
Text Mining Eighteenth-Century Travel Writing: The “I” and Autobiography of Narration

Catherine Nygren

catherine.nygren@mail.mcgill.ca

McGill University, Canada

How can text mining further explore and challenge our conception of how the style of British travel writing changed from 1700 to 1830? In this poster, drawn from the first chapter of my dissertation, I use text mining methods to explore the purported coming forth of the self in eighteenth-century travel writing, examining texts ranging from instructions for gentlemen and antiquarian accounts to the documents of New World explorers and the journals of female travelers. Increasing public demand for travel-related texts and the genre’s potential for experimenting and examining social, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas elevated travel literature to one of the most important - and popular - genres of the century. Despite the modern broadening of the definition of travel literature and analyses that use the lenses of feminism and post-colonialism, however, overviews of travel writing still primarily use close readings and representative samples of texts to make claims about the genre as a whole.

My project, however, will use a corpus of more than 3500 texts (curated through a combination of existing bibliographies and machine learning methods) to examine and challenge our received literary histories of the genre. In particular, this presentation focuses on the “I” and autobiography in narration. In the first half of the eighteenth century, authors crafted travel texts to have a balanced amount of personal narration: the voice of the narrator was required to provide order, entertainment, and authority in the narrative, but with an over-emphatic voice, the author would appear egotistical, fantastical, and unreliable. By the middle of the century, however, scholars identify a trend of authors increasingly writing in a first-person voice and interpolating their detached, factual observations with their personal experiences and reflections. Around the turn of the century, when many locations, particularly Grand Tour destinations like France and Italy, had

been described multiple times, readers desired more original writing and critics used personal narration as evidence that the author had actually travelled. Still, authors often felt they had to justify writing in a distinctive voice: Mary Wollstonecraft, when she found she could not “avoid being continually the first person—‘the little hero of each tale,’” became “determined to let [her] remarks and reflections flow unrestrained” (3). In this poster, therefore, I seek to examine this purported coming forth of the self in eighteenth-century travel literature. Tracking distributions of pronouns, such as “I,” “me,” and “you,” and other narrative signifiers will reveal the shifting trends of personal narration in my corpus. Analyzing the words used in titles—such as “Observations,” “Reflections,” and epistolary markers, among others—may provide further insight into how authors and publishers conceptualized and marketed the relationship between the author, the narrator, and the reading public. In examining such patterns, I seek to answer questions such as whether the pieces we consider more “literary” use the first-person voice more often or more experimentally, whether particular sub-genres or texts in my corpus are more likely than others to follow this trend, and whether any other shifts in grammar and vocabulary accompanied this new privileging of first-person narration. A corollary question is whether Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* is, as several critics contend, truly a catalyst for this trend, and how the influence of Sterne and other significant authors manifest in my corpus. In particular, I will pay close attention to female writers and authors of colour, following the work of critics such as Elizabeth Bohls, in order to see how they subvert and support the trends of travel writing at that time.

This first chapter on the self, along with my dissertation’s examinations of descriptive language and sub-genre, will provide an extensive understanding of eighteenth-century British travel writing. My approach encourages both breadth and depth in subject material, from patterns across hundreds of texts to significant paragraphs, sentences and words. This mixture of distant and close reading will offer a reformulation of the massive genre by, for the first time, analyzing a significantly larger corpus than was previously possible. My findings and methodology (shared through Github and other public forums) will provide critical resources and frameworks for future investigations of the language and genre of other forms of eighteenth-century literatures.