



## Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

### Video transcript

#### What is Euterpe? Part I

HUGUES MARCHAL:

Hello, I am Hugues Marchal, a professor of French literature at Basel University, and I work on rather puzzling books. These poems in verse were published between the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the 20th century, but they all deal with a subject that many of us would consider as very unpoetic. They sing the sciences of their time. They are what we call scientific poems. Let's have a closer look at some of them.

Here is a copy of *Les trois règnes de la nature*, *The Three Realms of Nature*, published by Jacques Delille in 1808. Delille needed no less than eight cantos to speak about the state of physics, astronomy, geology, or life sciences, and he did so with the support of famous men of science. As stated on the title page, the poem includes notes that were written, among others, by Georges Cuvier, the founder of palaeontology, who was held as one of the scientific geniuses of the time, just as Delille was considered as a poetic genius. Indeed, Delille's didactic poems were not only bestsellers in France, they were widely translated.

Here is a German rendering of the same book, *Die drei Naturreiche*. Again, a scientist, the chemist Ludwig Zenneck, was involved: he reviewed the notes. The French original, as well as the German translation, include beautiful engravings. These plates are another sign of the success of the books. Such expensive visual works could only turn profitable if many copies were sold. And Delille was certainly not alone in rhyming science. Here is, for instance, another poem, also from 1808, about astronomy, with unfolding charts.

Nor was scientific poetry limited to the beginning of the 19th century, this poem about beekeeping dates from 1898.

Now, it is not very difficult to collect such books today. They hardly have a market value. How come?

The antiquity produced several such poems that are still viewed as masterpieces. Lucretius' *De rerum natura* would be an obvious example. Similar poems kept being written and enjoyed as time went on, but when we reach the 19th century, things changed. Major poets came to think that science was depriving

the world from its poetical grace. According to Keats, for instance, Newton destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours. A little later, Baudelaire would proclaim that poetry was essentially anti-scientific, and he condemned didactic poets as 'heretic'. The position has prevailed. Roughly said, scientific poems of the time now appear to most literary historians as poems without poetry. They belong to a genre that modern aesthetics rendered unacceptable, even impossible.

However, we have seen that scientific poetry did not disappear all of a sudden after Delille. Far from it, in 1901, the first Nobel Prize in literature honoured another scientific poet, Sully Prudhomme. So the genre obviously still had supporters by that time, and this is what led me, along with a team of fellow researchers, to want to know more. We created a research project named Euterpe and aimed at understanding the dynamics of the genre over the 19th century. We wanted to inventory those forgotten poems, to retrace the debate that they fuelled, and to bring back their memory.

The project began in 2007, and it's almost completed. Our group has issued an anthology that presents more than 200 documents, mainly poems, but also texts advocating or rejecting the combination of poetry and science.

Yet, to retrace the dynamics of the genre over a whole century, we needed tools that traditional reading could not provide. We found so many books, more than 500, that it would've been difficult for an individual researcher to take into account all of the features. How should we deal with this? Distant reading.