feeling that "love" is viewed as a rather benign force. "Discoursing" as he does, the author successfully limits, even bans, the spontaneous, disruptive side of erotic energy, and thus tames in advance a potentially chaotic situation.

Although it is true that the authors of Les Passions de l'âme and the Discours sur les passions de l'amour share with many other writers of their time a core of basic beliefs, what is particularly important in terms of the study proposed here is that these works reflect a fundamental trend of classical moralist writing: the need to analyze love, to structure, to negate, to purge. This need, furthermore, clearly translates a desire to free themselves and their readers from the illusions of love, from the romantic, romanesque myth-making (prevalent earlier in the century, but also a long-standing trend of Western thought). One after another, each writer, emphasizing diverse means, seeks liberation from the demands of passion, and it is precisely these diverse ways "out" that this study will attempt to explore.

To insure conformity throughout this work, I have modernized all French spelling, including the quotations from modern editions where editors have chosen to leave certain forms unchanged, as in the Lettres of Mme de Sévigné and the Oeuvres complètes of the chevalier de Méré.

2. Ibid., p. 80.
3. Ibid., p. 126.
4. Ibid., pp. 175-76.
5. A precise analysis is available in Louis Lafuma's 1950 edition of the Discours sur les passions de l'amour, published by Delmas. This scholar conjectures that
the work is by Charles-Paul d'Escoubleau, marquis d'Alluye et de Sourdis. With greater certainty he concludes: "C'était certainement quelqu'un qui fréquentait assidûment plusieurs des vingt ruelles qui animaient la vie littéraire et galante de l'époque" (p. 108).


7. Ibid., p. 123.