Review

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Voltaire's correspondence is an unwieldy corpus, currently comprising over 21 000 letters. Perhaps thanks to its size, it is also one of the least well-studied of authors' correspondences. How should one go about examining Voltaire's epistolary practices, determining the relationship of his letters to his wider oeuvre, and assessing the correspondence as a whole? It is pleasingly paradoxical that some answers to these big questions, about an even bigger collection, lie in this short book of just 85 pages. Across six chapters, Nicholas Cronk and Glenn Roe use Voltaire's correspondence as a 'test case for examining the pros and cons of "close" and "distant" reading' (p.1), giving readers a taste of the sorts of analyses that might be run on large corpora by interleaving digital and more traditional, analogue methodologies. As the volume's title suggests, then, this is a book as much about experimenting with digital methods for humanities research, as it is about Voltaire and his letters. As such, it will surely interest a wide audience.

Chapter One, 'Beginnings', offers three important opening moves. First, it (re)familiarises the reader with key facts and figures relating to Voltaire's correspondence, and with some of the major complexities involved in working on this collection: its lost, rewritten, or forged letters, not to mention its constant expansion as letters are uncovered. There are no bombastic claims about what digital humanities can do, but rather careful caveats and nuance, grounded in the authors' deep understanding of Voltaire's extant correspondence: a heterogeneous, 'lopsided' (p.7) corpus, assembled by often hagiographic scholars, more representative of Voltaire's later life than his early years, and composed of over twice as many letters written *by* Voltaire as ones written *to* him. The chapter also provides a good overview of major recent research

conducted on eighteenth-century intellectual networks, especially that which has made extensive use of digital methods. And finally, this chapter establishes the corpus on which the experiments presented in this volume are conducted. Thanks to their long-standing association with the University of Oxford's Voltaire Foundation and the University of Chicago's ARTFL Project, Cronk and Roe have exploited the large datasets of these two organisations. Primarily, these datasets are Tout Voltaire[1] (a database of all of Voltaire's writings) and ARTFL-Frantext[2] (around 3500 digitised and searchable French-language texts, dating from the 13th to the mid-20th centuries).

Chapter Two, 'Names', addresses Voltaire's many and varied ways of signing his letters. Exploiting the fact that all of Voltaire's sign-offs have been structurally encoded in his digitised letters, available in the Electronic Enlightenment repository,[3] Cronk and Roe analyse the 586 different signatures in Voltaire's 15 723 known letters. Although a subject still awaiting detailed scholarly study, initial results suggest that the author variously used his signatures (or lack thereof, as is the case for over 7000 letters) as ways to network, to signal friendship, to maintain in-jokes, and to (re)invent his authorial personae.

Chapter Three, 'Neologisms', builds on this picture of a ludic and creative Voltaire. While many of Voltaire's major works show him to have been a linguistic conservative, reticent to deviate from the language of seventeenth-century authors, the correspondence reveals a more playful writer 'try[ing] out his lexical inventions before employing them in the wider public sphere' (p.29). The correspondence, Cronk and Roe suggest, serves as a 'laboratory' (p.29) – a word that recurs throughout this book – in which Voltaire can experiment. The chapter draws on evidence mined using corpus analysis of digital dictionaries, to find citations of Voltaire which constitute lexical first-use cases. Fascinating facts pepper the chapter, identifying this as a rich area for further research: like the fact that Voltaire's correspondence is one of the most cited literary works in Littré's 19th-century *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, just behind Montaigne's *Essais* and Amyot's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. Or like the thirty neologisms identified as first occurring in Voltaire's letters, which include the words 'alentours', 'fumiste', 'racinien', 'jouable', 'tolérantisme' and 'rabâcheur' (the latter possibly borrowed, in fact, from a missing letter written by Émilie Du Châtelet).

Chapters Four and Five deal with Voltaire's use of quotations in French and in Latin, respectively. Both chapters make use of the TextPAIR sequence alignment algorithm developed by the ARTFL Project, which identifies repeated instances of several words occurring in a chain. In Chapter Four, this algorithm is used to compare 1133 French literary texts in the ARTFL-Frantext database with Voltaire's letters, and to spot instances of Voltairean text reuse. Identifying unacknowledged (even

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[1] https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/toutvoltaire/.

[2] https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/artfl-frantext.

[3] http://www.e-enlightenment.com.

unconscious) instances of borrowing can help researchers to uncover authors' literary culture, as well as their wider authorial practices. And if initial results are anything to go by, it would seem that Voltaire is imbued with the literary culture of the 'Grand Siècle', suggested by his high degree of borrowing from authors such as Racine, Boileau, Corneille, La Fontaine and Molière. The chapter concludes with a thoughtful discussion of the limitations but also the tantalising potential of 'distant' reading, using sequence alignment algorithms. For anyone curious about the research potential of this technology, it is a helpful and interesting read.

Chapter Five goes back to the Latin literary culture that Voltaire acquired as a pupil at the Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand, and shows how staple authors on the curriculum (especially Horace, Virgil and Ovid) find their way into his letters later in life. The chapter also interestingly analyses the recipients of Voltaire's Latin quotations: it turns out that only a relatively small subset of correspondents (predictably, almost exclusively male) receive letters with any Latin in them. Such letters seem to be reserved for school friends who learned Latin alongside the young Arouet, teachers, acquaintances from his early legal career, and fellow authors and elite connections such as Frederick II and D'Alembert. Latin quotation, the authors suggest, is a form of cultural currency among members of this network.

Chapter Six, 'Futures', closes the book by gesturing to the new research directions – within but also beyond Voltaire's oeuvre – that digital methods might help humanities scholars pursue. The authors reaffirm the nuanced approach they have taken throughout this collection, that is, not to throw the close reading out with the distant. At their strongest, Cronk and Roe conclude, digital readings offer 'a productive telescoping between the fine grain of literary expression and the larger social and cultural systems at play in the eighteenth century' (p.70).

Many readers will know Cronk and Roe as co-directors of the Voltaire Lab, founded in 2018 and described as 'a virtual space for digital humanities research on the Enlightenment' (p.14). To an extent, then, this book is a kind of 'lab tour', offering readers a glimpse of work in progress (or in the pipeline) at the Voltaire Lab and by those within its network. Such projects include Digital Voltaire (an authoritative digital critical edition of Voltaire's complete works, to match and augment the hardback *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* completed in 2022), and Roe's large-scale ERC-funded project, Modelling Enlightenment. Reassembling Networks of Modernity through data-driven research (ModERN), based at the Sorbonne. However, the lab tour also comes with an invitation to readers – held out by the authors' regular comments about the research still needed, the tools still to be perfected – to consider whether any of these digital methods might be useful in their own work, and to join in thinking through their 'pros' and 'cons'. This is not a book that presents definitive conclusions, and it is all the more accessible and engaging for it.

The volume is part of the ever-growing Cambridge Elements: Eighteenth-Century Connections series, edited by Eve Tavor Bannet and Rebecca Bullard (for this and other early volumes), and more recently by

Tavor Bannet and Markman Ellis. The series specialises in the high-quality, rapid publication of original academic work, presented in concise and accessible format. The paperback (available for just £17) is impeccably produced, while the open-access digital edition provides free access to the full text and to colour versions of the graphics.[4] However it is read, *Voltaire's Correspondence: Digital Readings* will undoubtedly give much food for thought to students and scholars of Voltaire, of 18th-century authors, or of digital approaches to humanities study.

[4] https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108866552.