

The Nightjar's Shriek: Nature's Variety in the Sonnets of John Clare and Charlotte Smith

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Nightjars are frustrating creatures. One evening in May, we spent three hours tramping about looking for them in the Blean Woods, just north of Canterbury. It was dusk. We had been assured that at least ten were present in the area, and this was the time to hear their eerie cry. When we arrived, however, the omens weren't good. We sat staring out the windscreen, watching the rain sheet down, contemplating the mud and water, until it let up and a sodden ranger parcelled us into groups. Once we were in the woods, the hours were sweet. We roamed through coppiced glades, thick high meadows and patches of thin, accommodating woodland. Clouds scudded, there were flits of rain, but mostly the plate grey of evening, waning into the amber hues of twilight. What there weren't were nightjars. Or at least any we could see or hear. The night fell, and so again did the rain, and we made our way back to the car park. I must admit that we were only a little disappointed, because the second main purpose of the walk had been a roaring success. The nightingales were out in force, and the forest had nearly exploded with their incomparably powerful and various song.

There is an allegory here for European poetry: nightingales everywhere, but nary a nightjar to be found. Nightingales are possibly the most apostrophised birds in creation. Nightjars, with their unsightly gaping maws and strange industrial shriek, are understandably some of the rarest creatures in verse. John Clare was quite rightly surprised, therefore, when in 1823 he discovered this very rarity in a friend's bookcase:

I have never read [a poet] that mentions [the nightjar], except M^{rs} Smith in her Sonnets, which I had the pleasure to meet with last summer in a friend's book case. Her poems may only be pretty, but I felt much pleased with them because she wrote more from what she



Illustration: John James Audubon's 'Night Hawk, *Caprimulgus Virginianus*', an American cousin of *Caprimulgus Europaeus*, known by Clare as Night Jar, Fern Owl, Goat Sucker and Night Hawk (see *Natural History*, p. 32 and p. 32n4). Plate CXLVII, Audubon's *Birds of America*, published 1827-1838. Image courtesy of John James Audubon Center in Audubon, Pennsylvania and The National Audubon Society, via <www.audubon.org>.

had seen of nature then from what she had read of it. Therefore those that read her poems find new images which they had not read of before, though they have often felt them, & from those associations poetry derives the power of pleasing in the happiest manner.¹

The 'M^{rs} Smith' is Charlotte Smith, and the poem is 'Sonnet XLII. Composed During a Walk on the Downs in November 1787'. It formed part of her popular *Elegiac Sonnets*, published in numerous expanding editions between 1784 and 1800. One of the most prolific and popular English authors of the 1780s and 90s, Smith also wrote powerful novels, moving children's books and the fine blank-verse meditations, *The Emigrants* (1793) and 'Beachy Head' (1807). Like Clare—and many other poets—Smith was a keen botaniser and ornithologist, and like Clare, she was as well versed in local names and traditions as she was in scientific understanding. The nightjar, she informs us in a footnote to 'Beachy Head', is more commonly known as the goatsucker, 'from a strange prejudice of the Italians that it sucks their goats'. English peasants, she tells us, have their own strange prejudice—that the nightjar lays eggs under cows' skin, which then erupt into dangerous boils.²

The first crucial word in Clare's response to Smith is 'new'. What Clare responded to in her poetry was the variety of her imagery, her determination to describe what was there even if it was an ugly nightjar and not a decorous nightingale. Smith and Clare shared an aesthetic of variety, a philosophy of curiosity and openness to all things of the world. This had implications for the form, as well as the content of their poetry, as the second crucial word in Clare's response indicates: 'associations'. Smith's nightjar was not the mystic symbol of some unified truth. It was a looser, more associative type of image, whose meanings freely proliferate. Theresa M. Kelley has already observed this shared aspect of Smith and Clare's imagery, the way their 'poetic figures... recognize or resist taxonomic distinctions and labels', thus retaining their particularity and earthiness.³ When Clare read Smith's nightjar sonnet, he found a fellow natural historian, full of curiosity, and a fellow poet, the very form of whose poetry captured the variety of the world.

As poets, perhaps the most obvious similarity between Smith and Clare is their interest in the sonnet. In her lifetime, Smith's reputation as a poet rested on her 92 *Elegiac Sonnets*. Clare's 638 sonnets are among the most experimental and unique in the entire tradition. Here I complement Kelley's analysis of Smith and Clare's

imagery, by showing how their aesthetic of variety influenced the style of their sonnets. In section 1, I reconstruct their 'aesthetic of variety'. For them, variety is the foundation of beauty, and this has implications for their ideas about the nature of reality, poetry and the self. In section 2, I use statistical techniques to compare the form of Smith and Clare's sonnets, using Wordsworth as a point of comparison. As Tim Chilcott has already shown in the pages of this journal, statistics can reveal remarkable patterns in an author's style, which can escape observation if we focus simply on a few select examples.⁴ In this case, statistics reveal the great variety of Smith and Clare's versification, and their tendency toward parataxis. In the final section, I draw some conclusions about the 'objectivity' of Smith and Clare's sonnets, and suggest how this objectivity might alter our understanding of the Romantic sonnet in general.

1. An Aesthetic of Variety

To get started, let us return to 1823, to the friend's bookcase, and to the sonnet Clare found there. What did he find so striking about it?

The dark and pillowy cloud, the fallow trees,
Seem o'er the ruins of the year to mourn;
And, cold and hollow, the inconstant breeze
Sobs thro' the falling leaves and wither'd fern.
O'er the tall brow of yonder chalky bourn
The evening shades their gather'd darkness fling,
While, by the lingering light, I scarce discern
The shrieking night-jar sail on heavy wing.
Ah! yet a little—and propitious Spring
Crown'd with fresh flowers shall wake the woodland strain;
But no gay change revolving seasons bring
To call forth pleasure from the soul of pain;
Bid Syren Hope resume her long-lost part,
And chase the vulture Care—that feeds upon the heart.⁵

This sonnet is a good example of Smith's typical emotional register. A pervasive mood grips the entire landscape—'dark' clouds, 'fallow' trees, the 'cold', 'hollow' and 'inconstant' breeze, the 'falling' leaves and 'wither'd' fern all contribute to turn a November evening into a symbol of Smith's weariness and isolation. She contemplates both the 'ruins' of the year and of herself. Into this scene flies the nightjar 'on heavy wing', letting out its otherworldly shriek. The

light is 'lingering' and Smith can 'scarce discern' the bird. It is all the more sullen and mysterious for being invisible.

In the passage quoted above, Clare commended the poem for containing a new image. Smith describes what she actually sees in the world, not merely what she has read about. Accordingly, she describes things that don't appear in books, and are not familiar from our reading, although they may be familiar from our own experience. Such 'new images' taken straight from life, says Clare, give poetry its 'power of pleasing'. This is a simple argument, but it is worth unpacking. Why should 'new images' be necessarily more pleasing than old ones? In one of his prose manuscripts, Clare gives a clue: 'The Poet... loves variety better than order'.⁶ Similarly, in his fragmentary 'Essay on Taste', he describes his 'happiness in contemplating the different shapes of leaves of the various kinds of trees plants & herbs', and his pleasure in wandering among flowers 'to distinguish their characters'.⁷ Clare has an open and wondrous attitude to the small details of the world, which is linked to his more fundamental convictions about the nature of things:

Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares
But birds & flowers & insects are its heirs
Taste is their joyous heritage & they
All choose for joy in a peculiar way⁸

Clare lived in a radically pluralist universe. For him, things do not express the One Life, nor a single spirit more divinely interfused, as in Wordsworth's grandest nature poems. Instead each thing in it has its own 'peculiar' essence, its own 'way'. In Clare's reckoning, 'mind' is only one part of the universe, and is not 'alone' the source of meaning. This has a counter-intuitive result. 'Taste', our sense of beauty, does not come from the mind, but is actually the 'heritage' of the things in the world. This explains why Clare prefers 'variety' to 'order' and finds 'happiness' in distinguishing the 'characters' of things. It also explains why Clare could find the dismal image of Smith's shrieking nightjar beautiful. The nightjar is beautiful because it is itself. Simone Weil argues that our sense of beauty is a result of the soul's need for order. A natural scene, or a work of art, is beautiful because its parts harmonise and form a whole.⁹ Clare finds beauty in disorder, because order and harmony blend things together, obscuring each thing's 'peculiar' beauty.

In her prose, Smith propounded a theory of beauty much like Clare's. In *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804), Mrs. Talbot

(Smith's mouthpiece) says that her poems are designed 'to excite your curiosity', to make her children wonder at the behaviour and beauty of different plants and animals.¹⁰ She wants them to learn to draw, so they can see the 'various effects' produced by nature.¹¹ She chastises people who believe that 'the sea has no variety', and she recites a poem to reveal the contrary:

He who with more enquiring eyes
Doth this extensive scene survey,
Beholds innumerable changes rise,
As various winds its surface sway...¹²

Smith was influenced by John Aikin's *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (1777), a book she cites in her letters,¹³ and in a footnote to 'Beachy Head'.¹⁴ Clare once suggested that 'an able Essay on objects in nature that would beautify descriptive poetry might be entertaining & useful to form a right taste in pastoral poems that are full of nothing but the old thread bare epithets'.¹⁵ Aikin's essay is just such a book. Modern poetry is shackled, says Aikin, by the 'perpetual repetition of the same images'.¹⁶ Poets must learn 'to view the several objects of nature minutely, and in comparison with each other'.¹⁷ Nature is so various, that poets who describe it accurately need not fear 'falling into uninteresting sameness'.¹⁸ And their poetry will be beautiful, for it is 'variety, novelty, and distinctness of imagery which constitute the true riches of poetry'.¹⁹ Following Aikin, Smith found that beauty was the result of curiosity, and filled her poetry with precise images of unusual things—like her nightjar.

Smith and Clare share this aesthetic of variety, or as John Barrell puts it, an 'aesthetic of disorder'.²⁰ Barrell uses the term 'disorder' to draw a contrast between Clare and the eighteenth-century tradition of descriptive poetry. In James Thomson's landscape poems, there had been a dialectic of 'particularity' and 'multiplicity', as in Clare's poetry.²¹ It is difficult for the poet to describe particular things in vivid detail and yet also do justice to the great multitude of things that are present. Thomson resolved this tension, argues Barrell, by imposing an order on the landscape, synthesizing each particular thing into a larger whole which contained the multiplicity. Clare resolved the tension by cramming as much detail as he could into his poems. Thus details do justice to the particularity of things, while the resulting disorderliness gives the impression of a vast chaos outside the poem, doing justice to the great multiplicity of things.

Barrell's analysis is elegant. But he makes rather too strict a distinction between orderly Thomson and chaotic Clare. Wolfram Schmidgen has recently argued that an 'aesthetic of variety' runs right through eighteenth-century poetry and fiction, linking the loose prose of Daniel Defoe to the poetry of Thomson himself.²² For him, Thomson is not an orderly poet at all. Quite the contrary. Schmidgen shows how Thomson's uses 'or' to link different details of a scene in *The Seasons* (1726–30), and concludes that the poem has no 'coherent centre of perception and experience'.²³ Thomson, Smith and Clare all had this sense that reality outruns our attempts to describe it.²⁴ They found reality a challenge, and evolved different versions of the aesthetic of variety to meet it.

It might seem strange to interpret Smith's nightjar sonnet as a poem of variety, when it seems to blend all the different aspects of the scene into a single dominating mood. Most of Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* are indeed 'elegiac'. Bishop Hunt argues that their main theme 'is the gradual loss of... the "shaping spirit of imagination"... in face of the harsh realities of life',²⁵ which seems a far cry from the optimistic aesthetic I have just been describing. But a closer look at the sonnet's final six lines suggests that Hunt is subtly mistaken. Smith does not lose the power of imagination in this sonnet. Even after she has sunk into the dark and disappearing landscape, and heard the nightjar's shriek, she is still able to imagine the explosion of life at springtime: 'Ah! yet a little—and propitious Spring / Crown'd with fresh flowers shall wake the woodland strain'. Her imagination is able to shape the landscape, to replace its 'falling leaves' with 'fresh flowers' and the 'shrieking nightjar' with 'the woodland strain'. What she cannot do is awake the pleasure of this imagined landscape within her. Her feelings are independent of the scene around her, because her 'soul of pain' will not revive with the spring. The wind may be 'inconstant'. Her pain is not. Time is a 'deforming process' in much of Smith's poetry.²⁶ As time passes in this sonnet, it severs Smith from the world, leaving her only the husk of her existence, her 'soul of pain', a single entity in a world of many entities.

Smith describes a vast world, whose moods and meanings are different to her own. Clare could also find this chastening lesson in nature's variety. In one sonnet, he describes Swordy Well,

Showing the wonders of great natures plan
 In trifles insignificant & small
 Puzzling the power of that great trifle man
 Who finds no reason to be proud at all²⁷

We typically associate experiences like this in Romantic poetry with the sublime. Byron stared at the ocean, and it mocked human pretension. In many of Clare and Smith's poems, the situation is quite reversed. Nature does not mock us with its grandeur; instead its 'trifles' indicate that the mind too is a 'great trifle'.

2. Various Sonnets

Smith and Clare's aesthetic of variety made them two of the most original sonneteers of their age. They reshaped the sonnet to accommodate their curiosity and openness, and experimented with a variety of rhyme-schemes. Both of these impulses are starkly illustrated in one of Clare's most uncompromising sonnets:

The tame hedge sparrow hops about for seed
& painted red cap feeds on grunsel weeds
The blackbirds [forage] where [the] scarecrows was
& pecking linnet green as is the grass
Eats at the cabbage seed till all is gone
& thrushes fetch the cherries every one
The pink flies in the bushes all the day
& pecks about the leaves & goes away
The yellow hammer hops about the beds
& the young blue cap pecks the poppy heads
The wagtail wades the sink & willow wren
Peeps round the currant trees & hides agen
& sparrows feeding with the hens all day
Hears the maids shoo & scarcely flies away²⁸

This is an extraordinary sonnet: a rhyming list of eleven bird species, shorn of the philosophy, introspection and metaphor so typical of sonnets of this period. What do these birds mean? There is no explanation, no 'I' to view or interpret the birds, no adverbs or adjectives that give them an emotional colour. This is the purest possible expression of Clare's curiosity. As in so many of his poems, he 'takes the role of the natural historian', describing what he sees with clarity and accuracy.²⁹ The poem is full of facts. We see how the birds move: 'hops', 'pecking', 'fetch', 'flies', 'pecks', 'peeps'. We learn what different things they eat: 'seed', 'grunsel weeds', 'cabbage seed', 'poppy heads', 'chook feed'. We learn where they live, the blackbirds 'where [the] scarecrows was', the pink 'in the bushes', the yellowhammer 'about the beds', the wagtail in the 'sink', and the willow wren 'round the currant trees'. We learn that the linnet is

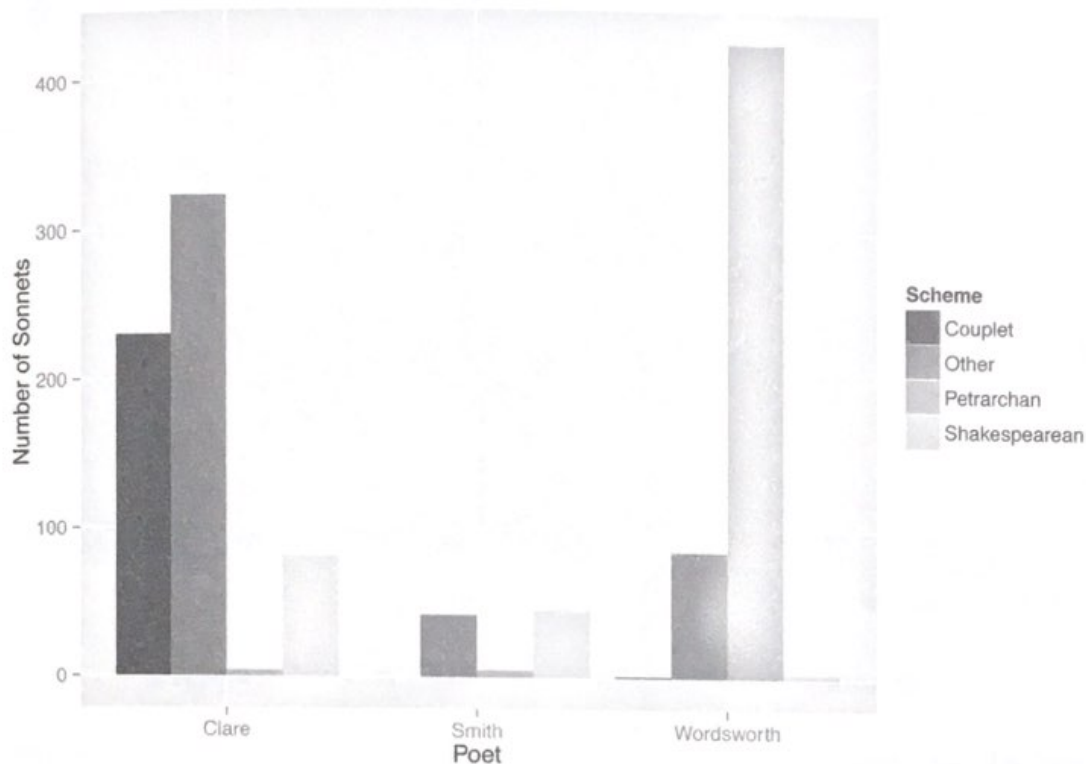


Figure 1. Clare, Smith, and Wordsworth's preferred rhyme-schemes

'green as is the grass'—Clare has the greenfinch in mind.³⁰ Finally, we glimpse how these birds cohabit with humans, as the sparrows 'Hear the maids shoo & scarcely flies away'. The poem is a list of realities, things you might see yourself if you sat or rode or walked or lay somewhere in the country. Its point, as Mrs. Talbot might say, is 'to excite your curiosity'. It has what Jonathan Bate calls 'the magic of naming'.³¹ Names evoke the reality and the individuality of living things. Naming one bird after another, in such a bald and cryptic way, makes the poem like a spell, conjuring little wonderful creatures from the cauldron of raw experience.

Such a poem is difficult to incorporate into the traditional history of the Romantic sonnet. As Jennifer Wagner, Joseph Phelan and Michael O'Neil tell the story, Smith revived the Romantic sonnet as an instrument for exploring 'sensibility', 'intense and personal experience' or the 'depths and mysteries' of the self.³² Her sonnets were emotionally explosive and formally undisciplined. Enter Wordsworth, who re-introduced the strict Petrarchan rhyme scheme and gave his sonnets a 'unitary structure' and 'masculine self-discipline' which would become the dominant model for the sonnet in the nineteenth century.³³ Clare's sonnet has neither intense emotions nor a unified structure of thought—though many



Figure 2. Rich rhyme in Clare, Smith and Wordsworth's sonnets

of his sonnets do have these features. Statistical analysis reveals, however, that this affectless poem illustrates trends that link his sonnets to Smith and the aesthetic of variety, and distinguish both Smith and Clare's sonnets from Wordsworth's. These three trends are: innovative rhyme-schemes, rich rhyme, and '&'.

a. Innovative rhyme-schemes. While Clare was not the first poet to experiment with couplet-sonnets,³⁴ he was the only Romantic to use the form extensively, and was the first great poet to make the form his own. As Figure 1 shows, both Smith and Clare liked to experiment with novel rhyme-schemes, at least compared to Wordsworth, who preferred the rigour of the Petrarchan form. But the couplet-sonnet was Clare's own territory: he wrote 230 of them, compared to Smith's zero and Wordsworth's one.

The effect of these couplet-rhymes is to give Clare's sonnets an open, undefined structure. In a conventional Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnet, a complex pattern of rhymes gives the poem a defined shape: the classic octave-sestet structure of the Petrarchan sonnet (*abbaabba cdecde*) or the three-quatrains-and-a-couplet

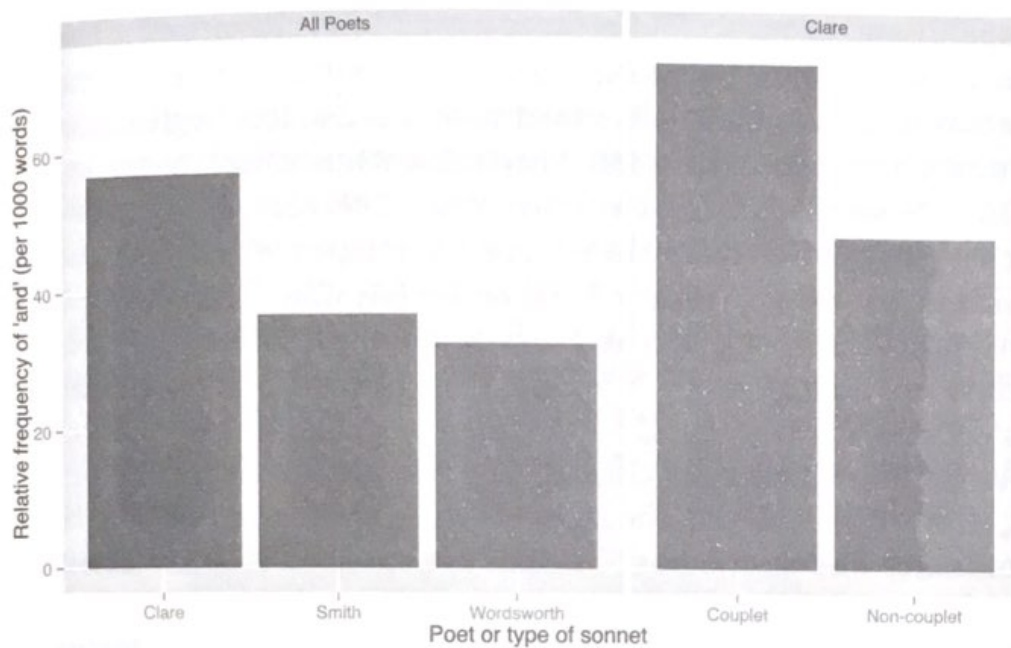


Figure 3. 'And' in Clare, Smith and Wordsworth's sonnets

structure of the Shakespearean sonnet (*abab cdcd efef gg*). In her classic study of *Poetic Closure* (1968), Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifies a key feature of rhyme-schemes like these: 'terminal modification'.³⁵ At the end of a traditional sonnet, the rhyme-scheme suddenly changes, and we can hear that the poem is soon to finish. When the final line ends, we can hear that the poem is complete, and get a sense of 'stable conclusiveness' or of the 'integrity' of the poem's structure.³⁶ But Clare's couplets do not work like this. The final couplet sounds identical to the previous six, meaning the poem ends with an 'expectation of continuation', rather than a sense of closure.³⁷ Clare's bird sonnet does not build to a conclusion or insight about the birds it describes. It plucks them from the world, apparently at random, revels in them for a while, and then abruptly ceases.³⁸ It is a remarkable evocation of aimless, serendipitous wonder.

It is difficult to generalise about the 323 sonnets Clare wrote with 'other' rhyme-schemes, since they are extremely various. But we can note two interesting facts. First, Smith was also very interested in such experimental rhymes—nearly half her sonnets have non-traditional structures (including her nightjar sonnet, which rhymes *abab bcbc cdcd ee*). Second, both Smith and Clare were interested in Shakespearean sonnets—nearly all their conventional sonnets were in this form. Wordsworth was relatively less interested in experimental rhyme schemes, and wrote only a handful of

Shakespearean sonnets. These facts are crucial, because in the Romantic period, both Shakespearean and experimental rhyme schemes were seen to be looser, easier to write, and less 'legitimate' than Petrarchan schemes.³⁹ John Thelwall enthusiastically argued that Smith's sonnets 'burst the unnatural fetters of arbitrary authority' simply because they were Shakespearean.⁴⁰ On the other side of the debate, Henry Kirk White felt that 'Little elegies, consisting of [three] stanzas and a couplet, are no more Sonnets than they are Epic-poems'.⁴¹ Smith may never have taken the extra step, and written couplet-sonnets, nor are her 'other' rhyme-schemes quite so various as Clare's. But it is quite true, as Weiner argues, that Smith 'relaxed' the rules of the sonnet, imbuing it with a 'spontaneity and immediacy' which appealed to Clare.⁴² Their various rhyme-schemes express their thirst for variety.

b. Rich rhyme. The second notable feature of 'The tame hedge sparrow hops about for seed' is its use of rich rhyme. The rhyme-pair 'day/away' is repeated twice in the poem. As Figure 2 shows, Clare's rich rhymes are as distinctive as his couplets.

Both Smith and Wordsworth studiously avoid rich rhyme—none of Smith's sonnets and only 4 of Wordsworth's sonnets contain any at all. But more than a quarter of Clare's sonnets have at least one rich rhyme, and some are positively laden with it. In one of his later sonnets, 'The Water Lilies',⁴³ three lines end with the word 'hours', three with the word 'flowers', and two with the word 'Lake', meaning that more than half the poem's lines end in rich rhymes, and the rhyme-scheme is the bizarre *abab caca dbdb aa*. Rich rhyme for Clare is another kind of repetition, which breaks apart the poem's structure. While the structural repetition of the couplets gives the sense that the sonnet could just go on forever, and continue to describe more and more wonderful minutiae of nature, the unpredictable repetition of the rich rhymes creates a sense of randomness. This is just the kind of feature in Clare's poetry that led Barrell to call it disorderly.

c. Parataxis. The final notable feature of 'The tame hedge sparrow hops about for seed' is its use of that most Clarean of all words, '&'. Rather than using subordinating conjunctions to turn the birds into a unifying argument, he presents a simple list, of this bird & this bird & this bird. Readers will doubtless have encountered many analyses of Clare's 'and's, and Figure 3 makes clear just how distinctive a word it is in Clare's vocabulary.

In their sonnets, Clare uses 'and' 57 times every 1000 words, Smith uses it 36 times, and Wordsworth 32 times. Readers will hardly be surprised that Clare uses the word so much more often, but two other patterns are noteworthy. First, as the second graph shows, Clare uses 'and' especially frequently in his couplet-sonnets (72 per 1000 words), as compared to all the other kinds he wrote (48 per 1000 words). Syntax supports verse form. When Clare wrote paratactic couplet-sonnets, his syntax became more paratactic. Second, although Smith may not use 'and' so often as Clare, she is more likely to use it than Wordsworth. Close inspection of her sonnets also reveals that she often achieved parataxis without the use of 'and':

Low murmurs creep along the woody vale,
The tremulous Aspens shudder in the breeze,
Slow o'er the downs the leaden vapours sail,
While I, beneath these old paternal trees,
Mark the dark shadows of the threaten'd storm...⁴⁴

Each line introduces a single detail, and there is only a single subordinating conjunction, 'while'. The 'while' does indicate that these things are happening at a single moment, but it does not fuse the objects into a totalising perspective. The 'I' it introduces is simply another object in the list. 'Along' the vale are the 'murmurs', and 'beneath' the trees is the 'I'. The aspens 'shudder', and the 'I' is 'marking' the clouds. It is in this parataxis, in the list-like quality of their greatest sonnets, that Clare and Smith most purely express their aesthetic of variety.

3. Variety and Objectivity

'And' is probably the single most interpreted word in Clare's vocabulary. Barrell argues that Clare aims to represent 'one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions' in his poems, and that 'and' makes everything seem 'simultaneous' because it gives 'only a loose sense of connectedness'.⁴⁵ More recently, Simon Kövesi has argued that Clare's 'and's are rebellious. In the face of parliamentary enclosure, which parcels the world into well-defined pieces of private property, Clare's 'and's suggest that the true world is beyond human control. The law might impose a hierarchical structure on the land, but Clare's 'and's are resolutely non-hierarchical. No person or thing is *above* anything else. Everything is *beside*, 'muffled by the wonder and blurred boundaries of a levelling nature'.⁴⁶

Comparing Clare with Smith suggests that his 'and's have yet another significance: they are objective. In Clare's world, the tree in the forest makes a sound even if no-one is there, and so long as there is one hand, it can clap. This is striking, because the Romantics—and especially Smith—have typically been interpreted as highly subjective writers. The most famous version of this argument is M.H. Abrams's, in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1952). Before the Romantic period, he argues, people saw the mind as a passive 'mirror' of the outside world, but the Romantic began to see the mind as a 'lamp'. It was 'active rather than inertly receptive', illuminating the world with its own light rather than receiving light through the eyes.⁴⁷ This argument is not as persuasive as it once was. Abrams did not live to see Brad Pasanek's vast database of eighteenth-century metaphors, which reveals that it actually became *more* common to compare the mind to a 'mirror' in the Romantic period, not less.⁴⁸

What makes the various things in Smith and Clare's poems objective is their annoying habit of escaping the mind's clutches. Reality is recalcitrant. Facts are disagreeable. Smith's images often escape by having contradictory meanings. In one sonnet, she watches the moon shine serenely above a break in a storm:

—So, in unsullied dignity elate,
 A spirit conscious of superior worth,
 In placid elevation firmly great,
 Scorns the vain cares that give Contention birth;
 And blest with peace above the shocks of Fate,
 Smiles at the tumult of the troubled earth.⁴⁹

Is the moon a symbol of Smith's own 'spirit conscious of superior worth', or does it implacably observe her 'vain cares' and 'shocks of Fate'? There is an insuperable contradiction between Smith's attraction and repulsion, between her admiration of the moon and her sense of its distance. Clare's objects rarely escape him so cruelly. They usually just enter and exit his poems abruptly, refusing to tarry for interpretation. In several poems, Clare compares these entrances and exits to thoughts. As he hunts orchids, 'natures skill/Doth like my thoughts run into phantasys'.⁵⁰ The land rail is 'hid as thoughts unborn'.⁵¹ And in Clare's own nightjar sonnet, the mysterious bird 'Wizzes as quick as thought'.⁵² The mind does not illuminate objects in similes like this; instead, objects turn back on the mind, reminding it of its own chaos and variety.

Readers need hardly be reminded that Clare, too, could be as elegiac as Smith—indeed, in his most famous poem, ‘I Am’, he describes just the kind of wasted mentality Smith depicts so movingly. Equally, Smith could be as wondrous and joyful as Clare at his most optimistic:

An early worshipper at Nature’s shrine,
I loved her rudest scenes—warrens, and heaths,
And yellow commons, and birch-shaded hollows,
And hedge rows, bordering unfrequented lanes
Bowered with wild roses, and the clasping woodbine
Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch
With bittersweet, and bryony inweave,
And the dew fills the silver bindweed’s cups—
I loved to trace the brooks whose humid banks
Nourish the harebell, and the freckled pagil;
And stroll among o’ershadowing woods of beech,
Lending in Summer, from the heats of noon
A whispering shade; while haply there reclines
Some pensive lover of uncultur’d flowers...⁵³

This could almost be Clare: an ‘and’ in every second line, and the ‘I’ whose only activity is to ‘love’, to love a world in which lanes, forests, commons and vetch and dewdrops live alongside the ‘lover’ of Nature who plucks the flowers. The world’s variety is humbling, but it needn’t always be chastening.

We can draw two salient conclusions from this comparison of Smith and Clare. Firstly, Clare the poet did not live in a purely masculine “brotherhood” of poets’, as John Goodridge, for one, seems to suggest.⁵⁴ Not only did he share attitudes to poetry, nature and life with Smith, but he was directly influenced by her. He included her in his ‘catalogue’ of truly descriptive poets, and claimed that it was her sonnets that inspired him to write the first of his own.⁵⁵ This should not surprise us. Bate observes that working-class and female poets faced similar challenges ‘in a literary world dominated by well-to-do, well-educated, well-connected men’.⁵⁶ This surely helps explain their humble conviction that the self is a small fragile thing in a vast and busy world.

Secondly, the comparison reveals that the aesthetic of variety enriched Romantic poetry from the beginning of the period to its end. Indeed, we might also detect it in Blake's fascination with 'minute particulars', in Dorothy Wordsworth's detailed journals, in Coleridge's apprehension of beauty in his chamber-pot, in Keats's masterpiece of impersonality, 'To Autumn', or in Felicia Hemans's fanciful notion that she could recognise the 'particular language' of different trees by the sound the wind made through their leaves.⁵⁷ Smith and Clare were poets of great humility, with a visionary perception of the largeness and complexity of the world. Such poetry will always be necessary, as long as people rest in the comfort of opinion, and refuse the challenge of reality. Nightjars are frustrating creatures. Don't expect them to do what you want.

NOTES

- 1 *Natural History*, p. 34. I have regularized the punctuation and spelling.
- 2 Charlotte Smith, *The Poems*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 239.
- 3 Theresa M. Kelley, 'Romantic Exemplarity: Botany and "Material" Culture', in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History* ed. by Noah Heringman (Albany: State University of New York Press), pp. 223-54 (p. 224).
- 4 Tim Chilcott, 'John Clare's Language', *JCSJ*, 35 (2016), 5-21.
- 5 Smith, *The Poems*, pp. 40-41.
- 6 *Natural History*, pp. 290-91.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- 8 'Shadows of Taste', *Middle Period*, III, p. 303.
- 9 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1952), pp. 9-11.
- 10 *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History, for the Use of Children and Young Persons*, 2 vols (London: Joseph Johnson, 1804), II, p. 134.
- 11 *Ibid.*, II, p. 52.
- 12 *Ibid.*, II, pp. 151-52.
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