

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

Video transcript

What is Euterpe? Part II

HUGUES MARCHAL:

We created a database in which each book was replaced with information about its size, its contents, its author, and many other elements. We have, thus, transformed our object in order to transform our perception of it and to move to a more abstract level. The database, as a whole, contains information about the genre itself. It will help us better grasp the fate of scientific poetry, but we also hope to use it as a model to understand how literary genres can flourish, then disappear.

For Franco Moretti, the main research outputs are graphs, maps, and trees, but databases allow for different visualisations, which we tested and tried to analyse in order to understand what they showed. Let us look at a few examples.

This graph charts the number of scientific poems published during the 19th century. It clearly challenges the common idea according to which the genre collapsed after Delille, who died in 1813. A famous romantic critic Sainte-Beuve, wrote around 1840, that his generation had witnessed the 'complete ruin' of the school of Delille. Here, we see that publications boomed in the middle of the century, and one has to wait until the very end of the period to see a diminishing curve.

This teaches us two important lessons. The graph shows that scientific poetry formed a lively genre during most of the century so that our vision of the literary culture of the time should be revisited to at least acknowledge this persistence.

But the graph does not prove that Sainte-Beuve was wrong to feel what he felt. The evidence is not sufficient to conclude that science and poetry still had an active dialogue.

One possible way of investigating this question is to have a look at the disciplines sung by poets. Here, successive phases clearly appear. The generation of Delille, for instance, gives preference to natural sciences. This kind of visualisation shows that their thematic choices are oriented towards that field.



But in the middle of the century, the interest of poets shifts towards applied sciences. And this comes as no surprise as this is the moment when devices like steamboats, trains, or photography erupted into daily life.

The computer also identifies scientists that were most frequently named in the poems. This kind of cloud visualisation shows how the genre helped create a canon of great men.

Finally, we can study the behaviour of the genre itself. One could think, for instance, that a genre has passed its prime when its supporters grow old. If we test the hypothesis, we do, indeed, find such an evolution. At the beginning of our period, the average age of the poets, when the books are published, is about 42. By the end of the century, they are about ten years older.