



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2019) Enumerations: Data and Literary Study. Andrew Piper. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. xiii+243. [Book Review]

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/25293/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

*Enumerations: Data and Literary Study*. Andrew Piper. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. xiii+243.

Reviewed for *Modern Philology* journal by Martin Paul Eve.

How the books on digital literary studies are proliferating, let me count the ways. Within the single-year period at which I am writing, Ted Underwood's long-awaited *Distant Horizons* will be out with Chicago; Roopika Risam's *New Digital Worlds* will have been published with Northwestern; Punctum Books will have brought us Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel's *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*; and I will have added to the noise with *Close Reading with Computers*, at Stanford, to name just a few examples.<sup>i</sup> It is onto such a crowded dancefloor that Andrew Piper's *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* makes its moves.

Piper's work marks a bold intervention in literary studies, one that is "about how computation participates in the construction of meaning when we read" (ix). This language of participation is chosen with care, for digital incursions in our discipline have often been badly received. As neoliberalism has been described as the disenchantment of politics by economics, some fear the digital humanities as the disenchantment of art by mathematics.<sup>ii</sup> It is, indeed, by now an annual ritual to note the accumulating scathing commentaries on the growth of digital panels at the MLA Annual Convention. *Enumerations*, by contrast to this bombast, aims to deliver a theoretically rich and literarily sensitive set of digitally-assisted readings. These readings are centered in Piper's book around a set of paired formalistic and thematic terms:

Punctuation/Opposition; Plot/Lack; Topoi/Dispersion; Fictionality/Sense;

Characterization/Constraint; and Corpus/Vulnerability. This structure allows Piper to shimmy between a more conventional literary mode and the digital side of his work.

The most successful example of this oscillation was, I felt, to be found in Piper's chapter Fictionality/Sense. This chapter examines what it means to think about literary language in the age

of machine classification. Since the high point of poststructuralist theory in the 1970s, of course, it has been a literary-philosophical commonplace to state that there is no absolute difference between literary and non-literary writing. That is, there is nothing a work of fiction or non-fiction can do within its own language to persuade a reader absolutely of its own factuality or fictionality. John Searle and Jacques Derrida have both claimed this at various points. For Searle, for instance, “The utterance acts of fiction are indistinguishable from the utterance acts of serious discourse”, while for Derrida, “No exposition, no discursive form is intrinsically or essentially literary before or outside of the function it is assigned”.<sup>iii</sup> The only problem for such a view is that Piper shows that machine classification can distinguish between fact and fiction with over 95% accuracy using just a 1,250-word stretch of text (94-100). For the sake of clarity, this computational approach is not checking whether a text is true. It verifies only the work’s “*intended* truth claims” within language (98). In this demonstration, however, I believe that Piper is justified in his claim that such an approach “puts pressure on some of the more common scholarly refrains of the recent past” (99). It is in this space of contestation that Piper best succeeds; these moments where computational discourse interacts with commonly held literary-critical precepts.

There are sections of *Enumerations* that I felt to be less successful. I do not dispute that, for instance, the chapter on historical trends in punctuation accurately documents “the overall distribution of literary features” and allows us “to identify those spaces of either lack or excess that give shape to any given genre or period of time” (27). The challenge, here, for me, was that I wanted to know more about *why* there is a “space of excess” in particular portions of twentieth-century poetry (29). That I felt under-satisfied here is not strictly Piper’s fault. Certainly, he pirouettes with dexterity between the “bird’s-eye view” and close reading (34-35) in order to demonstrate the ways in which periods seem to occur more frequently within poems that exhibit higher levels of internal “semantic difference” (40). While such a question may lead only to an infinite regress, though, I wanted to know why we might see the emergence of such semantic difference. This is to say that this chapter, for me, ably charted a formalistic history; one that was

backed by a good quantity of zoomed close reading. It withheld from me, though, a more thematically inclined history.

In sum, though, *Enumerations* is a landmark study in the interactions between computational formalism and literary theoretical approaches. Piper does sterling work in making the mathematics and computation accessible but out of the limelight, while also providing more detail for those who are interested. I should note that this book is not a “how to” guide to beginning computational literary work (although there are plenty of those).<sup>iv</sup> It is instead one that sits within a history of digital literary studies that is only now gaining more prominent attention, despite decades of work in this field.<sup>v</sup> What Piper may have just achieved, though, at a period of intense scrutiny of the digital humanities, is to have shown how quantitative approaches continue to aid interpretation and that they cannot sit apart from hermeneutics. Piper’s success, in my reading, was in the coming together of the digital and the theoretical. For, as the old adage goes, it takes two to tango.

Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck, University of London

- i Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018); *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. by Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018); Martin Paul Eve, *Close Reading With Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
- ii See William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2014); Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia, 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/>> [accessed 29 May 2016].
- iii John R. Searle, 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 58–76 (p. 68); Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg, Meridian (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 28.
- iv See, for instance, Matthew Lee Jockers, *Text Analysis with R for Students of Literature*, Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences (New York, NY: Springer, 2014).
- v These include but are hardly limited to Lisa Samuels and Jerome J. McGann, 'Deformance and Interpretation', *New Literary History*, 30.1 (1999), 25–56 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1999.0010>>; Tanya E. Clement, "'A Thing Not Beginning and Not Ending": Using Digital Tools to Distant-Read Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans', *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 23.3 (2008), 361–81 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/fqn020>>; Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, Topics in the Digital Humanities (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*, Topics in the Digital Humanities (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).