Comparing Correspondences: Robert Southey and Willa Cather

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This poster presents recent work in the visualization of literary correspondence from the TCLLP (Twentieth-Century Literary Letters Project), focusing on the comparative visualization and analysis of digital editions of letters.

How might we begin to compare the collected correspondences of letter-writers? As archival letters are increasingly digitized, either by libraries and special collection or by the large-scale digital correspondence projects now emerging (e.g. the Electronic Enlightenment project, Early Modern Letters Online), we now have the opportunity to investigate authorial correspondence at larger scales. Beyond the usual use of correspondence to fill out the historical or biographical background of a writer, or to provide thematic and social points of linkage between writers, large collections of digital letters allow us to pose a range of new questions and problems: what does the social network of highly interconnected writers look like? What sorts of visual arguments and tools are appropriate to inquire into literary correspondence? How do the forces of class, gender, status, politics and profession manifest in a large correspondence? How do we read the gaps, cracks, elisions, and unseen limitations inherent both in our archival evidence and our digital tools? What are the large-scale shifts in epistolary culture over time, and how might we better understand those shifts in the correspondence of particular writers? To think through those questions more concretely, we visualized and compared the metadata of two well-curated digital correspondences from the early nineteenth and early twentieth century, the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey* and *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather.*

We worked with the editors of these letters, and experts in TEI and RDF metadata transformation, to move the relationship implied by letter metadata – information about personal, political, geographical, and editorial networks of these very different writers – into visual representation. Our work forms part of an ongoing effort to bridge the gap between the Textual Encoding Initiative community, open linked data initiatives, and wider scholarly, library, and public audiences, as well as investigating important issues in data visualization as a hermeneutic activity.

This poster session presents our refined visualizations of these materials, and includes procedural as well as literary-critical findings: we will outline the process by which we move from TEI or less structured correspondence data into graph and network visualization; note some of interpretive and archival issues involved in that transformation; and display the refined visualizations comparing the political, personal, and literary networks of Southey and Cather. We hope to have an interactive conversation with attendees interested in network visualization, literary correspondence, Romanticism and modernism, open linked data, and the new TEI standards for correspondence data. The TCLLP is an open group of scholars interested in new approaches to twentieth-century literary correspondence, across linguistic, national, and disciplinary divides: we look forward to a discussion with Francophone scholars in particular.

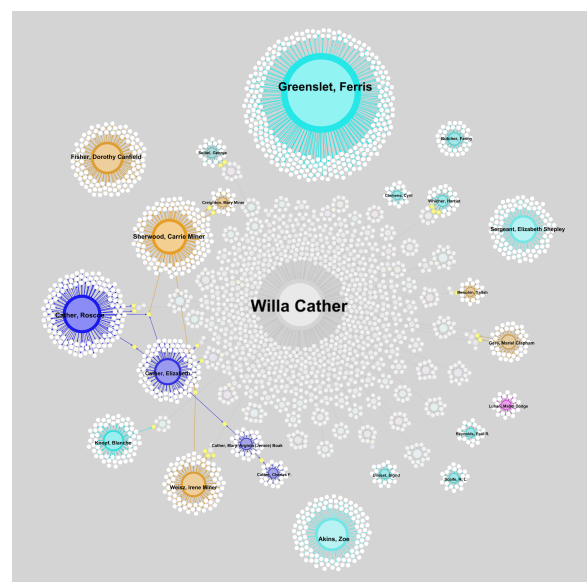Initial visualizations will be available on the project blog.

Figure 1: Willa Cather's major correspondents

Bibliography

Twentieth Century Literary Letters Project (n.d.) . Project Blog. http://www.modmaps.net/tcllp/project-blog/