

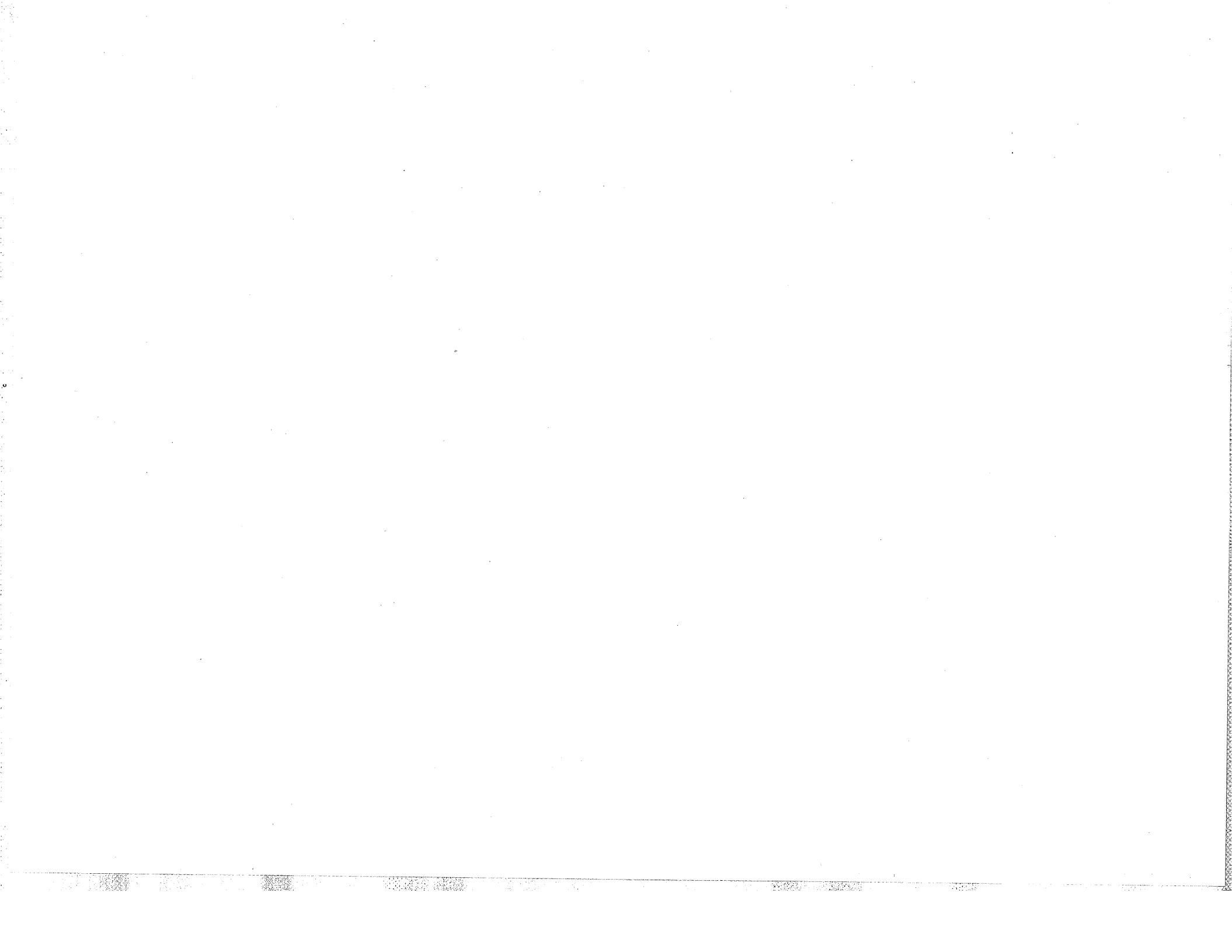
ORDER, IDENTITY, AND HARMONY
IN THE RELIGIOUS POETRY
OF CHRISTOPHER SMART

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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October 1970





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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Until recently "A Song to David" has been considered radically different from Christopher Smart's early poetry. Recent criticism has shown that, though of a higher quality, the "Song" is of a piece with his early work. No satisfactory reason has been given for the excellence of the "Song," however. This study emphasizes the differences between the early and late poetry, and finds the explanation for these differences in Smart's concepts of "identity," and the spirituality of all created things.

During his confinement for madness Smart recorded in Jubilate Agno his thoughts on religion, science, and Nature. These thoughts reveal a Berkeleian belief in the spirituality of the universe. This spirituality means for Smart that all things are of equal importance and praise the One who gave them life. It also means that things can be identical in that the property of one can become the property of another (trees blossom, not with fruit, but with gems). Since things spiritual are

particularly real, all things are real, even words and ideas. This means that words (which are real, i.e. have substance) are the things they represent, and sounds are what they represent (KAAT is cat).

The Seatonian poems were written before these ideas were evolved and articulated. Because of this, and because in them Smart attempts a Miltonic style, the poems are a failure. Images are lost in circumlocution, unnecessary periphrasis abounds, and his favourite devices, catalogue, repetition, and parallelism, are not well used. Nature is viewed within the order of the Great Chain of Being, and its praise of God is lifeless and dead.

Jubilate Agno is Smart's first attempt to put "identity" into practice. The work is incomplete and was not intended for publication, but it does contain lines and even passages of exquisite beauty.

The Hymns and Spiritual Songs exhibits a harmony of structure and theme, although its style is sometimes poor. The inter-play between the natural and the supernatural within the cycle of the Church year and the changing seasons makes it clear that man's (and Nature's) spiritual condition is ultimately what concerns Smart. Both this concern and the delightful descriptions of Nature are made possible by the spirituality of Nature and by "identity."

"A Song to David" is the finest expression of Smart's ideas. Although criticised for being obscure, irrelevant

in places, and too rigidly structured, this study shows that its themes are clear throughout, that all its sections are pertinent to the thematic strains, and that structure, theme, and style merge into one expression. The sweet and strong harmony which results is again made possible by the successful application of the concepts of "identity," and the spirituality of Nature, to structure, theme, and style.

Thus the two basic Smartian problems (the excellence of some of the later poetry within the bulk of the mediocrity of his verse, and the significance and effect of his confinement for madness) are seen as intimately related. The concepts articulated in Jubilate Agno during his confinement help explain the harmony produced in "A Song to David" and Hymns and Spiritual Songs. This study, then, sees Smart's poetry as a progression from order, through "identity," to harmony.

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INTRODUCTION

Two problems have confronted every student of Christopher Smart's life and poetry: the brilliance of "A Song to David" within the mediocrity of the bulk of his verse, and the significance and effect of his seven-year confinement for madness. These problems are fundamental. All criticism and all biography must take them both into account, for in Smart's case the critical and the biographical support each other perhaps more than in most cases. However, although everyone has agreed that these questions are basic, the last two hundred years have seen a wide variety of answers and explanations.

The explanations began during Smart's lifetime, finding their way into reviews of his post-confinement poetry. These were not explanations of the brilliance of "A Song to David," but rather explanations of how and why it is so different from, and thus poorer than, his earlier poetry. The reason for the deterioration, it was thought, was Smart's madness. Thus The Monthly Review, though prepared to be fair, did little more than express its pity:

From the sufferings of this ingenious Gentleman,
we could not but expect the performance before us
[A Song to David] to be greatly irregular;

.....
It would be cruel, however, to insist on the slight

defects and singularities of this piece, for many reasons; and more especially if it be true, as we are informed, that it was written when the Author was denied the use of pen, ink, and paper, and was obliged to indent his lines with the end of a key, upon the wainscot.¹

The Critical Review dismissed "A Song to David" as an "extatic song" and "a fine piece of ruins."²

The nineteenth century viewed the problem in a different light, but its explanation was no more satisfactory. Its solution, of course Romantic in nature, stated that the unquestionable excellence of the "Song" resulted from Smart's madness, that it was written in a fit of inspired ecstasy, and that in this way Smart once was enabled to transcend the limiting conventions of his day in which he was before and after pitifully trapped.³ It is a compelling explanation, but its weakness is that it categorizes Smart as the author of a single poem, thus discouraging study of his other work, religious and secular.

The twentieth century has offered a number of different explanations for the two problems, largely in reaction to the Romantic explanation. It has hinted that study of the early secular poetry will raise much

¹The Monthly Review, 1763, quoted in The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, ed. Norman Callan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949), I xlvi-xlvii.

²Ibid., p. xlv.

³See Robert Browning, "Parleyings with Certain People," in The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1890), VI, 312-318.

of it out of mediocrity;¹ it has stated that, although the "Song" is undoubtedly his masterpiece, "it is of a piece with his other religious verse--finer, stronger, sweeter, but of the same substance."² The most significant contribution of this century, however, has been the 1939 publication of Jubilate Agno,³ a document which was written during Smart's confinement and is thought to be the key to solving the basic problems of Smartian criticism. Perhaps the most fruitful result of that discovery has been Sophia Blaydes' demonstration that, although the eighteenth century could not or would not recognize the fact, Smart's later poetry, and particularly "A Song to David," conform in every important way to eighteenth century poetic theory.⁴

The other results of the discovery of Jubilate Agno have been disappointing, as scholars have chosen to track down Smart's allusions, unravel his puns, trace his sources, and indulge in biographical speculation.⁵ Thus Ainsworth and Noyes evade both of the basic questions:

¹See Donald Davie, The Late Augustans (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1958), p. xxviii.

²E. Ainsworth and C. Noyes, Christopher Smart, University of Missouri Studies XVIII, No. 4, (1943), p. 110.

³William Force Stead first edited the manuscript under the title Rejoice in the Lamb (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1939).

⁴Sophia Blaydes, Christopher Smart as a Poet of his Time (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1966).

⁵See especially Charles Parish, "Christopher Smart's Knowledge of Hebrew," Studies in Philology, LVIII (1961), 516-532.

In none of these pastoral experiments such as "The Hop-Garden" did Smart's genuine passion for the country and for every form of natural life find that rich and glowing expression in which it was to be clothed in the "Song to David"....Only after sickness, madness, and suffering was he able to "light language straight from thing," [sic] to see all clear, and to maintain a noble strain without a falter.¹

All of which is tantamount to saying nothing. And Arthur Sherbo's recent biography does little more than repeat at length this statement of the obvious.²

Now that the work of Ainsworth, Noyes, and Blaydes has demonstrated that the poet who wrote the Seatonian poems is the same one who wrote "A Song to David," and that the later religious poetry can be placed within the mainstream of eighteenth-century poetics, it is surely safe and perhaps now time to point to the differences between the early and the late religious poetry and thus once again to appreciate Smart's uniqueness. This can certainly be done without repeating the injurious excesses of the past. To rest content with Christopher Smart established comfortably as a typical eighteenth century poet is a mistake as serious as to pigeon-hole him as a madman who wrote one poem.

Robert Browning was the first to point out a certain characteristic of "A Song to David" which distinguishes it

¹Ainsworth and Noyes, op. cit., p. 53.

²Arthur Sherbo, Christopher Smart: Scholar of the University (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967). For a concurring opinion on Sherbo's book see the review by Patricia Spacks, "Wit and Madness," Yale Review, LVII, (1968), 285-290.

from the early religious poetry. "Smart," he said, "...pierced the screen/'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul."¹ In other words, Smart saw and communicated an identity between what a thing actually is and the words which represent that thing. It is quite remarkable that Browning saw this long before the publication of Jubilate Agno, for it is in this work that Smart evolves, articulates and puts into practice this theory of "identity"--that a word is what it represents.

What Browning did not seem to grasp is that this concept is only a part of a much larger theory of "identity" whose poetic application further distinguishes the later from the earlier poetry. This theory, also found in Jubilate Agno, states that all phenomena are spiritually motivated, a fact which has important implications. It means that all Nature is on the same spiritual level, and, in a sense which will be explained in Chapter One, identical. The ordering philosophy of the Seatonian poems, on the other hand, is the Great Chain of Being, a theory which divides all created things into degrees of spiritual importance. This is not to say that the failure of the Seatonian poems is due directly to Smart's use of the Chain (the attempt to imitate Milton shoulders much of the blame for that), but it does mean that much of the uniqueness of his later poetry, uniqueness not found in the earlier work, is due to a new vision of Nature as

¹Browning, op. cit., p. 314.