Versioning Wordsworth:  
Dynamic Collation in the New Medium

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents work on a scholarly hypertext edition of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads. Initially, we plan to digitize the four lifetime editions (1798, 1800, 1802, 1805) by compiling transcripts based on original printed volumes, marking these up with SGML in conformity with the TEI guidelines, and collating them with special software to discover variants and generate an apparatus criticus. Each poem would then become the focus of its own hypertext web, showing all four versions together for the sake of immediate visual comparison. Every page of the digital transcription will be linked to digital images of the printed text, so that features like font, margins, and layout of stanzas on a page will be accessible. Our purpose is to show the development of the poems in the Lyrical Ballads collection, and in the case of the poems by Wordsworth to show how these evolved towards their “final authorized” form. Cambridge University Press has undertaken to publish this electronic edition on CD-ROM in 1998, to commemorate the bicentenary of the first edition.

Wordsworth was chosen for this project because his restless habit of revision produced so many versions of each poem that trying to represent them in print stretches that medium to its limits. New media functionalities of electronic text, digital images, and hypertext may offer the capacity to fully exhibit this poet’s diversity. To know Wordsworth is to know not one but many selves, expressed in a succession of texts that mark the different stages of his personal development. Which to choose has always been the editor’s dilemma; establishing a text has always meant that we must privilege one version over others, and settle for a static representation of what might be better understood as a dynamic process. By digitizing Wordsworth, we hope to show that the electronic medium is best adapted to capture this protean romantic self by displaying the multiple versions of each work.

The new medium thus does not replace books but strives to do things books could never accomplish. Going beyond the book calls for new editorial methodologies and new paradigms of representation. As the member of the editorial team responsible for hypertext design, I am exploring the frames function of HTML and SGML browsers as a means to present an array of windows that will allow four versions of a poem to
appear on the screen at once. Navigation through these is achieved by a
guide I call a ‘variant map’, a sort of table of contents to each line in the
poem showing places where revisions were made. Each revision becomes a
"hotspot" linked to the corresponding lines in all four versions on the
screen, which scroll simultaneously to the line in question. This system of
‘dynamic collation’ adds motion to multiple views, conveying the fourth
dimension of time necessary to represent change.

Project Outline
Parallels have frequently been drawn between today’s rapid growth of digital communications
systems and the introduction of the printing press over five hundred years ago. George
Landow’s assertion (or is it a warning?) that ‘electronic text processing marks the next major
shift in information technology after the development of the printed book’ seems to herald a
ew epoch. Yet on the eve of the millenium we ought to be cautious about making
apocalyptic claims. The print revolution did not occur overnight, nor was it readily accepted
as a change for the better. After all, it is a commonplace of moral philosophy to question
whether, just because it has become possible to do a thing, it necessarily means that it is also
desirable to put it into practice. The myth of the paperless book is something we need to be
wary of; electronic text still needs to justify itself.

Anyone who has had the privilege of seeing a Gutenberg Bible will know that the innovation
of printing with movable type did not in and of itself create the modern book. In fact, the
earliest works of print technology differed very little in appearance from the manuscript
codexes that went before them. Designed to mimic a medieval manuscript, Gutenberg’s Bible
used types shaped to closely resemble hand-written script, was laid out in columns, and was
liberally decorated with illuminated capitals; he even printed some copies on parchment to
complete the effect. The transition from the written to the printed book is an apt illustration
of Marshall McLuhan’s observation that the content of any medium is always another
medium. New technologies seem to evolve by pouring old wine into new bottles.

But as the period of incunabula passed, the perfection of the art of printing lay not so much in
the technical feat of creating a manuscript without a scribe as in developing the unique design
features of the book. In Venice, Nicolas Jenson began to design clear and readable typefaces
that broke with the uncial tradition and created a totally new ergonomic environment for the
eye, while the scholar-publisher Aldus Manutius popularized the handy portable octavo
format and printed a wide range of secular philosophy and poetry using Greek, Roman, and
Italic fonts that mark the advent of the printed book as we know it today. The horseless
carriage phase of print technology had passed.

Dispensing with horses or with paper is only the beginning of a process by which we discover
the potentials of a new technology. Passing beyond a phase of negation, we need to pursue
the positive dimensions of a medium that is still in its infancy. To capture this moment, a
sharper analogy might be drawn from the early days of moving pictures, when the novelty of
motion made it sufficient to set actors before the camera to perform a play just as it had
appeared on the stage. It was not until it occurred to someone that the camera could move
too that the cinema was born. With pans, tracking shots, and close-ups, the new medium
began to take on an identity of its own. Just as automobiles gradually developed their unique
character once the novelty of self-propulsion had worn off, so the special characteristics of electronic texts will emerge once we begin to explore their special powers of representation. What seems important about electronic texts is not the absence of a material medium so much as the establishment of new relationships between the reader and the subject-matter.

If parallels are to be drawn between the print revolution of the early Renaissance and contemporary electronic publishing, it may more properly be said that we have passed beyond the Gutenberg stage and entered the Venetian phase of our electronic medium. No longer is hypertext a novelty nor is it peculiar to find e-texts in the form of highly-structured complex documents. Encoding methods using HTML and SGML are now widely understood, but less certain are we of Aldine values like visual clarity, scholarly accuracy, and ease of use. These are the focus of my work on the Wordsworth digital archive I am preparing with my colleague Bruce Graver, of Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island.

Using a variety of software and an appropriate mix of SGML and HTML mark-up, Graver and I are currently engaged in creating an electronic edition of William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads, a pioneering collection of English poetry first published in 1798. Wordsworth’s poems dominate the book, at least in sheer volume, and in subsequent editions he added so many more of his own poems that he felt entitled to put his name alone on the title page. Though revisions on the part of Coleridge will be given attention in the four lifetime editions of Lyrical Ballads (1798, 1800, 1802, and 1805) that we will reproduce in full, the textual alterations made by Wordsworth to his poems are so extensive and complex that they have posed problems for editors for generations. After the Lyrical Ballads poems were subsumed into his collected works, Wordsworth continued to revise them repeatedly, until the final versions left upon his death in 1850 were often markedly different poems from those he wrote half a century before. We therefore chose Wordsworth for treatment in the electronic medium not because of his prominence in the literary canon nor because of any perceived editorial defects in previous printed editions of his works, but precisely because his restless creativity has repeatedly challenged editors to represent it adequately. Wordsworth is thus an ideal candidate for this project, because his habits of revision stretch the print medium to its limits and call forth the potential of the new electronic medium to represent change.

Wordsworth was fond of chiding that ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’, but his practice of inveterate tinkering with his poems was an equally important part of his creative process. The question for his editors has always been whether to prefer the early versions of poems closest to their inspirational source or to rely on the final authorized texts. Spontaneity was highly regarded by the poets of the Romantic movement, though it might as easily be argued that perfection is the work of time. But there are also the versions in between, where a poem finely polished may be marred by subsequent over-refinement. The choice of copy-text has always been the editor’s dilemma: establishing a text in print has always meant that we must privilege one version over others, and settle for a static representation of what might be better understood as a dynamic process.

When we read Wordsworth, then, we always need to remember that we are reading only one version of Wordsworth at any given time. Unfortunately, the printed texts that scholars use, and even more important the ones students read, are constrained to give us only one Wordsworth or another so that we never can grasp him whole. But there is no way round
choosing a particular copy-text in establishing a printed edition. Traditionally, editors have stuck by the principle that the text the author leaves upon his death represents his final intentions, a sort of legacy based on the model of a last will and testament that has more to do with legal practice than with aesthetic considerations. Thus, the edition of 1849-50 published when Wordsworth was eighty years old has usually served as the copy-text upon which editions of his works are based. The inadequacy of this mode of representing a great artist’s achievement has been lamented by Jonathan Wordsworth, scholar, critic, and descendent of the writer, who holds the opinion that ‘on the whole poets are known by the best versions of their works: Wordsworth is almost exclusively known by the worst.’

This kind of unease with the portrait of the artist in old age has been registered among a whole new generation of Wordsworth editors in their mission to recover a younger, more vibrant figure. They have developed a snapshot of Wordsworth closer to the moment of inspiration by basing their texts on the earliest completed version of his poems. This trend has culminated in the Cornell Wordsworth, a series of scholarly editions begun in 1975 and ongoing. These volumes aim “to bring the early Wordsworth into view,” according to General Editor Stephen Parrish, by printing ‘clean, continuous ‘reading texts’ from which all layers of later revision have been stripped away.”

Recently, though, this drive to return to an originary Wordsworth has come into question. Decrying a ‘devaluing of secondary processes’ seen in the so-called primitivism of this approach to Wordsworth, Zachary Leader in Revision and Romantic Authorship urges us toward a more complicated view of the author. Leader wants us to understand the differing concepts of identity that underlie both the traditional and the revisionary editorial methodologies. Taking the final authorized version as your copy-text places a high valuation on clarification, refinement of meaning, and recuperation, and implies a concept of identity as something to be worked toward and achieved. Such a view of Wordsworth remains compelling, since what readers often value in the poet is the sense of stability and unity of self his work strives to convey. However, a difficulty arises when we recognize that Wordsworth’s intentions are irrecoverable. Furthermore, even where they can be roughly determined, they remain in the realm of wishes that may not be fulfilled, of goals set but unachieved. On the other hand, adopting as copy-text the earliest completed version of a work implies a solidarity with Romantic notions of the spontaneity and vitality of the youthful self. One difficulty Leader finds with this view is its ‘uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations’, which Jerome McGann warned against in his critique of the Romantic bias in Romantic criticism. Another difficulty Leader raises is that this approach in actual fact masks an aesthetic preference, which could be the subject of considerable debate. Besides, preferring either the late or the early Wordsworth is to slight all those versions in between, where a poem finely polished may be marred by subsequent tinkering. The editor is not really faced with an either/or choice between early and late, but something far more complicated, as Leader points out:

Early versions are more vivid ... but late versions are clearer. Early versions, it is claimed, are more original ... but late versions are more correct. Moreover, as I have tried to show, these oppositions are rarely as clear-cut as partisans would have us believe. (p.72)
Paying attention to what lies between places the stress on process over product, and calls for a revision of editorial practice itself.

Once it is concluded that the protean Romantic self can never be caught in any single text, it follows that there is not one but many Wordsworths, the young poet in his twenties evolving toward the old man of eighty with many stages in between, each with some claim to mastery and each therefore with some claim on our attention. Such a view of the poet is advocated by Susan Wolfson, who finds a resistance to closure in Wordsworth’s practice of revision:

Wordsworthian revision sustains the illusion of mastery but steadily postpones that achievement. Revision is endlessly open, not simply because any field of vision is open to numerous, potentially infinite interpretations and organizations, but because each view discovers new motions, changes, and interchanges.

The consequence of this concept of identity is a destabilization of the text, which can now only be represented adequately in its multiple versions. But the medium of print is not well-equipped to depict such an open-ended process. Print can only show change over time through a cumbersome apparatus of footnotes or end-notes. These place great demands on the reader, who must sort through, interpret, and plug in variant readings. Nor for reasons of space can the conventional book afford to print all versions as they evolved. The new electronic medium of hypertext might offer a solution, though Leader is dubious that anyone but the specialist scholar would want to use it (p.74).

True, an electronic Wordsworth may not be eagerly sought out by the general reader; I have met very few lovers of literature who prefer a screen-image over an affordable book which does not need elaborate equipment to use. Indeed, such a Wordsworth edition may not in fact be meant to be “read” at all, at least not in the sense in which we still use the term today. Instead, a hypertext Wordsworth would be meant to be explored and argued over. It could become the basis for new interpretations and new debates among readers of the poet, who now would be empowered to make and defend their own choice of preferred text. In these exchanges, the options could be studied closely in a fashion that the linear structure of print makes difficult, and used at a distance by scholars who don’t enjoy the privilege of proximity to a major research library.

Even more important, Wordsworth in hypertext may be the most effective way yet to represent Wordsworth in development. New media functionalities of electronic text, multiple windows, digital images, and interlinked hypertext may offer an avenue into the maze of this poet’s diversity. Hypertext may thus offer a means of grounding in actual practice Jack Stillinger’s theory of ‘textual pluralism’, in which ‘a work’ of literature becomes an abstract organizing principle around which every physically-embodied version (published editions, manuscript drafts, etc.) is grouped, as a text among texts to be viewed both separately and simultaneously with all its cognates.

But in the electronic medium where there is no one text but multiple versions, the problem of copy-text disappears only to give rise to new difficulties. The task for the editor is no longer the recovery of a single ideal text but the determination of what constitutes a version and how many of them exist. In the case of our electronic edition of Lyrical Ballads, we have chosen to concentrate on each individual appearance of a poem in print, though original manuscripts
could complicate the picture. In this case, however, very few complete manuscripts of any of the poems in the collection exist, and these usually reflect a printed text rather than being original compositions. For the reader, however, the problem is magnified. Where the text of a work is not one but many, readers must cope with an excess of information, must keep track of which version they are examining, and must be able to relate one version to another in an intelligible fashion. None of this can be accomplished without organization. It is not the reader’s discomfort so much as the danger of getting lost in cyberspace which is the real problem of hypertext.

Because this new medium reinscribes textual stability as a series of moments in a lengthy creative process, the dimension of time must be added to those of space. In our project, it is hoped that by adding motion to comparative views, hypertext will enable us to represent this fourth dimension in a way readers will find comprehensible. If electronic texts are to justify themselves, they must move beyond the three-dimensional space of the book. It is not enough to produce texts that are indexed and searchable; like the Aldine editions of old, electronic texts must establish their own unique conventions and develop easily-understood forms of presentation that distinguish them from what went before. The new medium should neither replace nor reproduce the book, but must strive to do things books could never accomplish.

Several electronic texts of Wordsworth’s poetry currently exist either on CD-ROM or over the Internet. Our project differs from these in several significant respects. First, the poems we will present have not been arbitrarily chosen, but are a reasonably coherent group stemming from a single collection. Second, our ‘copy-text’ will not be chosen or reconstructed; instead we are carefully transcribing in digital form the texts of all the original editions themselves held in libraries around the world, though of course our procedures will be informed by the findings of previous scholars, especially the editors of the Cornell Wordsworth series. Hence and thirdly, we will offer not just one version of each poem but all the versions of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge appearing in the four lifetime editions of Lyrical Ballads, together with later important versions of poems revised by Wordsworth in his lifetime, and these will be linked hypertextually. Fourth, our e-texts will be ‘marked-up’ or tagged using SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) in conformity with the principles of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). These files will then be collated using special software developed by Peter Robinson at Oxford University that will enable us to discover variants and generate an apparatus criticus. Fifth, we plan to link our transcribed e-texts to scanned images of the original printed editions in order to give the reader some sense of the look of the poems upon the page, especially with regard to fonts and margins. Finally, we intend to link the differing versions of each poem to one another in their own hypertext web, showing all versions together for the sake of immediate visual comparison. This scholarly hypertext edition will be issued on CD-ROM in the first instance, with the intention of proceeding to network distribution as soon as it becomes practical. With luck, it will be issued by Cambridge University Press in 1998 to coincide with the bicentenary of the first publication of Lyrical Ballads.

Cambridge’s CD-ROM series currently consists of four offerings: Peter Robinson’s edition of The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, a World Shakespeare Bibliography 1990-1993, Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary, and the Works of John Ruskin. The first of these (the one with which I am most familiar) assembles all 58 of the pre-1500 manuscripts and printed editions of the
prologue, using Robinson's Collate program to compare the different versions and to generate an apparatus of variants. The 58 versions, together with the apparatus and digitized images of 1200 manuscript pages, are linked together using Electronic Book Technologies' DynaText software to create a hypertext 'book'. Typically, a DynaText book is presented on the screen in two adjacent frames, one a narrow column on the left containing a table of contents and the other a wider data-frame on the right containing the text or texts compiled into a master file which give the effect of a single large file document that is scrollable and therefore searchable from top to bottom. Rather than accessing the contents of the DynaText book linearly, though, a simple mouse-click on one element of the table of contents takes the user directly to the designated section of the text. Each such section may be opened as an independent window, and the windows so generated can be scaled and moved about the screen to permit the comparison of texts. Up to this point, I have only been able to test our transcriptions and their SGML markup in Panorama Pro, an SGML browser from SoftQuad of Toronto, which yields effects similar to DynaText, though lacking the capacity to generate multiple windows.

Although DynaText is powerful SGML software that can handle a huge mass of complex material, I find myself as the member of the editorial team responsible for hypertext design chafing at some of its limitations. Though it is very adaptable, it was not designed with the literary scholar uppermost in mind. DynaText was initially conceived as a commercial product designed to provide rapid indexed access to large prose documents such as catalogues and manuals; its table of contents function gives effective access to works with section titles and sub-headings, but is a blunt instrument when it comes to the presentation of poetry, where the user quite rightly demands access line by line. Short of embedding every line of each poem into the table of contents, there seems to be no easy way of navigating through the variant texts. The Collate-generated apparatus helps if opened into an independent window, but then other windows have to be opened and manipulated on the screen in order to compare lines once interesting variants are found. Relying as heavily as it does on the traditional critical apparatus of variants, this display is not much of an advance on the format of the printed book, and considerably more unwieldy. The cluster of multiple windows we need to generate can be awkward to scale and arrange on the screen, nor is it easy to keep track of which window holds which portion of the immense compiled document. With a multiplicity of texts such as the Lyrical Ballads offers, it is all too easy for readers to lose their way. The navigational tool so far proposed, the inclusion of a 'base text for collation' at the top of the long document in the data-frame, is as much a relic of print culture as the model of the single-document 'book' divided into subsections. In addition to the multiple versions of each poem, the editor is obliged either to construct a further ideal version of the poem to serve as the 'base text' or, worse (because it violates the principle that this new medium should not merely reproduce the book but transcend it), to choose one of the existing variant texts, say from the first edition or the last lifetime edition, as the 'base text'. I had thought to address this difficulty by including texts of all the poems from all four lifetime editions of Lyrical Ballads as potential base texts, and then asking the reader at the beginning of each session to choose which of the editions he or she wished to use as the base text against which all the others would be collated. But this was not interactively so much as an offloading of editorial responsibility onto the reader, and furthermore resulted in an unnecessarily vast proliferation of alternative texts within the DynaText book.
Instead, to address these navigational problems, I have begun to experiment with functionalities associated with Internet delivery of documents over the World Wide Web. An array of windows is essential to the display of the Wordsworth project, for as Sherry Turkle observes "windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system." What seems most attractive about HTML standards at the present stage of development is that they give control over the use of frames, a system of layout in which windows are generated on the screen according to a pre-determined pattern. Though this pattern can be easily altered by the user, its grid provides an intelligible starting point for the display of multiple texts of the same poem on the screen at the same time. The prototype pages I have developed so far take the lyrical ballad 'We are Seven' as a test-case, and consist of preliminary gateway pages that lead to a galaxy of pages each composed of five frames: one narrow vertical column on the left plays the customary table of contents role, while a grid of four squares on the right allows the reader to compare four different versions of the poem on the screen at once. The text in each frame may be scrolled through manually, but by the use of HTML's internal anchors a simple click on a live hyperlink in the left-hand frame causes all four texts in the squares to scroll simultaneously to the same line. There are two advantages to this scheme of display: first, a degree of animation is introduced into the text that cannot be duplicated in print, and, second, a balance is struck between exploration and direction in the reader’s examination of textual complexity.

There is a second unusual feature of this scheme that is meant to help readers find their bearings. The left-hand column in this HTML treatment contains no mere list of contents but what I call a 'variant map' of the poem being studied. The variant map is a guide to revisions that were made at various stages in the poem’s development. It is based on the poem to the extent that it reproduces the text of the poem wherever changes were not made, but whenever a change in any of the versions under consideration is encountered it substitutes a descriptive hyperlink for the variants themselves. The reader is thus alerted by a sort of palimpsest that an alteration has been made, and by clicking on the 'hotspot' can summon up the parallel passages. Replacing the base or reading text with a variant map turns the annotation process inside out in a way that seems appropriate to the dynamism of this medium, for the hiatus in reading caused by running across a link cues the reader to click on the spot and look to the right (in the direction of the normal flow of reading) to learn the word or character elided and to compare texts. Rather than footnotes which distract attention from a definitive text, the variant map is an abstraction of the poem which does not privilege one version of the text over another and that piques the reader’s curiosity by means of gaps in the text to pursue the significance of revisions made in successive versions. Together with its links to the four display windows, the variant map makes possible a dynamic collation of variant texts that surpasses print.

Without doubt, there are numerous disadvantages to this proposed display scheme. Currently available bandwidth is simply too narrow and therefore slow to deliver over the Internet the amount and complexity of digitized texts and images we envision. Besides, not everyone is yet using a frames-capable browser, such as Netscape 2.0 or better (and some users are still restricted to the text-only Lynx system). We have therefore thought it expedient to stick with CD-ROM distribution for the present. Furthermore, whether reading out from the Internet or from CD-ROM, the 14-inch monitors commonly in use today do not have enough screen real-estate to display more than four versions of the text at a time, and even this minimum array for
our purposes appears somewhat cramped. While these drawbacks may soon disappear given the rapid advances in computer technology we are experiencing, a more lasting objection is raised when we consider that HTML is a much simplified subset of SGML and therefore inadequate to represent the complexity of the texts in question. However, in the case of the variant map element, it should be recognized that it can function effectively in the context of either markup scheme. The way its links interact with the frames environment is another matter, though, since Web-browsers like Netscape process internal anchors much more readily than an SGML viewer like Panorama Pro can. Indeed, I have been unsuccessful in getting Panorama Pro to run my HTML-based dynamic collation files properly, even when they are linked to the appropriate HTML-DTD. Hence I have been driven to the expedient of employing two software applications where one should do. Peter Robinson assures me that DynaText will successfully process both SGML and HTML files with internal anchors, so I am hopeful that the final product will not require the reader to be constantly switching software.

At present, though, I see no alternative to employing both SGML and HTML, since I am not convinced that the TEI-DTD has an adequate hyperlink capability. I have experimented with <ref> and <ref> tags, but have not been able to reproduce the simultaneous scrolling function I can achieve with HTML. At the moment, it remains unclear to me whether the fault lies with the TEI subset of SGML, the software I am using, or my own ignorance. I have thought of experimenting with HyTime links in SGML, which perhaps will offer a solution. Meanwhile, I shall make pragmatic use of HTML along with TEI-conformant SGML for the project, since I see the two as designed for different purposes. SGML, especially in the form recommended by the Text Encoding Initiative, is the best way to represent the logic of complexly-structured literary documents, by this means giving us rapid indexed access to large documents and enabling them to be searchable and self-concordancing. It was never meant to perform complex hypertext functions beyond those. In my experience, I have found that the HTML subset has a much more powerful and obvious linking functionality that makes dynamic collation possible. Perhaps it is just as well to regard them as complementary, and allow DynaText to process documents with either DTD seamlessly.

In whatever ways this project may develop, it takes its cue from a wish to attempt to do things through this medium that print cannot, and in the process to discover what some of the unique capabilities of electronic publication are. The stasis of print is valuable for some purposes, but the dynamism of electronic texts produces an almost living, organic effect which is lost when the text is killed into print. This aura of animation is obvious even in so basic a function as searching, though its capabilities are much greater than that. Setting searchability aside, the test of our efforts in designing electronic texts should be the following: If one can print out an e-text without losing some vital functionality, we have not truly realized the potential of this new medium.

References

8. Sven Birkerts points to this distinction quite clearly in The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 15: “It is precisely where reading leaves off, where it is supplanted by other modes of processing and transmitting experience, that the new dispensation can be said to begin.”
10. Jerome McGann considers these problems in his book on version theory, A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 102-114. James Thorpe, an early champion of version theory, proposed the expedient of identifying versions with separate appearances in print: “The work can have only such integrity, or completeness, as the author chooses to give it, and our only reasonable test of when the work has achieved integrity is his willingness to release it to his usual public”; see Thorpe, J. Principles of Textual Criticism (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1972), p. 38.

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