CHAPTER TWO

Smart’s Religious Poetry: Beyond Devotion and Enthusiasm

Smart’s poetry not devotional but religious

At the beginning of this chapter I will attempt to explain my choice of the term ‘religious’ as an adjective for the kind of poetry that Smart wrote after the stigma of ‘madness’ was attached to him, instead of resorting to such terms as ‘devotional, ‘mystical’ or ‘Christian’ – all of which have been used indiscriminately to describe English religious poetry, including Smart’s own poems. In the second half of this chapter I will explore why the religious poems of Smart’s later poetic career deserve closer attention to their radical religiosity than the political radicalism of his early writings.

David Marno observes that there are three categories of religious poetry in the early modern period:

In theory, there are three types of religious poetry in the early modern period: devotional poetry, prophetic poetry, and mystical poetry. Devotional poetry can be loosely defined as poetry that enacts or resembles religious practices such as prayer or liturgical acts. Prophetic poetry corresponds to the Scriptures in that it reports of a story and its report is ostensibly based on revelation. Finally, mystical poetry tends to focus on some sort of experience of the divine.  

164 David Marno, U C Berkeley English 165: Note for Course entitled “Religion and Poetry in the Renaissance,” at http://english.berkeley.edu/courses/1374
Smart’s *Jubilate Agno* and “A Song to David” can be seen as a unique form of religious poetry because they cannot be understood solely in terms of any single constitutive category listed above. They seem to partake of the characteristics of each category; but they are also carefully imprinted with the mark of a distinctive eccentricity that resolutely refers the readers back to the world of earthly nature instead of directing them towards other-worldly experience. Most critics agree that devotional poetry is orthodox, inoffensive, and safe for liturgical use, whereas religious poetry is concerned ‘with articulating the human experience as it opens onto the mystery of God.’ But Smart is more concerned with the quality of what may be conventionally called ‘subhuman’ rather than human experience.

Mystical poetry, on the other hand, permits the possibility of individual and personal interpretation of a scriptural text, and therefore can be more subversive than devotional poetry. Here the intimate, and often exclusive, relation between God and the worshipper’s soul is explored – often in terms of a spiritual love symbolized by sexual imagery – in the process of being transformed into ‘radical eros’. Addressing the beloved as Solomon does in *The Song of Songs*, mystical poetry represents, as W. Dennis Tucker says, ‘a liminal state, a threshold between betrothal and sexual union’ that mirrors a ‘life of

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partial withdrawal from the world. 'Mystics illustrate the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God,' writes Tucker, and it is expressed in a language of intimate communion, as the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride. Smart’s poetry, though it often plays upon a similar analogy between the sexual and the spiritual, never represents the poet’s relationship with God in terms of a ‘radical eros’. It is deeply embedded in the phenomenal reality of nature through the worshipping gestures of all creatures which, in their own individual attributes and actions, their ‘ways of love express’, even though they are far from the state of perfection in the spiritual order of being. In Chapter Three of this thesis I will further argue that Smart’s Jubilate Agno is the celebration of a radical non-understanding of God. Even though it resembles the apophatic mode of mystical unknowing as a basis for submission to God, Smart’s adoration is an expression of the alienated being of earthly existence, rather than of a transcendent divine communion.

As far as prophetic poetry is concerned, Smart does see himself as ‘the scribe-evangelist’ of God in Jubilate Agno, but he dons the mantle of David not so much to claim the same authority as his icon as to follow David’s ideal

mode of writing as ‘the POET of the UNIVERSE’\textsuperscript{170}, as reflected in the third stanza of “A Song to David”.

\begin{quote}
III
O Servant of God's holiest charge,
The minister of praise at large,
Which thou may'st now receive;
From thy blest mansion hail and hear,
From topmost eminence appear
To this the wreath I weave.\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

Smart’s later poems also strike a multiplicity of chords in responding to a wide range of contextual issues in eighteenth century debates on the affinity between poetry and religion. As Walsh observes, ‘the Song is a response to, or participates in, the debate concerning David’s character which raged in 1760, 1761, and 1762.’\textsuperscript{172} (p. 100) It has also been argued that Smart’s translation of the \textit{Psalms to David} around the same time that he wrote the \textit{Song} was intended to bring about a change in Anglican liturgical practice by emphasizing God’s place in nature,\textsuperscript{173} while Clement Hawes suggests that in \textit{Jubilate Agno} Smart was subverting ‘Anglican control over religious functions and services.’\textsuperscript{174} But the \textit{Song} clearly hints at its different status as a work of inspired creation.

Smart’s “Song to David”, modelled on the Psalms written by ‘the Great Author

\textsuperscript{171}Christopher Smart, “A Song to David,” St. 3, \textit{The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart} Vol. II, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{172}Marcus Walsh, “Introduction” to “A Song to David,” \textit{The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart} Vol. II, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{174}Clement Hawes, \textit{Mania and Literary Style}, p. 152.
of the Book of Gratitude,’ ‘opens with the image of the harp, the instrument upon which God is praised in Revelation (5:8, 14:2) and in David’s Psalms.’\(^{175}\) Walsh shows how Smart’s *Song* draws upon the Renaissance neo Platonic discourse which discovered an analogy between God’s act of making and the poet’s divine creation, alluding also to ideas of English critical theory that ‘poetry was in origin divine, that the greatest poetry was sacred poetry, and that the Bible was in large part poetic.’\(^{176}\)

Robert Lowth, in his Oxford Lectures on Hebrew Poetry entitled *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (1753) developed the essential themes that the Bible is extensively and sublimely poetic, and that the origin of poetry is in religion.\(^{177}\) The first office of poetry, according to Lowth, was to praise the Creator and display His mysteries.\(^{178}\) Deeply influenced by Lowth’s lecture, Smart sought to bring together David and Christ in an ‘elaborate and organic reconciliation of Old and New Testament reference.’ Pointing out that ‘the account of creation and the creatures in Psalm 104 is one of most important sources for “A Song to David”,’ Walsh indicates a number of correspondences between this poem and Smart’s translation of David’s Psalms, which show a

\(^{175}\) Walsh, “Introduction,” p. 111.

\(^{176}\) Walsh, “Introduction,” p. 106.

\(^{177}\) Ibid.

new development in Smart’s adoption of ‘the purposes and methods of evangeliastic Psalm paraphrase’ that prevailed before him.

Smart’s religious poetry is characterized by its emphasis, derived from Benedicite and Psalms, on praise, and especially the poet’s duty to participate in the creation’s chorus of adoration.

This duty of the eighteenth century poet to partake in ‘the particular and interior elegancies of the Hebrew poetry’ and ‘imagine himself exactly situated as the persons for whom it was written, or even as the writers themselves’ – which required the poet to feel them as a Hebrew – was enjoined by Lowth himself. While Lowth’s call to ‘endeavour as much as possible to read Hebrew as the Hebrews would have read it’ was clearly an attempt to rise above religious sectarianism towards building up a new imaginary community liberated from ‘the bonds of theology by displaying the purely human and historical content and value of the Bible’, Smart regularly used the language and strategy of Hebrew identification with the belief that ‘Romans and Englishmen were both descended from Israel’. (‘For Abiah is the father of Joab and Joab of all Romans and English Men.’) Walsh suggests that the association of the Laws of Moses and the precepts of Christ in the decalogue

182 Karina Williamson, Footnote 19, The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart Vol. I: Jubilate Agno, p. 15. However, Smart also claims that the Chinese are descended from Abraham in Fragment B, line 77, p. 25.
183 Christopher Smart, The Poetical Works I: Jubilate Agno, Fragment B, line 62, p. 22.
might be compared with Smart’s translation of the line ‘With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth’ (Ps. 119:13) into:

My lips are practis’d to recite  
Those venerable rules of right,  
    God gave the tribes he chose;

Also the new command he sent,  
That Christian charity cement  
    All parties, sects and foes.  
*Psalms* 119 beth. 25-30.

If this reads more like amplification than translation, the idea of God’s commandments issuing from David’s mouth in a state of divine ecstasy is even more radically altered in the following stanzas of the *Song*, which glorify the gracefulness of David’s divine melody that can transcend all enmity and win over the hearts of his foes.

XXVII.  
Blest was the tenderness he felt  
When to his graceful harp he knelt,  
    And did for audience call;  
When satan with his hand he quell’d,  
And in serene suspense he held  
    The frantic throes of Saul.

XXVIII.  
His furious foes no more malign’d  
As he such melody divin’d,  
    And sense and soul detain’d;  

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Now strinking strong, now soothing soft,
He sent the godly sounds aloft,
Or in delight refrain'd.

XXIX.
When up to heav'n his thoughts he pil'd,
From fervent lips fair Michal smil'd,
As blush to blush she stood;
And chose herself the queen, and gave
Her utmost from her heart, "so brave,
"And plays his hymns so good."\textsuperscript{185}

It is easy to see how David thus becomes typologically a precursor of Christ, and Smart himself a follower in their footsteps. This is the kind of liberty of ‘translation’ that Smart practices with ease in his later religious poems, much like his policy in translating classical sources like Horace. The last stanza resonates with erotic mystical suggestions of the bride’s yearning for the bridegroom, developing a trope of spiritual desire identifiable with The Song of Songs. As Tucker notes about medieval mystical writers:

Contemporary readers of the Song are plagued by modern ideas of the erotic. For the monastic writers, however, eros had a richer meaning, that of yearning. Even as the Bridegroom longs for his bride, so too did these writers yearn for the “kisses of his mouth” (Song of Songs 1:2). Indeed they welcomed the language of eros, of yearning, as an apt way to describe the human response to God’s love.\textsuperscript{186}

Smart had said about his 1767 translation of Horace that

\textsuperscript{185} Christopher Smart, “A Song to David,” The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart Vol. II, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{186} W. Dennis Tucker, “How Mystics hear the song,” p. 21.
it is closer to the original by "affinity in the spirit," and that consequently
his new translation is "not written in opposition to others" (5:4) but
instead adds a dimension to Horace the other translations lack.\textsuperscript{187}

As Chris Mounsey observes, Smart had never been very happy with his
reputation as a satirist, an attitude which was also reflected in these late
translations of Horace as distinct from his earlier ones. Orr has suggested that
after translating Biblical and other religious sources in his great religious
poems, Smart began to see himself as a Christian translator with a radical
approach to translation. Perhaps he cast himself in the image of St. Jerome,\textsuperscript{188}
who stated that he had not done a word-for-word translation of the Bible in a
work which would become the basis of the Latin Vulgate edition. John
Wycliffe, on the other hand, had to face the extreme punishment of burning at
the stake for his English translation of the Bible, and for saying that an
individual's own interpretation of the Bible was the best guide to a moral life.
Translation as interpretation could be considered blasphemy, and it was
generally believed that the word of God should not be interfered with. Even the
King James Bible was composed upon a principle of fidelity or absolute

\textsuperscript{188}Smart’s famous lines on his cat Jeoffry at the end of Fragment B are anticipated in B 68. ‘For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty, from whom I take occasion to bless God’ (p. 23). St. Jerome had a pet lion which followed him around like a cat, whence the English nursery rhyme:
\textit{St. Jerome in his study kept a great big cat,}
it’s always in his pictures, with its feet upon the mat.
Did he give it milk to drink, in a little dish?
When it came to Friday’s, did he give it fish?
If I lost my little cat, I’d be sad without it;
I should ask St. Jerome what to do about it.
I should ask St. Jerome, just because of that,
for he’s the only saint I know who kept a kitty cat.
adherence to ‘the original tongues’ as an attempt to curb the variability of translations based on individual interpretation. ‘On the whole, translations of the Bible had a different purpose from other purely literary works.’189 Leah Orr mentions that

Published in 1765, the *Psalms of David* were not meant to be a literal rendering of the Psalms into English but instead were “Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity, and Adapted to the Divine Service” (3:1). Smart also adds a disclaimer to his translation:

> In this translation, all expressions, that seem contrary to Christ, are omitted, and evangelical matter put in their room;—and as it was written with an especial view to the divine service, the reader will find sundry allusions to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, which are intended to render the work in general more useful and acceptable to congregations. (3:4)

Smart’s *Psalms of David* are not yet another “poetic” version of the Psalms or an attempt to provide a more literally accurate translation than his predecessors. Smart considers his work unique because he has designed it to be used with the Anglican service. He states up front that his translation eliminates non-Christian material and replaces it with “evangelical matter,” supporting the Anglican idea that the writings of the Old Testament prefigure Christ.190

Emma Mason, in her essay on Poetry and Religion in the eighteenth century notes that ‘the Protestant tradition had always encouraged the versification of scripture for a lay audience, and biblical paraphrase was popular as a way of echoing God’s word while avoiding any blasphemous attempt to

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190 Leah Orr, “Christopher Smart as a Christian Translator” p. 442.
replicate it.¹¹⁹¹ Even though Smart’s *A Translation of the Psalms of David* (1765) was largely overlooked, Mason thinks that it contained some of the most imaginative elaborations of familiar verses from the Bible. The opening line of Psalm 104, for example, begins with the line ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul’ and continues:

Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain: Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind: Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.

Frequently cited as a paraphrase of this is Watts’s “The Glory of God in Creation and Providence”:

The heav’n’s are for his curtains spread,  
The unfathomed deep he makes his bed.  
Clouds are his chariot when he flies  
On wingèd storms across the skies.  
Angels, whom his own breath inspires,  
His ministers, are flaming fires;  
And swift as thought their armies move  
To bear his vengeance or his love.  
(ll. 5–12)

Where Watts humanizes God, portraying “his own breath” as the force behind the blithe angels and sizzling ministers, Smart sets the whole poem on fire, arraying his God in a robe woven from light and drenching him with the glow sparked by angels in motion:

With light, which thou hast purer made,  
As with a robe thou art array’d,  
Whose pow’r the world upholds;  
And hang’st the skies in beauteous blue,  
Wav’d like a curtain to the view,

Down heav’n’s high dome in folds.
His chamber-beams in floods he shrouds,
His chariots are the rolling clouds
Upon th’ ethereal arch;
And on the rapid winds their wings
Majestical, the king of kings
Walks in his awful march.
(ll. 7–18)

Smart is at once lyrical and sublime here, producing a blend of what Lowth called the “vehement passions” and “gentler affections” to produce the ideal poetic expression (Lowth 1969: vol. 2, xxxiv. 424).^192

The suggestivity of Smart’s translation is even more remarkable when it passes through ‘the lens of madness.’^193 As Chris Mounsey points out, the title of *Jubilate Agno* is derived from a psalm:

The title, *Jubilate Agno* (“Rejoice in the Lamb”), reflects the title of the hundredth psalm, *Jubilate Deo* (“Rejoice in God”). To introduce his poem with the word *Jubilate* suggests Smart held an Anglican belief in the uniformity of worship. The hundredth psalm, often known simply as “The Jubilate,” was then, and is now, in daily use in Anglican morning service. With other, frequently used psalms and Hebrew poems, it is known as a “canticle.” However, Smart’s modification of *deo* to *agno* evokes a shift in emphasis from God to Jesus, the Son of God, who is known as the “Lamb of God” in the Gospel of St. John. Smart’s title, therefore, seems to suggest both conformity in worship and some modification of the regular forms.^194

Jubilate Agno ‘takes the form of a psalm, but is not itself a psalm, since it is personally and not divinely inspired.’ The change in the title of *Jubilate Agno*

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^193 Clement Hawes,
from the *Jubilate Deo* of Psalm 100 can be thus explained with reference to Smart’s belief system.

David can rejoice in God, since he writes with divine inspiration. Smart rejoices in the Lamb which is an earthly reference to Jesus, who is the human form of God, from whom he gets his human inspiration.195

Unlike religious poetry, devotional poetry does not claim for itself a prophetic voice and the certainty of a right to personal utterance. As Helen Wilcox explains in her essay “‘The Soul in Paraphrase,’” George Herbert’s use of the word ‘paraphrase’ in his famous poem called “Prayer” underlines an anxiety about free translation in seventeenth century devotional poetry. Following Richard Hooker’s statement in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597) that ‘our safest eloquence concerning God is our silence,’ seventeenth century writers often showed ‘a serious mistrust of verbal eloquence when it came to spiritual things.’ According to Wilcox ‘(d)evotional poetry by its very nature arises from a tension between heavenly aims and worldly means,’ and the fundamental conflicts between earthly and heavenly perspectives were encapsulated for Herbert in the relationship of the individual soul to God. This gave rise to the unresolved question: ’could the art of poetry capture in appropriate or adequate words the elusive experience of religious ecstasy or despair?’

The dilemma over invention and creativity...finds expression in contrasting devotional forms and modes in the seventeenth century; eloquence and silence, prayer and self-definition, intermingle in the struggle to paraphrase the relationship of God and the human soul. It would be wrong to regard the context of these struggles as entirely personal; in the great age of religious controversy, biblical translation and public preaching, neither the soul nor the language in which it might be paraphrased was free from tradition and associations. Poetry and devotion were located intertextually, their words existing in a web of interconnections with other texts both literary and spiritual.  

One radical strategy of Smart’s religious poetry is that it never suffers from such a dilemma about mediating between sacred and secular spaces, between sacred and profane languages. Nor does he enjoin silence out of deference to traditional theology or the inexplicable mystery of God. Without defying these views, however, Smart relies upon the transformative experience of his illness or madness to justify an irresistible urge to speak of God by validating nature as a locus of religion. The truth or error of such utterances, Smart suggests, is beyond his ken.

Marcus Walsh notes that in Smart’s Hymns and “A Song to David” a keyword is ‘stupendous,’ derived from ‘the Latin stupere, to be struck senseless, to be amazed at.’ The ‘incomprehensible and sublime nature of the godhead’ never deters Smart from his poetry, because he is reconciled to his limits about comprehending the ‘stupendous force/On which all strength depends.’ Christ

too, is the ‘stupendous stranger’ whose incarnation is a ‘stupendous blessing.’\textsuperscript{197}

The eternal joy of the Saviour is:

‘Beyond the bliss of ear or eye,
‘Beyond the heart’s conception high,
‘Beyond the topmost flight of mortal ken.’
Hymns 33. 29-31\textsuperscript{198}

\textbf{The difference in Smart’s religious poetry}

The uniqueness of Smart’s religious poems, especially \textit{A Song to David}, has been repeatedly acclaimed by later poets and critics. Browning speaks of Smart’s early poems as the rooms of ‘some huge house’ full of ‘the signs of decent taste,/Adequate culture.’ On encountering the Song the explorer had come suddenly upon ‘the Chapel’:

…from floor to roof one evidence
Of how far earth may rival heaven. No niche
Where glory was not prisoned to enrich
Man’s gaze with gold and gems, no space but glowed
With colour, gleamed with carving – hues which owed
Their outburst to a brush the painter fed
With rainbow-substance – rare shapes never wed
To actual flesh and blood, which, brain-born once,
Became the sculptor’s dowry, Art’s response
To earth’s despair.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{197}Marcus Walsh, “Introduction,” p. 117.
\textsuperscript{198}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199}Robert Browning, \textit{Parleying With Certain, People of Importance, in Their Day to Wit Bernard de Mandeville, Daniel Bartoli, Christopher Smart, George Bubb Dodington, Francis Gerard de Gerard and Charles and Introduced}. 1887. Reprint. London:
D. G. Rossetti thought that the Song is ‘the only great accomplished poem of the last century.’

In 1936 William Butler Yeats singled out *A Song to David* in the introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* as the inaugural poem of the Romantic period, in which man, “passive before a mechanized nature,” began to beat against the door of his prison.

Late eighteenth century critical appraisals of *A Song to David* often praised its ‘great rapture and devotion’ while hinting at the derangement of Smart’s mind. If the Song ‘established Smart’s claim to be considered a lunatic as well as a poet’, the early twentieth century discovery of *Jubilate Agno* reinforced it after W. F. Stead published the poem under the title *Rejoice in the Lamb: A Song from Bedlam*. Although current critical opinion disputes this claim by interrogating the diagnosis of Smart’s ‘madness,’ it is impossible to deny that the extraordinary language of Smart’s inspired lines in his two greatest poems can only be attributed to an extraordinary mental state. Marcus Walsh thinks that the Song is a part of Smart’s ‘policy’ of ‘turning to religion as a superior subject for poetry’ in the early 1760s. This point is made explicit in the following lines of his Hymns and Spiritual Songs:
The muse at length, no more perplexed
In search of human wit,
Shall kneel her down, and take her text
From lore of sacred writ.
Hymns 11. 5-8

But Walsh also notes that the theme of Adoration is already adumbrated in the second Seatonian prize poem, *On the Immensity of the Supreme Being*.

List ye! how Nature with ten thousand tongues
Begins the great thanksgiving, Hail, all hail,
Ye tenants of the forest and the field!
My fellow subjects of th’eternal King,
I gladly join your Mattins, and with you
Confess his presence, and report his praise.

The theme of adoration that runs through all of Smart’s religious poetry was derived from the Benedicite and Psalms, but the Seatonian Prize poems were written as imitations of the Sacred or High Miltonic Ode. Walsh shows how the tradition of the High Ode is modified in *A Song to David*, which combines both divine and heroic elements that required two separate forms in the classical tradition of the ode. Plato would admit in his ideal city only two poetic forms, ‘hymns to the Gods and encomia to good men’ (*Republic*). Smart brings both together in the *Song*.

The Song is not only a sacred ode or hymn praising God and the creation, but it is also a heroic ode, an encomium on David.

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203 Christopher Smart quoted in Marcus Walsh, “Introduction,” p. 105.
The first two stanzas reflect this duality of the addressee’s role as king and saint, as ‘both a patriotic and a religious hero’, by combining the sonorous and melodious styles of an ode and a song:

I
O Thou, that sit’st upon a throne,
With harp of high majestic tone,
    To praise the King of kings;
And voice of heaven-ascending swell,
5 Which, while its deeper notes excel,
    Clear, as a clarion, rings:
II
To bless each valley, grove and coast,
And charm the cherubs to the post
Of gratitude in throngs;
10 To keep the days on Zion’s mount,
And send the year to his account,
With dances and with songs:206

The classical form of the ode is replaced with a new ‘call and response’ form of Hebraic liturgy in *Jubilate Agno*. This is how it begins in Fragment A:

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb. Nations, and languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life.
Let man and beast appear before him, and magnify his name together. Let Noah and his company approach the throne of Grace, and do homage to the Ark of their Salvation.207

The most extraordinary thing about the poem is its structure:

It was originally composed at a varying rate of one, two, or three pairs of lines a day (where a pair of lines is one line beginning with “Let” and another beginning with “For”). The “Let” lines were grouped on one page, and the corresponding “For” lines on another. W. H. Bond, in his edition of *Jubilate Agno* (1954), worked out the “double” structure of the poem by matching contemporary dates which occasionally occur in both a “Let” and a “For” line. Since several pages have been lost or reworked, for many parts of the poem we have only either the “Let” lines or the “For” lines without the corresponding pairs. … the poem generates meaning both by “vertical” references (that is, between succeeding “Let” lines and between succeeding “For” lines) and by “horizontal” references (that is, between a “Let” line and its corresponding “For” line.

The fact that the “Let” and “For” lines of the poem were written on separate pages might suggest that it was meant for performance of some kind, by two speakers standing apart from one another, one of whom read a “Let” line, followed by the other, who read the corresponding “For” line. The alternate sounding of irregular length lines, in turn, echoes the performance of psalms and canticles in an Anglican church, and brings us back to the title. Antiphonal psalm and canticle singing of this type can still be heard daily in many cathedrals.  

Furthermore, ‘The *Jubilate Agno* testifies to its authorship by a Cambridge academic with an extraordinary facility in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, science, religion, and philosophy.’ Chris Mounsey observes that

It has been argued (Feder 1980) that the *Jubilate Agno* might represent the disordered dimension of a schizoid personality, while the *Song and Psalms* represent the orderly. But such a description falters when we discover on closer scrutiny that the *Jubilate Agno* is marked by as careful an internal and external coherence as are the other works. But, unlike the conventionally metrical poems, the *Jubilate Agno* does not give up its secrets easily.  

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Smart, however, does not claim community with Cambridge scholars or Professors in *Jubilate Agno* as he had done in his Seatonian Prize poems (‘For I pray God for the Professors of the University of Cambridge to attend and to amend.’

\[210\]). It is clear that the difference between Smart’s Seatonian prize poems and later religious poetry lies not merely in the lyrical simplicity of language and form in the later poems, but in a new purposiveness of the poet. Smart’s first departure from conventional rhetoric and formal rigidity comes with his deeply personal *Hymn to the Supreme Being on recovering from a dangerous illness* (1756), the implications of which have been discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. In a later poem on “Melancholy” in *Hymns for the Amusement of Children* Smart hints that the theme of religion in his poetry has become an obsession or a messianic zeal, which can only add to his sufferings but cannot be undone from his being.

O pluck me quick the raven's quill,
And I will set me down,
My destin'd purpose to fulfil,
But with this interrupted skill,
5 Of thought and grief profound.

How to begin, and how depart,
From this sad fav'rite theme,
The man of sorrow in my heart,[1]
I at my own ideas start,
10As dread as Daniel's dream.[2]

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Notes:
1. 8. *The man of sorrow* — the Messiah. Cf. Isaiah 53:3: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not".
2. 10. Prophet Daniel had a dreadful dream described in the 7th chapter of his book. See Daniel 7:1—15: "I Daniel was grieved in my spirit in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head troubled me".

Smart’s later poetry is unique not simply because it can be located within the discourse of a new ‘literature of madness’ that was emerging at the end of the Age of Reason, but because it brings the registers of religion and madness in a harmonious relationship with each other. Smart’s use of the metaphor of musical polyphony in the poem “Energeia” (quoted in Chapter One of this thesis) is very similar to the outburst of madness that Diderot portrays in the eccentric intellectual called Rameau’s nephew, but the polyphony of words achieved by Smart in his later religious poems like *Jubilate Agno* and *A Song to David* is quite different, and might be understood with reference to the mystical philosophy of prayer as propagated by eighteenth century Kabbalists like Bal Shem Tov and the members of the esoteric group called Bet El.

The eighteenth century East European Jewish leader Baal Shem Tov, or the Besht as he was popularly known, advised that study and prayer should be combined towards a stage-by-stage unification of the diverse worlds symbolized.

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by the multiplicity of words by allowing one’s soul to utter ‘a divine name in every word’ and be embraced by them in their stages of ascent towards God, until a complete unification with the divine was achieved.

Whenever you offer prayers and whenever you study, have the intention of unifying a divine name in every word and with every utterance of your lips, for there are worlds, souls and divinity in every letter. These ascend to become united one with the other and then the letters are combined in order to form a word so that there is complete unification with the divine. Allow your soul to become embraced by them at each of the above stages. Thus all words become united and they ascend to that immeasurable rapture and the greatest delight is experienced.\(^\text{212}\)

As the members of the Bet El practiced it, prayer was a form of silent meditation in which ‘music blended with men’s thoughts’ and discovered ‘the soul of the universe’ in each man’s soul through ‘a forgetfulness of externals.’

Amazed at his own discovery of this hidden treasure the mystic pursues his own course upwards until he attains the ecstasy enthroned. In a silence in which alone the soul may meet its God, destroyed worlds are reconstructed and restored to the pristine perfection and this is the aim of \textit{kavvanot}[intentions] – the meditation on the mystic meaning of certain prayers with intention to bring restoration.\(^\text{213}\)

Bringing together his lifelong habit of study and passion for music in the philosophy of prayer that underlies the later religious poems, Smart may well have been responding to these contemporary Jewish practices by amplifying


\(^{213}\) Baal Shem Tov, cited in \textit{Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism}, p. 128.
words and magnifying worlds with a similar mystical ‘intention’ of unifying and restoring the shattered universe of his life and times to God. Arthur Sherbo, in his article “Christopher Smart’s Knowledge of Occult Literature” which refutes William Force Stead’s argument that ‘Smart was versed in the literature of mystical or occult philosophy,’ nevertheless concedes Stead the point that Smart’s ‘ideas and images parallel those of certain mystical writers.’ Sherbo prefers not to confine Smart’s use of occult imagery in *Jubilate Agno* to his knowledge of any one or more authors, but take into account how Smart ‘played with words – their looks, their sounds, their meanings – often’: Sherbo concludes that

(A) great deal of what Stead looks upon as stemming from mystical and occult literature is merely a product of Smart’s imagination...A study of the sources of *Jubilate Agno* is still a desideratum, yet the interest of such a study would almost Surely center in the transformation of the source materials in Smart’s hands.\(^{214}\)

Christopher Smart is now conclusively listed as a religious poet in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Harriet Guest observes in her book *The Religious Poetry of Christopher Smart* that there appears to be a stark disparity between the conventionally Miltonic blank verse of Smart’s early Seatonian Prize poems and the intense exploration of religion in his later poems.

Although Smart wrote the "Seatonian Prize" poems early on, there is a contrast between the mimicked Miltonic blank verse and the intense exploration of religion found in his later works. His first "Seatonian Prize" poem, *On the Eternity of the Supreme Being* is part of two traditional types of religious writing: "authoritative discourse of religious poetry" and "tentative and self-critical discourse of an apparently more personal devotion". In connecting the two, he redefines "the role of the religious poet." By establishing a debate between these two forms, Harriet Guest claims that Smart creates "a poetic space which allows the poet to make provisional, even questionable statements", which are important to his later works. To Guest, Smart, in his religious poems, "is not concerned to offer instruction in Christian conduct."[215]

Although Smart’s overt purpose is to inculcate morals in his last work *Hymns Written for the Amusement of Children* (1771) – which was completed in the debtors’ prison -- its didactic purpose is often merely a pretext for writing a kind of poetry that approaches the haunting beauty of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Some of the hymns which offer stock prescriptions to ‘shun the wily lures of sin’ or advocate charity as a habit of giving alms to the poor are not among his best achievements. For example the following lines in doggerel verse from the hymn “Pray remember the poor”:

I just came by the prison-door,
I gave a penny to the poor:
Papa did this good act approve,
And poor Mama cried out for love.

But when the poems warm up to Smart’s favourite theme of Adoration, such as Hymn XXV entitled “Mirth”, Smart can attain sublime heights even in a children’s poem.

With white and crimson laughs the sky,
With birds the hedge rows ring:
To give the praise to God most high,
And all the sulky fields defy,
Is a most joyful thing.

Linda Feldmeier comments:

Again, there is a note of restraint, but it is not gratuitous. Smart’s vivid sense of the pleasure of a pre-dawn escape into the fields, away from society, is as strong as his moral fervor. If the child is cautioned against the untamed exaltation of the colts [earlier in the poem], it is because Smart saw a more glorious world in the lamb’s pasture. And whether or not we find it an enviable goal, it is true that “blithe security” is the product of a moral universe, and not a natural one.216

Karina Williamson suggests that Smart’s Seatonian Prize poems are ‘taken from the common stock’217 of ideas called ‘physico-theology’—an eighteenth century British extension of the discourse of natural philosophy which attempted to reconcile Newtonian science with the official tenets of Christianity. In the essay “Christopher Smart and Heresy,” Karina Side had discussed Smart’s anti-Newtonian position as Trinitarian (falling back upon ‘the concept of the tri-partite nature of man’ according to Robert Brittain), but she refuses to see this

as a theory of trichotomy and therefore, a heresy. She confirms that ‘the idea of man as trinity had other champions in the eighteenth century.’ But in his later poems beginning with *Jubilate Agno*, Smart not only adopts an anti-Newtonian position to break away from the bounds of physico-theology, but engages in a discourse that has affinities with mystical negative theology and Hermetic tradition, as the last section of this Chapter will show.

In *Jubilate Agno* Smart praises Newton’s chastity (‘For CHASTITY is the key of knowledge as in Esdras, Sir Isaac Newton and now, God be praised, in me.’) but rejects Newtonian science in unequivocal terms (‘For Newton nevertheless is more of error than of the truth, but I am of the WORD of GOD.’). Similarly, he denounces Lockean empiricism as the foundation of atheism (‘For Lock supposes that an human creature, at a given time may be an atheist i.e. without God, by the folly of his doctrine concerning innate ideas./For it is not lawful to sell poyson in England any more than it is in Venice, the Lord restrain both the finder and the receiver.’). Edward Joseph Katz observes:

The poet-prophet extends his assault on modernity by calling into question the materialism of a different order, that is, the foundations of a materialist understanding of nature, as advanced in Newton’s *Principia* (1687). In the For lines of B 160-63, Smart rewrites the first five of Newton’s principles:

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For MATTER is the dust of the Earth, every atom of which is the life. For MOTION is as the quantity of life direct, and that which hath not motion, is resistance. For Resistance is not of GOD, but he -- hath built his works upon it. For the Centripetal and Centrifugal forces are GOD SUSTAINING and DIRECTING.  

Most conclusively and authoritatively, Karina Williamson notes that as Smart ‘had never repudiated scientific explanation as such’ in his earlier poems which combined ‘admiration for the genius of Newton with scepticism about the capacity of human reason to comprehend the mysteries of Nature,’ ‘Smart’s outright rejection of Newtonian science in *Jubilate Agno* was a new feature of his poetry.’

Emma Mason observes that ‘eighteenth-century treatises on poetry tend to launch into the defense of the religious hymn, heralding it as the genre most able to teach us, in Pope’s words, “Things unknown”, both cognitive and emotional (*Essay on Criticism*, l. 575, in Pope 1988).’

As the most profound of all that is inexplicable, God was considered a tricky subject best approached through a form able to handle mystery gently, releasing the reader from the strictures of reason and into the realms of religious experience. Milton had already stressed the significance of poetry for a

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221 Edward Joseph Katz, ““Action and Speaking Are One”,” *Christopher Smart and the Enlightenment*, p. 56.
thorough, general education and stated that while philosophical rhetoric was perhaps more subtly complex, poetry was “more simple, sensuous and passionate,” able to speak to the heart as well as the mind (Milton 1951: 68). Nature was not simply a witness to the existence of God. It was also a force able to both humble and uplift the reader of religious poetry into an aestheticized state of worship. James Thomson argued to that effect in the *The Seasons* (1726–30) and wrote in his “Preface” to the second edition of “Winter” that poetry had the power to “unworld” believers, awakening them to reflect upon and deeply feel their natural environment (Irlam 1999). Mason quotes Aaron Hill’s *Judgment-Day, A Poem* (1721) as an example of the kind of religious poetry that was being written in the early eighteenth century.

_Worlds against Worlds, with clashing Horror driv’n,_  
Dash their broad _Ruins_ to the _Throne_ of Heav’n!  
Thro’ flaming Regions of the burning Air,  
Down rain distilling Suns, in liquid Rills,  
Mix’d with red Mountains of unmelted Fire!  
Hissing, perplex’d, with _Show’rs_ of Icy Hills,  
And _Cat’ract_ Seas, that _roar_ , from _Worlds_ still higher;  
Mingled, like driving _Hail_ , they _pour_ along,  
And, _thund’ring_ , on our ruin’d _System_ fall!  
(ll. 205–13)

The terror induced by even the idea of the final day had long captured the poetical imagination: Watts was aghast by the “shrill Outcries of the guilty Wretches” who are gnawed from within by the “living Worm” (*Judgment-Day*, ll. 17, 19).

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This fear of the Judgement Day was transferred to mid eighteenth century pre-romantic poetry, where ‘the horror of the last day was magnified by Newton’s discoveries, the final destruction of the universe all the more shocking given its size and reach.’ Edward Young’s *The Complaint or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742) was a particularly successful poem in this era because of its capacity to ‘lyrically blend the epic realms of the universe with the quiet and elegiac emotions of the graveyard.’\(^{226}\) Much of it was a rumination of the brief and miserable existence of human beings: “‘How poor, how rich, how abject, how august, /How complicate, how wonderful, is Man!’… (i. 68–9)”. Contemporary readers were especially touched by the narrator’s assurance that “Nothing can satisfy, but what confounds; / Nothing, but what astonishes, is true” (ix. 836–7).\(^{227}\)

As Harriet Guest argues, Young, addressing a public audience in what appears a private moment, unites his readers in a virtual congregation, desocializing them from individual influences in order to heighten the impact of his didactic and devotional message (Guest 1989: 65).

Smart, however, considered Young misguided in his attempt to disperse readers only to unite them in shared isolation. For Smart, the poet’s role was to revive adoration in believers and gather them in real, not imagined, communities of faith. This purpose is underlined by the antiphonal structure of his own universe poem, *Jubilate Agno*, structured as a series of psalm-like verses each beginning with the word “Let” or “For.” Always concerned to build communities, Smart used his poem as a space to argue for liturgical reform of the kind that would invite more believers in:

\(^{226}\) Emma Mason, “Poetry and Religion,” p. 64.

\(^{227}\) Edward Young, *The Complaint or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742) cited in Mason, p. 65.
For it would be better if the liturgy were musically performed. [...] 
For it were better for the service, if only select psalms were read. 
(B511) 228

Clement Hawes, in his essay “The Utopian Public Sphere:
Intersubjectivity in Jubilate Agno,” has argued that ‘the peculiar mode of
authorship projected by Jubilate Agno’ cannot be explained in terms of ‘the
specifically eighteenth century configuration of public-private relations’ if one
looks only at ‘the poem’s public – if otherworldly—dimensions’ or ‘its secular,
but seemingly cryptic and hermetically private, aspects’ without attempting to
analyze their interrelated nature.229 He traces in Jubilate Agno a kind of
rhizomatic or ‘root-like and endlessly ramifying structure of enunciation
designed … to mobilize novel infiltrations between the space of private
subjectivity and that of public reflection.’

The most telling illustration of Smart’s reconfiguration of public and
private in Jubilate Agno is perhaps found in the arrangement of the poem
itself on the page. Indeed, Smart’s call-and-response form is so unusual in
the original manuscript, in which lines beginning with “Let” and “For”
are linked across discrete folio pages, that it constitutes a notable crux of
editorial presentation. Although Jubilate Agno survives only in
fragments, the intact portions of Fragments B and C are evidently
organized by Smart’s pairing of a line beginning with “Let” with an
answering versicle beginning with “For.” The “Let” lines ritually
juxtapose an individual human being with another of God’s species so
that the pair can rejoice together: “Let man and beast appear before him,
and magnify his name together” (A5). Jubilate Agno thus strives to

imagine an entire cosmos of God’s creatures – animals no less than people – worshipping together.\textsuperscript{230}

It is also important to remember, as Emma Mason reminds us, that Smart’s focus in his religious poems was on a different kind of universe than in the majority of poems written in the eighteenth century in that it spilled beyond the human world.

Smart considered Newton’s vision to be alien and cold, straying from the warm love of God:...For Smart, then, the universe is not an immense cosmos but the “Word,” that which signifies at once the spirit, or energy of life, the Bible, and Christ, who himself embodies all believers and creatures: “For I have a providential acquaintance with men who bear the names of animals. . . . For I bless God to Mr Lion Mr Cock Mr Cat Mr Talbot Mr Hart Mrs Fysh Mr Grub, and Miss Lamb” (B113–14). It is not surprising that Noah’s Ark offered Smart a metaphor for this divine body, one in which everything is translated back into Christ, including, famously, his “Cat Jeoffry” (B695).\textsuperscript{231}

Hawes points out further that if the “Let” and “For” lines are arranged side by side, as in W. H. Bond’s bicolumnar edition, they enable us to understand how \textit{Jubilate Agno} becomes ‘a remarkable attempt to reimagine bourgeois domesticity’ by drawing attention to a ‘criss-crossing’ or a ‘transverse relationship’ between the “For” and “Let” lines of different pairs, as for example, in the following lines:

\textsuperscript{230} Hawes, “The Utopian Public Sphere,” p. 199.
\textsuperscript{231} Emma Mason, “Poetry and Religion,” p. 66.
Let Ibhar Rejoice with the Pochard – a child born in prosperity is the chiefest blessing of peace.  
For I bless God for my retreat at CANBURY, as it was the place of the nativity of my children.

(Bond, B1 75)

Let Elishua rejoice with Cantharis – God send food bread and milk to the children.  
For I pray to God to give them which I cannot earn for them any otherwise than by prayer.

(Bond, B1 76)²³²

**Smart and the poetics of Enthusiasm**

The uniqueness of Smart’s religious poetry also needs to be situated in the context of contemporary discourses of enthusiasm and the Sublime. Enthusiasm – literally “the god within,” from the Greek *en-theos*— ‘stood for a belief that people could be immediately connected to the divine, and could use this connection as a source of inspiration and power in speaking, writing, and acting.’²³³ In the eighteenth century, however, the word gathered associations of religious schism and fanaticism even though in the seventeenth century it was seen as a mark of Protestant radicalism. Morillo writes:

> Although disputes over enthusiasm heat up throughout Enlightenment Europe, its legacy in Britain is especially contested thanks to its historical relationship to the English Civil Wars (1641–60) and Protestant sectarianism. Consequently, modern studies of the importance of

²³² See Hawes, “The Utopian Public Sphere,” p. 201.
enthusiasm’s simultaneously religious and political ideals to the artistic craft of writing verse in Britain typically begin in that period of unprecedented civil turmoil, when radical Protestants were transformed into architects of the first modern European state. Enthusiasm, whether seen as hero or villain, helped England to do the astonishing: to abolish both its hereditary monarchy and its state church.234

Swift, ‘the fiery Jeremiah of the anti-enthusiasts,’ had represented enthusiasm ‘as one of many malignant forms of Proteus, the changeling god’ in his “Ode to the Athenian Society” (1692):

This “surly, slippery god” (l. 197) appears in the guise of “madmen and the wits, philosophers and fools, / With all that factious or enthusiastic dotards dream” (ll. 203–4). Proteus, emblem of multiplied meanings, can “contrive to shock your minds, with many a senseless doubt” (l. 207). Enthusiasts are dotards, fools, and dupes; and such remains Swift’s view in his later brilliant examination of reading, interpretation, and knowledge, A Tale of a Tub (1704).235

While Dryden and Locke were the greatest detractors of enthusiasm in the seventeenth century, John Dennis was the first eighteenth century advocate of enthusiasm in poetry. In his Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry (1701) and its sequel, The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704), Dennis redefined enthusiasm as a subset of passion and argued that in the best poetry ‘readers are not carried away to ungrounded fancies, tumults, and anarchy, but instead are transported to calm heavenly contemplation and spiritual inner peace’:

234 Morillo, “Poetic Enthusiasm,” p. 70.
Religious ideas, for Dennis, are the indispensable source of sublimity: ‘never any Passage had all these Marks [of sublimity] . . . unless it were Religious’ (Dennis 1939–43: vol. 1, 361). Irlam writes that

as the century unfolds, the religious tinctures of the sublime will slowly fade, leaving behind a nature suffused with meaning, the natural sublime. This is not to imply that devotional poetry disappears; rather, it establishes a lively parallel tradition that persists through the eighteenth century. It should be underscored that Nature is never quite itself in the natural sublime, but always a vehicle, a medium for some other freight of meaning: that is, finite nature becomes an expression of infinity, divinity, spirit, the essence or nature of nature.  

However, as Irlam notes, eighteenth century poetry shifts from the ‘religious sublime’ to split into the ‘natural sublime’ on the one hand and the ‘rhetorical’ or ‘textual’ sublime on the other. Irlam writes:

Although eighteenth-century poetry shared with literature, music, and the fine arts the vogue for the natural sublime, one should not repeat Baillie’s mistake of supposing that the rhetorical sublime was merely a servant of the natural sublime, that “the sublime in writing is no more than a description of the sublime in nature” (Ashfield and de Bolla 1996: 88).
Passing from the religious to the natural, the concept of the sublime in the mid-eighteenth century was acknowledged as a ‘striving to represent the unrepresentable and for understanding how phenomena and experiences might escape understanding.’

Kant, in the fullest statement on the sublime to emerge from the eighteenth century, is barely interested in literature at all. In its stead emerges an attention first to the religious sublime and, through its mediation, the ushering forth of the natural sublime. The attention to the natural sublime in the eighteenth century signals the locus of the divine in a minor key, appropriate to an age (the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment, etc.) grown increasingly secular, rationalistic, and generally more circumspect about theological matters. However, theories of the sublime still fail to switch comfortably from rhetoric to nature, from the textual to the nontextual or extratextual. This distinction collapses in the issue of representation. Both the textual sublime and the natural sublime ultimately depend upon an idiom of representation, whether this be linguistic representation (rhetoric) or representation mediated through some perceptual or ideational apparatus like the Imagination as it apprehends a sublime object (nature).²³⁹

Smart’s poetry is a memorable product of his times because it documents the interface between the religious sublime and the natural sublime, in a language that can only hint at the meaning of meanings in nature without presuming the capacity to express it. In that sense it is also a record of a human lack of knowledge, a ‘non-knowledge’ or agnoia, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter. I will now go on to analyse certain passages from Smart’s pre madness poetry to show how it is already departing from the dominant eighteenth century associations of the sublime with terror and pain, as

proposed by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Here he defines the source of the sublime as follows:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.  

Unlike the dominant Burkean idea of the sublime which permeates late eighteenth century poetry of Nature, encountering the majestic imprint of God in Nature does not arouse terror in Smart’s religious poems.

The second-last Seatonian Prize poem that Smart wrote in his ‘sanity,’ entitled *On the Power of the Supreme Being* (1754), begins with a Burkean exhortation to feel the Sublime power of God in Nature:

' TREMBLE, thou Earth!' th' anointed poet said,  
'At God's bright presence, tremble, all ye mountains,  
And all ye hillocks on the surface bound.'  
Then once again, ye glorious thunders roll,  
The Muse with transport hears ye, once again  
Convulse the solid continent, and shake,  
Grand music of omnipotence, the isles.

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'Tis thy terrific voice, thou God of power,
'Tis thy terrific voice; all Nature hears it
Awaken'd and alarm'd; she feels its force,
In every spring she feels it, every wheel,
And every movement of her vast machine.\textsuperscript{241}

In the next few lines the poem seems to open up a dialogue on the sublime with Longinus, mediated through his Burkean adaptation, by referring to the mountains (notably Alps) and the oceans which evoke the grandeur of God's power, but also tremble under its sway:

Behold! quakes Apennine, behold! recoils
Athos, and all the hoary-headed Alps
Leap from their bases at the godlike sound.
But what is this, celestial though the note,
And proclamation of the reign supreme,
Compared with such as, for a mortal ear
Too great, amaze the incorporeal worlds?
Shou'd ocean to his congregated waves
Call in each river, cataract, and lake,
And with the watery world down a huge rock
Fall headlong in one horrible cascade,
'Twere but the echo of the parting breeze,
When Zephyr faints upon the lilly's breast,
'Twere but the ceasing of some instrument,
When the last lingering undulation
Dies on the doubting ear, if named (check) with sounds
So mighty! so stupendous! so divine!\textsuperscript{242}

The closing line of this passage has an ironic ring, anticipating the turn that the ode takes in its middle, when it urges the terrifying forces of nature to acknowledge the creator's love magnified 'in works of a minuter mould:'

\textsuperscript{241} Christopher Smart, “On the Power of the Supreme Being” (1754), The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, pp. 236-237
Wherefore, ye objects terrible and great,
Ye thunders, earthquakes, and ye fire-fraught wombs
Of fell volcanoes, whirlwinds, hurricanes,
And boiling billows hail! in chorus join
To celebrate and magnify your Maker,
Who yet in works of a minuter mould
Is not less manifest, is not less mighty.
Survey the magnet's sympathetic love,
That woos the yielding needle; contemplate
Th' attractive amber's power, invisible
Ev'n to the mental eye; or when the blow
Sent from th' electric sphere assaults thy frame,
Shew me the hand, that dealt it!—baffled here
By his omnipotence, Philosophy
Slowly her thoughts inadequate revolves,
And stands, with all his circling wonders round her,
Like heavy Saturn in th' ethereal space
Begirt with an inexplicable ring.²⁴³

The poem makes a radical political point by suggesting that the executive machinery of God in the destructive forces of Nature is a ‘dread theocracy’ where God’s power is not held ‘alone’:

But not alone in the aerial vault
Does he the dread theocracy maintain;²⁴⁴

The poem ends with a reminder of the ‘supreme, unutterable mercy’ of God and hope for the new millennium to be ushered in by Christ. Smart has not yet started writing his religious poetry representing the weak, the meek and even the devious creatures of nature in their supplication to God, but the following lines suggest quite clearly which way his sympathy lies:

O love unequal'd, mystery immense,
Which angels long t'unfold! 'tis man's redemption
That crowns thy glory, and thy pow'r confirms,
Confirms the great, th' uncontroverted claim
When from the Virgin's unpolluted womb,
Shone forth the Sun of Righteousness reveal'd
And on benighted reason pour'd the day;
'Let there be peace' (he said) and all was calm
Amongst the warring world—calm as the sea,
When 'O, be still, ye boisterous winds,' he cry'd,
And not a breath was blown, nor murmur heard.
His was a life of miracles and might,
And charity and love, ere yet he taste
The bitter draught of death, ere yet he rise
Victorious o'er the universal foe,
And Death, and Sin and Hell in triumph lead,
His by the right of conquest is mankind,
And in sweet servitude and golden bonds
Were ty'd to him for ever.—O how easy
Is his ungalling Yoke, and all his burdens
'Tis ecstasy to bear! Him, blessed Shepherd,
His flocks shall follow through the maze of life,
And shades that tend to Day-spring from on high,
And as the radiant roses, after fading,
In fuller foliage and more fragrant breath
Revive in smiling spring, so shall it fare
With those that love him—for sweet is their savour,
And all eternity shall be their spring.245

In all of Smart’s Seatonian poems, as well as in “A Song to David,”

Smart’s central theme is that ‘the harmony, beauty and intricacy of creation
show forth the glory of God.’ As R. D. Stock notes, the space given to biblical
and explicitly Christian matter gradually expands through the Seatonian poems,
almost with a resolve to dispel the demoniac and the terrible.

The first two poems often strike the rationalistic tone of Pope or Thomson; but in the third Smart refers plainly to the fall of man and original sin, in the fourth to the Old Testament miracles and Christ, and in the fifth and last he introduces David in his office as an exorcist. The effect of David’s harp is compared with that of Orpheus’: he “Drove trembling Satan from the heart of Saul./ And quell’d the evil Angel.”

In “A Song to David” and the imagery of divine music in *Jubilate Agno*, that is to say, in Smart’s so called poetry of madness, there is a still higher sublimation of fear:

The earlier figures – Orpheus the divine harper, David the harper and exorcist, Christ the Healer and Exorcist – are now associated with the Godhead directly, and their sanative, restorative powers with the actual creation. Weird, not mad, is the image of the angels emanating from God’s harp, and there is surely a wise artfulness in moving from the harp’s stupendous melody to the stillness and serenity of the soul. Here is devotional poetry with an uncommon luminousness and shimmer. The anthropomorphic note so blaring in Watts and disdained as crude by Pope, Thomson and Hume, is here more finely tuned, and heavenly harps have been rescued, however briefly, from their usual vulgarity.

Smart’s poetry of madness, therefore integrates both religious and natural sublime with the rhetoric of the sublime that he so majestically wields in *Jubilate Agno*. In his essay on the eighteenth century discourse of the sublime, Shaun Irlam writes that the sublime – as an expression of violent emotional agitation – was often articulated through bombastic effects attempting to convey the impressions of the natural objects exactly as they might be perceived by the senses.

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For Dennis, the sublime encounter is measured by the violence of emotional agitation it provokes, an axiom that inevitably led to much bombastic fishing for sublime effect: “For the Spirits being set in a violent Emotion, and the Imagination being fir’d by that Agitation; and the Brain being deeply penetrated by those Impressions, the very Objects themselves are set as it were before us” (Dennis 1939–43: vol. 1,363). From such a conception, it comes as no surprise that terror and cognate affective states become the natural habitat of the sublime. Already apparent here is how the natural and rhetorical sublime overlap in the idiom of representation; in this encounter with the natural sublime, the brain, like a wax tablet, is forcefully engraved with “Impressions” which reproduce the object, “set as it were before us.”

Smart’s poetry is exempt from these rhetorical and empirical excesses of pre-romanticism. Marcus Walsh points out that ‘Smart’s poetry is characterized, especially after the madhouse years, by nonvisual modes, the conceit, the pun, the metaphor, and the allusion.’ Such poetry is quite rare in the days of pre-romantic imagination, which expressed itself most characteristically in Newtonian imagery of light and colour. Smart’s unparalleled skill as a poet lies in keeping the reader aware of both the immateriality and the materiality of a figurative expression, as exemplified in his very different way of defining and applying the word ‘impression’ to his own art of writing poetry. This brings us to the last contextual link of Smart’s religious poetry with the discourse of critical theory and poetic practice that was later termed ‘pre-Romanticism’ by literary historians.

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249 Marcus Walsh, “Community of Mind,” Christopher Smart and the Age of Enlightenment, p. 33.
It has been observed that Smart’s understanding of figuration in his own poetry was ‘the poetics of what he himself terms Impression’ and ‘serves to bring into focus the Enlightenment’s impact on language and rhetoric.’\(^{250}\) In the preface to his verse translation of Horace (1767) Smart defines Impression as arising out of ‘a quasi divine forcefulness or immediacy.’

Impression then, is a talent or gift of Almighty God, by which a Genius is impowered to throw an emphasis upon a word or sentence in such wise, that it cannot escape any reader of sheer good sense, and true critical sagacity.\(^{251}\)

Smart confesses ‘this virtue to be far more powerful and abundant in the sacred writings’\(^{252}\) than in poetry, which shows that for him it was more spiritual than sensational, and far from being a conscious rhetorical exercise for the poet, as Hawes observes. Anticipating this doctrine, Smart had elaborated in *Jubilate Agno* ‘a metaphor from type-founding in which the reader casts the image that Smart has ―impressed‖ into the mold of his language’\(^{253}\):

> For my talent is to give an impression upon words by punching, that when the reader casts his eye upon ‘em he takes up the image from the mould which I have made (B 404)\(^{254}\)

‘Impression’ in Smart’s poetry is thus no longer burdened with an essentially Lockean meaning of sensory perception; nor does it suggest a spiritual

\(^{250}\) Clement Hawes, “Introduction,” *Christopher Smart and the Age of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

\(^{251}\) Christopher Smart, “Preface to the Horace Verse Translation” … (1767), quoted in Clement Hawes, “Introduction,” *Christopher Smart and the Age of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

\(^{252}\) Ibid.

\(^{253}\) Clement Hawes, “Introduction,” *Christopher Smart and the Age of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

\(^{254}\) Christopher Smart, Jubilate Agno Fragment B, line 404, quoted in Clement Hawes, “Introduction,” p. 6.
unworldliness that is characteristic of the mystical poet. Hawes notes in particular the suggestion of a plastic artistic medium that Smart’s use of the word is redolent with:

Smart’s highly sedimented notion of impression depends on a “violent imprinting” metaphor derived from the technology of print culture, and it condenses a number of themes and issues around origins, copying, mechanical reproduction, novelty, sensory perception, and memory. If the term ultimately derives from Locke’s usage, it probably does so antithetically…  

This non-representational idea of ‘impression’, which leaves so much to the discerning reader’s capacity for reading, and to responding creatively to the poet’s private – almost esoteric – imagery, carries a number of suggestions in Smart’s Preface to the translation of Horace. According to Todd Parker it ‘marks a text as somehow eccentric, somehow beyond the “prosaic.”’

“Impression” as an aesthetic criterion creates a vertical hierarchy of readers and, by doing so, leaves aesthetically less sophisticated readers with an imperfect understanding of a particular text’s full rhetorical significance – a significance akin to that of a parable.  

Smart’s perception of himself as a poet of Impressions (as he writes in Fragment B line 404) therefore draws attention to the adept reader’s participation in creating meaning, which is not only a mark of their aesthetic or

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literary sophistication, as Parker notes, but also a spiritual qualification that ensures the transmission of an esoteric language between the poet and the reader.

Even though Smart’s later poems show thematic similarities with the poets now branded as pre-Romantic, Smart’s religious poetry stands wide apart from the essentially secular representation of nature in pre-romantic poetry. For Smart, Nature is forever imprinted with the signature of God. As Thomas Woodman suggests, it is very difficult to fit Smart into the literary historical narrative of a transition from Augustanism to Pre Romanticism in the mid-eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{257} Discussing the two most representative works of pre-Romantic poetry, Thomson’s \textit{Seasons} and Akenside’s \textit{The Pleasures of Imagination}, Woodman remarks:

As we have seen, nature was increasingly associated with subjective moods and thus blended in with the growing interest in individual psychology and the imagination. The cult of the sublime was also linked with the concern for the expression of the passions, and the latter in turn modulated into sentiment and sensibility in this so-called Age of Reason. Blanford Parker argues for a Protestant revival at about this time, reflected in Young’s \textit{Night Thoughts} (1742–5), although Young’s work is also striking in its more subjective emotionalism (Parker 1998: 219–30). \textit{But with Christopher Smart a true Christian sublime is attained}, and later in the century William Cowper’s evangelicalism takes the dual form of sensibility and criticism of his society. The passions and the sublime in Gray and Collins are secularized, however, as we have also seen with their predecessor Thomson.\textsuperscript{258} (Italics mine)

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Smart is thus singular in his representation of the ‘true Christian sublime’ of nature, which is neither steeped in Newtonian admiration of cosmic laws nor in secularized criticism of society.

Marshall Brown suggests that Pre-romantic poetry is characterized by a ‘foregrounding of subjective consciousness and the subjective self’, which leads to a new discourse of ‘the self-image and role of the poet.’ But as Woodman points out that Smart’s poetry, however subjective, does not give expression to a poetics of subjectivity:

Smart once again is different here, although he may not at first seem so. In assimilating his voice to that of the prophet-poet King David, Smart makes use of Christian typology in which the believer actually becomes that which is imaged.

Woodman thinks that the pre-romantic poets’ aspiration to the sublime often caused them to cull their diction from a ‘more traditional high style than is usual with either the Augustans or the Romantics.’ Gray wrote in a letter, for example, that the “language of the age is never the language of poetry” (letter to Richard West, 1742, in Gray 1971: vol. 1, 192). Woodman also observes that the dominant political ethos of preromantic poems is a kind of ‘civic humanism.’

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261 Ibid.
As with the Augustans, however, even when these poets write more plainly, a certain elite politeness may remain, and there is some degree either of condescension or of self-conscious sentimentality when they deal with lower-class subjects.\(^{263}\)

Smart’s perspective, though not as radically different in its class position as that of Burns or Blake, distinctly foregrounds the lowly and the bestial, and there is very little adherence to the norms of elite politeness in the language and style of *Jubilate Agno*. Woodman concludes:

Both Burns’s popular poems and Blake’s *Songs* mark a deep inversion of traditional norms in this respect, and show that genuine simplicity still remains an option. Blake, of course, an “Early Romantic” in the fullest sense, goes much further in creating … a radical mythic structure that is able to link the visionary with the ordinary, to bring the transcendent back together again with the real and the human. Wordsworth’s myth of nature achieves a similar purpose. Only Smart, among the poets discussed earlier in the chapter, with his remarkably realized re-presentation of a more orthodox Christianity, was able to bring about anything quite like this.\(^{264}\)

Smart so vehemently rejects the culture of politeness and the ethos of civic humanism in seeking benediction for animals in *Jubilate Agno* that this act of rejection might be said to constitute the core of his radicalism, as I shall argue in the last chapter.

\(^{264}\) Ibid.