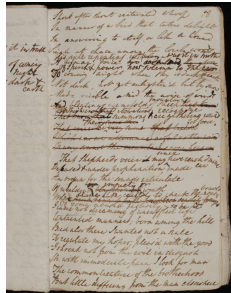


On the growth of my own mind

Visualising the creative process behind Wordsworth's autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, in context

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Introduction

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 holds the entire manuscript collection of 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.

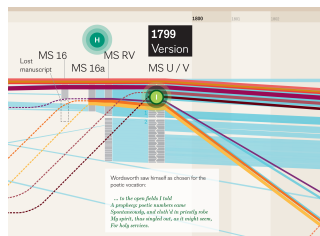
The visualisation was a response to an open commission for a permanent exhibit in the particular space of the Jerwood Rotunda, a circular building eighteen feet in diameter this is in permanent use.

The Brief

A key requirement was that the work should elucidate two ideas:

- That great poems don't just come from nowhere – they are the product of the creative spirit and exhausting hard work.
- That many hands make light work – that the poem could not have developed without the support of those around him.

These should offer new insights for a wide range of visitors, from schoolchildren to graduate students of Romanticism



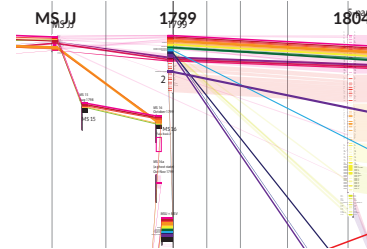
A Timeline

In representing cultural collections, time is often a complex factor with multiple and varying semantics: for example, the time of creation, of collection, the temporal traces of influence.

In the case of Wordsworth's *Prelude* there are a number of additional temporal considerations:

- It is a poem about memory that grows out of recollected "spots of time" from childhood, the meaning of which to the poet change in relation to one another as he ages.
- The process of poetic composition lasts a lifetime, with periods of intense revision coinciding with and influenced by events of global significance in which the poet is caught up.
- Our knowledge of Wordsworth's creative process only emerges from a painstaking excavation and reconstruction of the manuscripts during the century following his death.

The approach chosen for the static graphic was a "relational timeline" which aims to capture these many different characteristics of time and demonstrate their mutually contextualising relationship at a glance.



User Response

The graphic was tested with various visitor groups, from primary schoolchildren to attendees at a specialist academic conference, as it went through several dozen iterations.

To meet the needs of such a wide range of users, the most important additional requirement was for some form of induction into the process of "reading" the relational graphic.

A combination of approaches were developed to answer this need:

- The creation of an additional, simplified version of this graphic to familiarise visitors with the approach, with step-through labelling
- The removal of certain levels of graphical and textual detail in this version and their replacement by photographic illustrations

The response of users to the provision of two versions was highly personal, with some from each age/expertise group preferring the graduated approach, others the process of discovery.

The Aesthetic

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 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. An early draft without colour crafting is shown on left.



Interactive/generic form

Although commissioned as a static graphic, the *Prelude Timeline* grew out of past work by the designers on interactive, screen-based projects. It was always envisaged that a further stage of the work might take this form.

The opportunity for R&D around this came through the AHRC/REACT Books and Print Sandbox, working in collaboration with Bristol University to propose a generic form for a touch-screen interpretation of creative process and adaptation.

Three texts were chosen as the basis for the research: Shakespeare's Henry IV, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and Hugo's *Les Misérables*

In each case, history flows though and around the original texts in complex and various forms: the influence of historical sources, the contemporary context of composition, the subsequent reworkings for particular ideological purposes.

The three month project was partially successful, the first-stage "translation" of the *Prelude* model being too literal, the size of screen requiring a fundamental revisiting of the principles of visual "cross-reading" appropriate for a display graphic.

