INTRODUCTION

Smart is a typical minor poet of an uninteresting age.

Cyril Falls

Christopher Smart’s position as a minor poet

Christopher Smart is usually regarded as a minor poet of the eighteenth century. While Pope is seen as a formidable influence on Smart and other late eighteenth century poets, Smart’s contemporaries like William Collins, Thomas Gray, William Cowper and even Oliver Goldsmith are better known and more frequently anthologized than Smart. Smart’s poetry, moreover, is too allusive, eclectic and eccentric to be comfortably classified as pre-romantic, although in his last and best poems Smart had come a long way from the classicism of his early works. Does Smart, then, deserve the obscurity which makes his poetry so unfamiliar to the student of English literature?

W.H. Auden, in the Introduction to his edited anthology of Nineteenth Century Minor Poets, defined the minor poet as one who cannot measure up to all the conditions that a poet needs to fulfill in order to qualify as a major poet. These are that:

1. He must write a lot.
2. His poems must show a wide range of subject matter and treatment.

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3. He must exhibit an unmistakable originality of vision and style.
4. He must be a master of verse technique.
5. He must show a process of maturing which continues until he dies, so the reader can differentiate between poems written at the early stage and poems written later.²⁹

If we consider Auden’s list as a valid set of criteria it will be obvious why Smart was never placed in the category of major poets. Very few of his early writings are remarkable for their originality. He was not noted for a prolific output of poetry in the sane years of his life. And he rose to his greatest poetry, as he claimed, by a sudden spiritual conversion rather than by gradually acquiring maturity in thought or technical skill. But interestingly, Auden himself was a great admirer of Christopher Smart. He quoted lines from Jubilate Agno soon after its publication in the notes to the first edition of his book New Year Letter (1941), even though Auden’s ‘own poetry bears no imprint of Smart’.³⁰

As a scholar of Cambridge University Smart had gained acclaim for his brilliant Latin verses and imitation of classical forms, and among the literati of his time Smart’s fame rested on his skills as a writer of odes and satires in which he continued to follow the neoclassical styles of Dryden and Pope until well after the emergence of a pre-romantic aesthetic in the eighteenth century. Smart’s first ‘original’ poem, in which he ventured into the ‘sublime’ mode, was "Ode for Musick on St. Cecilia's Day." His most ambitious work, The Hop

Garden, published in his first volume of poetry called *Poems on Several Occasions* (1752)\(^{31}\), was a Georgic in two books running to well over seven hundred lines of Miltonic blank verse. ‘A conspicuous feature of the poem is its mixture of styles, ranging from polysyllabic Latinate coinages and Spenserian archaisms to blunt colloquialisms,’ writes Karina Williamson.\(^{32}\) Though this particular poem attracted some attention for its wit and realism, an anonymous writer in *The General Review* (1752) pointed out that Smart would have earned more credit by reprinting his poems *On the Eternity of the Supreme Being* (1750) and *On the Immensity of the Supreme Being* (1751). This might suggest that Smart was recognised as a promising writer of religious poetry even before his recorded experience of spiritual conversion. Karina Williamson, the Oxford editor of Smart’s *Jubilate Agno* and his religious hymns, remarks:

> The reviewer’s judgment was shrewd. These poems were the first and second of Smart’s five Cambridge prize poems, published between 1750 and 1755, which later-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century opinion rated the peak of his achievement; this assessment was reflected in the frequency with which they were quoted from and reprinted.\(^ {33}\)

In Smart’s own time his poems mainly appeared in journals like *New Ballad, Ladies Magazine, Universal Magazine, Midwife* and so on. His best known satire, *The Hilliad* (1753), intended to discredit Hill who was

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\(^{31}\)Christopher Smart, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1752) at http://books.google.co.in/books?id=yniHDv-rjmEC&dq=Smart+poems+on+several+occasions+date&source=gbs_navlinks_s  
\(^{33}\)Ibid.
Smart's enemy in the paper war between Hill and Henry Fielding, is too full of topical allusions to be appreciated today. Between 1750 and 1755 Smart wrote five devotional poems which regularly won him the Seatonian prize for religious/devotional poetry as a Cambridge scholar every year. These were *On the Eternity of the Supreme Being* (1750), *On the Immensity of the Supreme Being* (1751), *On the Omniscience of the Supreme Being* (1752), *On the Power of the Supreme Being* (1754) and *On the Goodness of the Supreme Being* (1756). Smart’s biographer Chris Mounsey suggests that he wrote these poems and offered them for the Seatonian prize on the advice of his well wishers so that he could be assured of a fixed income every year. Nevertheless, he seems to have disappeared from the London literary scene in 1853 and for the next two years during which he faced a lot of retaliation for his political involvement as a Grub Street writer, and he also suffered a permanent setback during these years.34

**The story of Smart’s conversion**

In 1756 Smart had the most acute attack of a dangerous illness that had been assailing him for some time and his recovery from it was a turning point in Smart's life, which he commemorated with a *Hymn to the Supreme Being, on Recovery from a dangerous Fit of Illness* (1756). The tone of grateful adoration

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34 See Chris Mounsey, *Christopher Smart: Clown of God*, p17 and Chapters 4 and 5 in general.
of God’s goodness in this poem is very different from Smart’s celebration of the same idea in the more academic poem which he had written shortly before coming to write the *Hymn*. In his last Seatonian poem *On the Goodness of the Supreme Being* (1756) Smart begins with a formal invocation to David, the biblical writer of Psalms who was hailed by British classicists as the Orpheus of Israel, asking to be inspired by David’s ‘divinest skill’ to give ‘voice and sound’ to the muse for praising ‘Her God on earth, as he is prais’d in heaven.’

ORPHEUS, for so the Gentiles call’d thy name,
Israel’s sweet psalmist, who alone could wake
Th’ inanimate to motion; who alone
The joyful hillocks, the applauding rocks,
And floods with musical persuasion drew;
Thou, who to hail and snow gav’st voice and sound,
And mad’st the mute melodious!—greater yet
Was thy divinest skill, and rul’d o’er more
Than art or nature; for thy tuneful touch
Drove trembling Satan from the heart of Saul,
And quell’d the evil Angel:—in this breast
Some portion of thy genuine spirit breathe,
And lift me from myself; each thought impure
Banish; each low idea raise, refine,
Enlarge, and sanctify;—so shall the muse
Above the stars aspire, and aim to praise
Her God on earth, as he is prais’d in heaven.35

Smart’s identification with David is complete in the cultivated personal voice of the *Hymn* (corresponding to its more lyrical, but irregular, stanzaic lineation)

which marvels at the fact of sharing the blessings of the same miracle by which
‘Israel’s ruler’ was restored to health after a mortal illness.

WHEN Israel's ruler on the royal bed
    In anguish and in perturbation lay,
The down reliev'd not his anointed head,
    And rest gave place to horror and dismay.
Fast flow'd the tears, high heav'd each gasping sigh
When God's own prophet thunder'd—MONARCH,
    THOU MUST DIE.

'And must I go,' th' illustrious mourner cry'd,
    'I who have serv'd thee still in faith and truth,
Whose snow-white conscience no foul crime has died
    From youth to manhood, infancy to youth,
Like David, who have still rever'd thy word
The sovereign of myself and servant of the Lord!'

The judge Almighty heard his suppliant's moan,
    Repealed his sentence, and his health restor'd,
The beams of mercy on his temples shone,
    Shot from that heaven to which his sighs had soar'd,
The Sun retreated at his maker's nod
And miracles confirm the genuine work of God.36

It has been observed that in Smart’s case it was a mental illness from which he
had very little hope of return, as suggested in the following lines which allude to
his own illness – with their repeated reference to his ‘follies’ and loss of reason
or sense:

But, O immortals! What had I to plead
   When death stood o'er me with his threat'ning lance,
When reason left me in the time of need,
   And sense was lost in terror or in trance,
My sick'ning soul was with my blood inflam'd,
   And the celestial image sunk, defac'd and maim'd.
I sent back memory, in heedful guise,
   To search the records of preceding years;
Home, like the raven to the ark, she flies,
   Croaking bad tidings to my trembling ears.
O Sun, again that thy retreat was made,
And threw my follies back into the friendly shade!

But who are they, that bid affliction cease!—
   Redemption and forgiveness, heavenly sounds!
Behold the dove that brings the branch of peace,
   Behold the balm that heals the gaping wounds —
Vengeance divine’s by penitence supprest —
   She struggles with the angel, conquers, and is blest.\(^{37}\)

Yet in these lines Smart also suggests that he fails to see himself as worthy of such a miracle and cannot explain it as anything other than the grace of Christ, which enabled the suppression of divine vengeance by repentance. With a graphic description of how life and the desire to live seeped into his veins little by little Smart resolves to consecrate the rest of his life to singing the praise of God:

In man humility's alone sublime,
   Who diffidently hopes he's Christ's own care—
O all-sufficient Lamb! in death's dread hour
   Thy merits who shall slight, or who can doubt thy power?

But soul-rejoicing health again returns,
   The blood meanders gentle in each vein,

The lamp of life renew'd with vigour burns,
And exil'd reason takes her seat again—
Brisk leaps the heart, the mind's at large once more,
To love, to praise, to bless, to wonder and adore.  

Having been granted this ‘second birth’ by one ‘Whose pow'r's
uncircumscrib'd, whose love's intense,/ But yet whose justice ne'er could be
withstood’ the recovered poet is now transformed, by the mediation of Christ,
into a lyre of God in both body and soul:

He pitying did a second birth bestow
A birth of joy—not like the first of tears and woe.

Ye strengthen'd feet, forth to his altar move;
Quicken, ye new-strung nerves, th' enrap'tur'd lyre;
Ye heav'n-directed eyes, overflow with love;
Glow, glow, my soul, with pure seraphic fire;
Deeds, thoughts, and words no more his mandates break,
But to his endless glory work, conceive, and speak.  

The poem concludes with a vow to cultivate charity as the highest of the virtues
who adorn the ‘Almighty’s throne,’ but also to live for Him and love Him most
who has forgiven him:

Deep-rooted in my heart then let her grow,
That for the past the future may atone;
That I may act what thou hast giv'n to know,
That I may live for THEE and THEE alone,
And justify those sweetest words from Heav'n,
THAT HE SHALL LOVE THEE MOST TO WHOM THOU’ST
MOST FORGIVEN.

Within a year of publication of this hymn Smart was admitted to St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics. Even though he was released ‘uncured’ in 1758, Smart was kept in confinement till 1763 – possibly for a few years in his own house and afterwards at a private asylum. It was during these seven years of his incarceration that Smart produced ‘an astonishing quantity of brilliant and original poetry,’ among which the most intriguing was *Jubilate Agno*.

Between 1757 and 1763 he wrote *A Song to David*; most if not all of *A Translation of the Psalms of David* and "Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England" (published together in 1765); and the lengthy manuscript of *Jubilate Agno*, the surviving fragments of which, amounting to more than seventeen hundred verses, represent only about a third of what he actually wrote.41

**Smart’s meagre reputation as a religious poet**

Smart continued to write other kinds of poems after his release from the asylum in 1763. The three small collections of his verse published in these years contain short odes, complimentary addresses, fables, songs, epigrams, and so on. But even though they look very similar to the poems written in his early career, according to Karina Williamson Smart seems to have been trying out a new kind of secularized religious poetry after 1759, ‘in which the light lyrical

framework delicately implies a message of Christian hope and reassurance. But nothing that Smart produced after 1763 seems to have been a success with the public or the critics.

During the last years of his life Smart lived in dire poverty and landed up in the debtor’s prison. His writings were generally dismissed as those of a madman. His second oratorio, *Abimelech* (1768), was performed only once in his lifetime; *The Parables of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1768) was dismissed with derision by the *Monthly Review* (May 1768) and with the faintest of praise by the *Critical Review* (April 1768); while *Hymns, for the Amusement of Children* (1771), his last work, was totally ignored. Karina Williamson notes, after Robert Brittain, that in some of these hymns a ‘simplicity of diction’ is combined with ‘the most startlingly accurate arrangement of thought’ to achieve a quality similar to that of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

The theology of these hymns is in sharp contrast to that of Isaac Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (1720), the most successful of earlier attempts of the kind; where Watts's hymns are designed to save children from the dangers of sin, Smart's emphasize the bounteousness of God's blessings on earth and the joyful promise of salvation hereafter.  

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42 Ibid.  
43 Ibid.
The last nail in the coffin of Smart’s fame as a poet was dug when the editor of the posthumous collection of his verses decided in 1791 to exclude the Psalms, hymns, versified parables, translations of Phaedrus and Horace, *A Song to David*, and other poems from the small volumes of 1763-1764, on the grounds that they showed ‘melancholy proofs of the recent estrangement of his mind’. By the time of his death, Smart's reputation as a poet had suffered an almost complete eclipse. From being the prize-winning poet of Cambridge, with ‘the sublimest energies of religion’ at his command,

he sank in estimation into "poor Smart the mad poet," as Thomas Percy described him in a 17 October 1786 letter to Edmond Malone, and thence into comparative neglect until the twentieth century.\(^{44}\)

Despite respectful references to some of his other works and occasional reprintings, Smart became generally known as a one-poem poet – the author of *A Song to David*. Even the publication by Edmund Blunden of some of Smart's hymns, psalms, Horatian translations, and other poems in 1924 remained a passing critical interest, without altering the popular perception of Smart as the author of a solitary masterpiece--an ‘inestimable jewel buried in an ash-heap,’ as Edmund Gosse described it.\(^{45}\)

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The real turning point came with the discovery in 1939 of *Jubilate Agno*, the work which, even more than *A Song to David*, has captured the interest of modern poets—including Allen Ginsberg, Alec Hope, John Heath-Stubbs, Peter Porter, Jeremy Reed, and Wendy Cope—many of whom have paid him the tribute of imitation and parody; while through Benjamin Britten’s festival cantata, *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943), a setting of portions of *Jubilate Agno*, the poetry of Christopher Smart has found a response among many for whom poetry ordinarily has little appeal.  

**Smart as a poet of madness and modernity**

Smart began to be reclaimed as a religious poet mainly because his great religious poems—“*A Song to David*” and *Jubilate Agno*—were rediscovered as the poetry of madness. While most eighteenth and nineteenth century critics tended to dismiss the poems written during his asylum confinement as the ravings of a madman, early twentieth century scholars like Lawrence Binyon and Geoffrey Grigson recognised Smart as ‘a case of fascinating interest’—‘doubly mysterious because of his madness’. The works of recent scholars and biographers of Smart, not a little influenced by Foucault’s seminal work on the great divide between reason and unreason during the age of enlightenment, have tended to focus on the modernity of Smart’s madness. Instead of following the line of a possible medical diagnosis of that madness as manic-depressive disorder, Clement Hawes has shifted the emphasis by characterizing the modernity of Smart’s poetry as infused with a rhetoric of ‘religious mania’ that was common to many radical puritan millenarian writers.

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46 Karina Williamson, “Christopher Smart: The Poetry Foundation.”
in post Civil War England.\textsuperscript{47} According to Hawes, Smart’s poetry as well as his polemical writings was underlined by his belief in the revolutionary ideals of European radicalism, which rendered his poetry not only deviant but dangerous to eighteenth century investments in reason and respectability.

Recent biographers like Clement Hawes and Chris Mounsey as well as editors like Marcus Walsh, Karina Williamson, Betty Rizzo and others have drawn attention to Christopher Smart’s religious poetry as essentially embedded in modernity. Postmodernist theologians like John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, in the Introduction to their book \textit{Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology}, even suggest that Smart was a precursor of the theology that Milbank et al have branded ‘radical orthodoxy’:

the great Christian critics of the Enlightenment – Christopher Smart, Hamann, Jacobi, Kierkegaard, Peguy, Chesterton, and others – in different ways saw that what secularity had most ruined and actually denied were the very things it apparently celebrated: embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, human political community. Their contention… was that only transcendence, which 'suspends' these things in the sense of interrupting them, 'suspends' them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth over- against the void. Such radicalism indeed refuses the secular, but at the same time it does ‘re-envision’ a Christianity which never sufficiently valued the mediating participatory sphere which alone can lead us to God.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} Clement Hawes, \textit{Mania and Literary Style: The Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

The ‘modernity’ of Smart’s religious poetry had a great impact on twentieth century modernist poets from W.B. Yeats to Edith Sitwell, Allen Ginsberg, Theodore Roethke, Peter Porter, and others. One may even venture to say that Smart has turned out to be a ‘poet’s poet’ in the eyes of posterity. As Karina Williamson observes:

It is notable that beginning with Robert Browning, it has been poets rather than critics who have been the warmest and most perceptive admirers of the poetry of Christopher Smart. In a 1975 radio broadcast in Australia, Peter Porter spoke of Smart as "the purest case of man's vision prevailing over the spirit of his times." While it would be facile and unilluminating to characterize Smart as a proto-Romantic, there can be no doubt that the combination of visionary power, Christian ardor, and lyrical virtuosity in his finest poetry was unappreciated and unmatched in his own age.49

Whether one reads Christopher Smart’s case as that of a ‘persecuted mystic’ or holds, like Norman Callan, that in reading Smart’s writings ‘we are brought up against the problem of … the personality of a man who does not recognize that his misfortunes may in some, degree be due to his own failings,’50 the appeal of Smart’s religious poetry is still best described by Edith Sitwell – one of the first twentieth century poets to pay a glowing tribute to Smart and his relationship with God:

Heaven was undimmed by the cruelties and by the darkness of Bedlam, unbroken by starvation, warm in the midst of that deathly cold. This madman of genius, this poet of genius, for all the barriers of his madness, continued to walk in the cool of the evening with his God.51

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49 Karina Williamson, “Christopher Smart: The Poetry Foundation.”