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Introduction to Digital Humanities
Speculative Research Project
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Poetic Transformations during Wartime

The twentieth century was a period of rapid change and extreme transformation — politically, intellectually, and socially. Through two extremely violent wars, economic crashes, and technological developments, the socio-political state of the world remained in constant flux. These changes can be observed through many mediums (news reporting, policies and laws, memoirs and novels), but the transition between a pre and post-war world is also accurately represented by the art produced before, during and after the wars. Many artists, writers, and poets of the early twentieth century faced catastrophic and incomprehensible violence during World War I and World War II, both of which altered the public conception of reality. Analysis of artistic work can uncover greater intellectual and emotional truths to the impact of these wars, moving beyond (while still accounting for) political and social changes. One notable poet of the twentieth century is René Char — a French writer and Resistance fighter during the second world war. Having published over 30 collections of selected poetry and prose, Char's work paints a broad picture of the intellectual and artistic transformations over the course of his lifetime (between 1907 and 1988). His involvement in several artistic movements and collaboration with many notable artists of the century make his work pertinent and a widely accurate representation of artistic focuses during the 20th century. Additionally, unlike many European artists of the time who fled warzones, Char was directly involved in the war. Therefore his work in particular may shed new light on the impact of global violence. This project aims to explore how René Char's poetry changes during and after World War II as emblematic of greater intellectual and public transformations.

René Char's poetry has already been a small subset of humanistic analysis and research for the past several decades but never on a large scale or in a publicly accessible manner. Shifting the research of his work into the digital sphere would simultaneously extend his work to a larger audience while enabling researchers to discover patterns that may have been otherwise impossible to find. Char's poetry is difficult

to understand — his writing is chock-full of metaphors that barely makes sense, leaving readers with fragments of meaning and feeling. Char often merges and combines contradictory ideas within a single sentence or uses shockingly out-of-place images that have intrigued readers and scholars for decades. In fact, his work has been translated dozens of times, often with wildly different interpretations of the same poem or fragment. Translation studies involve a deeply analytical close reading and this is the traditional focus of the study of his work — namely, attempts to make his selective and often incomprehensible word choice make sense through close reading and translation. This project aims at the other end of the spectrum by taking advantage of digital tools like distant reading, pattern identification, and large scale analysis of gendered pronouns or prepositions to fill the gaps that translators and humanistic scholars may have left behind. By understanding any large-scale transformations in Char's work in tandem with the scholarship that already exists, scholars could make much broader conclusions about the effect of wartime on artistic production.

The dataset that we would be using is the corpus of René Char's published work. Having written over 30 collections of poetry and prose written between the ages of 15 and 80, his body of work is large enough to find concrete linguistic patterns in a multitude of ways. In the early 1980s an enormous collection of his work entitled *Oeuvres Complètes* (Completed Works) was published by the French publisher Gallimard and contains the majority of his notable writing throughout his lifetime with over 1600 pages of his writing.¹ This source would be the essential gathering point and standardized collection of Char's corpus because it is reliable, consistent, and available in digitized archives. Alternate sources could include separately published collections that may have been left out of *Oeuvres Complètes*, but these editions would also have been published by the same ubiquitous French publisher Gallimard to maintain this standardization. The scope of *Oeuvres Complètes* is also large enough that it is unlikely that supplementary work would be required, but if they are, these texts are equally available in bookstores and libraries. Additionally, due to the enormous number of translations of his work and the amorphous nature of his writing itself, it will be important to analyze Char's writing in its original French. Otherwise,

¹René Char, *Oeuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

literary and linguistic details may become lost or obscured. It is also significant that the entirety of his work has not been translated by the same person and it would be impossible to standardize the translations for consistent study in English or another language. Therefore, the dataset of his individual works will be collected from *Oeuvres Complètes* in the original French and the work will be classified by publication year because the aim of this study is to investigate the change in his work over time.

The dataset, that is the body of Char's work, can be cleaned and organized using tools such as POSTDATA (Poetry Standardization and Linked Open Data), which can simultaneously clean and deliver his digitized poetry while making other organizational programs like OpenRefine redundant and unnecessary in this context. The POSTDATA project aims to “bridge the digital gap among traditional cultural assets and the growing world of data” by focusing on poetry analysis and using semantic web technologies to standardize and classify literary data.² The project makes poetry accessible as machine-readable data by compiling and digitizing written collections — specifically, by storing the text as XML files in a organized website format. Researcher Elena Gonzalez-Blanco describes the project as “a big step towards building a comprehensive, accessible, and interoperable poetry repository” and by using this established form of clean and streamlined data organization for Char's corpus, we can begin to take advantage of other digital tools for analysis.³

Following the organization and transition of his work into a digitized space, the analytical work of the writing itself can begin. It is important to begin this analysis with the research questions of Nyugen, Dong et al., 2020 in which researchers reckon with contextualizing the digitization of literary sources within a socio-cultural context.⁴ In their research, attempts to bring together qualitative and quantitative research instead of solely relying on one or the other illustrate a responsible and ethical

²Elena Gonzalez-Blanco, Salvador Ros, Pablo Ruiz, María Luisa Díez, Helena Bermúdez Sabel, et al, “Poetry and Digital Humanities making interoperability possible in a divided world of digital poetry: POSTDATA project” *EADH 2018: Data in Digital Humanities*, European Association for Digital Humanities, (Dec 2018, Galway, Ireland), accessed May 2024, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2203806>.

³Ibid.

⁴Nguyen D, Liakata M, DeDeo S, Eisenstein J, Mimno D, Tromble R and Winters J, “How We Do Things With Words: Analyzing Text as Social and Cultural Data,” *Front. Artif. Intell*, no. 3 (2020), accessed May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2020.00062>.

aspect of digital humanities that is pertinent to this proposed project. While analyzing René Char's work, it will be vital to rely *both* on digital analysis in addition to personally and qualitatively identifying trends, which these scholars refer to as "insight-driven computational analysis."⁵ To begin this work, a distant thematic reading of his corpus can illuminate patterns and themes that would otherwise remain difficult to find, categorize and analyze. Inspired by the project by El Khatib and Ross, 2022, *A Beginners Guide to Using Voyant for Digital Theme Analysis*, this project can begin with the broad scope of discovering patterns in Char's collected works throughout the course of his lifetime.⁶ Voyant Tools is an accessible digital resource that identifies vocabulary repetitions between multiple texts and can be used to concisely represent which words Char uses more and less frequently. By mapping these patterns, whether that be through word frequency lists and clouds or KWIC displays (Key Word in Context), critical analysis can be achieved in a timely and accurate manner. Char's specific linguistic choices, whether that be repeated words throughout his lifetime or themes that he returns to, can highlight a facet of his writing that would have been otherwise buried in the sheer amount that he published. An extension of this part of the research would be to separately categorize his work by date. Poems written between 1928 and 1939 can be analyzed separately from those written between 1939 and 1945 (during World War II) which can also be separate from his writing from 1945 to the end of his life in 1988. These two facets of study (analysis without date-based separation and analysis of each time period of his life) will illuminate the way in which his work remains the same throughout the course of his lifetime as well as make way for analysis of World War II writing and how unprecedented violence changed the themes and word choices in René Char's poetry.

A continued form of distant reading analysis that can complicate and extend this research is stylometry — the statistical analysis of texts, typically between genres or between authors. While this project focuses on one genre and one author, I propose that wartime creates seismic shifts in the human psyche — particularly for those directly impacted by the fighting, like Char himself as a member of the

⁵Ibid, p 11.

⁶Randa El Khatib, Shawna Ross, "A Beginner's Guide to Using Voyant Tools for Digital Analysis" *Humanities Commons*, (2022), accessed May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.17613/42c8-mk80>

French Resistance. Taking inspiration from research by Rezaei and Kashanian, 2017, *A Stylometric Analysis of Iranian Poets*, this form of analysis will be used to compare and contrast the three different eras of Char's work that have already been identified (pre-war, during war, and post-war).⁷ The conclusions from this analysis can allow researchers to further understand the implicit effects of wartime violence — does it affect the internality of one author so much so that their writing no longer resembles their earliest work? Does the very “fingerprint” of an author change due to wartime trauma? This investigation of attribution is a new lens with which to work on the study of wartime artists. While stylometry can be used to compare and contrast multiple authors (or to identify authorship as in Binongo, 2003, *Who Wrote the 15th Book of Oz? An Application of Multivariate Analysis to Authorship Attribution*)⁸, it can also be harnessed to understand the emotional threads of a text. As explored in Whissell 1996, *Traditional and Emotional Stylometric Analysis of the Song of Beatles Paul McCartney and John Lennon*, emotional stylometry may be a valuable tool to investigate texts with deeper emotive threads, like the poetry of René Char.⁹ In this study, Cynthia Whissel begins to unravel the emotional threads of the Beatles' songwriting through the change in their lyrics over time. This style of analysis can be used directly in the proposed statistical analysis of René Char's work and how the emotionality of his writing may change over the course of his lifetime. Stylometric analysis therefore extends the broad thematic research achieved with Voyant Tools and specifies the transformations of Char's poetry.

Once conducting these larger statistical analyses, one extended thread of investigation could be with LIWC analysis, or Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, developed by James Pennebaker in the early 90s. Closely related to stylometry, LIWC is a software tool that counts and categorizes words — whether that be groups of obvious nouns or verbs related to the same topic or small parts of speech like pronouns,

⁷Sohrab Rezaei and Nasim Kashania, “A Stylometric Analysis of Iranian Poets” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 2017), accessed May 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0701.07>.

⁸José Nilo G. Binongo, “Who Wrote the 15th Book of Oz? An Application of Multivariate Analysis to Authorship Attribution,” *CHANCE* 16, no. 2, (2003), accessed May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09332480.2003.10554843>.

⁹Cynthia Whissell, “Traditional and Emotional Stylometric Analysis of the Songs of Beatles Paul McCartney and John Lennon” *Computers and the Humanities* 30, no. 3 (1996), accessed May 2024, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30200392>.

prepositions, and articles (what Pennebaker calls “junk words”).¹⁰ Since its development in the 90s, LIWC dictionaries have been converted into other languages, including French, so this analytical tool would still be useful for analyzing Char’s poetry. In the previous investigation of stylometric analysis, we focus solely on the content and topics that may transform in Char’s poetry but by including LIWC, we can also understand a vital and more nuanced aspect of his work; namely *how* Char writes instead of simply *what* he writes about. James Pennebaker explains this phenomenon thoroughly in his Ted Talk *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, in which he emphasizes the value and connotative meaning of these aforementioned “junk words,” which are officially known as “function words.”¹¹ He discovers that it is in these small (and overlooked) articles and prepositions that deep emotional, intellectual, and social meaning can be discovered. Since we have already discussed the analysis of Char’s word choice through keyword analysis and general thematic categorization of vocabulary, LIWC can fill in the gaps that may have otherwise been missed as the concluding and most specific part of this proposed project. In the social-emotional context of his work, how does Char’s use of function words change over time? Particularly in a language like French, with malleable pronouns and emphasis on gendered nouns (that Char is conscientious of in his writing), LIWC would be an essential part of this research.

Following research and conclusions, the first consideration for the dissemination of the project are copyright laws. Due to the texts’ publication by Gallimard, it would be impossible to publicly share the datasets and poetry from POSTDATA (although the use of this text for research purposes is still permitted). Therefore, we can share the research compiled by the project — word maps from Voyant Tools, lists of themes and vocabulary, pronoun counts, as well as whichever models and statistics come from the conclusions of the project — but not the original poems. As long as the public audience cannot reproduce original texts from our data, we can still share valuable conclusions from the analysis itself. This research would first and foremost be published in a journal in order to share it with the general public and other researchers. It is important to consider scholars both within the Digital Humanities field

¹⁰James Pennebaker, “The Secret Life of Pronouns.” (Youtube, uploaded by TedxAustin, February 19, 2013), accessed May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGsQwAu3PzU>.

¹¹Ibid.

as well as the multitude of René Char experts and translators that already work closely with his writing. Perhaps conclusions from this research could be factored into future humanistic research (books or translations) involving René Char and help scholars engage more deeply with these texts.

By combining several forms of textual and linguistic digital analysis, the study of René Char's poetry can be extended beyond close readings and translations. This adds an entirely new dimension to the transformation of Char's poetry over time — with Voyant Tools and stylometry, we can uncover repetition and word choice across the span of his corpus that may have otherwise been missed. We will also be able to compare these choices between his early work and later work, allowing us to clearly map any linguistic and emotional transformations. Finally, by incorporating LIWC analysis, the subliminal threads of how his art changes during wartime can be more clearly understood while narrowing the scope of the project and making the research more specific. Perhaps violent imagery would become more common after the war (a hypothesis that may or may not be true), but LIWC can illuminate his relationship to the world around him through analysis of “function words.” By analyzing his enormous body of work with these digital tools, we may be able to paint a broader picture of how wartime and violence affect the production of art, particularly poetry, in a nuanced, multifaceted, and specific manner.

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