The Artifactuality of Narrative Form:
First-Person Novels in France, 1601–1830

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Abstract   When literary scholars analyze narrative personhood historically, they typically see *periods*, explained as an effect of deeper psychosocial mutations. Thus the dominant first person of the eighteenth century is the counterpart to a new bourgeois subject, while the third-person omniscience of the nineteenth might reflect an age of increasing state control. The article argues that only our impressionistic use of mostly canonical examples permits such sweeping statements and that the very notion of the period (never mind episteme or paradigm) is undermined by a quantitative examination of the literary archive and its evolution. Based on a systematic sample of French novels over twenty-three decades, this study concludes that narrative forms such as the memoir novel and the epistolary novel behave as successful artifacts. As they spread, they achieve a recognizable form that peaks at a certain point, after which use steadily declines. Because the novel as a whole is composed of multiple forms in constant flux, it becomes impossible to isolate periods of homogeneous practice that could be said to operate according to some deeper sociocultural logic.

Keywords   periodization, first-person novel, quantitative literary history, digital humanities, literary evolution

From what we know about the history of the novel, the consensus seems to be that particular periods have preferred narrative postures. The eighteenth century is the heyday of the first-person novel; in the nineteenth third-person "omniscience" holds sway until the reintroduction of the first person—often through new methods, such as the interior monologue—in the modernist

novel. How are we to explain the "systemic" dominance of narrative forms? Some strands of literary criticism skirt the question entirely. It doesn't come up if one seeks to articulate narrative form primarily with the choice of the individual writer who, in pursuit of a specific aesthetic goal, weighs the resources and disadvantages of each mode.[1] And it probably goes without saying that the formalist and synchronic orientation of most narratology resists devoting attention to such historical clustering.[2] By contrast, narrative personhood is of much greater interest to the ideological criticism that has dominated literary studies for many decades, the very job of such criticism being to map cultural practices onto sociohistorical mutations. To give a schematic idea of possible explanations in this vein, the popularity of the first-person novel in the eighteenth century can become an effect, symptom, or agent of the rise of the interiorized bourgeois individual;[3] the apparent neutrality of the third-person "omniscience" might be said to be the narrative counterpart of the social surveillance characterizing the new capitalist state;[4] first-person modernist experiments repeat the alienation visited on the individual by a more advanced capitalism.[5] Yet while ideological criticism is attentive to history—bases, superstructures, and all manner of macroprocesses—it is not terribly concerned with history, understood as how change actually comes about. A phenomenon such as the first-person novel is just there, and then you explain—often with high degrees of sensitivity and subtly, to be sure—why its presence at that moment makes sense.

1. "[Stevenson] spoke of his habitual inclination towards the story told in the first person as though it were a chance preference, and he may not have perceived how logically it followed from the subjects that mostly attracted him" (Lubbock 1921: 218). Writing of the narrative transformation of the initial first-person version of *The Castle*, Dorrit Cohn (1978: 171) comments: "Kafka would surely not have bothered to make this laborious change in midstream, had he thought that it was of no consequence to his fiction. More or less consciously he must have known that there were advantages to the K. over the I."

2. Monika Fludernik's work is an obvious exception. See especially Fludernik 2003.

3. "An exemplary bourgeois, the writer of the *I*-novel, under the guise of the narrator, offers up to the public his or her own experience" (Démoris 2002: 459; my translation); "the European novel started a new career with the rise of the *I* as a perceived vehicle for a fresh kind of truth, which was both ostensibly objective in its narrative apparatus and subjective in its access to the inner reaches of the soul" (Stewart 2001: 181); "interiority's enchantment is made immediately perceptible thanks to first-person narration" (Pavel 2003: 145; my translation).

4. Referring to the nineteenth-century novel's third-person omniscience, D. A. Miller (1988: 24) writes, "Even to speak of a 'narrator' at all is to misunderstand a technique that, never identified with a person, institutes a faceless and multilateral *regard*."

5. For Fredric Jameson (1981: 221–22), modernist interest in narrative "point of view" is historically marked in this way: "Jamesian point of view, which comes into being as a protest and a defense against reification, ends up furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world, a world whose social vision is one of a thoroughgoing relativity of monads in coexistence and whose *ethos* is irony and neo-Freudian projection theory and adaption-to-reality therapy."

Naturally, it always makes sense: correlations are everywhere, and in spades when one is trafficking in abstractions like the "Enlightenment project," the "liberal subject," or "market capitalism." Such exercises in motivating the device can produce intuitively satisfying and resonant associations—so satisfying that one can forget to wonder how such epochal shifts actually play out beyond the confines of a few familiar works tasked with playing the symptom to some deeper cause.[6] The rise of first-person forms in the eighteenth century is linked to the rise of the individual, we say, and it's hard to dissent, hard not to go back to the period's canonical novels and choose the ones that best make the point you want to make about what you think the individual is—triumphant, anxious, heteronomous, take your pick. Nonetheless, explanations that sound plausible in the context of a few known coordinates may look decidedly less so when confronted with a more detailed description of the literary archive. It's not just that it's better to have more information. Rather, details truly matter. That additional information *constrains our explanations* for what is occurring.

In the 1710s, for example—and I'll explain presently the origin of these estimates, which are not anomalous—some 13 percent of all French novels are first-person novels of the familiar "memoir" type: narrators narrate their lives or a good chunk thereof. In the 1730s the proportion rises to 40 percent. In the 1750s it falls back to about 28 percent. Anyone with a passing knowledge of French history would probably hold that the steep increase over two decades is anything but arbitrary. The death of Louis XIV in 1715 signals the end of traditional courtly identity practices, thereby enabling the expansion of a new sort of "postabsolutist" subjectivity—something like an individual freed from the hierarchical pressure cooker of court life memorably described by Norbert Elias (1983). Sounds good. But there are problems. Is it really likely that the individual emerges so quickly, just where we want it, especially given that whenever a change is in need of motivation, scholars of European history and culture from the twelfth century on have, with almost comical

6. There is congruity between my dissatisfaction and that expressed in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's (2009) attack on symptomatic reading. Not identity, however. It strikes me as plausible, for example, to see in individual works traces of the conscious or unconscious ideological tensions specific writers face. At any rate, if Bruno Latour (2005: 22) is to be believed, the divining of deep causes is hardly the province of literary critics alone: "When sociologists of the social pronounce the words 'society,' 'power,' 'structure,' and 'context,' they often jump straight ahead to connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing interactions, to see everywhere in the cases at hand yet more examples of well-known types, to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings."

compulsion, rushed to provide this very one?[7] Why in the 1730s is the number around the 40 percent mark? It could be much higher, one might suppose before realizing that any such supposition is baseless, given that literary history has never really provided any sense of what constitutes a strong "market share" for a novelistic form. And then there's the unmistakably just-so side to the story. Had that 40 percent been the figure for the 1710s, wouldn't we still maintain, mutatis mutandis, the same explanation, arguing now that the senility of absolutism, rather than the death of a monarch, was making the change possible? Moreover, why the retreat in the 1750s? Surely the world-historical individual hasn't already receded in importance. Perhaps he or she has merely found other literary forms for his or her individuality. But if that's the case, mightn't he or she have had *other* such forms both before and after the development of the memoir novel? In which case the memoir novel would not be a sign that something has just happened, would not, then, have the satisfying signifying power we thought. It would just be . . . an artifact.

My goal in this article is indeed to advance an understanding of the artifactual nature of literary form. The first-person novel is one of many other cultural artifacts that humans invent, use and refine, repurpose or discard. No doubt it is right to say that writers "choose" the forms they use, choose them for artistic or political reasons, or because everyone else is doing the same, or maybe even "just because." And it's certainly sensible to imagine that the choice can be ideological in ways that may escape the knowledge of the purported chooser. But one can only choose between possibilities that exist. On the face of it, the "existence" of first-person narration cannot possibly date to the period I examine. Petronius gave us the *Satyricon* long ago, and at least one Greek novel (Achilles Tatius's second-century *Leucippe and Clitophon*) features a first-person (frame) narration. Then come the Renaissance examples, such as Francesco Colonna's beautifully strange *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) and of course the Spanish picaresque tradition. All these and others are undoubtedly in the first person and, as long as we don't take too parochial a view of the term, probably novels as well. But the first-person novels that start to grab significant market share in the eighteenth century aren't picaresque, aren't Neoplatonic dream narratives, and so on. They are formally distinct entities — not only the memoir novel but also the epistolary novel — whose invention, stabilization, and abandonment can be empirically observed. At the close of my argument I will return to the gain derived from considering this process of invention as akin to, say, that of the

7. Already in 1950 one historian was lamenting that his predecessors had found the bourgeoisie rising at numerous points from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. See Hexter 1979 [1950], cited in Boulukos 2011: 377.

telephone or the bicycle. For the moment I will only observe that it is a dubi-
ous form of Platonism to hold that the idea of the first-person novel precedes
and enables all local instantiations, so that the *Satyricon*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*,
La vie de Marianne, and *Wuthering Heights* become members of one illustrious
family. In my view, these novels are simply artifacts, possibly related through
some sort of demonstrable influence or evolution but quite possibly not. And
my wager is that treating them as artifacts will help us better understand the
evolution of narrative forms, even if the type of understanding involved ends
up being, of necessity, less totalizing than that promised by symptomology.

The data I will present come from a systematic, decade-by-decade sam-
pling of French-language novels from 1601 to 1830 based where possible on
the standard bibliographies of the periods spanned.[8] The sample for each
decade is made up of the novels published in a given set of years in that
decade. Where novel production is relatively limited, the set of years ranges
from five to eight. In other words, for these decades the statistics offered
reflect an examination of approximately 50 to 80 percent of the production.[9]
With rising production, the sample set shrinks to four, three, two, and (in
the nineteenth century) one year per decade.[10] Each novel is tagged for a
number of features, and these metadata are tabulated in the figures. Of these
formal features, the ones of most interest to the present study involve, obvi-
ously, narrative person. I have not, however, tagged every single title figuring
in the bibliographies under the appropriate year. Seeking to throw as wide

8. These bibliographies are Jones 1939; Lever 1976; Martin et al. 1977. In the absence of any
such works covering the first half of the nineteenth century, I relied on *La bibliographie de la France;
ou, Journal général de l'imprimerie et de la librairie*, an official weekly account of all books published
in France whose annual index includes the generic rubric "Romans et contes" ("Novels and
Tales").

9. Approximately, because the years consulted and not consulted in a single decade cannot be
expected to have exactly the same production. In all cases I've consulted only novels available
either digitally or in the libraries of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Tolbiac and Arsenal);
the Bibliothèque du Château d'Oron in Switzerland; and my home institution, the University
of California, Berkeley. The labor and expense of tracking down other works would be wasted,
since their number (2.5 percent of novels sampled) could have no impact on my findings. The
precise samples are for 1601–80, years 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 of each decade; for 1681–1730, years
6, 7, 8, 9, of each decade; for 1731–50, years 7, 8, 9 of each decade; for the 1750s, years 6, 7, 8, 9;
for the 1760s, years 8, 9; for the 1770s, years 7, 8, 9; for 1781–1800, years 8, 9 of each decade; for
1801–1830, year 8 of each decade. The total number of novels in the sample is 1,309.

10. The years per decade sampled were not determined by a precise formula, novel production
being too diachronically varied for that. Some decades are no doubt "oversampled" (fewer
years would have given similar results). In my opinion, however, none is undersampled (though
of course more data is *always* desirable). For the most part, this opinion derives from the
regularity of the trends observed. Indeed, the reliability of any given decadal figure is controlled
by the figures for adjoining decades. Finally, since these are samples, the figures given are
estimates of the actual composition of a decade. (Margin of error, at a 90 percent confidence
interval, varies between plus or minus 5 to 10 percent depending on the decade.)
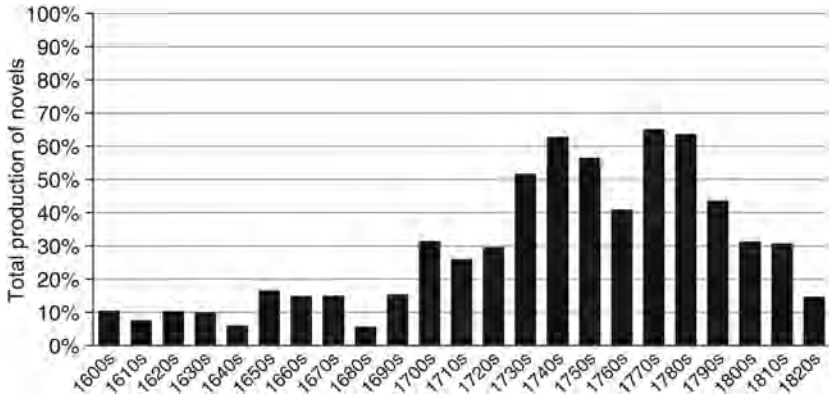
Figure 1   First-person novels

a net as possible, bibliographers have included many titles that for varying reasons—some definitional, some practical—I've not wanted to consider French-language novels (which henceforth I will call, for simplicity, French novels). The vast majority of these other titles are translations and short-story collections.[11]

Figure 1 is a graph of first-person French novels over the period studied expressed as percentages of the total production of novels.[12]

11. More minor categories of exclusion are: (a) works belonging to identifiable extranovelistic genres, e.g., biographies, travel narratives, historical memoirs, periodicals; (b) a diverse range of nonnarrative items that bibliographers inventoried because they contained narrative sections, say, a treatise in which the author recounted a parable or miscellanies that contained a tale; (c) books that contain "characters" but that I have judged insufficiently narrative, such as allegorical tableaux or conversations on one or more topics; and (d) items under ten thousand words, an arbitrary cutoff put into place because these extremely short novels are often formal oddities from a variety of perspectives apart from their length.

12. A couple of clarifications regarding what I count as a first-person novel are in order. The vast majority are, to use Gérard Genette's (1980 [1972]) familiar parlance, homodiegetic narrations, i.e., those written by characters active in the plot. Also included, however, is a small number of heterodiegetic narratives in which there is a relation of historico-spatial contiguity between narrator and characters, i.e., the narrator offers a purportedly true "report" of contemporary actions in which he or she plays no role. (The first person in such cases is typically limited to the beginning and the end of the narrative.) This type of heterodiegetic narrator is inseparable from the pseudofactual truth claims proliferating in the early novel, which is often published anonymously (see Paige 2011). By contrast, the *I* of "authorial" heterodiegetic narrators (e.g., of Homer, Henry Fielding, or Honoré de Balzac) is situated on a different plane with respect to the characters—either ontologically different (in the case of fiction) or temporally different (in the case of real-world historical subject matter). Such first persons do not figure in my tallies. (They would be, moreover, nearly impossible to ferret out systematically should one even want to follow them.) It also bears noting that these definitions of the first-person novel leave out potentially sizable amounts of first-person homodiegetic narration, specifically, narration that occurs *within* third-person novels in the form of inset or embedded narratives. Finally, the distinctions made in the course of this inquiry are pragmatic descriptions

Prior to the 1730s, which is the moment first-person works become dominant, we can discern three plateaus. One takes up the first half of the seventeenth century, when first-person novels represent about 10 percent of the production. A second plateau corresponds to the second half of the century, with a level of around 15 percent, save one anomalously weak decade. The opening three decades of the eighteenth century form a third plateau at around 30 percent. An obvious reaction to this information would simply be that interest in the first person is growing, and on one level growth cannot be denied. But on another, it needs to be: no one thing is minimally present at the start of the seventeenth century that grows little by little and takes over in the mid-eighteenth only to fall away at the opening of the nineteenth. These bars represent first-person works, but they do not tell us what kinds of first-person works they are. What's missing is precisely the artifactual dimension.

The most important first-person artifact, the one responsible for the remarkable rise (and fall) visible in figure 1, is what I call the document novel (the most obvious and plentiful of which are memoirs and letter collections). No doubt there is a long tradition of poets referring to source texts, often to bestow authority on their works. Document novels, by contrast, are a legitimately new phenomenon. Only as we approach the eighteenth century are readers informed that they have before them not books composed by a writer using bona fide and credible sources but rather the actual documents—perhaps pruned or groomed—written by protagonists. Such documents eliminate the role of the poet-historian, creating in its stead the liminal position of the "editor" vouching for the authenticity of the material he or she presents, material that is massively if not exclusively in the first person. Radical novelty in literature is not easy to find, but the document novel may just be such a black swan: with the possible exception of travel narratives, the form is without earlier analogues. More astonishing than its brute novelty is the success of its "market takeover." Nonexistent before 1660, the document novel comes to represent over half of all new novels published in France during the heart of the eighteenth century.[13]

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of this particular archive. They do not and need not amount to a systematic typology of possible first-person modes.

13. The category of the document novel is designed to separate a certain kind of first-person novel (the kind framed as a document written by the protagonist or observer) from another (in which the first person is simply "there," as in, say, the *Satyricon*, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, or for that matter *The Great Gatsby*). I freely admit, however, a complication. Many memoir and epistolary novels are not actually presented by an "editor" as documents (they lack paratextual information aside from an anonymous title page). This phenomenon is, however, a historical development resulting from the dropping of a pretense that had been universal. As such, we

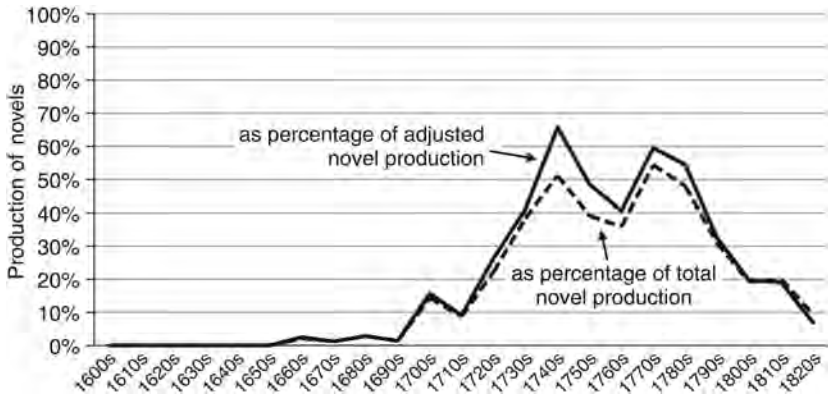The growth of document novels looks something like figure 2.

Figure 2   Document novels (I)

"Something like," as this representation is derived from one possible take on what should "count" as a document novel. (I'll present alternatives in a moment.) And in fact even within this one representation I offer two calculations. The dotted line represents document novels as a percentage of all novels published. Here we see that even in its heyday the form breaks the 50 percent mark just twice and just barely. The solid line, which shows greater dominance, represents document novels as a percentage of certain types of novels, what I call the "adjusted" production. The adjusted production eliminates "marvelous" narratives—narratives with chronotopes that do not correspond to that of what I'll unapologetically call the real world. These feature supernatural occurrences (fairies, genies, and metempsychosis, though not uncanny occurrences, such as ghosts), promiscuous geographic displacements (as in many *contes philosophiques* [philosophical tales]), or exotic settings (certain pastorals, say, but not colonial novels). This class represents 7.2 percent of the total novels in the sample. The discrepancy between the two lines of figure 2 arises both because marvelous novels very rarely take the form of documents (under 6.0 percent of them do) and because they are not equally present over the period. They cluster, historically, in the heart of the Enlightenment, which of course is when the document novel prospers as well. As the dotted line shows, these factors have the effect of muting the document novel's success. I will use the adjusted production over the balance of this article primarily for the heuristic reason that it makes trends starker but also

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might want to speak of a process by which the "documenticity" of these forms recedes. Nonetheless, I classify all such forms as document novels.

because it makes sense to consider document novels as a subset of novels having real-world settings rather than as a subset of all possible novels.[14] At any rate, reintegrating marvelous novels into the calculations would make some of the evolutions that interest me less obvious but would not fundamentally alter any of the conclusions I will offer.

Let's return, then, to the solid line in figure 2, which is easier to read as a bar graph (figure 3).
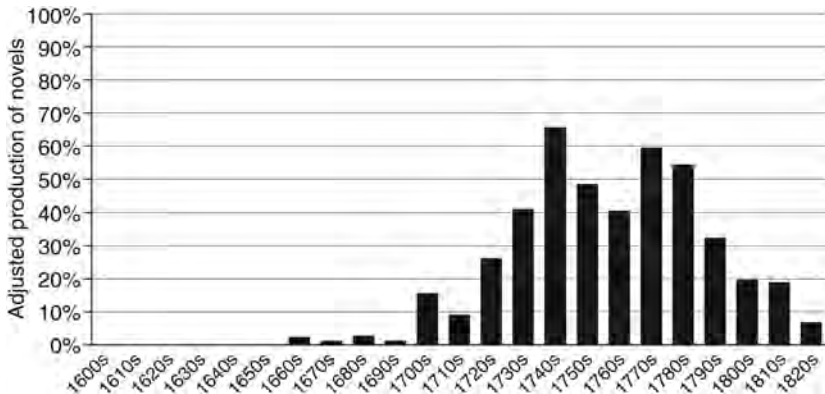

Figure 3   Document novels (II)

We can make a few preliminary observations. First, the document novel clearly rises and falls and does so in a roughly symmetrical fashion. Second, the obvious success of the form can be characterized as a plateau with peaks—a plateau of about sixty years, during which document novels represent between 40 and 65 percent of all novels produced, with two peaks (in the 1740s and the 1770s) separated by a relative lull. Third and crucially, this huge transformation of the novelistic landscape takes a lot of time. The triumph of the document novel, temporary as it is, does not map onto a literary generation or school and cannot be dismissed as a *courte durée* (short duration) "fashion" or "craze." The adoption of a given literary artifact is not sudden

14. Although my exclusion of marvelous works is not unmotivated (they are starkly less likely to be first-person documents than real-world novels), it may also appear to be the result of a persistent mimetic bias on the part of critics, one that unaccountably restricts the bounds of noveldom. My first response is that such a mimetic bias is in fact inscribed in the history and not just in the historiography of the novel, since nearly nineteen out of every twenty novels in the corpus are real-world novels. Second, even if we choose to ignore this dominance and make the argument that our conception of the novel is fundamentally skewed by exclusive attention to the real-world chronotope, as does Srinivas Aravamudan (2012), it should be obvious that I am interested not in what "the" novel (as a totalizing abstraction) may be said to do, culturally, ideologically, or even aesthetically, but in the evolution of a limited number of (hopefully) well-defined artifacts that have traditionally gone under the name *novel*.

but measured in decades, and the abandonment of the artifact is similarly paced. Another way of putting this is that the literary system appears to have a high coefficient of (metaphorical) inertia.

Figures 2 and 3, I've hinted, are the result of choices with respect to the artifacts we want to tabulate as document novels. Basically, the latter take the form of a document produced by one or more protagonists, with the memoir novel and the epistolary novel being the most salient examples, both of them first-person. Among the complications, however, are the following. Some documents are historical in nature, claimed to be unearthed chronicles produced in some other time. The putative source of these narratives, which are usually third-person, is not a protagonist but rather a chronicler from some variably remote time. The responsibility for another class of documents, apocryphal memoirs or letter collections, is ascribed not to unknown contemporaries but to celebrities of the day. Travel narratives make up a further category of documents. (The boundary between works of these last two types and genuine memoirs, letters, and traveler's accounts—a boundary that may or may not have been perceptible to original readers—is troublesomely difficult for the researcher to police.)[15] And there exist as well first-person documents by observers of actions of which they are not the protagonists. These books, neither memoirs nor letter collections, resemble a report and take the form of a letter to a curious acquaintance of the observer.

Figures 2 and 3 ignore these complications and focus on objects that the modern reader is most familiar with and that in any case comprise about 75 percent of all document novels—memoir and epistolary novels taking as their subjects nobodies, that is, people of whom the reader can't have been expected to know before picking up the book.[16] According to these data, the 1720s mark the decisive expansion of this core type, which I call the type A nobody document novel. Whereas for the first forty years of the latter's existence around 2 percent of novels take this form, by the 1720s things have changed. Type A nobody document novels then make up over a quarter of all novels, and they increase their hegemony from there. Even the data from the 1700s and the 1710s (which show an average of 12 percent of type A nobody document novels) barely hint at what is about to happen.

15. As a rule, I've excluded from consideration "celebrity" memoirs and letter collections and travel narratives that I deem unplotted. Works of this sort are usually but not consistently excluded in the first place from the bibliographies I worked with.
16. My use of *nobody* is derived from Gallagher 1994. However, Catherine Gallagher's *nobody* has a number of metaphorical connotations that I leave aside, notably its association with overt fictionality. In my use nobody novels refer to those that have protagonists who would have been unknown to readers. (Somebody novels, by contrast, concern people of renown—legendary, historical, or contemporary figures whom readers would have heard of.)

Yet the sudden expansion of the 1720s looks less sudden once we factor in some other variants of the document novel, at least the first-person ones. Though they represent only a fifth of all document novels, that fifth is not evenly distributed (figure 4).
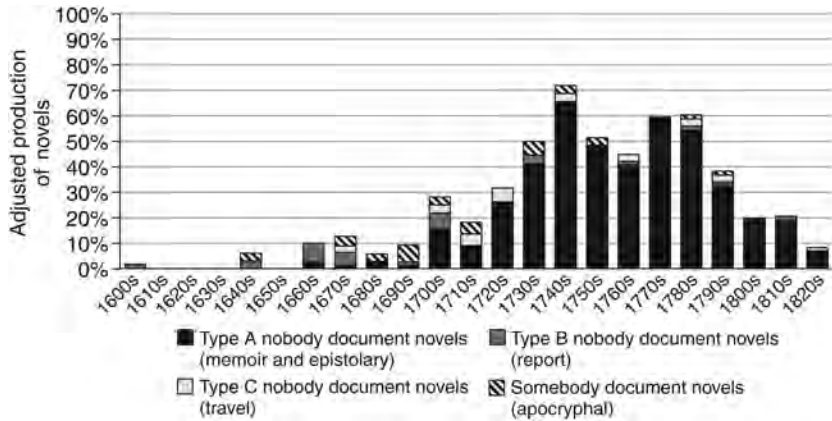
Figure 4   First-person document novels (all types)

Nothing in this figure changes the big picture we had from the last figure, but now the breakthrough of the core variety of document novel in the 1720s seems better prepared. A history of moderate interest is visible in the other categories of first-person document novels, which I'll describe in a moment. These cluster in the first half of the form's life span. Before 1721 the type A nobody document novel represents only part of the interest. Its popularity is no greater than that of report novels (here labeled type B) or apocryphal (somebody) document novels. After 1721, by contrast, 90 percent of document novels are type A. Between 1751 and 1790 — the heart of the Enlightenment, as it were — the figure is 93 percent. Over the course of its ascending popularity, the document novel can be said to become "purer." People increasingly make the same choices.

Whatever happens in the 1660s, it is not the "invention" of memoir and epistolary novels, the forms that will come to dominate in France for a number of decades in the heart of the following century. Such invention is what you declare when you know what's going to happen, when you know who the victors will be. But writers at the time are unaware of which document novel will prove the most broadly useful. They experiment with a number of related artifacts. Figure 4 shows that in the last third of the seventeenth century the document novel is very often a novel of somebodies: the memoirs presented to readers are said to be from the pens of celebrities of the day. Only at the

beginning of the eighteenth century do the nobody variants start to outpace the apocryphal variant. And the first-person document that appears first on the scene is not the memoir novel or the epistolary novel but the report novel (classified as the type B document novel). Its use, however, is so haphazard and scarce that one can hardly speak of a trend. The only meaningful trend in these data starts in the 1700s. It's then that the number of type A nobody document novels starts to grow, and as it does the "family" of document novels of which it is a part becomes increasingly homogeneous. Apocryphal document novels appear only sporadically and then fade; report novels recede to trace quantities; and travel novels, always a rarity, more or less disappear after 1750.

Type A nobody document novels "win," but here too some further scrutiny is necessary. For it turns out that report novels and apocryphal document novels aren't the only losers. One other loser, at least over the short term, is hiding in the category of type A novels itself. This is the epistolary novel, and one would never suspect its strange fate, given the way literary history usually discusses it. The development of the epistolary novel has always made for a great story, especially in France, a country with a long string of canonical examples: *Lettres portugaises* (Gabriel Joseph de Lavergne, comte de Guilleragues [attrib.], 1669), *Lettres persanes* (Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, 1721), *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (Françoise de Graffigny, 1748), *Julie, ou La nouvelle Héloïse* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1761), *Les liaisons dangereuses* (Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos, 1782), and so on. Given such hits, how can one not agree that the form is continuously available from the late 1660s and that all these examples add up to a continuous and vibrant tradition? Isn't it obvious that writers like Montesquieu and Graffigny adapt the genre established by *Lettres portugaises*?

No doubt there are epistolary novels before, say, 1730. But is there an "epistolary novel," by which I mean a recognized formal structure, reproducible and reproduced? Granted, it's not clear how many epistolary novels (or to take some examples from art history, landscapes and still lifes) one has to inventory before one can declare that the formal structure is recognized. Probably more, though, than there are over the half century that follows *Lettres portugaises*.

Figure 5 indicates that the epistolary novel has very little uptake before the 1740s or even the 1750s. Letters were indeed an obviously useful first-person document, and people did experiment with them, even in ways that these data haven't captured. For instance, in these years and even reaching back further still, a few third-person novels include as appendixes collections of the protagonists' letters. Still, most writers tinkered with the memoir, not the
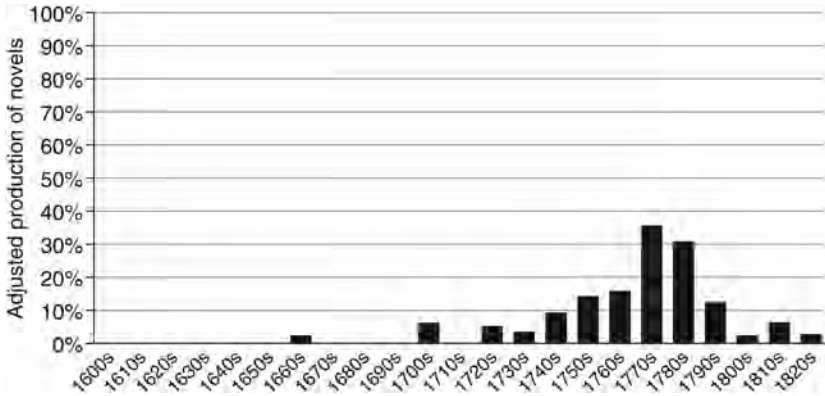
Figure 5   Nobody epistolary novels

letter. Figure 6 represents epistolary novels and memoir novels proportionally over the first full century of the document novel's popularity.
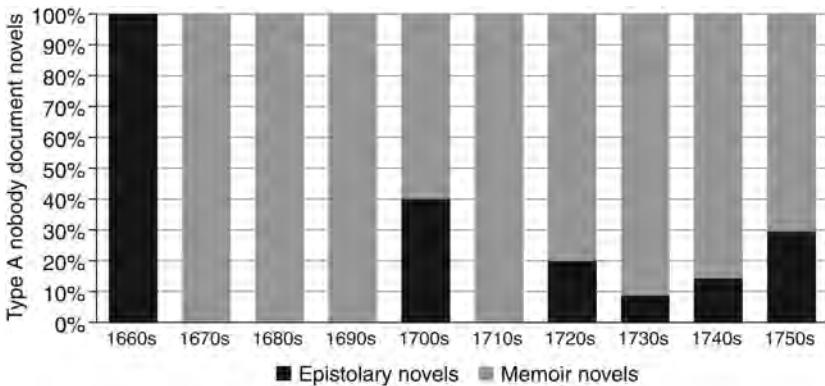

Figure 6   Proportions of memoir and letter novels

The abrupt variation comes from the small number of texts in this subsample—prior to the 1730s five texts per decade at most. Nevertheless, it's clear that epistolary novels are a minority choice, and one that does lose out, at least over the medium term covered here.[17] Another way of putting this is

17. A minority choice and, moreover, one that really has little formal coherence beyond the brute fact of the letter collection format. A more qualitative examination, which I cannot perform here, would reveal the extent to which these texts are not only scarce but don't in fact even resemble one another until the introduction in the 1720s of the ethnographic epistolary novel associated with Montesquieu. See the similar conclusion Robert Adams Day (1966: 192) reaches in his study of the English archive: "The examples of letter fiction discussed in the preceding pages form a very large and heterogeneous collection; a statement that neatly labels some few of them may be absurd when applied to the others. To look for development or

that when the nobody document novel starts to solidify its hegemony, it does so because of the memoir novel. Experiments with the epistolary form came to nothing for a surprisingly long time. Only in the 1760s did it start to represent a strong proportion of document novels.

Indeed, it is the late arrival of the epistolary novel that explains both the long hegemony of the nobody document novel (at least 40 percent of the adjusted production for sixty years) and its strange double peak, both visible in figure 3. When we pull apart the two distinct artifacts that are the memoir novel and the letter novel, we see in fact two successive rises and falls (figure 7).
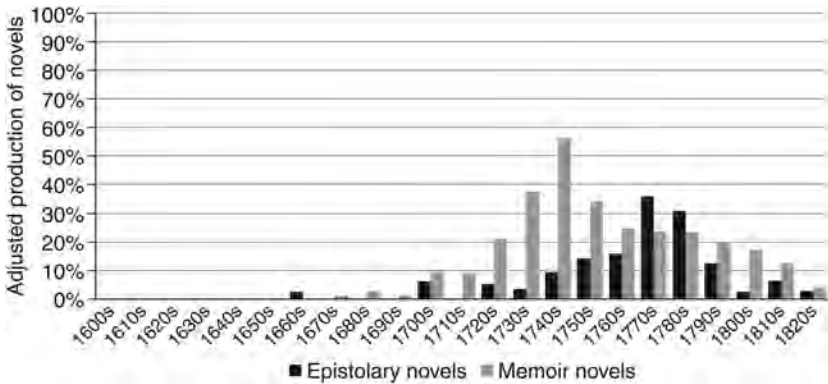

Figure 7   Type A nobody document novels

Visualized this way the double peak is evidently not the result of a loss of popularity followed by a resurgence. In fact, each artifact here peaks once and falls away. There are no second acts, perhaps, in literary history, at least at the systemic level.

No second acts, and not all first acts are equally successful. The epistolary novel is the poster child for the eighteenth-century novel, so nicely does it seem to dovetail with Jürgen Habermas's famous public sphere argument, so neatly does it seem to embody the century's trademark sociability and sentimentality. Claims for its ubiquity are common. Perry Anderson (2006: 162) has credited Montesquieu's early *Lettres persanes* with "initiating the generic hegemony of the epistolary novel over most of the century." Claims for its cultural importance can be hyperbolic. For Lynn Hunt (2007: 39), thinking of Rousseau's *Julie*, "Epistolary novels taught their readers nothing less than a

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evolution in this era of English fiction shows an ill-considered rage for order." (Amusingly, despite this apparent acknowledgment that such novels don't add up to a coherent practice, Day cannot keep himself from titling the relevant chapter "The Epistolary Novel Arrives.")
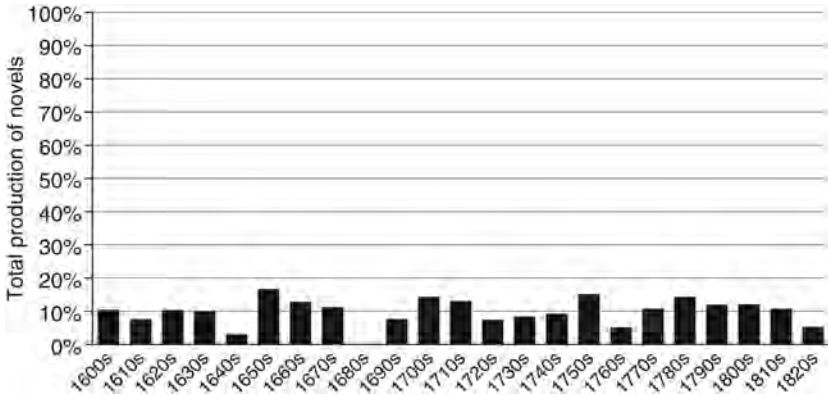
Figure 8   First-person novels, excluding memoir and epistolary forms

new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order." And yet the adoption of the epistolary novel is not only slow, it is surprisingly short-lived: its victory over the memoir novel is limited to just two decades, the only two, moreover, during which it represents over 30 percent of the production. Indeed, of the two major kinds of nobody document novels, the memoir novel shows much greater historical flexibility. Though quickly losing its extraordinary market share of the 1740s, it remains widely practiced for another half-century, with the 1760s to the 1790s forming a stable plateau (at around a quarter of the production). Only with the exponential rise of third-person novels at the beginning of the nineteenth century is the memoir novel ushered from the stage.[18] And even then it puts up more resistance than the epistolary novel, whose outsized prominence in the rearview mirror of literary history is doubtless an effect of the quaint exoticism of a form that has fallen so completely into disuse.[19]

But what about other first-person novels, novels that I don't consider to be documents, novels that show up in figure 1 but not in subsequent figures? Such first persons include male lovers complaining, Petrarchan-style, about their cruel beloveds, people focusing on episodes of their lives, and participant-observers recounting stories of which they are not the protagonists. Save for the first of these categories (limited to the opening decades of the seventeenth

18. This takeover confirms my no second acts theory, because the third person novel at the turn of the nineteenth century is artifactually distinct from the third-person forms that prospered before the document novel's reign. This too is a subject of the wider inquiry of which the present study is part.
19. Notwithstanding local revivals. Individuals are always free to exploit old forms seriously or in the spirit of camp.

century), all occur throughout the period studied. But they do so as a kind of white noise (figure 8).

Certainly, a good number of different types of first-person narration are practiced over this period, and subsequent periods invent new types as well. But the fact remains that without memoir and epistolary novels there is quite simply no rise (and fall) of the first-person novel. Only two distinct artifacts substantially changed—for a time—the way people wrote novels. Only two proved broadly useful.

Why, though, insist on calling them *artifacts*? Why not simply *genres*, that old workhorse of literary history? And does such a terminological change really help us explain what's behind their prospering at this moment as opposed to that moment?

Genres, despite tangential associations with specific narrative forms, are predominantly defined by content. Gothic novels have ghosts, ruins, and so on; realist novels have cities and filth and money; bildungsromans have young protagonists making their way in the world. That content does not map in any predictable way onto forms. For example, generically disparate content can share a form: the gothic novel, the historical novel, and the realist novel are all predominantly, though not exclusively, third-person "omniscient" narratives. Similarly, some genres work *across* forms: the sentimental novel of the eighteenth century is widely found in both epistolary and nonepistolary narratives.[20] Adding to this confusion is the mismatch between the pace of change in genres and narrative forms. In certain traditional accounts, genres like pastoral, romance, epic, and tragedy work as nearly archetypal constants and as such cannot synchronize with the changes observed here. Conversely, many local studies tend to emphasize the mothlike transience of genre. Franco Moretti (2005: 17–24), synthesizing such scholarship, has found that when so conceived, genres are invariably twenty-year phenomena. But this definition too confronts us with a similar if opposite lack of synchrony. Given these problems, *genre* cannot be a helpful term for getting at the type of changes in narrative form I've been examining.

Against form as solely a product of the choice and expression of an individual artist, against form's quasi-magical sympathy with its cultural, political, or economic moment, an artifactual understanding puts needed emphasis on the sheer thingness of art objects. Like any object of human origin, literary forms must be invented, and invention is inevitably a continuous and social

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20. Which is one reason to resist the widespread consideration of the epistolary novel as a genre. Another is the sheer asymmetricality of considering the epistolary novel to be a genre when other formal narrative arrangements (the memoir novel, various third-person novels) are not. (The data Franco Moretti [2005: 14–16] presents on the epistolary novel's rise and fall are skewed in this way.)

process—social not in the sense of socially determined but in the sense of transindividual. People do not invent alone; their inventions are constrained by what other people have done. In other words, new artifacts need to come from somewhere besides the inventor's head (almost always from other people's older artifacts), and successful artifacts need to be worked on (by people who refine the initial invention, sometimes to do new things with it). Which is also to say that they evolve as opposed to just plain changing. The production of any new artifact is dependent on extant ones. "Whenever we encounter an artifact, no matter what its age or provenance, we can be certain that it was modeled on one or more preexisting artifacts," writes George Basalla (1988: 209), who dubs this change within continuity "the stream of made things."[21] It's tempting to think that writing is immaterial. Why can't anyone any place write a memoir novel if he or she so desires? He or she can, but only if the memoir novel has already been invented through an incremental process of adaption of previous narrative artifacts. (In the case of the memoir novel, by the way, the form is rather patently plucked from the extranovelistic domain—historical memoirs which flourished in mid-seventeenth-century France [see Fumaroli 1998 {1972}; Hipp 1976].) Thus change is stabilized or constrained by the very materiality of narrative forms.[22]

Constrained change is visible in the patterning of the archive. The most obvious pattern is the basic rise and fall of adoption and abandonment. The coming and going of narrative forms takes some time, thus producing, instead of sharp spikes followed by nothing, curves whose smoothness is surprising (at least to me). At the broad narrative level of which I've been speaking, nothing is adopted overnight. Decades of isolated early experiments precede acceptance, which also takes place over decades. Formal dominance, meanwhile, represents a peak, not a span of stability. And a form's ebb is likewise protracted. This is not to say that literature does not know fads. Surely many classes of literary objects come and go more quickly. (Such may be the case with the "genres" Moretti studies.) However, on the one hand, at a sufficiently broad level, the level of narrative postures, change takes much more time. While people are constantly modifying their practices, they don't do so

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21. My description here of the nature of artifactual change is indebted to Basalla's study, though it is also congruent with more recent work in science and technology studies, which I will allude to below.

22. Note that this is not the "materiality" that appears in the history of the book scholarship. Quite rightly, this work has encouraged us to remember that the meaning of a text is often inseparable from the transmission of it: words always must be embodied, transmitted through some medium. Yet the suggestion seems to me to be that without the mediation of ink, press, paper, binding, and so on the words themselves are in fact immaterial, infinitely plastic. Though I cannot fully argue it here, my position is that narrative forms are not merely *like* material artifacts but *are* material artifacts.

abruptly. This is why we might describe the behavior of the system as being properly evolutionary—characterized by the stabilized change to which I've just referred. On the other hand, change doesn't always take the same, predictable amount of time. Novelists in France experimented with memoirs and letters at the same moment, but the epistolary novel took much longer to reach its peak than the memoir novel, and the latter, once past its peak, remained moderately popular for much longer than the former. To say that the archive is patterned is not to claim that it is ordered by mechanical laws. (I will return to this point.)

Even limiting ourselves to the few forms studied here, we can note another pattern in the trajectory of successful artifacts. The evolution of document novels, I've mentioned, can be described as a kind of purification. A nebula of related artifactual practices gives way to a more homogeneous field. In other words, when a few people tinker with an artifact, the outcomes don't look a lot like one another; when lots of people do something, the something they do is much more uniform. A practice's growth might lead one to expect greater variation. Shouldn't an expanded market be a diversified market? Yet what may be true on a systemic level—a vibrant literary scene may well support more different types of novels than a restricted one—doesn't hold at the artifactual level. The popularity of an individual artifact in fact correlates with its formal stabilization. Indeed, it is that stabilization that signals the public's shared recognition of a formal category (e.g., the epistolary novel).

Only a few artifacts, however, achieve the dominance of the epistolary or memoir novel. Many others are practiced a bit and then disappear, while others reappear occasionally over a longer span without ever catching on. Concerning the first-person novel, these also-rans constitute the background
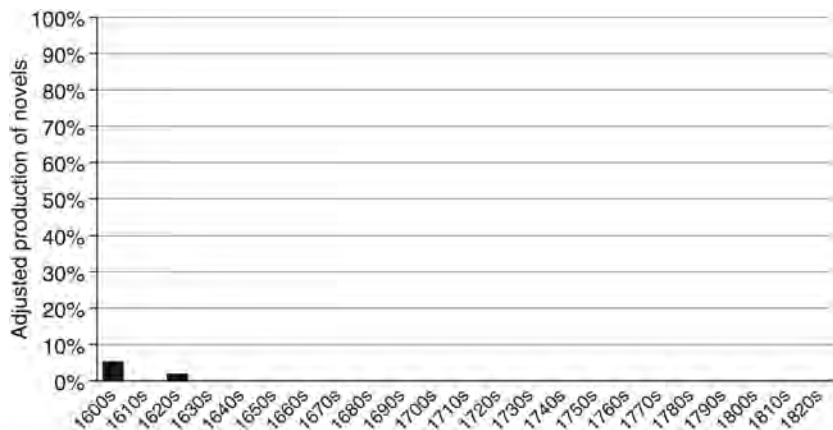

Figure 9   Lyric first-person novels

"noise" we see in figure 7—an average of 10 percent of novels per decade with minimal swings in either direction. Within that steady background level, things change but not according to the kinds of patterns observable with successful artifacts. One form of the first-person novel I mentioned briefly above is what I call the lyric novel, by analogy with Renaissance Petrarchan poetry: these feature first-person male narrators complaining about their beloveds' cruelty. Unsurprisingly, the practice—always sparse—disappears as memory of the Petrarchan tradition recedes (figure 9).

Type B nobody document novels—"report" novels in which someone who has witnessed or heard of a recent occurrence narrates it in a letter to a friend—are a marginally steadier presence over the period (figure 10).
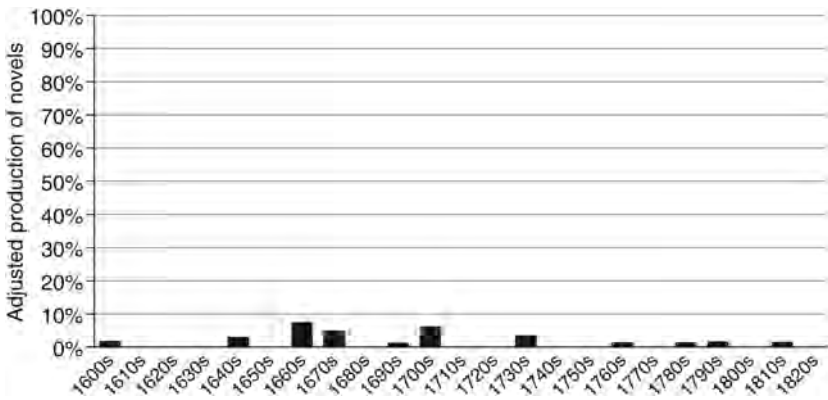
Figure 10   Report novels (type B nobody novels)

Some trending is in fact detectable here despite the low market share throughout. Only for the years of initial experimentation with document novels, the 1660s and the 1670s, do the bars represent three or more books a decade. Otherwise, they represent two books (the 1700s and the 1730s) or much more often just one (the balance). This is evidence of a brief, low-level experimentation with a form that quickly becomes a mere idiosyncrasy. We could produce similar figures for travel narratives or for different kinds of nondocument first-person novels, some of which display more historical clustering than others but none of which is popular enough to pattern in the manner of the major document novel variants. The main point to retain is that these low-level changes end up canceling themselves out, thus producing the relatively steady din of figure 7.

The description of the patterns in the data on first-person novels leads, then, to one basic conclusion. Most people select from a relatively limited but

changing array of artifacts, while inevitably some people press other artifacts into service. In literary behavior, as in other forms of behavior, there are norms, means, and deviations. I quite willingly underline the unsurprising nature of the conclusion while at the same time pointing out that it may not be so unsurprising in the context of the historiography of the novel. After all, we are usually told how *significant* the novel is, as if it were a kind of wormhole leading down to the essence of modernity itself. A lot of critical baggage informs such an idea. Most obviously, there are Michel Foucault's (1971) epistemes "making possible" the various discourses of one or another period. And there is the not unrelated "cultural poetics" of New Historicism, according to which a period's artifacts add up to one big text, the text of culture itself, traversed by tensions and paradoxes, certainly, but nonetheless possessed of a reassuring meaningfulness (see Liu 1989). Either way, art forms such as the novel amount to far more than just art forms, in that art forms are the decryptable signs of a hidden order. To this I would reply that there does seem to be an order in novels—those patterns again—though it's something akin to a *statistical* order.

But is anything in the data, anything in the artifactual understanding I've proposed, really incompatible with major accounts and assumptions about the rise of the first person and its subsequent replacement by the third? At the outset of this study I gave a few examples of explanations that were familiar to the point of banality—the individual's importance in the newly bourgeois eighteenth century, society's in the now industrially capitalist nineteenth. This sounds okay if what we know about the record is that eighteenth-century novelists used the first person a lot (witness A, B, and C), whereas their nineteenth-century counterparts preferred the third (as shown by X, Y, and Z). In such a case the sketchiness of our knowledge enables the narrative, which doesn't demand that we really think about how one epoch gave way to another. Yet once we know that given forms appear to operate on a more artifactual timetable—the rises are gradual, the peaks quickly pass, the falls look like the rises—the mapping of practices onto the supposed "logic" of this or that period is much less tempting. More important, the very notion of the period itself—time during which practices are stable or at least share some one thing that wasn't there before—comes to seem untenable. Viewed artifactually, the archive simply can't be seen as the epiphenomenal trace of momentous changes. So the ups and downs in the figures no longer "mean" anything in the normal literary-cultural-historical sense. Rather, they are an expected feature of the artifactual landscape. Since humans are always

inventing new stuff, every period is a period of transition. Which really amounts to saying that there is no such thing as a period.[23]

Another current of scholarship likes to see in the succession of narrative modes not symptoms of a social order changing in stages but rather the advance—also staged—of an aesthetic program for rendering the individual in all his or her subjective complexity. According to this view, the move from first-person documents to third-person omniscience and then subsequently to modernist interest in point of view is a refinement in technique. Hence, Vivienne Mylne (1981: 267) calls omniscient narration "an extension of the methods of character-revelation practiced in memoir-novels and letter-novels." First-person narrators thus "prepared the way for omniscient narrators" (ibid.). As a specialist of the eighteenth century, Mylne has no incentive to portray first-person document novels as primitive, but typical formulations hit a more obviously triumphalist note. Witness, say, Percy Lubbock's (1921: 62) heralding of the arrival of (postomniscient) point of view: "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself." Or less partisanly, Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg (2006 [1966]: 274) write, "Just as the narrative device of the eye-witness narrator is characteristic of picaresque and its attendant forms of simple realism, the device of the omniscient narrator . . . is characteristic of complex realism."

Such accounts (which of course differ in their particulars) have a certain congruity with the artifactual understanding I propose. Notably, they posit change not as rupture but as evolution: people build on the insights of their predecessors and modify their inventions. At the same time, while seemingly more evolutionary, these explanations are difficult to separate, first, from a periodism just as clunky as that of symptomology and, more important, from their teleology. Indeed, as developed in science and technology studies (STS), the terminology of the artifact was designed precisely to counteract a model of evolution that would see change as directed toward "something better." Seeking to replace the commonplaces of an older history of science—the great inventor, the march of progress—STS generally proceeds through finely grained case studies aimed at revealing the contingency of technological change. It's not the intrinsic superiority of a given technological artifact (often assumed to come from the insight of a single inventor) that explains its success. Rather, an array of factors conjoin to produce an outcome—and typically an outcome *over time*—that was in no way inevitable. Yes, successful artifacts "work better" than the ones they displace, but "working" is actually

23. See Ted Underwood (2013: 157–75) on the challenge posed to periodization by quantitative methods and the "continuous gradients of change" (ibid.: 170) they often reveal.

something that is worked on and that in any case has only contextual meaning. Working for whom exactly? To what end? "The 'working' and 'nonworking' of an artifact," writes one STS scholar, "are socially constructed assessments, rather than intrinsic properties of the artifact" (Bijker 1995: 75).[24]

Why do most people frequently choose *this* artifact and not another—third-person omniscience, say, instead of epistolarity? Why do they do so at one moment and not before, not after? Why do others at the very same time make other less popular, less apparently timely choices? For STS, there can't be a blanket explanation of the "getting better" variety; it depends on the case. The data I've assembled on the evolution of narrative forms obviously do not amount to a case study. I've observed the rise and fall of memoir and epistolary novels, but I have not tried to open the "black box" of motivations.[25] It may be difficult to study the invention of these narrative forms in the way Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (1985) have studied the air pump or W. Bernard Carleson (1991) has studied General Electric: literary production is frequently decentered and temporally dilated. Difficult or not, however, I think it's largely unnecessary, because it's not terribly hard to imagine what's inside the box—a mishmash of motivations that will combine in different ways depending on which particular artifact we study. Personal, political, and aesthetic motivations, certainly, and one shouldn't discount either the persistent value of novelty itself.[26] Indeed, aside from the very local explanations, *values* may be the key term. Artifactual innovation and adoption are driven by the values of the innovators and adopters, not by epistemes or paradigms or even by "society," another favorite external cause we wheel in when needed (see Latour 2005). Values are multiple, and they interfere with one another; some change contextually and often quickly, while others are much more widely shared and enduring. In this light, which depending on taste may be disappointingly humdrum or refreshingly sober, the curves we've observed are not signs or symptoms of anything particularly momentous but instead the result of these pushes and pulls. And if the literary

24. This is something of a commonplace in the scholarship. Other formulations include "progress in technology must be determined within very restricted technological, temporal, and cultural boundaries and according to a narrowly specified goal" (Basalla 1988: 216); "studies of choice of technology show that alternatives often exist, and the fact that one technology supersedes another is not even evidence of superiority at all, since other factors are involved" (Edgerton 1999: 123).
25. The black box metaphor was much used by early STS, which very much wanted to open it (see Pinch and Bijker 1987: 15). My frequent use of the word *people* ("most people" behave one way), far from being a fudge, is intended to foreground how little I pretend to know about the individual actors—race, class, gender, geography, just for starters. Granularity could be added, very possibly with great interest, but that would necessitate a different study.
26. See Martindale 1990. It goes without saying that an explanation such as Colin Martindale's novelty imperative has difficulty gaining traction precisely because it is historically meaningless.

record is not a bewildering swirl created by the play of multiple, conflicting, and changing motivations, this is because the production of any new artifact is constrained by extant artifacts.

So why this particular artifact at that particular moment? For lots of reasons and no reason. Asking why this or that form arises in one decade and peaks in another is hopeless. Things could easily have been otherwise. Not radically otherwise, I'm sure. Choices are limited by dominant values and by whatever artifacts are available for modification. Broadly speaking, it's no doubt right to say that the career of the document novel would have been impossible in a society that didn't value the individual—maybe tenth-century France or fourteenth-century China. But acknowledging this does not commit us to accepting the claim that the document novel rose when it did because the individual appeared precisely in those same years and not before. The curves I've displayed could have started earlier or later; their shapes could have been different. There are reasons behind the adoption of these forms: their adoption is not arbitrary. But nor is it necessary. Only in conspiracy theories and New Critical poems do all details have meaning.

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