

A Response to Sandro Jung, "Some Notes on the 'Single Sentiment' and Romanticism of Charlotte Smith"*

MONIKA GOMILLE

During recent years, the poems of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) have, after almost two centuries of neglect, come to be recognized as belonging to the most important poetry of the late eighteenth century.¹ *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), her first volume of lyrics, made her famous almost overnight;² it is considered to have given a fresh stimulus to the English sonnet tradition which, with the sonnets written by William Wordsworth, reached a new pinnacle at the turn of the century. By its abundance of, for instance, apostrophe, personification and the conventional elements of the pastoral, Smith's poetry still participates in the neoclassical tradition, which was then in the decline;³ at the same time, however, she established new figures of thought and poetic devices, so that Stuart Curran was able to describe her as "the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic" (Curran xix). Both her ideas about the correspondence between nature and the poet's mood and the notion of nature's simplicity and healing power were often associated with Wordsworth's poetry, who was perhaps the most important romantic influenced by Smith.⁴

Smith's genuine achievement is the revitalization of the sonnet structure in the eighteenth century. Traditionally (though not quite aptly) the sonnet is seen as a love poem. Smith, who was of course well acquainted with the Petrarchan tradition, did not, however, use the sonnet for love poetry; because, as Fry observes, "the reading audience of her day would surely have found a sequence of love sonnets inappropriate for a woman writer" (17). She therefore makes personal feeling and melancholy caused by the

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conditions of her female existence the main subject of the sonnet (Fry 18). Curran sees her most important achievement in the fact that, using the sonnet form and thus exploiting a time-honoured poetic form for the expression of frustrated masculine desire for her (feminine) purposes, she reverses traditional gender roles.⁵ As regards the sonnet *form*, Smith, however, did not subscribe to the Petrarchan model but instead adopted the Shakespearean sonnet structure with three quatrains, followed by a couplet offering a summary statement of the preceding twelve lines.

Charlotte Smith's poems posthumously published under the title *Beachy Head* (1807)⁶ have been the subject of a seminal article by Judith Pascoe dealing with the 'female gaze' in poetry, where it has been claimed that, in these poems, Smith focuses on the details of plants and flowers traditionally associated with the feminine. It has been argued that the main focus of Smith's poetry is on the close description of the fauna of her immediate surroundings and maintained that "the nature she experiences seems to be much more an intimate acquaintance than an awe-inspiring force" (Pascoe 203). This seemed to be a natural perspective for a female writer of the late eighteenth century, as a mountain top perspective seemed, as Marlon Ross put it, "not an easy one for a female poet to assume" (44).

Sandro Jung's essay concentrates on some of Smith's descriptive lyrics that focus on landscape. Smith was rightly called "a regional poet,"⁷ as she celebrates the beauties of the Sussex landscapes. A considerable number of her *Elegiac Sonnets* focus on the South Downs region. She particularly celebrates "Aruna," the river Arun, which flows south to the sea a few miles east of Bignor Park near Bignor, the village where she had spent her early years. As Jung observes, in her poem "Written by the Sea Shore—October, 1784" Smith relies heavily on the aesthetic category of the sublime, as in poems such as Sonnet 26 ("To the River Arun").⁸ Jung, however, identifies a series of typical romanticist traits in Smith's "sublime" poetry, too. His findings, therefore, support Judith Pascoe's observation that Smith "moves quickly from the majestic to the minute, from the sublime to the beautiful" and that she "refus[es] to reinscribe her contemporaries' hierarchization of these terms" (Pascoe 204).

In my opinion the most interesting trait of Charlotte Smith's poetry, brought to the fore in Jung's article, is the fact that she writes from the position of the borderline. He situates her in the context of a profound poetical transition in the late eighteenth century. He writes that Smith's poetry "foreshadows Wordsworth's conception of nature as well as continues the tradition of natural description of Thomson and Collins" (281) and observes "a fusion of elements nobody before had ever attempted" (281). Furthermore he addresses her variation of the elegiac stanza, which means that she uses the sonnet form as a generic hybrid, exposing the mix of lyrical genres associated with the early history of this poetic form.

To conclude, Smith's poetry is interesting in its own right, as it develops a poetics of border crossing. It uses male-gendered poetical forms such as the sonnet and inverts the gender code traditionally associated with it. It exploits the flexibility of the sonnet structure and manipulates the poetic form as a generic hybrid. Smith's descriptions of natural scenery oscillate between the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime and refuse to accept the gendered epistemologies traditionally associated with these hierarchizations. Finally she invests the time-worn conventions of eighteenth-century Augustanism with new meanings and thus creates something radically new.

In-between spaces have, in the wake of contemporary cultural theories and post-colonial studies, attracted great interest during recent years. These new approaches in literary and cultural studies have opened our eyes for mixed forms and concepts of hybridity. Therefore I would suggest that rather than argue about Smith's achievements as a more or less orthodox (pre-)romanticist, we should rediscover her writings in the context of the contact zone and the notion of transitions and transgressions.

Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Düsseldorf

NOTES

¹See e.g. Fry vii.

²Fry vii. The popularity of Smith's poetry becomes, perhaps, most obvious by the fact that by 1851 eleven editions of *Elegiac Sonnets* had been published; cf. Brooks 13.

³Fry 14 ff.

⁴Curran xix.

⁵Curran xxv.

⁶*Beachy Head* is considered to reflect her mature poetic voice; cf. Fry 32.

⁷Fry 19.

⁸Cf. Fry 23.

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