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The Textures of Romanticism: Exploring Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head" (1807)

In this essay, I will introduce the notion of 'texture' as a key to understanding the lasting importance of Romanticism for the formation of modern aesthetic paradigms and textual practices as we know them. In doing so, I will draw on 'recent' as well as not so 'recent' trends in Romantic studies.

To begin at the end: As the subtitle indicates, I will draw on a text which has, after a long period of neglect, only recently re-emerged as one of the most important texts of the expanded canon of Romantic writing which we have come to take for granted. I could not have done so without the revisionism of the 1980s, both in terms of an increasing awareness of the continuity of the Romantic Ideology in literary studies on the one hand and in terms of the recovery (in all senses of the word) of female writers from the period on the other. The key element of these revisionist tendencies was, as Richard Cronin pointedly observed in 2000, to transfer "to 'history' that glamour that was once routinely attached to the word 'imagination'" (Cronin 2000, 2). One consequence of this move was the near-abolishment of the category 'Romantic' in the 1990s: All that was left after thorough historicization was what was then only half-jestingly referred to as the Period Formerly Known as Romantic, acronym PFKAR, which became the mere latter end of the long eighteenth century (1660-1832) as described and conceptualised after the cultural turn of literary studies.

Since then, however, and thus more recently, the pitfalls of this development have been clearly identified: Not only did the bracketing of 'imagination' lead to the uncomfortable consequence that one should consider "Erasmus Darwin [...] a better poet than Wordsworth" (Cronin 2000, 9), an idea which even the stoutest historicizers did not like to entertain; what is more, the canon of the Big Six (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron) simply refused to give way or even be modified: Additions, yes, but only if some kind of family resemblance in terms of principles of Romantic aesthetics and poetics could be substantiated,[1] as was clearly the case with Charlotte Smith, while other recovered women writers testified to the persistence of Neoclassicism or the poetics of sensibility and thus to the fundamental complexities of periodization. In spite of its assimilation into the long eighteenth century, the Period Formerly Known as Romantic has also persisted in claiming "representation out of all proportion to its duration" in literary histories, as James Chandler points out in the *English Romantic Literature* volume of the *New Cambridge History of English Litera-*

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1   On the importance of Wittgenstein's notion of 'family likenesses' for the description and conceptualisation of Romantic diversity cf. Bode 2005, 134-136.

ture (Chandler 2009, 9), which has only slightly fewer pages than the preceding volume on *English Literature 1660-1780* (cf. Richetti 2005).

All in all, then, the most recent trend in Romantic studies on a broader scale has been a renewed acknowledgement of the fact that in the decades at the close of the long eighteenth century the cultural practices and strategies which we now discuss under the heading of Romanticism established, in Christoph Bode's succinct formulation, a new "*set of responses*, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific *challenge:* the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernisation of European society" (Bode 2005, 127; emphases in the original). In the process, and here I again quote from James Chandler's introduction to the *Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, "the categories of 'aesthetics' and 'poetics' both underwent serious transformation in ways that still matter in the early twenty-first century" because the period saw "the emergence of what might be called a cultural idiom, a whole way of being in the world" based on the introduction of a new mode of writing which "we still call 'imaginative literature'" (Chandler 2009, 1, 3, 5).

Throughout this resurgence of Romantic studies as a field in its own right, however, there has been an insistence on maintaining the historical specificity gained through the historical turn, on acknowledging the period's multifariousness and the homogenizing effects of retrospective period constructions, and on the textual bias of Romantic strategies with their insistence on autonomy and transcendental meaning. And it is this latter point on which I will focus my following remarks: Taking my cue from William St. Clair's seminal study *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004), which, as a recent review essay insisted, "[n]o Romanticist can, or should, avoid" (McLane 2009), as well as from the highly volatile and varied research agenda documented in the (so far) 30 volumes since 2004 of the *Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print* (Series Editors: Anne K. Mellor and Clifford Siskin) and parallel attempts at reconceptualising the two main discursive formations of the long eighteenth century, Enlightenment and Romanticism, as 'events in the history of mediation' (cf. Siskin/Warner 2010, 1 and passim),[2] my own take on 'Recent Trends in Romantic Studies' will focus on the notion of 'texture' and its layering of textuality, mediality and modernity that has shaped our culture for more than 200 years. I will begin by briefly summarizing the theoretical contexts and contours of 'texture' as developed more extensively in recent publications of mine (cf. Reinfandt 2011 and 2013). In the second part of my paper I will then proceed to illustrate the usefulness of the concept with regard to Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head", which, as an elaborate staging of and meta-commentary on all available discursive forms of the period on the one hand and in view of its very own problems of material transmission on the other, lends itself particularly well for these purposes.

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2   Clifford Siskin in particular has outlined his understanding of both Enlightenment and Romanticism in these terms with regard to their changing attitudes to the notion of 'system' in "Mediated Enlightenment: The System of the World" (in Siskin/Warner 2010, 164-172) and "The Problem of Periodization: Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Fate of System" (in Chandler 2009, 101-126).

1.   Theories of Texture

1.1   Contexts of Theory

One of the more interesting side shows of the boom of literary theory and its mutation into (capital-T-) Theory with broader cultural aspirations from the 1980s onwards was the fate of 'text' in the new dispensation, as both Theory and cultural studies seemed to mark a decisive break with literary study's philological heritage. Towards the end of the 1980s, however, the relation between textual and literary theory began to emerge as a slightly marginalized but nevertheless, as it turns out now, productive agenda, with D.C. Greetham's "Textual and Literary Theory: Redrawing the Matrix" charting the terrain in 1989 and his magisterial *Theories of the Text* providing a storehouse of insights and coordinates a decade later (cf. Greetham 1989 and 1999). Throughout most of this period, however, the debate remained mostly a one-way street, with some (but by no means all) textual scholars and editors reading up on current literary theory and discussing its implications for textual scholarship, while the proponents of Theory remained largely oblivious to textual theory. One of the most prolific contributors to the debate was Jerome McGann (of *Romantic Ideology* fame), as monographs with titles such as *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, *The Textual Condition* and *Radiant Textuality: Literature since the World Wide Web* indicate (cf. McGann 1983, 1991 and 2001). More recently, McGann has hinted at his disenchantment with the way things are going in an extended intervention in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which argues for a return to philological principles and a turning away from "the specifically literary interpretation of culture" brought about by the shift from philology to hermeneutics and on to the "meta-interpretive interests that played themselves out, in diverse ways, under the general banner of Theory" (McGann 2009, 13). As I have argued elsewhere, however, this bypassing of theoretical sophistication in the humanities does not seem promising, and McGann's vision for "a sociology of the textual condition" could definitely profit from the cultural and historical turn that literary theory and literary studies have taken in recent years (cf. Reinfandt, 2013).

In fact, it seems that a fusion of literary and textual theory is finally underway. Sukanta Chaudhuri, for example, sketches a similar scenario to McGann's in his monograph on *The Metaphysics of Text* (2010), but his attitude to theory is much more pragmatic. "Not so long ago," he observes in the opening paragraphs, "it seemed that the Age of Theory in literary criticism was destined to last." He then proceeds to list the neglect of the close study of texts on the one hand and the not always fully acknowledged reliance "on exceptionally close analysis [of texts] in tandem with the hermeneutic" as Theory's somewhat contradictory hallmarks, which are nevertheless united in their valuing of "[e]lusive meaning [...] over the concrete sign" (Chaudhuri 2010, 1-2). Again in a somewhat contradictory manner, elusive meaning comprises both what Derrida vis-à-vis the hermeneutic tradition called the 'transcendental signified,' and, as one might polemically say, the transcendental signified of deconstruction itself, différance. Since then, however, "the Age of Theory has," according to Chaudhuri, "yielded to the age of the material text and its fortunes" in a change that was "largely activated by the universal spread of the computer and online communication, the electronic text and the World Wide Web"; Chaudhuri goes on to state one of the funda-

mental premises of work in the field (and also my own project): "The electronic text crystallizes the way all texts work, allowing us to view the process more clearly" (Chaudhuri 2010, 2-3).

What Chaudhuri is interested in is how "the material medium of the text contributes integrally to its meaning" and how the materiality of the text can be brought into accord with the text's "conceptual, abstract being, separate from its material vehicle yet defining itself in material, even sensory terms: implicit locations, spaces, time-planes, relationships between the parties in the discourse (reader, purveyor, author *et al.*)" (Chaudhuri 2010, 5). The text (or, as I would say, the texture of the text) thus provides access to "an unbroken chain of signifying functions" from "language" through "formal text" to the "specific material forms" embodying and disseminating it, and an enquiry into text along these lines "takes on board every participant in the textual process" (Chaudhuri 2010, 6) and is thus regrounded in material cultural practices. While this may sound like a whole string of transcendental signifieds in their own right – Chaudhuri elaborates on the title of his book: "I wish to look behind the text that meets our eye in order to see what makes it up and how, as a metaphysician investigates what makes up the apparent reality of our experience" (Chaudhuri 2010, 5) – the difference lies in the foregrounding of the material evidence of mediation, which remains largely unattended to in hermeneutical readings while deconstructive readings take note of it more in terms of the philosophically conceptualized interface between language and writing rather that its actual material mediality (which more often than not is print rather than writing in the abstract).

1.2   Contours of Texture

My own concept of 'texture' addresses similar concerns.[3] Usage of the term in literary studies can be traced back to the New Critic (and poet) John Crowe Ransom, who introduced the distinction between, on the one hand, "the prose core to which a reader or critic can violently reduce the total object" (that is to say, the 'transcendental signified' of a hermeneutic reading), and, on the other, "the differentia, residue, or tissue, which keeps the object poetical or entire" (and which should be attended to by close readings) (Ransom 1938, 349). In a slightly later publication Ransom attaches the terms structure and texture to this distinction and illustrates it with an architectural metaphor: "A poem is a *logical structure* having a *local texture* [...] The paint, the paper, the tapestry on the wall are texture. It is logically unrelated to structure" (Ransom 1941, 648; emphases in original). The context here is obviously the foregrounding of form in both modernism and formalism – modernist poetry, one could say, makes visible what goes for *all* texts,[4] just like, as Chadhuri insists, the electronic text today makes us aware of "'hypertextuality' as a factor of all texts, not only the electronic" (Chaudhuri 2010, 7).

And by a simple reversal of precedence between the traditional idea that structure in Ransom's sense is *represented* by texture, we have now come to accept in a literally post-modernist constructivist fashion that texture *constitutes* structure and provides the only possible precondition and access-point for processes of meaning production and thus, ultimately, meaning itself.

From here, the implications of texture *outside the text* can be traced on various levels. First, texture provides the interface between materiality and phenomenology, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out:

> Texture [...] comprises an array of perceptual data [...] whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure. [...] If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together [...] [w]hat they have in common is that [...] both are irreducibly phenomenological. To describe them primarily in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation. (Sedgwick 2003, 16, 21)

Interestingly, a whole strand of discussion in literary studies seems to follow this line of thinking of late, arguing that the ideology of 'critical reading' in literary and cultural studies should be supplemented with or even transcended by agendas of 'uncritical reading' (cf. Warner 2004), 'reflective reading' (cf. Felski 2009, who positions 'reflective reading' between 'critical' and 'uncritical reading') or 'surface reading' (cf. Best/ Marcus 2009). A comparable interest in the aesthetics of surfaces can also be observed in other disciplines (cf., for example, Shusterman 2002 and von Arburg *et al.* 2008). Secondly, and one step farther away from the immediate presence of the material text by moving from phenomenology and perception to cognition, the notion of texture has been claimed as a key term for *A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* by Peter Stockwell. Stockwell defines texture as "the experiential quality of textuality" and lets his discussion range "into the aesthetic senses of value, attractiveness, utility and their opposites as well," which "are all part of the textural experience of reading literature," leading from feeling to meaning and determining literary impact in terms of resonance and intensity, sensation and empathy, voice and mind, and identification and resistance (Stockwell 2009, 14-15 and passim).[5] And finally, taking the step from cognition to communication and cultural practice, Richard H.R. Harper has used the term texture to address the fates of *Human Expression in the Age of Communications Overload:*

> Communicative practices create a texture – a complex weave of bonds that tie together those who are communicating. This texture has various forms and strengths: some bonds [...] are instant and others slow, some ephemeral and others permanent. These bonds vary according to the type of act in question and in terms of the technologies that are used to enable acts. (Harper 2010, 196-7)

While this understanding of texture seems to be as far from the material text as it gets, it is nevertheless still grounded in it through the determining role of technologies mentioned at the end of the quote. And while I personally do not think that it is a good idea to remove the notion of texture from its immediate reference to text and textuality, I nevertheless acknowledge that all these approaches help to chart the terrain of textural implications.

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3   It is interesting to note that my own publications in the field and Chaudhuri's book gestated completely independently from each other in places as diverse as Tübingen and Kolkata. There seems to be a broader theoretical development on a global scale at work here, at least as far as Anglophone academia is concerned.

4   The same argument has been made for German literature by Moritz Baßler (cf. Baßler 1994, 1996, 2007).

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5   For an instructive recent discussion of the promises and limitations of cognitive theories in literary and cultural studies see Savarese/Jager 2010.

What is implied by the textures of material texts? I would argue that the texture of texts bears traces of the history of mediation. In other words: Parallel to viewing Enlightenment and Romanticism as events in the history of mediation on a larger scale, every single text can be linked to the history of mediation through its texture on a smaller scale. Thus, an inquiry into texture has to take into account media history with its specifically modern dimensions of convergence, intensity and immersion (at the interface of technology and reception). And it would have to take into account the possible consequences of these developments in terms of literacy (on the level of actors), performativity (on the level of interaction between actors and texts) and semiotic potential (in terms of reference and experientiality). It is this last, intra-textual dimension that is at the centre of my understanding of texture as a possible access-point for construing a text's status as an event in the history of mediation, and the following map will guide my reading of Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head".
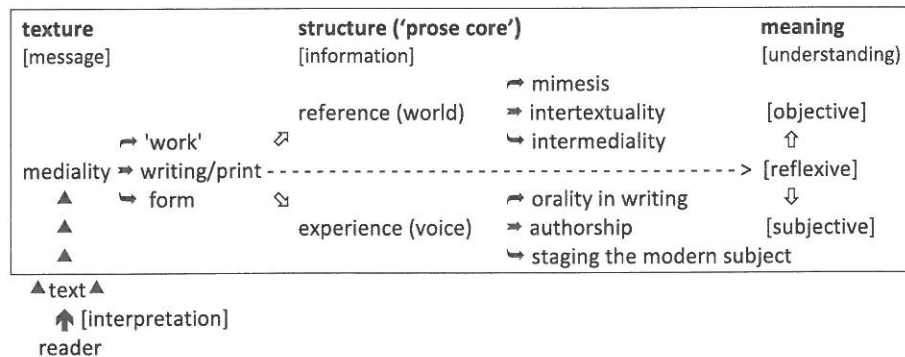
texture [message]		structure ('prose core') [information]		meaning [understanding]
			↱ mimesis	
		reference (world)	↠ intertextuality	[objective]
↱ 'work'	↗		↳ intermediality	⇧
mediality ↠ writing/print	- →			[reflexive]
▲ ↳ form	↘		↱ orality in writing	⇩
▲		experience (voice)	↠ authorship	[subjective]
▲			↳ staging the modern subject	

▲ text ▲
↑ [interpretation]
reader

Figure 1: The Texture of Modern Literary Texts

The three-dimensional layout of this scheme takes its cue from Niklas Luhmann's re-conceptualisation of communication as a threefold process of selection comprising message (*Mitteilung*), information (*Information*) and understanding (*Verstehen*). As a prerequisite for understanding the scheme adequately and for clarifying that it does by no means re-establish unproductive form/content (texture/structure) dichotomies, it is important to insist on the counterintuitive complexity of this theoretical frame, which conceives of communication as a dynamic process autonomous from human action (cf. Luhmann 1992 and 1994). The three dimensions can be briefly characterized as follows:

1) The **texture** of the text is the point of access for the reader, and it operates on the Luhmannian level of **message**, i.e. as a form whose selectivity actually creates the (shape of) information, which is then processed as having been there first. That the message is actually perceived as a message is an effect of its texture, or, more specifically, of its **mediality**, i.e. the fact that the text has been fixed in **writing** and/or **print**. The stability facilitated by writing and print induces an unprecedented degree of **reflexivity** through making texts available for repeated actualisation in communication. What is more, language itself assumes a fixed **form** within the confines of writing and

print, while on the other hand certain messages will be conventionally associated with certain communicative contexts so that certain modes of constructing/construing information are predetermined. This applies especially to the literary text, whose status as a potential **work** of art may trigger particularly elaborate reading techniques.

2) Any given texture is, as a potential message, loaded with various registers of mediality, which may in turn point to different informational, i.e. semantic and semiotic potentials of the texture as message. This becomes fairly obvious in the case of modern literature, which, as a rule, tends to be suggestive of a doubled transcendental signified on the level of **information** (What is the text about? What is its 'prose core', its logical structure?). Modern literary texts seem to indicate both on the one hand a potentially objective **reference** to the **world** (**mimesis**) as well as to other texts and media (**intertextuality, intermediality**) *and*, on the other hand, the dimension of subjective **experience** and perspective as embodied in **voice** through the characteristically literary mediality of (feigned) **orality in writing**, which can in turn evoke modern conceptions of **authorship** and authority or stage all kind of variations on the forms modern **subjectivity** and individuality can take.

3) With all this, the reader can generate **meaning** more or less individually or originally, but these constructions will always be framed by those constitutive **dimensions of meaning in modern culture** which can be heuristically identified as **objective, subjective and reflexive** in spite of their overall dynamic amalgamation in all cultural processes. In the light of all this, it should be clear that **understanding** can no longer be conceived of in terms of a hermeneutic recovering of a transcendental signified. It is rather a negotiation of emphases with their respective potential constructions of transcendental signifieds, which may or may not result in further communication in various discursive contexts (with communicative 'connectivity' being the prerequisite of Luhmann's notion of understanding, which has nothing to do with what human beings make of it). There *is*, in short, nothing beyond texture in modern culture, and I will return to this virtualisation of reality after my reading of "Beachy Head".

2.   Constructions of Authoritative Voice in Print: Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head"

When in 1833 William Wordsworth paid homage to Charlotte Smith, nèe Turner, who had died in 1806, calling her "a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be acknowledged or remembered", he himself already contributed to the anticipated neglect by placing his praise in a footnote to a poem which has not turned out to be among his best remembered works ("Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bees' Head", qtd. in Labbe 2011, 5). Since the 1980s, however, Charlotte Smith has been re-instated to a position of eminence in the Romantic canon, where she has played a more central role than any other recovered woman writer and frequently even been treated at eye-level with Wordsworth himself.[6] Smith's literary

6   Cf. Fletcher 1998, 334 ("Wordsworth was less innovative than was once assumed, he and Charlotte were developing pastoral and pairing down diction simultaneously") and Labbe 2003, 164 ("[B]etween them, Smith and Wordsworth created what we now describe as 'Romantic' po-

career, which instigated the Romantic re-vitalization of the sonnet form with her highly successful *Elegiac Sonnets* in ten constantly growing editions between 1784 and 1811 and also brought forth ten novels in ten years (1788-1798), was capped by her 731-line blank verse poem "Beachy Head", which came out posthumously in a volume entitled BEACHY HEAD: WITH OTHER POEMS, BY CHARLOTTE SMITH. NOW FIRST PUBLISHED. LONDON: PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR; AND SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD. 1807, an edition running to 219 pages of poems and notes. While since the 1990s, and thus after a gap of roughly 180 years, the title-poem in particular has been regularly re-edited and anthologized (cf. Smith 1993, 2003 and 2007),[7] the original volume is now readily available in facsimile on Google Books.[8]

Why is this poem so important for our present concerns? It is important because of its paradigmatic illustration of the possibilities of print as a medium for texture. A reader approaching the poem in its original form – and that is what I will do here in view of the material dimension of texture – may learn from the prefixed 'Advertisement' (v-viii) that the author of the following poems has died and that "The Poem entitled *Beachy Head* is not completed to the original design." (vii) However, the text's status as a Romantic Fragment Poem in Marjorie Levinson's sense is debatable (cf. Levinson 1986 and Andersen 2000). Stuart Curran, for example, the editor of the first new edition of Smith's poetry, insists on the poem's "structural unity" and surmises that only the epitaph mentioned towards the end is missing (Smith 1993, xxvii). And Smith's second editor, Judith Willson, points out that while the text's "non-linear, associative, diachronic mode" may let it appear "garrulous, or shapeless" to the reader, Smith's "most powerful and ambitious poem" nevertheless represents her attempt at presenting an "encyclopedia of her imagination" (Smith 2003, xxii), thus indicating a certain degree of systematic organisation. What emerges here is that many readers, and even the most sophisticated readers of recent years, "have found ['Beachy Head's'] narrative performance difficult to construe" (Kelley 2004, 293) while nevertheless sensing a degree of organisation on a different level.

A first step towards solving these riddles can in fact be taken by not letting oneself be fooled by the continuous surface of the blank verse poem with its verse paragraphs of irregular length into assuming that there is one speaker or narrator.[9] By picking up cues from Jacqueline Labbe's ground-breaking reading of the poem in her 2003 monograph on *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender* and by paying close attention to the texture of the original edition, one can instead see how

etry"). In Romantic studies in Germany, Smith has made it prominently into Bode 2008 (235-250) and Reinfandt 2008 (57-66, 107-110).

7   In 2006, the poem was included in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edition (Vol. 2; 47-66).

8   The following analysis will be based on this edition, supplying page references for the notes but adding line numbers for the body of the poem proper according to the *Norton Anthology* (cf. Fn. 7) for greater convenience.

9   Kelley 2004, 288, for example, flatly speaks of "Smith's narrator."

the poem is concerned with pitting authoritative voices against each other in print, as the following chart indicates:[10]

The Poet	
(26 pages in original edition)	
Part I (pp. 1-9; ll. 1-117):	masculinized 'I'
Part II (pp. 9-12; ll. 117-166):	feminine Contemplation
Part III (pp. 12-19; ll. 167-281):	gender-neutral 'mind'
Part IV (pp. 20-27; ll. 282-389):	lyrical 'I' (C.S. > W.W.)
The Narrator	
(25 pages in original edition, incl. 8 ½ pages quotations of stranger's poems)	
Part V (pp. 27-51; ll. 390-731):	disembodied descriptive narrator
	(lone antiquary vs. peasants;
	the stranger vs. the hermit)
The Historian	
(35 pages in original edition)	
63 endnotes (pp. 143-179), some of them lengthy	

Figure 2: *Beachy Head* and Its Constructions of Authoritative Voice in Print

As we can see here, there are no less than six voices in the poem, which can in turn be classified into the three broad categories of the Poet, the Narrator, and the Historian (cf. Labbe 2003, 146-154 and Labbe 2011, 130-136). While the poem's main text falls into two parts of roughly equal length by the Poet and the Narrator,[11] the "poem's notes contain a persona often actively opposed to the 'Poet' who occupies the poem-proper" (Labbe 2003, 54) but not quite as far away from the Narrator of the second half of the poem. It is with regard to this third speaker, which Labbe dubs 'the Historian' (Labbe 2011, 132) (though 'the Naturalist' would also have been apt in places), that the materiality of texture comes into play. In her first monograph, Labbe speaks variously of 'notes' and 'footnotes' (cf. Labbe 2003, 54-56) and only concedes in her own endnotes that it is actually 'endnotes' in the original edition (Labbe 2003, 62, note 23). In a later chapter of her book, she comes clear about this (Labbe 2003, 160) but comments in the notes with reference to Smith's correspondence with her publisher that "Smith's wording suggests that she may have been in favour of printing the notes as footnotes rather than endnotes" (Labbe 2003, 165, note 27).[12] This is in fact common practice in most recent editions of the poem as opposed to the common practice of poetry publishing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (providing a good example of the influence of the state of technology on textures). What is more, in the period between

10   Cf. Labbe 2003, 53-63 and 142-165, who reads the poem in terms of its "constructions of an authoritative poetic voice that is, eventually, undermined by the Poet herself" (142).

11   The Poet's fragmentation into four distinct voices is counterbalanced by the fact that the Narrator gives way to yet another poetic voice by quoting two poems by the poet-figure in his narrative, the stranger, who mirrors the Poet as a seventh voice on the story level.

12   The 'footnote'-inaccuracy persists in Labbe 2011, 131 and 133, and the note referring to the placement question is somewhat oblique (198, note 61).

these two dominants of practice one of the consequences of the Romantic ideology of organicism was a tendency to omit notes entirely.[13] In terms of texture it is important to note at this point that it makes a fundamental difference with regard to the 'presence' of the third speaker in the reading process whether the notes are printed at the end of the text (as in the original edition) or as footnotes, and it may well be that the status of the third speaker was more precarious originally than recent commentators (including Labbe and myself) are willing to acknowledge.

So how can the unfolding textu(r)al drama of voices be described? The poem begins by establishing a virtual observer position on Beachy Head, which covers both what is there and what is not, i.e. the actual view *and* its historical embedding, the latter in this case envisioned in a strange mixture of new geology and conventional faith:

> On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!
> [...]
> I *would* recline; while fancy should go forth,
> And represent the strange and awful hour
> Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent
> [...]
>   from the continent
> Eternally divided this green isle.
> From thy projecting head-land I *would* mark
> Far in the east the shade of night disperse
> [...]
> (ll. 1-13, my emphases)

From the very beginning, the poem negotiates the distance between direct observation and experience on the one hand and the larger perspectives of how to make sense of things on the other, introducing a horizon of possibilities spanning personal memories (the conditional 'would' can also be read as indicating the past), literature ('fancy'), religion ('Omnipotent'), and science – the second note links 'vast concussion' and 'Omnipotent' to "an idea that this island was once joined to the continent of Europe, and torn from it by some convulsion of Nature" (143-4). So far, it seems, the roles are clear: The Poet presents direct observations, memories, and fancy with the occasional conventional reference to religion thrown in, while the Historian counters these with (ideas about) facts. It is, however, not as easy as that, and the following reading will tease out the implications of the poem's mode of second-order observation afforded by the medium of print, which samples and juxtaposes these discourses and their respective modes of 'speaking'.

The Poet, for one, seems to initially take her (?) cue from the Omnipotent mentioned in line six. The reclining and speaking 'I' of the beginning recedes, and the unfolding panorama of maritime nature and human endeavour takes on neoclassical overtones ("the ship of commerce" l. 42) and would have evoked for contemporary readers the tone of William Cowper's 6000-line blank verse poem *The Task* (1785) (cf. Andersen 2000, 552-561). Accordingly, Labbe characterises the speaker of the first part of the poem as a "masculinized 'I'", who is then replaced in the second part by "a subset of

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13   Which is, strangely enough and counter to the historicising trend in Romantic studies of the day, also the case in the *Selected Poems* (Smith 2003).

reason", "feminine Contemplation", reflecting upon (capital-H) History. Contemplation is in turn replaced by a "gender-neutral [reflecting] 'mind'" in the third part, which returns to "simple scenes of peace and industry" (l. 169) in the present (Labbe 2003, 146-7). While clearly evoking the Wordsworthian ideal of low and rustic life, the presentation in "Beachy Head" is more inclusive both with regard to the role of women and to actually existing social problems. It ends with an extended meditation on the impossibility of happiness (ll. 255-281). Only then does an 'I' return, and it is clearly not a "continuation of the masculinized prospect viewer of the poem's start" but a personalised speaker who clearly draws on both Wordsworth's distinction between the experiencing and the remembering I with autobiographical grounding and the, for the contemporary reader, "familiar figure of 'Charlotte Smith', sorrowful and needy" as established in the *Elegiac Sonnets* (Labbe 2003, 148):

> *I* once was happy, when while a child,
> I learn'd to love these upland solitudes,
> And, when elastic as the mountain air,
> To my spirit, care was yet unknown
> And evil unforeseen: – Early it came,
> And childhood scarcely passed, I was condemned,
> A guiltless exile, silently to sigh,
> While memory, with faithful pencil, drew
> The contrast [...]
> (ll. 282-290, emphasis in original)

All in all, this emergence of a recognizably Romantic speaker seems to be more muted than Wordsworth's varieties, and nature is perceived in much more scientific detail than Wordsworth was wont to do. Following the extremely Wordsworthian lines "An early worshipper at Nature's shrine, / I loved her rudest scenes" (ll. 346-7), for example, the reader is treated to an enumeration of the types of plants in Nature's shrine, and the notes add information about their botanical classification and Latin designation, before the poem returns to the 'vast concussion' from its beginning by addressing geological and natural history in the concluding passage of this part (ll. 372-389). The first half of "Beachy Head" thus provides a compendium of poetic modes from Neoclassicism through Sensibility into Romanticism, and the latter is clearly reoriented towards the world as it really is, both in its material and social dimensions. Halfway into the poem, the Romantic subject along the lines of what Keats called "the wordsworthian [sic] or egotistical sublime" (letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27th Oct 1818) stands corrected or at least contextualized: There are other modes of poetic as well as non-poetic speaking, and all of them, the poem seems to suggest, are necessary to get at the world in its totality.

Meanwhile, the notes, whether 'present' or more remote, are by no means as 'objective' as one would expect after this outline. Yes, there are many notes neutrally providing scientific classifications and terminology for birds and plants, while others explain turns of phrase or point to sources and further reading in geographical and social di-

mensions,[14] and yet others provide sources for literary allusions to writers like Oliver Goldsmith and Milton (155, 176). However, one can also find subjective authorial commentary, such as in the second note about the 'convulsion of Nature' already quoted, which goes on to link the scientific idea to the author's personal experience: "I confess," the authorial persona adds, "I never could trace the resemblance between the two countries. Yet the cliffs about Dieppe, resemble the chalk cliffs on the Southern coast. But Normandy has no likeness whatever to the part of England opposed to it." (144) This strategy can then be observed time and again (cf. 158-9, 163) even to the point of qualifying and modifying Linnaeus's classifications in the light of personal experience (165-6). The longest notes invariably refer to matters of history, which are mostly presented without subjective interference in a matter-of-fact tone (cf. 146-151 on the Scandinavians and their role in English history), but once they move into the realm of archaeology and geological history, they acknowledge the speculative character of historical knowledge much more strongly (cf. 161-163 on the possible significance of elephant bones found at Burton in Sussex).[15] Thus, while clearly strengthening the informational dimension of reference by way of intertextuality, the notes clearly do not abandon the informational dimension of experience. Instead, they supplement the "familiar [poetic] figure of 'Charlotte Smith', sorrowful and needy" (Labbe 2003, 148) with a much stronger staging of authorship which presents 'Charlotte Smith' as thoroughly educated and at home in all walks of life and discourse. Between them, then, the discourses of the Poet and the Historian mark two varieties of modern authorship, but they also mark spheres where they overlap, such as the masculine authority of the first poetic speaker with its bracketing of subjectivity on the one hand and the balancing of objective scientific knowledge with subjective experience in the notes on the other.

Interestingly, the "disembodied descriptive narrator" (Labbe 2003, 150) of the second half of the main text of the poem puts both these two varieties of authorship to the test of life, as it were. He begins with science as embodied in the abstract worldview of a "lone antiquary" (l. 406) who arrives on the scene and is somewhat implausibly depicted as the epitome of human ambition which is then depicted as the origin of war, exploitation and urbanisation (ll. 419-505), while the self-sustaining world of peasants and shepherds presents itself as more authentic and fulfilled to a passing "wanderer of the hills" (l. 442). This latter outsider-figure, which seems to lend itself immediately for a positive construction of the Romantic Poet, however, is also deconstructed. The narrator introduces "the stranger," a first hermit-figure and poet who fled to the countryside due to, as the rural populace assumes, disappointed love, and there proceeds to sing Romantic songs and scatter leaves with Romantic poems in nature (ll. 573-654).[16]

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14   Cf. the endnote to page 4, line 14: "'The beamy adamant.' Diamonds, the hardest and most valuable of precious stones. / For the extraordinary exertions of the Indians in diving for the pearl oysters, see the account of the Pearl Fisheries in Percival's View of Ceylon." (145)
15   This is what justifies Labbe's characterisation of the speaker of the notes as "the Historian" (2011, 133).
16   Both the stranger's song "Were I a shepherd" (ll. 531-555) and his 'rhapsody' to 'Amanda' (ll. 577-654) left "near one ancient tree" (l. 573) are quoted in full by the narrator and mark the escapist and naïve variety of Romantic poetry.

While characterised as "not indeed unhappy" (l. 656) by the narrator, this poet-figure is nevertheless criticized for being egocentric and unproductive (ll. 655-670), and stands in marked contrast to a second hermit-figure who has fled the world not for a momentary emotional mishap but because he was "long disgusted with the world / And all its ways" (ll. 673-4) in general. This "hermit of the rocks" (l. 709), who is in a note identified as "a man of the name of Darby" known from the folklore of the area of Beachy Head some thirty years earlier (and thus providing an interesting variation on the dimensions of orality and intertextuality in my scheme, cf. 178-9), dedicates his life to saving or at least burying shipwrecked sailors until he himself drowns in a stormy night. The poem ends with the following lines:

> Those who read
> Chisel'd within the rock, these mournful lines,
> Memorials of his sufferings, did not grieve,
> That dying in the cause of charity
> His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,
> Has to some better region fled for ever.
> (ll. 726-731)

While it is not clear to what extent this ending can be seen as Charlotte Smith's intended ending, it has nevertheless served the purpose of rounding off the poem marvellously for many readers. Just like the ambiguity of 'I would recline' in the beginning, which can indicate both a virtual present and a past observer position, the first two lines here also oscillate between the past horizon of the story world and the present horizon of the reader, establishing an ambiguity for 'these mournful lines' that can either refer to the (missing) epitaph for the hermit of the rock or to the poem itself, which has moved from the summit of Beachy Head into the rock of its material being.

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And this, finally, brings us back to the notion of texture. Perhaps more than any other poem or even text from the period, "Beachy Head" does not try to 'naturalize' simulated speaking positions, but uses the medium of print to induce reflexivity by putting various speaking positions (which are normally naturalized in their various discursive contexts) next to each other as segments or layers in a seemingly neutral texture. Even if you assume that all the "competing speakers" come together "under the mantle of 'Mrs Smith' the author" (Labbe 2003, 147) (as many readers will, because that is how they have learned to read texts), the texture of "Beachy Head" nevertheless parcels out dimensions of information which are normally either organized in clear hierarchy or in smooth continuity into the different and recognizable registers of the Poet, the Narrator, and the Historian. As a result, the poem's particular mediation of ostensibly objective reference to the world through mimesis of observation as well as intermediality (the panoramic view, references to drawing) and intertextuality on the one hand and its mediation of the subjective experience of the world as staged in voices with their respective modes of speaking on the other represent paradigmatic positions of modern authorship. These in turn illustrate opportunities for staging and constructing the modern subject, which at the same time turns out to be *subject to* (rather than the subject

of) communication and discourse as well as prone to deconstruction through sheer multiplicity.

A text like "Beachy Head" thus occupies an eminent position as an event in the history of mediation. Or, viewed from a slightly different angle: the poem illustrates in exemplary fashion a decisive shift in a history of the real constructed in terms of changing 'ontological holds' on the real which depend on new forms of media technology, a history envisioned by Clifford Siskin in an essay on the role of "Textual Culture in the History of the Real" (cf. Siskin 2007). Around 1800, Siskin argues, the pre-modern regime of a metaphysical real which frames a virtual physical gives way to a modern physical real as we know it when modern culture is fully saturated with print (on the connection to Romanticism cf. also Behrendt 2011). This physical real then frames virtual representations until these increase their ontological hold on the real and finally replace the physical with the shift into digital culture in a process which nevertheless goes back to what is still and in spite of everything occasionally called the Romantic Age (cf. Otto 2011). (What would then complement the virtual real of the new dispensation on the level of virtuality is a matter of speculation – a new metaphysics of text?)

This, however, is the broadest view. Closer to home, a text like "Beachy Head" provides an exemplary case study for 'Recent Trends in Romantic Studies' as it amply illustrates the complexities and synchronicities that a cultural historian engaging with the Period Formerly Known as Romantic has to come to terms with. At the same time, its highly individual texture also provides a suitable testing ground for the resurgence of a fairly clear but nevertheless differentiated and varied understanding of what the designation 'Romantic' entails.

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Romantic Textualities

1.   After Theory?

The text is a problem. It always is. But it is even more so in Romantic theory and poetry. Studying Romantic poetry always includes a theoretical reflection on the status of what we are looking at, holding in our hands, reading. The question of the text is therefore a question about the status of theory in literary studies. In the following paper I want to argue that the problematic status of the text in Romantic literature provides one of the most fruitful sources of recent theoretical endeavours in Romantic studies.

For just over a decade, there have been numerous publications proclaiming the end of theory. The titles of these books seem to suggest that we simply have to take it as a fact that literary theory has come to an end. One thing these theories have in common is that the term theory is treated as virtually synonymous with post-structuralism and deconstruction, i.e. with the influence of French philosophy on Anglo-American literary studies.[1] Peter Barry included a chapter entitled "Theory After Theory" in the 2009 edition of his popular textbook *Beginning Theory*. In this study, Barry identifies three major events that led to the decline of theory not only in literary studies but also in public esteem. The first of these events is the 1987 discovery that Paul de Man published some 200 anti-semitic and pro-Nazi articles as a young man in Belgium. This fact, together with Jacques Derrida's defence of de Man, Barry claims, led to a severe crisis of the moral standing of deconstruction: "Literary theory, then, was seriously compromised by the de Man affair, and thereafter it never quite recovered its prestige, its confidence and its sense of moral and political rectitude" (Barry 2009, 281). The second event is the publication of three essays by Jean Baudrillard in which he maintained that the Golf war did not take place. Baudrillard's analysis actually demonstrated that the war was staged as a media event with TV images showing "no actual human casualties" (Barry 2009, 281). What was presented on TV, therefore, hid the cruel reality of the events in Iraq in the early 1990s. But Baudrillard's essays were publicly misinterpreted: they came to be understood as a manifesto of denial rather than the severe criticism of Western warfare that they really are. Finally, the third event which caused a crisis of literary theory is the Sokal affair. In 1996, Alan Sokal published an essay "largely made up of what he considered to be a skein of postmodernist clichés" (Barry 2009, 284). Although it is not altogether wrong to claim that these events shook the foundations of theory in the last two decades of the preceding century, this recent proclamation of the end of theory begs the question what the term theory actually signifies.

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1   For a discussion of the use of the term theory in literary theory see Culler (1997), 1-17.