

On the growth of my own mind: Visualising the creative process behind Wordsworth's autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, in context

Poster Presentation

Alex Butterworth
Amblr LLP
Oxford
alex@amblr.net

ABSTRACT

Wordsworth's great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, is a unique text, created over the greater part of the poet's long lifetime and subject to endless revision until its first publication shortly after his death. The Wordsworth Trust is fortunate to hold the entire collection of the poet's manuscripts, including thirty-three versions of the poem of extremely varying length and degrees of completion. A recent research project, involving three leading textual experts, explored the significance of these manuscripts to our understanding of his creative process, both as literary and material artefacts.

The final stage of the Wordsworth Manuscripts research project was a commission to interpret the research in the form of a data visualisation for display on the wall of the museum's new Rotunda, a circular building roughly twenty feet in diameter, constructed from local stone and slate. In regular use for educational visits and readings by contemporary poets, the work commissioned from Amblr was required to command the space without obstructing it. The solution conceived and realised by writer, historian and digital designer, Alex Butterworth, and data illustrator, Stefanie Posavec in 2012 was *The Prelude Timeline*.

Keywords

timeline, literary, subjectivity, versioning, manuscripts, contextual

1. INTRODUCTION

The brief was to provide a creative visual representation of the significance of the Wordsworth Trust's manuscript collection to elucidate the creation of *The Prelude* for an audience with a wide range of expertise, including schoolchildren, general public and graduate students. An extended process of research and consultation with textual and curatorial experts led to the design of a hybrid of timeline and data

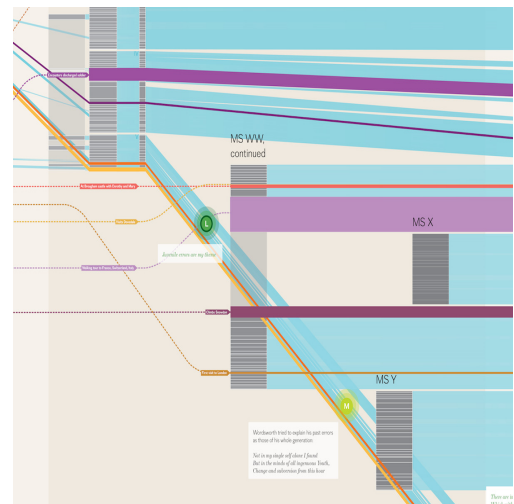


Figure 1: Intensive revision/expansion of MSS: 1804/5.

visualisation ("data art"). The design traced the source of poetic inspiration in Wordsworth's early experiences (the famous "spots of time", Fig. 4, let side), through their initial representation in poetic fragments scrawled in notebooks, their construction into a simple two book version (Fig. 1), and the half century process by which they were moved and reworked into a fourteen part poem of over nine thousand lines.¹ It also addressed the vexed question of the ghost five book version, imagined by the poet but never written in distinct form.²

1.1 The core timeline of textual change

Every line of each of the manuscripts was counted and visualised in the vertical bars, positioned on the x-axis according to the date of completion of the respective versions, with width indicating the approximate duration of their copying or composition. The poem, in a final form with posthumous revisions by family members, was first published only shortly after Wordsworth's death and during the twentieth century

¹The complex materiality of e.g. *Letter from Goslar* fragment see in <http://collections.wordswordth.org.uk>

²Duncan Wu (ed.) *The Five-book Prelude*, Oxford, 1997

a series of textual scholars would subsequently challenge the canonical status of this version.³ This afterlife of the poem is figured too with the process of rediscovery of the earlier manuscripts represented in a similar but palimpsest form to the original composition, towards the extreme left of the graphic, echoing aspects of the creative process (Fig. 3)

1.2 The influence of contextual events

Time flows from left to right, with the textual product of Wordsworth's composition visualised in the core of the y-axis. Where sections of existing text are edited out of a new version but retains its integrity as a distinct poetic work, this is shown falling away out of the frame.⁴ Contextual information is presented in a fusion of graphical and textual form below the textual flow, with the frames of text boxes coloured to each represent multiple thematic concerns that impacted on the creative process, from the biographical to the cultural and political. Arrows extending vertically upwards from these boxes reference specific points of impact on the text, which are themselves marked by circular symbols with matching colour coding.

1.3 Subjective temporalities

Within the graphic are two significant exceptions to the fundamental principles of its organisation, or those expected by timeline conventions.⁵

The first is the location of the incidents from the poet's childhood memory known as the "spots of time" which consistency dictates should be placed in the lower section of the graphic (Fig. 4, left side), in a manner similar to the other, later biographical influences on the poem. It was determined, however, that these biographical influences should enjoy a special status that recognised their generative function within the creative process. To achieve this, an arbitrary distortion mapped their horizontal sequence onto the vertical place, positioning them in an aesthetically pleasing sweep at the extreme left of the graphic to foreshadow accounts of their occurrence within the early manuscript versions of the poet's autobiography. This both allowed for visual clarification of their place within the poem and implied an appropriate identity of memory and poetic evocation.

The other departure from convention concerns the horizontal scaling, which is variable by year in an attempt to evoke in approximate form the intensity of activity on the poem's composition during that period, or by the other hands who acted as copyists. The reasons for this were both conceptual, building on the author's previous explorations of temporal distortion, in interactive form, in *The Commune Timeline*⁶ to represent subjectivities of experience (though constrained

³Ernest De Selincourt, *Early Readings in The Prelude*, Times Literary Supplement. Thursday, November 12, 1931: 886; Stephen Gill and Jonathan Wordsworth on *The Two-Part Prelude of 1798-9*, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, London, Norton, 2000

⁴The self-censorship by Wordsworth of the Vaudracoeur and Julia episode, a mythologised version of his own French love affair

⁵Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, Princeton, 2010

⁶<http://pariscommune.herokuapp.com>

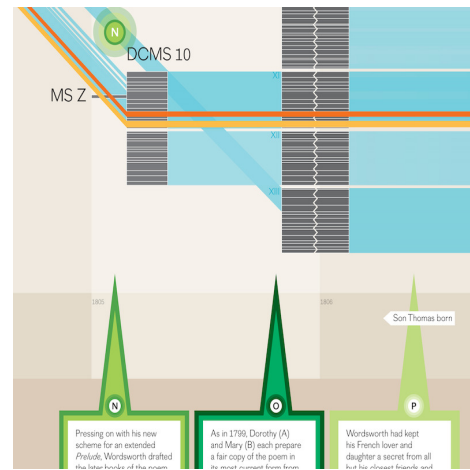


Figure 2: Contextual influences on the creative process.

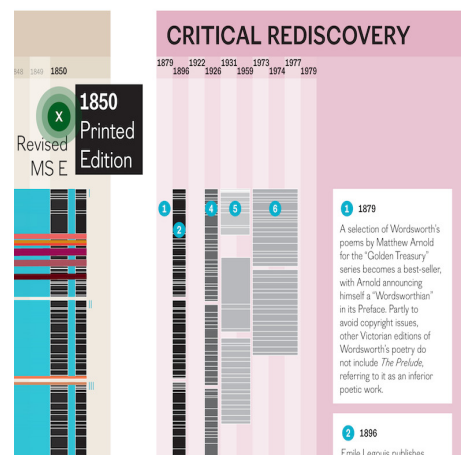


Figure 3: Scholarly rediscovery of previous versions.

by the features of the SIMILE software used), and a pragmatic compression of visualised activity and elision of those periods of time less directly relevant to the composition.⁷

1.4 Visitor experience and aesthetics

The purpose of the Prelude timeline was to engage visitors across a wide range of interest and knowledge levels and with diverse patterns of attention. In the final iteration, two versions of the timeline, each around four metres long, were displayed side by side in the Jerwood Rotunda, with the main graphical structure identical in each but with different levels of detail in the text/supporting material. A key was provided to induct viewers, while those with time and interest were lead to graduate from the first graphic to a deeper engagement with the second.

The aesthetic of the work was inspired by the natural themes of the poem, with particular reference to the recurring poetic motif in *The Prelude* of pebbles seen through a tumbling

⁷Uta Hinrichs, Holly Schmidt and Sheelagh Carpendale. EMDialog: Bringing Information Visualization into the Museum. IEEE TVCG, 14(6):1181-1188, 2008



Figure 4: The larger of the graphics installed.

stream. This offered an apt analogy to the flow of text sections through multiple manuscript versions, while the points of contextual impact chosen for illustrative purposes alluded to the pebbles. The colour palette was drawn from the late summer landscape of Grasmere.⁸

2. CONCLUSIONS

The project explored the potential of timelines/visualisation for the representation and elucidation of literary texts, particularly those concerned with memory and historiography, through versions, adaptations, etc. In so doing it addressed certain significant considerations that arise when visualisation techniques are used to represent lived narratives or the history of mentalities, for example around the representation of subjective experience using humanistic visual language, and how to trace and weigh potential causation.⁹

The static graphic was informed by the author's work with interactive timelines and stands as a frozen moment of dynamic exploration. A subsequent practice-based research project by Amblr, in collaboration with the University of Bristol and the AHRC REACT hub, explored how aspects of this approach might translate for on touch-screen tablet computers, with reference to two additional texts through and around which history flows (Shakespeare's first history tetralogy and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*) and points a range of future applications for cultural collections.

⁸Further images at www.amblr.net

⁹Johanna Drucker, *Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display*, *Digital Humanities*, 2011 5(1)