

The Novel by Numbers: Parameters for a Quantitative Study of Literary Evolution in the Long Eighteenth Century¹

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This presentation involved the subject of scale in two ways. First, in the familiar sense of Digital Humanities' "distant reading" (Franco Moretti): my study of the novel's evolution incorporated data from approximately 900 works, each of which was tagged for various formal and paratextual characteristics. One may characterize this as a "larger" scale, in the sense of having many more data points than typical histories of the novel, or as a "smaller" scale, precisely because novels are shrunk to data points, rather than approached through 1:1 reading. But scale was also involved because of the tendency of history-of-the-novel scholarship to move effortlessly from the individual text—and often a very small part thereof—to The Novel writ large. Fine-grained readings of a classic thereby give way to assessments of what The Novel *is*: about the deep social, ideological, and subjective functions it performs within the Modern; about, even, The Novel's world-historical destiny. Thus, the selected objects of the literary historian become something like *chosen texts*—privileged signs or ciphers of something otherwise invisible and much, much bigger. As much as this paper sought to study more novels, it also resisted the scale shift involved when one uses a given class of objects to tell the momentous story of the coming of the Modern.

One particular version of this story recounts what Catherine Gallagher calls "the rise of fictionality." According to this idea—which has been around since a pioneering study of Lennard Davis's in the 1980s — the novel, over the course of the eighteenth century, doesn't so much become more and more closely aligned with reality (as Ian Watt had famously argued) but rather moves from being highly referential (a "true story" about "real people") to a genre unashamed of its own lack of literal truth. My immediate question was whether this rise could actually be observed in the French novel. If it could, did the shape of the rise support or undermine some of the explanations offered by scholars relying on evidence from carefully chosen texts?

The data gathered did indeed confirm that there was a rise of fictionality in eighteenth-century France, at least in the sense that by 1800 many fewer texts were advanced as literally true. Yet the pace of change undermined the frequent assumption that writers and readers were "discovering" some new mode of reference or "learning" something about the nature of fictionality—that they were intuiting, for example, Coleridge's famous "suspension of disbelief." In fact, from the 1730s, many novelists *admitted* that their novels were invented, but they were simply outnumbered by those who continued to emphasize the factual status of their works. From the 1710s to the 1770s, between 50 and 60 percent of French novels contained assertions of literal truth; only around the 1780s did truth assertions recede. This "plateau" makes typical arguments about a growing consciousness of fictionality appear unlikely. Instead, I proposed two alternate explanations.

¹ The essential data and argument of this paper can be found in Nicholas Paige, "Examples, Samples, Signs: An Artifactual View of Fictionality in the French Novel, 1681-1830," *New Literary History* 48.3 (2017): 503–30.

First, assertions of truth or fictionality were not conceptual or epistemological in nature (i.e., the result of some people grasping something that others did not, or of mutating modes of knowledge production), but instead linked simply to values. Most producers continued to operate under the assumption that artworks had a more powerful emotional and moral effect when they were indexed to literal truth. Second, such values were imbricated in the forms available for writing novels—chiefly, the forms of the memoir novel and the epistolary novel, both of which were initially invented precisely because of the charge of literal truth they carried. Both forms could be and were used without truth pretense; but only with the invention of a competing form did truth pretense truly recede. I hypothesized that this competitor form was a specific kind of third-person novel displaying traits that earlier forms did not possess: greater length, segmentation into chapters, and particular varieties of omniscience.

Hence, this paper ultimately offered a technological explanation for the observed features of the novel's evolution. Literary forms—forms such as the “fictional novel”—do not arise out of a quasi-magical sympathy with the conceptual apparatus of a period. Rather, they are artifacts that reflect the values of those who produce and consume them, and like all artifacts, they must be invented, with invention being understood as an incremental process. And they are also artifacts that transform values, in that new forms bring with them new uses. Finally, such a technological view entails abandoning the idea of “periods” characterized by stable practices corresponding to a given world-view and separated from other periods by moments of rupture or transitional zones. In fact, forms are in constant evolution, an evolution that is not imputable to conceptual paradigm shifts but rather to the ceaseless interplay between artifacts and values.