

Nicholas Paige, Technologies of the Novel (2/8/21)

Casey Patterson

Welcome, and thanks for joining us in this episode of *Cafe*, the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel podcast. In this installment, our host Margaret Cohen is joined by Nicholas Paige, Chloe Edmondson and John Bender, following a discussion of Nicholas's new book *Technologies of the Novel*. Nicholas is a professor in the Department of French at the University of California, Berkeley. His previous book *Before Fiction* offers a history of the novel from the point of view of fictionality, and *Technologies of the Novel* aims to be the first quantitative history of the novel, using a systematic sampling of formal devices from French and English novels to trace their development from 1600 to 1830. John Bender is an emeritus professor of both English and Comparative Literature at Stanford University, and is the John G. and Morris M. Doyle Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies. And Chloe Summers Edmondson is a lecturer in the Thinking Matters program at Stanford University. Her research is situated at the crossroads of literary criticism, cultural history and media studies, with a focus on letter writing practices in 17th and 18th century France. She has also worked on numerous digital humanities projects in affiliation with the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Modern History*, and in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. And she recently co-edited the volume *Networks of Enlightenment: Digital Approaches to the Republic of Letters*. This conversation was recorded on February 8th, 2021. We're thrilled to be sharing this conversation with you. So thank you again for listening in, as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.

Margaret Cohen

Nick Paige, it's really, really exciting to have you here to discuss your book, which I understand is really—as we used to say—hot off the presses. Is that true?

Nicholas Paige

Well, it's print on demand, actually, so it's always hot off the presses.

(laugh)

Margaret Cohen

So the title of the book, *Technologies of the Novel*. A little bit shocking to anyone who grew up with an Enlightenment understanding of literature as non-instrumental. What do you mean by technology, the novel as a technology?

Nicholas Paige

It's not the first time that a book has been published calling the novel a "technology," there's one called *Technology of the Novel*, which is trying to Walter Ong's distinction between orality and writing. So this is different, it's a notion I developed. I think it's better to start rather with technology than the idea of the artifact. So as I was kind of trying to parse the, say, 200+ year early history of the novel in France—running from about 1600 to past 1800, by 1830—is where I go in France. It seemed to me that the best way of getting at this was to kind of look at kind of fairly discreet, formal iterations of novels that kind of came and went. And so I started to call these things "artifacts." And in order to kind of understand the coming and going of those artifacts and the way they changed in time, both as a percentage of the market and changed in themselves—like, the very early epistolary novels didn't really look anything like what we kind of think of as epistolary novels by the time we get to the heart of the 18th century, that's just one example—in order to kind of think these changes, I went for this idea of artifacts and the way artifacts evolve, and might these literary artifacts evolve like technologies evolve? So just think, you know, smartphones and toilets and all the rest, right? So, I did finally find so I did a not insignificant amount of work reading around science and technology studies, just to see, you know, how they talk about technological evolution. This idea of evolution has been kind of controversial in literary circles. Obviously, there was Franco Moretti's attempt to kind of use a try to pass that kind of idea of natural selection for cultural products, and I would say that that did not take off as an idea. But historians of technology use it a lot to explain how various technological artifacts arose, and then were worked on over time, changed their shapes and became good at doing things that they didn't really do well at the outset. Technologies, then, kind of maps on to this concern with thinking of literary forms as artifacts, and artifacts that are in some sort of evolution, "evolution" meaning a constrained change, a process of change that is constrained by the idea that whatever we do tomorrow may be new, but its newness is always kind of confined or constrained by a manifold of possibilities which is given to us by what people have done yesterday, and what they are doing today. Right, so that's basically it. I mean, I've made a lot of use of Brian Arthur's book on what is technology and how it has evolved, how it evolves. And, you know, he offers a definition of technology that I like, that basically it's an organized purpose system for doing things, for doing things that people want to do. And it can be material, and it can be more material. But that's basically a definition of what technology is.

John Bender

So how do you see the join between this broad notion of technology—which may overlap to some degree with the notion of system that you also use—how do you see the fit between these highly specific studies and analyses and that big idea of technology? There seems to be a kind of have a fracture in the book.

Nicholas Paige

Yes, there is a there is a split between, you know, what happens at the level of the system and the various artifacts there are that make it up. So I mean, one issue, one question that arises, sometimes, is: "well, given the system, given this understanding of literary technologies and artifacts, how does this change the way you read? [For instance] *Tom Jones*, right? And my first

answer is that it doesn't have to change the way we read *Tom Jones*. It kind of depends on which questions you're answering of *Tom Jones*. If you're answering questions about, you know, why is it split into chapters? And why do we have this voluble narrator? It may be useful to kind of consider that as an effect of practices that are inherited. So you might want to understand that way, that's what it could be but it doesn't have to. I mean, there are all sorts of ways in which individual works are fascinating and productive of meaning that really don't enter into these kind of questions of the macro behavior. So it's very abstract. In a way, what I'm doing is super abstract, I'm abstracting from content. I'm abstracting from who are the producers ones? One question I never ask in this project is "who is writing these novels? Where are they being published? In a capital, or to be published in the provinces?" These are questions I don't ask—male writers, female writers, don't ask this question. Aristocratic? I don't know. So there's a lot of abstraction. Now, one of the reasons I think that nonetheless, what I'm doing is does have kind of a coherence to it is because even when you do all that abstraction, you still get very interesting patterns and recurring patterns. And for me, that that is a confirmation that I am asking the question that actually has historical meaning. If I just got back noise when I graphed out what I was looking at, then I think I would kind of asking the wrong question. And, I mean, to a certain extent there's selection bias in the book itself, because only the graphs that actually revealed something which made it, and alright, there are other graphs that didn't do anything. But actually most of the most of the hunches, most of what I was doing lead to information and patterns and I think that this might just be the fact that I have kind of been working on the novel for a while and kind of had intuitions because of my fairly long term interaction with the archives. But other things didn't play out—for example, I was convinced that if you measured the amount of time that was given over to character portraits in novels, that as you went on that would decrease, and it totally doesn't decrease. What happens, it turns out—and this is part of the chapter I have on this, on a third person novel that seems to me to kind of be formally coherent and new, so I call it "the new third person novel," but "new" does not mean modern, it doesn't mean "our" novel, it doesn't mean the novel of the 19th century, it just means it's new at the time—one of the properties of that novel was to start out with scenes. So you actually didn't introduce characters, you didn't say, you know, "so and so was the third son of so and so and had inherited," you know, it wasn't a character portrait, it wouldn't be that kind of biographical, or moral character portrait, or possibly even a physical one, they would start with scenes. So physically, they'd kind of set a location, and then they'd have their human actors start to do things within that physical space. It's virtually non-existent in the first half of the century, with some exceptions. And so I discovered that while I was looking for character portraits, which were getting longer, and in fact, I ended up finding this other thing.

Margaret Cohen

it does seem to be that that a lot of the tags really do turn around this notion of reference and fictionality. And are almost like a shock, which in that way, I do see in continuity before fiction, to try to relinquish that sort of Austen universe, you know, and think about all the different ways that readers could imagine the relationship between the world depicted in narrative and the world depicted the world in which they were living. I don't know if those are just the tags

that worked out and those are the ones that you include, or if that, that kind of shape somewhere in it shaped your perspective.

Nicholas Paige

Yeah, I mean, so you know, there was this earlier book *Before Fiction* that came about 10 years ago, where I wasn't really tagging things yet, I kind of postulated these 'regimes,' preferential regimes, you might want to call them, and there were three of them. And one was the Aristotelian regime, which was: in order to make novels you take you take important heroes from legend or history that people love and have been talking about for a long time and then you show them doing the things they're known for doing and you know, you invent a little love story to you know, flesh it out or do whatever you do it, you do what you need to do to put your mark on it. It's something that tragedians did all the time, it's not that strange. So that was one regime, and then the second regime was the pseudo-factual regime where you don't have these kind of well-known characters, these somebodies, you invent your characters, they're these nobodies. No one's ever heard of Roxana, you know, before they open the book. They're not supposed to have. But you say that Roxanna existed, you know? Or Crusoe, whoever. So I call that pseudo-factual because there's this truth pretense in it. Right? And that's different. It's very different from the Aristotelian method. In the Aristotelian, if you're an Aristotelian novelist, you never have to say that Nero existed, because everyone knew that Nero existed. You only have to do that when you start to try to push out and invent a literature of nobodies, which, as I think you were hinting is great for you if you really want to talk about what's going on today. I mean, there are a lot of advantages to using to using nobodies who, you know, people Paris and London and so on, so forth, [don't know] rather than talking about the classical past or maybe the Renaissance. You know, obviously that that has a certain powerful usefulness. And then the third regime was, you know, I call it the fictional regime, which was still nobodies, but then you just kind of give up this pretense that they're true, right? And so basically, I never really gave up those three categories. I don't really call them regimes anymore, because I just think it's not too helpful. [Because] we think of segmentation of history in a certain way, and once you start graphing things, you realize that there are essentially no periods there. So if there are no stable periods, then the term 'regime' doesn't make a lot of sense, right. But so that's sort of where I came from. And these were tags that kind of continued to work. I did have to elaborate variations, and I had to tweak them. Because these were terms that I essentially, first I applied them to the 18th century where they worked very well. But then when I started moving back to the 17th century, in France, there were all these other artifacts that actually couldn't really be classified by these terms. And you start to have a lot of essentially *roman a clef*, right. So you have these keyed novels. And even within the category of the Aristotelian novel, there was kind of a variant in which usually your protagonist was invented, but all the other characters were taken from history. So that's kind of an interesting variant that appears and then fades out again in a very in a patterned way. It all does kind of make a certain sense. So the tags are, you know, partially there, they're a guess based on, you know, one's experience, and then you refine them. But you know, that's what you do. If you were a pollster, and you wanted to investigate people's sexual preferences, you'd start out with a number of things, and you start to meet people and they're like, I don't identify

with any of them, so you have to come up with new checkboxes for people. That doesn't show the process is broken, that shows the process is working, you know.

Chloe Edmondson

I think to speak to what you were saying earlier about how abstract your project is, and how it doesn't entertain this data of who the producers are, and, you know, the gender of authors, etcetera, I do wonder if in some ways your project is actually opening an avenue for a scholar to come along and kind of take up the baton and look at the data that you have generated against some of that other data and see what kinds of crossovers you can find, or if somehow qualifying the data that you have with other data might actually answer some of the questions that I think were coming up in the discussion earlier about, you know, some of the questions about: why innovation at this time versus another time? What is that feedback loop of the consumers and the producers?

Nicholas Paige

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. And of course, you know, a lot of people they write a book, they're like, "Yes, I think someone else should do that." So I'm in a little bit in that position of saying, "I think, yes, that's a great subject for someone else to do." I mean, I think the gender thing could be really interesting, I think the question question of geographical location, as well. There's some difficulty with gender because so many 18th century novels were published anonymously, so then you've kind of got to figure out what to do with those. But your basic point is great. I mean, like, translations I think is an awesome one, right? I mean, you know, what does the effect of translations do? Can we trace some sort of a formal feature actually being imported from a different country? So in England that would go through France for a certain part of the novel's history, and then in a slightly later part of the history probably go back the other way, because France was importing a lot of novels from England, right. So, you know, a great question would be: is there any evidence that these practices spread through diffuse through translation. So, I think that that's another great question along these lines. But ... I mean, I'm happy to entertain the idea that—how shall I say—that the production figures of novels might be important? Or, you know, libraries? These are some of the possible affordances of novels that John mentioned in our earlier conversation. Yeah, I mean, I'm obviously completely open to more granularity, right. I think, you know, in a way this book is really low hanging fruit. It's really amazing how little we kind of knew about the way people wrote before some of these graphs. I mean it. They surprised me a lot. A lot of the time. No, I had no idea that there were this many kinds of so-called French nouvelle, or, I didn't know the market penetration of the epistolary novel, I assumed it would be way higher. I mean, it's higher in England than it is in France. But even in England, kind of a flash in the pan, it doesn't last very long. In terms of just sheer production numbers, this is the first book that really compares French production figures to English production figures and finds they're uncannily the same for most of the 18th century. Uncannily, I would say. I mean, granted, England has a smaller population, so that's interesting. Then you guys talk about, like about literacy rates and stuff like that. But for brute numbers they are exactly the same. There's a lot of low hanging fruit there, the stuff we didn't know that's like, "Oh!" and once you know it, it does become more difficult to spend certain types of [--].

John Bender

I think you're wise about translations, because they're usually adaptations in the 18th century. And the translation of *Clarissa* bears surprisingly little relationship to the novel. But I can see that there might be finer grained areas that you could go into, for instance, Frances Bernie's novel, *Evelina*. I don't know whether you've read it. Its form is epistolary. But as the novel moves along, the letters get longer and longer and longer. And you get to the point where the letters will be like, 30 pages long in the printed text. So if the novel were wanting to be a third person novel, not an epistolary novel, where I'd say that isn't true of like [...] at all, there's things like that. But let's continue with *Tom Jones*, that specifically asks to be looked at with regard to the epic, a novel that is chaptered, it is booked and chaptered like an epic. Which of your categories does it go into? Because the characters are all invented, I believe?

Nicholas Paige

Yeah, well, I mean, there are a number of different tags, right? And some types of novels share certain tags. So it's a little complicated for people who actually read the book. So it depends, but we could talk about the truth posture of the book, we could talk about its division into books and chapters, we could talk about it as a third person novel. So there are all these kinds of different tags that we could give to understand its place and understand its relationship to other literature of the time. You know, how representative is it of other books that were being written at the time? So that's kind of some of the things that one would do, but it doesn't mean in its basic kind of form, it would look much more like so-called, you know, what we often call "romance" that for me, simply, there is no distinction with the novel. Romances, they're novels, they're novels that share a certain family resemblance of characteristics and they're formal, they're axiological. They have the types of characters, they have the number of characters, they have that sort of thing.

John Bender

They have their particular journeys, which *Tom Jones* has.

Nicholas Paige

Very often there is a journey there, which can be in the original form kind of Mediterranean in scope, but has all sorts of of national scopes as we move into later periods. So there'll be a lot of different ways of talking about classifying *Tom Jones*. I don't think it was in my sample of English novels from that decade, So I'm just wondering, I don't think I actually did tag it. But then it would just be one point, you know, it'd be one data point. And sometimes the data points of important books are actually very representative of what's going on, and sometimes they aren't. Sometimes they're ahead of the curve, sometimes they can be behind the curve. It really depends. And that doesn't seem to have anything to do with success.

John Bender

It would seem to me your system is not well calibrated to deal with the traditional conception of influence, for example, the influence of Richardson's *Clarissa* on Rousseau's *Julie*, or say the influence of *Tom Jones* on Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, or Dickens' *Bleak House*.

Nicholas Paige

Yeah, no, that is absolutely true. And I don't deny those influences. I did come back to something that did come up during an earlier discussion, that was, you know, I tend to think of this book as just kind of displacing a bit the focus from more obvious types of influence, sometimes more obvious types of classifications of novel. So genre classifications in which things like setting and character type and plot arcs are all kinds of very familiar, because they can fit in with genre, right? So instead of kind of qualifying novels that way, or instead of kind of tracing evolutions through influence, right, I'm kind of looking at a level that is, you know, again, a little more abstract, and, and potentially could seem completely without interest. I mean, so: how interesting is it to follow how many first person novels are written? Or how many epistolary novels, or how many third person novels with chapters, how interesting can that be? And I mean, that the gambit of the book is that, actually, that's more interesting than you think. How important can it be to know how many novels were written with kind of bonafide historical protagonists? I mean, I think it is interesting. It's not that type of influence that you're talking about, which I think is super interesting and it's undeniable. But for example, you know, despite the uptake of a novel like Rousseau's, *Julie*, right, I would argue that the influence of that novel is much more visible in later plots, in later characters, and the values that the characters of later novels espouse than in its specific epistolarity. So Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* is obviously totally Rousseauistic, But formally, it looks completely different. It's a very interesting artifact in itself. It's not particularly—I wouldn't say it's a one off but it's not a particularly frequent artifact that one finds. But he wasn't following *Julie* as a polyphonic epistolary novel, right? That's not what it was doing.

Margaret Cohen

Chloe, can I come back and just ask you something if you happened to have it in the back of your mind? When you asked Nick, "Well, could this lead to material or give conclusions that scholars could take in other directions, for example, to answer questions about gender and authorship," I know you've done a lot of letter reading in the 18th century, and reading both letters and novels and letters and other genres. And I'm just wondering if there were conclusions that were suggested to you, or directions for research that you thought were interesting?

Chloe Edmondson

Absolutely, I think what I was really thinking about while I was reading this book was, I think there was definitely—I had a yearning for some of those questions of causality and thinking about why are these very interesting patterns happening when they are? And I was actually drawing on this less from my work reading correspondence, but more actually from my experience working on other digital humanities projects, and thinking about how we could map different cultural value changes or societal changes with thinking about gender, thinking about social class, thinking about diffusion and geographical location, and how actually mapping some of the data of the novel forms against that data might qualify it further. It's not to say that we might be able to say that, "oh, clearly, this is causing that," but maybe it might just qualify how we interpret some of those, those peaks and declines. And I think that actually, Nick, you do

that, I think, in some chapters more than others. So for instance, when you talk about the phone's impact on novel production, you know, that that graph was a very clear graph of looking at the, you know, the direct influence of a, you know, political event on how many novels were being written and published, and I think that there are opportunities, right, and maybe we could do more of that thinking about, you know, libraries or relations, but sales, additions being printed, and or even tracking, for instance, some of the literary criticism or the discussion about these books, and seeing how that might impact what comes next. And I think it was also interesting, because in John's remarks, you mentioned affordances, and I thought that was really interesting because I also work a lot at the intersection of media studies and literature. And so thinking about affordances, and, you know, "is the novel as having affordances, or the novel as an affordance, or thinking about even some of the many institutions, John, that you mentioned earlier about the postal system, circulating libraries, thinking about all of those different things and think about how those have as affordances in relation to the object of the novel, how that impacts these different systems rising and falling. So I thought it was interesting that John you invoked that word affordance, because I think that's another great term and concept to bring out in from STS for thinking about literature and literary objects.

Nicholas Paige

So I think that works really well, with kind of production figures of the novel, in kind of a brute way. I'm not sure it's going to explain as well, the coming and going of artifacts. So I mean, I think one does want to know, you know, why, in England, is there such a large increase in novel production and 1750s and then again, like, 1770s, 80s, there's another take off, if I recall correctly, I don't actually recall all the variation in the graphs. I mean, by and large, those increases look very similar to what's happening in France. So I think it may be interesting to kind of ask if we can kind of pinpoint some sort of shift, right. And, sometimes the shift might be due to the technology, and sometimes the shift might be due to these affordances that are really outside the novels themselves. So what I mean by the technology, for example, when the CD replaced the cassette, sales of recorded music went way up. So an obvious explanation is that actually, you know, CDs were simply much more useful than cassettes, they could they just be used in ways that just made people buy more music, because this is a way better format. Now, it's kind of a hypothesis, but it's interesting that you know, the replacement of records by cassettes didn't actually do the same thing. Because everyone, if you remember cassettes, they're not very convenient. They're convenient because you can put them in the car, but otherwise, they're horrible to use, right? Because you can never find your song. Whatever. Yeah. I think there may be an example of that in the data where, and I think you alluded to this before Chloe, where in the in the in the 1730s in France there's a bit of a large rise in the production of novels and I kind of postulated it may have to do precisely with the fact that this was actually when the memoir novel was coming online. And my hypothesis was, well, could it be that basically, this this new formal possibility that had kind of been worked on slowly over time but that for some reason, right then was developing some sort of a kind of a coherence, or recognizability? Could it be that because of that, that formal possibility, it actually kind of induced more people to become novelists, or more novelist write more novels, because there was something, a narrative, a narrative kind of position or posture there, that never existed

before that all of a sudden, they thought could be made to do all this stuff. It's only a hypothesis, I can't know. The only other thing I'd say for these, these, these external affordances, post offices and so on and so forth, is that it can be hard to locate in time with any precision, right? I mean, you know, more and more libraries, and more and more literacy and greater postal networks, you know, but most of these things are usually kind of: more, more and more, right. So it strikes me that it's kind of hard to pin down specific changes to those things, because there's no kind of, or there's rarely a kind of, boom moment.

John Bender

Maybe there is a boom if you take the raven bibliography seriously, and the introduction to it. There is a boom not only in novel publication, starting in the late 70s, early 80s in England, but in publication period, people are reading and more buying more books. So maybe we shouldn't give so much stress to a novel-publication boom, because this is: more people can read and more people are reading more books. Some of them are cheaper—not all, the so-called triple decker is actually more expensive, but say the Minerva books, which 800 of them published between the late 80s and early 20s—were very cheap. And so, I mean, in a way separating out the graph of novel publication is misleading.

Nicholas Paige

Totally, and I mean, I do point to this actually, at the beginning of I think chapter 10. In a way, this doesn't tell us that the novel is becoming more important. This just tells us that there are a lot more novels, but there may be a lot more plays a lot more poems, you know, etc, etc. So we really don't necessarily know, but we can try to figure out. There is some, you know, fairly recent good bibliographical work that would suggest that these increases don't show the solidifying hegemony of the novel, they just show just expansion of the publication market in general, which might be due to literacy, and so on and so forth. So that's really important. And then one could imagine, you know, also doing other analyses that would involve trying to figure out, if and when novels do actually capture a larger proportion of the market for what we want to call literature. That would be interesting. And I'm sure it does happen sometime in the 19th century. But when, I don't know. But that is absolutely true, that the brute numbers don't give us data because they themselves have to be contextualized. Yeah.

Margaret Cohen

I have a question for all three of you, which is to what extent can we think of the novel in the 18th century, for example, as a national novel, and I understand why archives make it very difficult to work across national traditions. And, as Chloe was saying at our event, there's so much work that's gone into your book and that goes into DH production that it feels a little bit ungrateful to ask for more, but if you look at you know, novel readers that are at least well known in the 18th century, there is this enormous cross channel exchange, and it's not only through translations, it's through people reading, you know, in the two languages. And I mean, I know Chloe, you've worked on mapping, you know how all the letters circulate. So, I'm just wondering, how does that skew what you're showing us? If novels sit in print corpuses, does the nation sit in a kind of international republic of letters?

Nicholas Paige

I think the graphs for the 18th century basically show that what happens in France happens in England as well. And there's some differences, but the similarities are clear—like, the way the epistolary novel spreads and kind of homogenizes formally into its kind of pulp, polyphonic variant, the exact same thing. Even things like the way the novel chapterizes on both sides of the channel, extremely similar. Use of scenes as well, extremely similar. There are differences so that the truth pretense hangs on France much longer than it does in England, and I have my explanation that basically the way that we interpret the English situation—especially in the midcentury, the midcentury in England is characterized by some brusque movements that you never see in the previous 150 years of the French tradition. So my hypothesis, which is quite simple, is that basically there was basically no tradition of the English novel before then, and so it was very easy for the system to be rewired, in that the system was barely present at all. It was very easy for novelists to adopt the epistolary novel because it's not really displacing anything. But at any rate, there are these very interesting differences but the broad similarities seem to me to be evidence that there's just total porosity between these two countries, at least, which are not the only two countries, but I think it's very porous.

John Bender

Well that's a finding in itself, because in terms of traditional readings as I would understand them, the French novel much more heavily saturates the English novel with, say, Behn, Manley, Haywood, Defoe, and these core forms like the *roman secret*, the *roman a clef*, and then the later 18th century, the mid, say Fielding and Richardson, aren't especially French, whereas Defoe and Mannley and Haywood and Behn, who's a little older, have very significant French dimensions. I mean, in many ways *Roxanna* is a French novel. But that's at the level of content, not at the level you're dealing with. So in a way what your abstraction yields is something important, it seems to me that your frank acknowledgment that you're dealing in abstraction is crucial and very important, not an apology. I mean, the main achievement of structuralism as a movement was to show the power of abstraction in cultural and literary analysis, I think. I mean, you're not a structuralist but the power of abstraction can be very very great. I always think of Jerry McGann's statement that if you follow the critical paradigms as an assumption of your object of study, then you're not generating real knowledge, and the move toward abstraction is a move toward real knowledge, it seems to me.

Nicholas Paige

It also, to me, is a means of struggling against a fetishization of cultural specificity. I mean, cultural specificity is a great generator of knowledge, of super causal claims that, "Ah, there's this form that only arises in this place and it's so tied to that, and it makes our literary analyses super important," and anyway, there's a kind of fetishization of difference there, and I think abstraction helps us realize that, you know, a lot of people in different cultural circumstances—well, you ask how different is England? In the great scheme of things, how different is England from France? In these different cultural circumstances, you know, actually people make very similar choices in these two cultures. One is protestant, one is culture, one is aristocratic, one is poor, and look. They're actually making very similar choices. Their values are actually not all that different. It's not that different. It's different, but it's not that different. So that is

something that is kind of important to me, is to get away from a type of emphasis on cultural difference that is basically achieved through simply not looking anywhere else. Asking, if the novel is caused by the daily newspaper in England, should we be looking to see if somewhere that doesn't have a daily newspaper is also producing novels, like France, for instance.

John Bender

With regard to structuralism and abstraction, I think it's wise to stay away from the question, why, and just focus on the question, what. And Daubenton says that in his essay on description in the *Encyclopédie*, he's relying on Buffon when he says that. But "why" is a kind of rabbit hole to go down and when you go down it you come out in *Alice in Wonderland*, you know—

Nicholas Paige

But it's enjoyable, you know, it's like QAnon, when you go down [you get lost but] everything starts making sense. When you go down that hole, everything starts making sense. [laughter]

Margaret Cohen

[laughter] "it's enjoyable!"

Chloe Edmondson

But I also find it interesting that it seems that our discussions, both earlier and now, it seems that there are two threads that emerge, which one is the evolution, if you will, of the different novel forms and artifacts that as you've pointed out are remarkably similar. Similar things happening in London and France, [etc...]. But at the same time it seems that we've been talking a little bit about content and the differences in content and also the influence as you point out of, you know, the epistolary form of *Julie* may not have influenced *Paul et Virginie* but there is a certain kind of content aspect that undeniably is being tracked through other works, and so I wonder to, to introduce this other question of the national novel, if perhaps that might reside more in content and subject matter and themes, perhaps, and how those are deployed in different cultural contexts, and I think that, that also brings us to a question that I have been thinking about along the lines of gender too, and Margaret's book on the sentimental education of the novel, and how perhaps mapping gender might also provide an interesting lens back into, Margaret your earlier argument about how French male authors kind of coopted this form from female authors.

Margaret Cohen

Absolutely, I mean, I'm both very curious and very apprehensive of what the literary field would look like if it were subjected to Nick's kind of abrasive and, you know, invigorating abstraction. [laughter] And it would turn out that I had read a little subset of novels and in fact there was a whole other world out there, which I think is probably the case, you know. But, but all arguments are kind of local and partial, and if you don't make them you can't go any further,—

John Bender

You've read a lot of novels though.

Margaret Cohen

I did! I read them in the old *bibliothèque nationale*, you know—

Nicholas Paige

And you read them! I didn't even read them. So, you know my education [...]

Margaret Cohen

Well I kind of got really into, a like, digital reading *avant le lettre* because I got to start checking off codes, and like “oh, right, the scheming women of the world,” you know, “the duplicitous man,” you know, whatever—

Nicholas Paige

That's neat, that's really neat, and that does remind me a little of folklore categorization or something like that, yeah. Which is really pretty fascinating.

Chloe Edmondson

I was excited about your proposition earlier that one aspect that your data reveals is this much longer history of novels in France before, you know, it happens in England and thinking about the history of the novel more as the history of the French novel, actually, and I thought that was a really exciting finding from your book. Which is a nice argument for not closing French departments in the U.S. [laughter]

Nicholas Paige

That's the only one, I think—it's the writing on the wall. [laughter] I thought it would be interesting to try to produce some figures and do some samples for the English novel in the 17th century. You know, there are bibliographies, they lump together a bunch of different stuff, a lot of republications and stuff like that. But there just aren't many novels in Britain, but for that reason I thought I probably could whip that out pretty quickly. But, you know, I'm done. I'm done with that. I enjoyed talking about what it all means, but as for the actual data I'm satisfied with what have here.

John Bender

You might just read Aphra Behn's love letters, if you haven't, because it's first of all very very French and it's a hybrid of epistolary and third person narration.

Nicholas Paige

That was very typical of the time, basically all the early epistolary stuff was very *sui generis*, so you could get for example a little third person novella and it would feature, like, an appendix of the letters exchanged between the people, you know. That stuff was really, it was all up in the air and that's fascinating with the epistolary novel, it's uptake is so so, it takes forever to take off, you know we think it's obvious to imagine all of these kinds of people with various degrees of relation, some of the letter writers know each other and they're over here, and there's another packet of letter writers over here, and they kind of partially match up like a venn diagram. So that's like, the polyphonous epistolary novel. And you might think that's kind of

obvious but I think the record shows that it took people a long time to figure out, “oh, that’s how we can make an epistolary novel work.”

John Bender

Except for Richardson, he goes from the familiar letters to *Pamela* at once, and though there are a few other correspondents in *Pamela* it’s chiefly Pamela, and seven years later he’s at *Clarissa*.

Nicholas Paige

No, yeah, *Clarissa*, it’s...it’s amazing. Listen, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* is amazing as well, however, you can show that *Persian Letters* didn’t have that sort of uptick. Because it was kind of, basically a twist on an early epistolary novel, it was a novel of observation, where you’d have characters exchanging observations about, usually a local culture, often foreigners, and so it’s twist on that and he adds this great harem plot and so on and so forth, and he achieves this polyphony but there’s like *no* uptake of this, you could say until Richardson. But Richardson’s was kind of its own thing, he wasn’t building on Montesquieu, he did his own thing. So that’s kind of what I call—that’s an example of invention that does kind of take up the model that most people think of, that’s like, “wow, there’s this great instance and then people copy it.” And basically: yes, though, to look and see how long it took people to copy it is amazing, it took them twenty years to really uptake on that.

John Bender

But your point of the learning curve remains, thinking just that with Richardson it’s a fast learning curve with him.

Nicholas Paige

Yeah, it takes people a long time to change the way that they do things. It took a pandemic for us to stop burning all of this hydrocarbon just to go to these stupid conferences, when actually we don’t have to do all of that, right? There’ll be some happy medium but basically it took us the pandemic to shake us out of doing things the way we always do.

John Bender

That’s why we don’t get to have dinner with you!

Margaret Cohen

Yeah! I wish you had burned some in your hydro-electric vehicle, but you know—

Nicholas Paige

I know, it’s sad but we will—just in the same way that people still write books featuring heroes of the past, people still write Aristotelian novels, there’s still a lot of Aristotelian films they’re called bio-pics, they have a reason for being and they will continue to be. So we will continue to see people in person but it does kind of offer these other possibilities where I can be invited to give a talk in Germany, where I was never going to take off in the middle of the semester and

go to Germany, but I can do it now and, you know, no one would have thought of doing that before, and you know, why not?

John Bender

Speaking of audience, I saw that there were 59 people here earlier, and I saw at a talk with a former colleague who is now at another university, it was attended by a thousand people, so—

Margaret Cohen

I know, I saw that we had an attendee from Denmark who had just started dropping in on our Center for the Study of the Novel events and seemed to really enjoy them. Well Nick, I wish we could have a drink, and dinner, but—

Nicholas Paige

I know, we'll just have to drink alone! [laughter]

Margaret Cohen

It's been really great to talk to all of you, and thank you so much for your time and your interest.

John Bender

Yes, thank you Nick.

Nicholas Paige

Thanks to all of you, you've been super, super, super generous.

Casey Patterson

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