

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER SMART'S  
A SONG TO DAVID

by

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## ABSTRACT

## I

The Origins of A Song to David

This chapter deals with the outlook of the poet, his re-dedication to the service of God, his Hymn to the Supreme Being (1756), his madness and confinement, Jubilate Agno, and references to the Psalms and A Song to David in the Jubilate Agno.

## II

## (i) The Form and Structure of the Poem

A Song to David is a poem of praise, a paean bringing in the whole of the cosmos. As such it takes its origin from the Psalms of David. Smart prepared himself for the triumph of the Song by writing his Seatonian poems on the attributes of the Supreme Being. The stanzaic pattern of the Song, romance-six, is used by other eighteenth-century poets, but its master is Smart. The basic structural device consists of repetition and the matching of parts of the poem. The description of the contents provided by the poet is not wholly to be trusted.

## (ii) An Explication of the Poem

This section, the longest portion of the thesis, is a line by line commentary on the poem; the intent is to supply background

for the reader. The meaning of ambiguous or obscure phrases is suggested; glosses for unfamiliar words are either supplied from the work of previous critics and editors or suggested by the study of biblical and other contemporary texts. The character of David, as drawn by Smart, is not the historical or biblical figure, though it has something in common with the medieval concept of David. Cross-references to Jubilate Agno are noted; The work of W. F. Stead, W. H. Bond, and J. B. Broadbent is correlated with some original study. The climactic nature of the final stanzas is discussed.

### III

#### (i) Links with Other Poems by Smart

The recurrence of similar themes and patterns in other works is pointed out. There is a definite relationship between the Song and Smart's later poems.

#### (ii) Comparison with Some Other Poets

Other poets of a similar bent utilize a biblical story in their work. Parallels and contrasts are found in the handling of a similar theme by Cowley, Prior, and Browning. A close resemblance exists between A Song to David and The Benedicite Paraphrased, a poem by James Merrick.

#### (iii) A Song to David is Unique in its Aesthetic Achievement

The achievement of A Song to David is defined. The effect upon the reader is discussed and the success of the poet commented upon. A place is claimed for A Song to David in the top rank of devotional poetry.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
	The Origins of <u>A Song to David</u> . . . . .	1
II	<u>A SONG TO DAVID</u> . . . . .	10
	(i) The Form and Structure of the Poem .	10
	(ii) An Explication of the Poem . . . . .	21
III	CONCLUSION . . . . .	95
	(i) Links with Other Poems by Smart . .	95
	(ii) Comparison with Some Other Poets . .	98
	(iii) <u>A Song to David</u> is unique in its	
	Aesthetic Achievement . . . . .	109

Throughout this thesis references to A Song to David and to the Psalms, Hymns, and Parables of Smart, are taken from The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, edited by Norman Callan, 2 vols., (London, 1949). Since the edition of Jubilate Agno by W.F. Stead called by him, Rejoice in the Lamb (London, 1939) is not in the chronological order, all references to this work are from W.H. Bond's edition (Cambridge, Mass. 1954), in which that order is observed as far as the fragmentary nature of the manuscript allows. The abbreviations S.D. for A Song to David, and J.A. for Jubilate Agno, are used to conserve space when quoting and thus obviate a great many footnotes. Quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James version.

Thesis: A Song to David is not unique among the works of Smart or his contemporaries in terms of form, theme, or purpose; it is unique in its aesthetic achievement.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION:

#### The Origins of A Song to David

The surest impulse to the writing of poetry is an intense perception of the world. The great poet feels more intensely than the majority of mankind. Christopher Smart experienced a constant delight in the created order; a delight which was in time transformed from an almost hedonistic enthusiasm, into a deep religious conviction. In Jubilate Agno he says "For in my nature I quested for beauty, but God, God hath sent me to sea for pearls" (J.A. B 1, 30).

Christopher Smart saw the world with a great intensity, and rejoiced in what he saw. In Jubilate Agno he comments, "For I have a greater compass both of myrth and melancholy than another" (J.A. B 1, 132). This was not untrue. His delight in the multiple creations of the Lord was apparent in the early poetry and in the late. But only after his seven years of "jeopardy," that is his incarceration in various asylums as a religious maniac from 1756 to 1763, did Smart attain the "gift of impression" which enabled him to express his appreciation of the world around him as intensely as he felt it. He diverted the stream of sensuousness into the straight banks of religious



observance, and found the channel deep enough (with a few overflowings) to contain the full tide of an ecstatic relation to the created order.

The Hymn to the Supreme Being, on Recovery from a Dangerous Fit of Illness (1756), records Smart's crucial dedication to the service of God. He determined to make his life a tribute to the glory of the Deity. This decision changed his life and transformed his work. With some lapses, this dedication filled the poet's mind for the next fifteen years. His literary output, with the exception of the translations of Horace and Phaedrus, was of a religious nature until the year of his death in 1771. In his Hymns for the Amusement of Children (1770), he admonished his readers to "pray without ceasing.../Nor ever in the Spirit faint."<sup>1</sup> Such was his own practice. His religious convictions assumed the proportions of an obsession, and he was no longer sought by his friends.

Smart's madness was a form of religious mania. His insistence on public utterance of praise to God was not in accord with the norm of his age, but his convictions were no more irregular than those of most of the Hebrew or Christian saints and prophets. Perhaps Smart's compulsion, harmless enough to be sure, resulted from his inability to cope with the bustling world in which he found himself. At any rate, he withdrew into a world of religious experience where he felt he could hold his own. Perhaps

feelings of inadequacy stemmed from his apparent incapacity to manage his affairs, and the symptoms of strain were manifested in his recurring mental breakdowns (1756-1763).

The poet bolstered his self-esteem, however, through a conviction that he was the chosen of God, one of the "elect" in a fallen age. This conviction was strengthened, presumably, by Smart's involvement with the masonic lodge, which is suggested by his poem, "A Song by Brother Smart, A.M.,"<sup>2</sup> and by the line in Jubilate Agno, "For I am the Lord's builder and free and accepted Mason in CHRIST JESUS" (J.A. B 1, 109). In addition to his masonic interests, Smart, on the evidence of statements in Jubilate Agno, took the claims of the British Israelite movement seriously, and saw himself as a descendant of the Hebrew prophets. The role he cast for himself as a "builder," and as a worthy descendant of the prophets, was that of a reformer of the Church of England liturgy.

It meant much to Smart that he was "the Reviver of ADORATION amongst ENGLISH-MEN" (J.A. B 2, 332). His conviction that his role was to reform the Church of England was so strong that his Hymns were designed with that in mind. If we are to accept the verdict of the critics, Jubilate Agno was conceived with the idea of Smart himself leading an antiphonal reading in the Church after the manner of some Hebrew poetry.

His "conversion" led Smart into those frequent and public utterances of noisy prayer which brought about his imprisonment. The poet felt himself wronged and persecuted, but he rejoiced in the conviction of an eventual justification, "For the hour of my felicity, like the womb of Sarah, shall come at the latter end" (J.A. B 1, 16). He thought of his imprisonment as a sort of martyrdom, and termed it "my jeopardy." He writes of it thus in Jubilate Agno:

Let Elizur rejoice with the Partridge, who is  
a prisoner of state and proud of his keepers.  
For I am not without authority in my jeopardy,  
which I derive inevitably from the glory of  
the name of the Lord.

(J.A. B 1, 3)

Smart probably wrote these lines in the third year of his captivity (1759). The thought stayed with him, and he used the term later, "the Lord direct me in the better way of going on in the fifth year of my jeopardy June ye 17th. N.S. 1760," (J.A. B 2, 560).

Not all of his confinement was distressing to Smart. He was given writing materials, and in creating Jubilate Agno he found an outlet and a fulfillment. He began to have a certain degree of freedom, and eventually the opportunity to garden a little, "...the Lord succeed my pink borders," (J.A. D, 118). He was able to theorize about his writing:

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  
wch I have made.

(J.A. B 2, 404)

The further expansion of this thought is noted by both Stead and Bond, the editors of Jubilate Agno, as occurring in the introduction to Smart's verse-translation of Horace (1767), I, xii:

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.

Jubilate Agno was written while Smart was locked up as a result of exhibiting signs of religious mania. As far as can be ascertained from the fragmentary manuscript, it covers the seven years of the poet's imprisonment with fairly regular daily entries. The last entry was made in January 1763 when he was released. In this work - part poem, part diary - Smart experiments with verse forms, records many of the happenings of his circumscribed world, and utters his sentiments of praise and adoration. Many images and phrases recurring in A Song to David make the Jubilate Agno a valuable corrolary to a study of the great poem.

It seems likely that A Song to David, published a few months after the poet's return to the world in 1763, was written in the asylum. That has been the concensus of opinion since its appearance. In a recent study of Smart (1961), Geoffrey Grigson places the composition of the Song quite early in Smart's imprisonment (1759). He asserts that the Psalms and Hymns were written before the

Song which was an offering of thanks to God for the completion of the work. Grigson's evidence does not seem conclusive, and it is more likely that though A Song to David was composed during Smart's incarceration, the work upon the Psalms was continued until their publication after the poet's release.

In Jubilate Agno there are several references to the translation of the Psalms and a collection of Hymns which would suggest that this work was done at least in part while the poet was in the asylum. The collection was probably not finished as it did not appear until 1765, two years after the poet's release. On the other hand, he may not then have had a publisher willing to hazard the venture. The first mention of the Hymns which were published with the Psalms is in the last fragment of Jubilate Agno where Smart writes, "The Lord help on with the hymns" (J.A. D, 199). The inference is that they were being composed. Bond dates fragment "D" between July 1762 and January 1763. The next entry of interest in this connection comes a week or two later and is about the Psalms, "I pray for the soul of Crockatt the book-seller the first to put me upon a version of the Psalms" (J.A. D, 210). A footnote by Bond says that as Crockatt had been dead ten years, the plan for the Psalms was not a new one. By the entry of approximately seven days later we see that the project was well under way, "I pray for a musician or musicians to set the

new psalms" (J.A. D, 217). Three days later Smart inscribes, "...the Lord forward my translation of the psalms this year" (J.A. D, 220). The succeeding entry is of interest in that it belies accusations of Smart's being ungrateful to those who tried to aid him, "I pray God bless all my subscribers" (J.A. D, 221).

sp  
|  
An earlier passage in the Jubilate Agno may be interpreted as referring to the composition of A Song to David:

For the nightly Visitor is at the window of the impenitent, while I sing a psalm of my own composing.

(J.A. B 1, 32)

This was written during the autumn of 1759, but the reference is not clear. But though it was composed in an asylum the Song bears few of those marks of its place of origin which reviewers then and now have affected to see in the poem.

saved ?  
i common  
The first edition of A Song to David ran to five hundred copies and was published by Fletcher in 1763. A second version, with a few changes, was appended to the edition of the Psalms in 1765. The next editions were in the nineteenth century; by the twentieth the poem was becoming quite common and it was reprinted both separately and in anthologies, in England and America. The Collected Poems<sup>3</sup> contain most of Smart's writings including his masterpiece, but the most enjoyable text to read, and the

one with the most extensive notes, is the limited edition by J.B. Broadbent (1960).

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Smart, Hymns for the Amusement of Children, 3rd ed. 1775, Oxford; Facs., 1947 XVIII.

<sup>2</sup>W.F. Stead (ed.), Rejoice in the Lamb; A Song from Bedlam, London: 1939, p.25.

<sup>3</sup>N. Callan (ed.), The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, London: The Muses Library, 1941.



## CHAPTER II

### A SONG TO DAVID

#### (i) The Form and Structure of the Poem

Smart said in the introduction to A Song to David that it was "A poem composed in a spirit of affection and thankfulness to the great author of The Book of Gratitude, which is the Psalms of David the King." Smart was full of the Psalms as he wrote the Song. He had been working on a versification of them for several years and was completing that work. In Jubilate Agno Smart refers to "a psalm of my own composing." This may well be the Song, whose theme is that of the Benedicite in the Order for Morning Prayer in the Church of England: "O All ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise Him, and magnify Him forever."

This theme was not new to the poet. It had occurred in his Seatonian poems. In the second of these, On the Immensity of the Supreme Being (1751), Smart not only speaks of man and all animate nature as praising the Deity, but of the inanimate earth doing so as well:

Oh! cou'd I search the bosom of the sea,  
Down the great depth descending; there thy works  
Wou'd also speak thy residence; and there  
Wou'd I thy servant, like the still profound,  
Astonish'd into silence muse thy praise!

The thought is continued with the lines:

Yet man at home, within himself, might find  
 The Deity immense, and in that frame  
 So fearfully, so wonderfully made,  
 See and adore his providence and pow'r -

In the last lines of the poem, Smart states the position  
 which was to become more and more his own as his religious  
 conviction gained upon him:

*bend*  
 I see, and I adore - O God most bounteous!  
 O infinite of Goodness and of Glory!  
 The knee, that Thou hast shap'd, shall bend to Thee,  
 The tongue, which Thou has tun'd, shall chant thy praise,  
 And thine own image, the immortal soul,  
 Shall consecrate herself to Thee for ever.

(Callan, p. 231)

The next of the Seatonian poems (1752) picks up the theme:

Then, O ye people, O ye sons of men,  
 Whatever be the colour of your lives,  
 Whatever portion of itself his Wisdom  
 Shall deign t'allow, still patiently abide,  
 And praise him more and more; nor cease to chant  
 ALL GLORY TO THE OMNISCIENT, AND PRAISE,  
 AND POW'R, AND DOMINATION IN THE HEIGHT!

(Callan, p. 236)

If the Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer is Smart's, it also  
 picks up the theme of ceaseless adoration:

Thy name in hallow'd strains be sung,  
 Let ev'ry heart, and ev'ry tongue,  
 The solemn concert join.

The origin of the Benedicite is biblical, and it occurs in  
 those Psalms of David which were Smart's delight:

Praise ye the LORD, Praise ye the LORD from the  
 heavens: Praise him in the heights.  
 Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him,  
 all his hosts.  
 Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye  
 stars of light.

Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters  
 that be above the heavens.  
 Let them praise the name of the LORD; for he  
 commanded, and they were created.  
 He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath  
 made a decree which shall not pass.  
 Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons, and all  
 deeps:  
 Fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind  
 fulfilling his word:  
 Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all  
 cedars:  
 Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying  
 fowl:  
 Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all  
 judges of the earth:  
 Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children:  
 Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name  
 alone is excellent; his glory is above the  
 earth and heaven.  
 He also exalteth the horn of his people, the praise of  
 all his saints; even of the children of  
 Israel, a people near unto him. Praise ye  
 the Lord.

(Psalm 148)

The same theme occurs in others of the Psalms, notably in  
 Psalms 149 and 150, but in Psalm 148 the presentation  
 recalls Smart so much to mind as to be fairly obviously a  
 source.

A Song to David is just such a song of praise. Into  
 it Smart draws a sampling of the entire universe, citing  
 each creature, each thing, as a fit subject and a suitable  
 giver of praise to the Deity. The scope is vast: the  
 intent, honorific; the result, a sublime song of cosmolog-  
 ical joy in the creation.

Although it is modelled on the Psalms, seemingly  
 artless in the effortless grace of their poetic movement,  
 Smart's masterpiece is not uncomplicated in its stanzaic

structure or simple in its theme. The complexity and intense compression of the internal structure of the Song may appear as undisciplined wandering at a casual glance. But a careful study reveals an exact control.

The stanzaic pattern of A Song to David is romance six,<sup>2</sup> a fairly common one in the century. Smart uses it also in some of his Hymns, but there it is seldom as successful, largely because the rhythm does not carry the reader forward as it so irresistibly does in the Song. The syntax of much of Smart's poetry, not only of the Song, and indeed of some of his prose works such as The Midwife, is frequently inverted and complex. Such inversion was common in the age, but Smart uses it to good effect in the Song. He uses active verbs in the present tense, particularly in the Adoration stanzas. This helps to give the feeling of immediacy which is an integral part of the experience of the poem. In this context Broadbent writes:

...in contrast to the static painterly vision of the Augustans, active verbs put the whole year in present motion - cleaves, tilt, burnishes, eludes, shuts.<sup>3</sup>

Although poets of the age, such as Gray and Pope, do use active verbs in natural description, they are not typical of this sort of devotional poetry. The form of the stanza, which is an integral part of Smart's best work, was not invented by him, though he was one of its most successful exponents, and he certainly gave it new life. He used it, for instance, in thirty-three of his translations of the Psalms.<sup>4</sup>

He used it in several of his Hymns. But other writers used it also. The most notable example, of course, is that of The Benedicite Paraphrased, a poem known to be by Merrick but so much in the form, style and manner of Smart, and particularly of A Song to David, as to elicit from Robert Brittain a serious attribution of it to Smart, (PMLA, March, 1941). A.D. McKillop pointed out its real author in the same organ, but not until June, 1943.

In the 1765 edition of the poems there is an advertisement to the effect that "this Song is allowed by Mr. Smart's judicious Friends and enemies to be the best piece ever made public by him, its chief fault being the exact Regularity and Method with which it is conducted."<sup>5</sup> Whether or not such regularity be a fault, it is very much in evidence. R.D. Havens notes the complexity of numerical organization with which the Song is interwoven:

The Song begins with three stanzas of invocation, which are followed by fourteen (twice seven) describing David, by nine (thrice three) which give the subjects of which he sings, and by three recounting the results of his singing; then comes a group of nine consisting of an introductory stanza; seven devoted to the seven "pillars of the Lord," and a concluding stanza; then an introduction, a group of nine stanzas that summarizes the Biblical moral code, and a conclusion; then a stanza introductory to the three groups that follow, each of seven stanzas dealing with adoration; and finally five groups of three which treat of earthly delights and the greater delight in each field to be found in God.<sup>6</sup>

Broadbent notes of the Song:

Its regularity is a little mad for Smart was obsessed with numbers.

(Broadbent, Song, p. 33)

The patterning of the poem according to sequences of the mystic numbers, and the great degree of regularity involved, should negate any consideration of the Song being produced in insanity. The breakdown of the organization of the Song given by Havens is not that of the "Contents." Broadbent, in his edition of the Song, also omits Smart's argument or "Contents" because it is incomplete and inaccurate. It ignores the structures inherent in the poem and suggests other, more thematic, orderings. It omits stanzas, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XLIX, and LXXI altogether. In fact, as Havens notes, it bears all the hallmarks of a hurried and careless job, probably not part of the initial work. The structure is not quite as Havens suggests, however, and he is sometimes hasty in his willingness to quibble with Smart's account of the contents. He says:

Each of the stanzas LI-LXXI is distinguished from the rest of the poem by having the words "For ADORATION" at the beginning of one of its lines and, as if to emphasize the unity of the group, the word "adoration" is printed in capital letters; yet in the argument the first of these stanzas is joined to that which precedes although this preceding stanza does not contain the words "For ADORATION," and the last seven stanzas which do contain the words "For ADORATION" are treated as if they were independent of the preceding fourteen.

(Havens, p. 179)

One is inclined to agree with Havens that Smart is neither clear nor complete in his "Contents," but when he elaborates, Havens betrays his weak point:

The next stanza, beginning "PRAISE above all," announces the theme of the three following groups, each of seven stanzas closely related to one another and set off from the remaining verses by verbal repetition and by thought. Each of these twenty-one stanzas has the words "For ADORATION" at the beginning of one of its lines. Throughout the last seven stanzas these words come in the first line, where they are likewise found in the introductory stanza of the first group and the concluding stanza of the second.

(Havens, p. 181)

Here the intent on constructing patterns of three and seven, perhaps Smart's interest, but definitely Havens' passion, leads the critic astray. These twenty-one stanzas are related in theme, and the structural factor of the repetition of the words "For ADORATION." But the internal structure of the twenty-one-stanza group is not in groups of seven. Smart links stanzas I and II as "The transcendent virtue of praise and adoration." The two stanzas do deal with these qualities. Then Smart lists "An exercise upon the seasons, and the right use of them, ver. 52 to 64." This "exercise" is properly verses LII to LXIII inclusive. Havens says in a footnote that Smart ignores LXIV. Perhaps the difference was a slip made while noting down the Contents in a hurry. Be that as it may, the twelve stanzas are quite clearly separated by the subject matter - the four seasons as representative of

adoration. Structurally, the group is separate also in being unique in its sliding scale of the phrase "For ADORATION" which as Havens and other critics have noted, occurs in line one of stanza LII, line two of LIII, and so on through the group of twelve. Next come eight stanzas with the phrase "For ADORATION" in the first line. These can be divided into groups of one and seven, if that is meaningful. The subject of the first, stanza LXIV, is David, that of the next seven, things of the earth as subjects of adoration, and as an exercise on subduing the senses. Clearly Havens' enthusiasm for numbers, (Broadbent suggests that Smart's passion for numbers is a little mad), has carried him away.

In A Song to David, as in Jubilate Agno, repetition is one of the essential structural devices used to gather the poem into clusters upon the string which is the theme of praise. Besides the obvious grouping of the "adoration" stanzas, various other groups are linked by structural devices. Stanzas V to XVI are linked in that each of them commences with, and discourses upon, one of the commendatory adjectives applied to David in stanza IV. The next nine stanzas depend upon the one verb "sung" in stanza XVIII which serves for the succeeding eight. "He sung of God .... Angels .... Of man .... The World .... Trees .... Of fowl .... Of fishes .... Of beasts ..." and "Of gems." The stanzas from XXXI to XXXVII are linked by the use of



the Greek letters which are introduced in stanza XXX as "The pillars of the Lord." As Christopher Devlin points out, the seven pillars appear in Proverbs.<sup>7</sup> The reference is not, however, as his printer has put it, to Proverbs XI, but to chapter nine of that book; "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars" (Proverbs IX,1). There is another reference to the pillars in Samuel, "...for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them" (I Samuel 2:8). Finally, following the stanzas on adoration are five groups of three. Each group is held together by its exploration of a certain attribute being applied to things of the earth in the first two stanzas, and reapplied to some religious or devotional interest in the third.

A Song to David is complex in theme as well as structure. The themes are seldom distinct and often overlap. In the opening stanzas Smart hails David as poet and hero; praise for the Deity, both by Smart and David, is interwoven with the praise offered by the rest of the created order throughout the remainder of the poem. But the David whom Smart reveres and emulates is not the David of the Old Testament. His character has been modified, even transfigured. Christopher Smart's view of biblical history and the Hebraic laws also underwent modification, always toward a more "Christian," that is a more liberal or New Testament position. Robert Brittain

says:

Christopher Smart's greatest 'hero,' whom he admired both as man and as poet, is a composite figure made up of the various Psalmists and other Biblical writers and called by him David.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly Smart's view was modified by his reading of Delany's An Historical Account of the Life and Reign of David, King of Israel,<sup>9</sup> in which several of the events of the life of David are given an unusual interpretation.

A Song to David is a poem of praise, a paean bringing in the whole of the cosmos, an attempt at the expression of the universal indebtedness of the created order to the Almighty. It is the record of a piety which for that time was joyful and assured. There is in it none of the melancholy and dismal fear and religious observance that was manifested by Dr. Johnson, for example. The poem is calm and peaceful. There is none of the disorder of Jubilate Agno, none of the questioning of the Divine order to be found in some of the earlier poems. In it, Smart realizes and makes apparent an acceptance of the state of God's created world. It is a joyful utterance, filled with the happiness of a conscious harmony and peace. It is the peace which is traditionally associated with the man of God finally overcoming the snares of the world. In the Song there is such an untroubled acquiescence as might have been felt by Saint Francis.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>E.G. Ainsworth & C.E. Noyes, "Smart: A Biographical and Critical Study," University of Missouri Studies, XVIII, #4, Missouri, 1943, p. 113-114.

<sup>2</sup>Romance-six is a common metre in English poetry. The pattern of syllables in the line is 886, 886, the rhyme-scheme is a a b c c b.

<sup>3</sup>J.B. Broadbent, A Song to David, Cambridge: 1960, p. XX.

<sup>4</sup>This stanza is used in Psalms number I, VIII, XVI, XVIII, XIX, XXVIII, XXIX, XXXII, XLVII, XLVIII, LIII, LXIV, LXVIII, LXXXII, LXXXIV B, LXXXVII, XC, XCVII, CXVIII, ANOTHER OF C, CIII B, CIV, CVIII, CX, CXI, CXVIII, CXIX, CXXVIII, CXXXVII, CXXXVIII, CXXXIX, CXLVII, CL.

<sup>5</sup>From the advertisement printed in the 1763 Poems; cited in Transactions of Bibliographical Society, G.J. Gray, Vol. VI, p. 269-303, London: 1893-1920.

<sup>6</sup>R.D. Havens, "The Structure of Smart's Song to David," in Review of English Studies, XIV, 1938, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Devlin, Poor Kit Smart, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Brittain, Poems by Christopher Smart, Princeton: 1950, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup>Patrick Delany, An Historical Account of the Life and Reign of David, King of Israel, London: 1740-42, 4th ed., 1769.

(ii)

An Explication of the Poem

I

Smart ascribes to David a throne in Heaven granted him by the Deity to facilitate his yielding the praise which Smart's God seems to require:

O Thou, that sit'st upon a throne  
To praise the King of kings<sup>10</sup>

There seems a definite statement of duty imposed. At any rate, the image created is of David upon a throne with harp and voice very much in evidence. Partly as attributes of David, partly, perhaps, because of their function, both harp and voice are exceptional. In the phrase, "...harp of high majestic tone," both the actual sound and the function of the instrument are implied.

And voice of heaven-ascending swell,  
Which, while its deeper notes excell,  
Clear, as a clarion, rings:

(S.D. 1)

Although the N.E.D. gives authority for such a use of the word "swell," to speak of a voice "swelling" is less usual than to refer to some musical instrument in this way. That the word was used merely as a facile rhyme is not typical of the practise of Smart in this poem. Fairly obviously the reference is to a rise in volume sufficient to be heard in heaven even when David was on earth. In music it is common to refer to such an increase in volume in these

terms, particularly when the instrument in question has a swell-pedal. Most organs, and other pipe instruments, have such a pedal, and so does the harpsichord. The volume of the sound may be increased by opening traps or doors over the sound box. It would not be uncommon in his practice if the association - harp - harpsichord - swell - rise to heaven - had led to Smart's choice of this word.

Nothing related to David is to be taken lightly; he excels in all. This is true of even the deep notes he utters, though they are clear, "as a clarion."

## II

David is also to "bless each valley, grove, and coast," in short to bless all of creation. The blessing, however, assumes the form of a prayer of thanks to God for the creation. Others of the heavenly host have duties also. One of David's functions is to "charm the cherubs to the post / Of gratitude," a task for which his playing is apparently adequate. He has

To keep the days on Zion's mount,  
And send the year to his account,  
With dances and with songs:

Can Smart refer here to some form of time reckoning in the celestial realms? A sort of musical rendering of the Jubilate Agno? He identifies himself so strongly with David, that this is very possible. The meaning of keep in the sense of an observance - to keep the sabbath - may be

intended. David's main function is to provide the praise and blessings to be rendered in two ways, "with harp...and voice." Thus David becomes the archetypal poet, the prophet-bard, the minstrel.

The entire atmosphere around David is a highly idealised and pastoral one. The concept of David as shepherd colours the poem.

The David portrayed by Smart is not the historical, or biblical figure, though he is similar to the medieval picture of the patriarch. He is a figure comprised of the poet's reaction to any number of Old Testament prophets, tempered by his natural Christian abhorrence of violence, and coloured by that account of David made public by Doctor Delany, in 1743.

The dances and songs which figure in the last line of the second stanza are based on biblical story (David's dancing before the people shocked Michal) but here these actions are indicative of the poet's attitude to his hero. He sees David as joyful. Smart's own religious experience was one of joy rather than gloom.

### III

In the third stanza the poet again addresses David, asking him to accept the proffered bays. David's position as "minister of praise at large" is not unlike that which Smart conceived for himself, "For by the grace of God I am

the Reviver of ADORATION among ENGLISH MEN" (J.A. B 2, 332). The whole poem is dedicated to maintain that this is indeed "God's holiest charge." The third line of the stanza refers directly to the Song as offering David praise in his turn. The fourth and fifth lines of this third stanza pick up the thought introduced in the first line of the poem and ask David's attention and invoke his aid for the work.

In the last line of the third stanza, Smart asks that David appear and receive or accept the wreath that the poet is weaving for him. The "wreath" is A Song to David, and the analogy is with the crown of laurel or of bays that was given to the victor or the hero in classical times. Indeed the practice did not end there and is still carried on in the symbolism of contemporary prize-giving. An interesting parallel is to be found in the first of John Donne's Divine Poems. This poem, "La Corona," commences with the lines, "Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise, (italics in the original) Weav'd in my low devout melancholie."<sup>11</sup>

The positioning of David on the "topmost eminence" is one of the elements of a pattern, linking, even confusing, David the man with his race and with his descendant, Jesus. David, as "Servant of God's holiest charge," is representative of Smart's attitude towards the essential nature of praise of the Almighty. This praising

of the Deity is the poet's prime concern and man's first duty; "the post of gratitude" being that situation with which Smart was most concerned, as is evident by the "jeopardy" that he was willing to accept for his public utterance of enthusiastic prayer.

#### IV-XVII

Stanzas IV to XVII form the next distinct group. Havens maintains that Smart was aiming at two groups of seven stanzas in accord with the mystic petterring of the poem. Since the poet is dealing with an obvious group of twelve, the number has to be made up with the introductory and concluding stanza. The group is illustrative of the various positive attributes of David's character.

#### IV

The introduction to stanzas V to XVI sets forth, according to Smart, "The excellence and lustre of David's Character in twelve points of view," (Contents of A Song to David). This is one of the stanzas which Edith Sitwell found so amusing:

...part of the amusement...of this most  
beautiful and neglected work is due to the  
solemn piling of adjective on adjective:  
"Great, valiant, pious, good, and clean,  
Sublime, contemplative, serene,  
Strong, constant, pleasant, wise."12

She modifies the statement, however, with the rider, "But it is the laughter of pleasure," (Sitwell, Pleasures of Poetry, p. 77).



The unconventional system of twelve virtues - as opposed to the usual seven - is peculiar to Smart. Though he is content with the more accepted grouping of seven in the Hymns for the Amusement of Children, he twice mentions the twelve in Jubilate Agno:

For there be twelve cardinal virtues - three to  
the East - Greatness, Valour, Piety.  
For there be three to the West - Goodness,  
Purity and Sublimity.  
For there be three to the North - Meditation,  
Happiness, Strength.  
For there be three to the South - Constancy,  
Pleasantry, and Wisdom.

(J.A. B 2, 355-358)

Having associated the virtues thus fairly arbitrarily with the points of the compass, Smart groups them with the twelve sons of Jacob:

For there be twelve cardinal virtues the gifts  
of the twelve sons of Jacob.  
For Reuben is Great....  
For Simeon is Valiant....  
For Levi is Pious....  
For Judah is Good....  
For Dan is Clean....  
For Naphtali is Sublime....  
For Gad is Contemplative....  
For Ashur is Happy....  
For Issachar is strong....  
For Zabulon is Constant....  
For Joseph is pleasant....  
For Benjamin is Wise....

(J.A. B 2, 603-615)

With the exception of the changing of "Purity" for "clean", and "Meditation" for "contemplative"; and "Happiness" for "Serene" - this last a rhyme-induced change; - the virtues are the same and in the same order as in the first section

from Jubilate Agno. In the second section from Jubilate Agno all the virtues are in the order in which we find them in the Song; again "Happy" is found where we have come to expect "Serene", but the departure is in the Song where the demands of a rhyme scheme impelled the change.

The association of each Hebrew name with its accompanying virtue is, as Robert Brittain points out, not entirely arbitrary. He writes:

...the associations are suggested either by the meaning of their names (Genesis xxx), by the words of Jacob's blessing (Genesis xliv), or by some such obvious fact as that the Levites were the priestly tribe (hence piety as their peculiar virtue).

(Brittain, p. 299)

David, as the embodiment of the greatness of Israel, becomes an "epic prototype of his people."

Smart commences on one of his main themes in the fourth stanza of A Song to David with the enumeration of the attributes of David. The implicit commendation is couched in just such words as Edmund Burke declares to carry with them, wherever found, the associated reverberations of the sublime.<sup>13</sup>

In his Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), he suggests that through long association some words are always thought of in connection with the sublime response and that they therefore always elicit that response from the reader wherever they are used. One of the categories of the sublime with

which Burke was not much concerned is the "religious sublime." Into this the Song may be considered to fall. There is a similarity in the practice of both writers, however, which may be worth noting. In the Song Smart describes David's character as:

Great, valiant, pious, good, and clean,  
 Sublime, contemplative, serene,  
 Strong, constant, pleasant, wise!

(S.D. IV)

While all these words exhibit the sort of connotative extension of which Burke speaks, several of them, "Wise, valiant, good and great," are actually used by Burke as examples of his thesis. It is not unreasonable to assume that the word sublime itself may carry with it some such charged meaning.

The following twelve stanzas illustrate each of these commendatory adjectives applied to David. But, as in the rest of the poem, the comments on David as the type of the saint, and indeed, of Christ himself, reflect Smart's reaction not only to his ostensible hero, but also to the Deity. The syntax and the stanzaic structure are so involved as often to require a very careful examination before it is clear to whom Smart is referring; consequently, the praises bestowed implicitly and explicitly on the one figure carry over and affect the total apprehension of the poem.

Each virtue is mellifluously treated in its individual stanza, thus the twelve of them, together with the introductory and concluding stanzas, make up the fourteen of this section.

## V

David's greatness is illustrated in the fifth stanza. Here Smart says that he is:

Great - from the lustre of his crown,  
From Samuel's horn and God's renown,  
Which is the people's voice.

(S.D. V)

Several things are implied here. The lustre of David's crown refers, obviously, to the fact that he was considered worthy to become king of Israel, chosen by God through the prophet Samuel, and annointed from a horn of oil:

Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured  
it upon his head....

(I Samuel x, 1)

The temporal and physical lustre of the actual crown is also implicit in the image.

Smart accepts David's success in his relationship with Saul and Jonathan, as well as his ability to control his men, as evidence of a worthy character. David's continued achievements in this line are accepted by Smart, as by the church, as indicative of God's continued support.

## VI

David's readiness for battle is one of the Old Testament attributes of his hero that the poet does not modify. David's warlike nature seems to be admired by the poet. The sanction of the church upon the Christian knight makes the Hebrew leader's warlike nature acceptable to the less violent spirit of the writer. The valiance of David is most popularly known through his memorable feat of slaying "the boaster." This encounter, like those subsequent battles with the Philistines in which David won the bounty which he paid for Michal, his first wife, had the sanction of Divine approval. The encounter with the giant has traditionally eclipsed the many greater battles in which David led the Hebrews with such success, to the great chagrin of Saul.

## VII

The piety of David is the subject of stanza VII, and Smart's material is taken not only from biblical sources but from Delany. Robert Brittain notes that "the seraph in his soul," (i.e. Divine inspiration) is not associated with David's plan for the temple until Delany's paraphrase of the biblical story. Delany speaks of David as "filled with the image of a glorious and magnificent temple, impressed upon him by the immediate influence of the spirit of God," (Delany, II, 5). Again Brittain notes

Delany's discussion of Nathan's revelation of the divine prohibition of the completion of the temple by David.

Delany stresses David's gratitude that the building will be completed by his son. This is the "welcome news" of the fifth line of the stanza. The condolence of the final line, though not untypical of the character of David, seems introduced here more for the convenience of rhyme - not usual with Smart - than for any essential relevance to this portion of David's history. But, David's spontaneous grief on the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, and of Abner is an instance of David's willingness to condole.

#### VIII

The extreme compression of the last two lines of this stanza is a good example of that "gift of impression" of which Smart speaks in Jubilate Agno and to which he again refers in the introduction to his translation of Horace. The poet's success with a wide range of reference offered in small room is here most apparent. Smart was not boasting idly when he claimed this ability. It is what sets off his work from many of the contemporary endeavours.

We see elsewhere (Psalm CIII & XXXVII) the concept of "spiritual good breeding" which is implied in the first and second lines of the stanza. The "genuine vein" refers to the fact that David's house was chosen to produce the

Messiah. Hereafter it was to be the "best" of the Jewish families, although until Samuel annointed the son of Jesse it had been one of the lesser branches. The annointing did not guarantee David's continuance in the favour of the Lord, however; Saul had also been annointed by Samuel upon Jehovah's instruction. But Saul fell from favour through disobedience. David was with God in all he did - with the exception of the taking of Bath-sheba, an event for which the shepherd king was sincerely repentant. The word "Jehudah" is merely another form of Judah and is used as an alternative.

David's goodness was exemplary, but most memorably so on one of the occasions when he forgave his king. Saul had taken an army into the hills of En-Gedi to slay David, and David was hiding with his men in a cave into which Saul came alone and unprotected. Although his followers urged him to slay Saul, David forebore, (I Samuel xxiv, 3&4). His respect for the person of his King was founded in the fact that Saul had been annointed by Samuel and was thus the chosen of God. So David cut off the hem of Saul's garment, confronting Saul with it as he went to rejoin his body guard. Even Saul was forced to forget his jealousy and suspicion in the face of this proof of David's forbearance and goodwill.

David's goodness was apparent on another occasion when he forgave Shimei his cursing, (I Samuel xxiv, 7).

Again David's followers urged the severest punishment for the offender, but David's better nature prevailed. This, at any rate, is Smart's reference. It is interesting to note, however, that on his death-bed David asked that Shimei be punished for this offence. In doing so he was violating an oath.

## IX

The cleanness of stanza IX is, of course, spiritual purity. The two terms are interchangeable in the catalogue of virtues in Jubilate Agno (J.A. B 2, 356 & B 2, 608).

While fleeing in the wilderness David's acknowledged "cleanness" serves him well. Upon his word that he and his men are clean, the prophet Ahimelech feeds them with the consecrated breads from before the altar of the Lord:

And the priest answered David, and said,  
There is no common bread under mine hand,  
but there is hallowed bread; if the young  
men have kept themselves at least from women.

And David answered the priest, and said unto  
him, Of a truth women have been kept from us  
about these three days, since I came out,  
and the vessels of the young men are holy....

(I Samuel xxi, 4 & 5)

Purity is one of the main concerns of Smart in his religious experience. He took quite literally St. Paul's injunction to pray without ceasing. The last fifteen years of his life are an attempt at realizing a complete dedication. Because of his habit of incessant prayer, the poet was locked up. His enthusiasm in matters



devotional did not suit the spirit of the times. Dr. Johnson later said of him to Dr. Burney, "I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society." Smart's own comments in Jubilate Agno about routing the passersby in Hyde Park show that he was conscious that his ways were not accepted. Probably Smart came as close to a state of "perpetual prayer" as any man not a cloistered monk may well attain. He projects his own constant impulse to the state of prayer and adoration onto his hero, and David must be, "Clean - if perpetual prayer be pure."

Perhaps the example of David's love, which the poet refers to, was his constant refusal to attack Saul, though Saul sought his life. On at least two occasions David was close enough to plunge in the sword himself. It might be argued that this was love not for Saul but for his God and for "the Lord's annointed," perhaps even for himself. He was unwilling to defile himself and alienate Jehovah.

Nor was David devoid of carnal love, witness his many "wives." His sin in sending Uriah the Hittite to the forefront of the battle that he might be killed was also attributable to that feeling which in our politer moments we call love. Certainly he did it that he might possess the beautiful Bath-sheba. It seems likely that this is not Smart's reference, however. Though he stoutly

maintains that the passions are to be made use of, a reference in Jubilate Agno suggests that celibacy is most acceptable to the Lord, and women the root of all trouble.

The poet says:

For beauty is better to look upon than to  
meddle with and 'tis good for a man not  
to know a woman.

(J.A. B 1, 105)

This theme is taken up with yet greater emphasis in another section:

For I prophesy that there will be less misery  
concerning women,  
For I prophecy that they will be cooped up  
and kept under due control.

(J.A. C, 66 & 67)

It was his lust for a woman - Bath-sheba - that caused David to fall. So perhaps Smart is not completely unreasonable in his fear of the female influence.

X

The sublimity of David is again closely involved with Smart's own desire to be in a perpetual state of grace, to be en rapport with his God, a desire which he projects without much strain upon the Hebrew psalmist. For Christopher Smart, David is in constant communion with the messengers of the heavens; he is the recipient of instruction, of joy, of love from the Eternal.

The sublimity of the Jewish King is apparent to Smart in the psalms and other writings attributed to him. The Song was written after Smart had translated the Psalms

of David, and the poet was imbued with the grandeur and sublimity of his original. Delany insists that the Proverbs were also written by David (Delany, ii, 326).

Nor could David's ability to remain in the good graces of the Lord, despite his belligerent actions to both Jewish and Philistine opponents, fail to impress Smart. Saul was damned for far less.

The "eternal theme" of the third line is the incessant preoccupation of both the Hebrew and English writer with praise of the Deity; it is also fairly apparently a pun, that is, the other meaning obtains as well, and the sentence may be read with "God" in opposition to "the eternal theme," thus God, who is eternal, is a suitable theme for poetry.

## XI

David's habit, one he shared with all reputable Old Testament leaders, was to retire in solitude whenever troubled, and consult his God. Once again, Delany brings this out with greater emphasis than does the Bible, but the facts are to be found in I Samuel.

Contemplation was the one of the twelve virtues that Christopher Smart may be supposed to have understood. His seven years in "jeopardy" gave him ample time to experience it to the full; and, indeed, it may be thought to have enabled him to adjust his genius to his world. Certainly he emerged from the asylum a calmer and more

serious man, with his ever-present predilection for things spiritual directed and given new impetus. Smart was acquainted with "the cherub contemplations."

David's was not an untroubled reign; when he was not being attacked by Saul or the Philistines, his own sons were seeking his throne. He fled many times from Saul and his other enemies and his ability to forgive and bless can only have been excelled by his capacity for destruction on his frequent raids. Of these, however, Christopher Smart does not speak.

## XII

David's serenity in the face of great tribulations and contention, Smart seems to suggest, is the result of his early pastoral experience while he herded sheep along the banks of Kidron, the brook which divides Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. But although David conquered the city in later life, it is unlikely that he herded sheep here. Within the framework of this poem, Smart accepts the form of soft primitivism associated with pastoral poetry, or with the eighteenth-century cult of the noble peasant, which attributed all possible temporal pleasures and real contentment to country life, where a simple existence free from the temptations and distractions of urban existence endowed man with wisdom and goodness.

The peace which David sought was certainly not with the Philistines. Throughout his life he was at odds with

them almost constantly. And though in order to keep his hands clean he often restrained himself from seeking revenge, his instructions to Solomon on his death-bed were to destroy some of his surviving opponents. One notes the irony of his words to Solomon:

And keep the charge of the Lord thy God,  
to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes,  
and his commandments, and his testimonies,  
as it is written in the law of Moses, that  
thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest,  
and whithersoever thou turnest thyself:

That the Lord may continue his word which  
he spoke concerning me, saying, If thy  
children take heed to their way, to walk  
before me in truth with all their heart  
and with all their soul, there shall not  
fail thee (said he) a man on the throne  
of Israel.

Moreover thou knowest also what Joab the  
son of Zeruiah did to me, and what he  
did to the two captains of the hosts of  
Israel, unto Abner the son of Ner, and  
unto Amasa the son of Jether, whom he  
slew, and shed the blood of war in  
peace, and put the blood of war upon  
his girdle that was about his loins,  
and in his shoes that were on his feet.

Do therefore according to thy wisdom,  
and let not his hoar head go down to  
the grave in peace.

(I Kings ii, 3-6)

And if this were not enough to disillusion any follower he continues:

And behold, thou hast with thee Shimei  
the son of Gera, a Benjamite of Bahurim,  
which cursed me with a grievous curse in  
the day when I went to Mahanaim: but he  
came down to me at Jordan, and I sware  
to him by the Lord saying, I will not  
put thee to death by the sword.

Now therefore hold him not guiltless:  
for thou art a wise man, and knowest what  
thou oughtest to do unto him; but his  
hoar head bring thou down to the grave  
in blood.

(I Kings ii, 8-9)

So much for David, "sow(ing) the seeds of peace."

### XIII

Certainly David's strength may be supposed to have overcome Satan in that he remained in the good graces, so to speak, of the Lord. In the book of Samuel, however, David's strength is put out largely to soothe and to overcome the troubled spirit of Saul. In attributing Saul's unrest to the machinations of Satan, Smart departs from the scriptural source, as he did in his translations of the Psalms, to emphasize those elements of the original most acceptable to him. In I Samuel, chapter xvi, it is expressly stated that the evil spirit which came to Saul was not from Satan, but was sent from God to work his destruction:

And it came to pass, when the evil spirit  
from God was upon Saul, that David took  
an harp, and played with his hand; so Saul  
was refreshed, and was well, and the evil  
spirit departed from him.

(I Samuel xvi, 23)

David's strength lay, like Samson's, in his God. All the machinations of evil were overcome by David's faith, as were the lion and the bear:

And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept  
his father's sheep, and there came a lion

and a bear, and he took a lamb out of the flock, and I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him.

(I Samuel xvi, 3, 4 & 5)

The image of the lion is such a one as Burke would consider "sublime," the bear also. Their inclusion here is appropriate.

#### XIV

David's constancy in love can hardly be thought to apply to his treatment of women. In those days for a king, or indeed for any rich man, to have more than one wife was not exceptional; and the number of wives of David's son, Solomon is proverbial, but David was something less than, "Constant, beyond the verge of death," to Michal, or Abigail or the others.

Michal was his first wife; she was taken away by Saul and given to another leader for a time. Whereupon David took Abigail, the widow of Nabal, and Ahinoam of Jezreel, (I Samuel xxv, 43-44). There is the evidence the second book of Samuel (iii, 2, 3 & 45) as to the number of other wives he had. Nor was David without numerous concubines. Then there was Bath-sheba; and of course, Abishag, the Shunamite.

To Jonathan, however, David may be thought to have been constant, and it is doubtless this constancy to which Smart refers:

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle. O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places.

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished.

(II Samuel i, 25-27)

Furthermore, David's treatment of Mephibosheth, in the light of his feelings toward the lame, is evidence of a feeling for Jonathan motivating him, "beyond the verge of death."

And David said on that day, Whosoever getteth up to the gutter, and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, that are hated of David's soul, he shall be chief and captain.

(II Samuel v, 8)

David's treatment of Ziba and Mephibosheth is a little involved, but he shows great tolerance both to the servant and to the lame son of his friend Jonathan.

## XV

That David was pleasant Smart would maintain from the several places in the scriptural record where he is spoken of as being loved by all of Judah.

That he was "pleasant" in armor we may doubt, though Smart's modified statement that he was "glad" seems more probable. (The NED does support Smart's use of the word, however.) That he was so in "ephod", that is, in one meaning of the word, in the vestments of the priest, we may take on faith. David's final alienation from Michal



came about because he danced before the Lord (and incidently before the serving maids) so clad:

And David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod.

And as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal Saul's daughter looked through a window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.

(I Samuel vi, 14 & 16)

However, Michal's reaction does not please David:

Then David returned to bless his household. And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, How glorious was the King of Israel today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself.

(II Samuel vi, 20)

David's reply is to the point:

And I will be yet more vile than this, and will be base in mine own sight: and of the maidservants which thou hast spoken of, of them I shall be held in honour.

Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death.

(II Samuel vi, 22 & 23)

This is less illustrative of David's love or pleasantness than Smart would have us recollect.

The three elements of the human creature, "Man, soul, and angel," are explained by Robert Brittain as part of a heretical belief in the tri-partite nature of man. Further comment on this problem is reserved for the discussion of stanza XLII.

## XVI

The eminence of which Smart speaks in the third stanza of A Song to David is here elaborated upon. It arose, Smart implies, from David's recovery from his fall. In the scriptures David has many falls and, in a manner of speaking, rises above each. Delany again makes all clear; he retells the story of David's lust for Bath-sheba and the murder he commits for her:

...Millions have been lost in these  
labyrinths of guilt; but none, sure,  
in any more intricate and perplexing  
than this...millions have fallen,  
have sinned, as David did; but who  
ever repented and recovered like him?

(Delany, 11, 320)

The reference is to David's weakness in taking Bath-sheba:

And it came to pass in an eveningtide,  
that David arose from off, his bed, and  
walked upon the roof of the king's house;  
and from the roof he saw a woman washing  
herself; and the woman was very beautiful  
to look upon.

And David sent and enquired after the  
woman. And one said, Is not this Bath-sheba,  
the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah  
the Hittite?

And David sent messengers, and took her;  
and she came in unto him, and he lay with  
her; for she was purified from her  
uncleanness; and she returned unto her  
house.

And the woman conceived, and sent and  
told David, and said, I am with child.

(II Samuel xi, 2-5)

At this point David almost orders Uriah to go down to his house and sleep with his wife, but Uriah does not so David sends further messages:

And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by Uriah.

And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

(II Samuel xi, 14 & 15)

David's complacency on hearing the news of this success is remarkable (II Samuel xi, 23-27). But when he is rebuked by Nathan, the prophet, David repents (II Samuel xii, 9-14). However, of this union was Solomon later to be born. Inscrutable are the ways of the Almighty.

As to the "precepts" of the fifth line of the stanza, Delany again makes all clear:

As critics have considered the first nine chapters of Proverbs, only as a preface to what is properly called the book of Proverbs, the attentive reader will find all the precepts, from the beginning of the fourth chapter to the end of the ninth, to be only recitals of David's instructions to his son Solomon.

(Delany, II, 299)

Certainly the counsel given to Solomon in Kings is not notable for its morality, though perhaps politically wise.

## XVII

In this stanza Christopher Smart is again projecting the feeling of the poet upon the psalmist. That his writings

gave Smart, "...balm for all the thorns that pierce, For all the pangs that rage," we may believe. David, however, sought solace in transports less esoteric. Smart attributes to him a joy in intellectual creation far out-reaching that pleasure which David found, albeit momentarily, in his first wife, Michal, and in the young virgin who "comforted him" in his old age. Brittain notes that Delany speaks of Abishag as David's wife, thus establishing a parallel between her and Michal. This was not an essential correlation for Smart to make in order to use these figures as he does. They were both beloved by David, and as such serve to illustrate Smart's point.

The second group of stanzas in A Song to David is thus concluded. So Smart ties off his eulogy of the character of David.

#### XVIII

In the stanza, Smart commences on a nine-stanza section enumerating the topics of David's Song. The recounting of those created things which were thus blessed by David is a transparent device enabling Christopher Smart to anticipate his own praising in the Adoration stanzas of the second half of the poem. Here Smart, the poet, and David, the psalmist intermingle.

#### XVII-XXVII

From stanza XVII to XXVII Smart is enumerating,

according to the "Contents" prefixed to A Song to David:

The subjects he made choice of - the  
Supreme Being - angels; men of renown;  
the works of nature in all directions,  
either particularly or collectively  
considered, to ver. 27.

(S.D. 'Contents,')

for example:

He sung of God - the mighty source of  
all things - the stupendous force on  
which all strength depends;

(S.D. XVIII)

The single verb "sung" in stanza eighteen does duty for the following nine stanzas. Then, in successive stanzas, Smart elaborates upon the various aspects of the Creation; of man, the world, the planets, light, plants, fowl, fishes, beasts, domestic and wild, and gems. In the group of nine stanzas Smart is at home on his own territory and is at ease with his verse. Several of the images in this section are derived from Psalm CIV.

Here Smart states one of the underlying precepts of the poem: that all things depend, quite literally, upon the Deity:

From whose right arm, beneath whose eyes  
All period, pow'r and enterprize  
Commences, reigns, and ends.

Conscious as he was of the intervention of the heavenly powers in the everyday life of eighteenth century England, Smart weaves the fabric of his intense belief into his paean. The source material of the poem - the books of

Samuel and of Kings - illustrate the statement of the second half of stanza XVIII. Therein the personal intervention of the Lord effects all establishment, or change, of temporal sway.

Smart's was a very visual imagination, as the clarity of his images makes apparent and one can correlate this stanza very well with the crude illustrations of the world dependent from the heavens which so often accompany early editions of Paradise Lost.

## XIX

Smart's positive assertions on the subject of angels were not in accord with orthodox Church of England beliefs. They savoured rather too much of the Popish elements which the laws of the land were still prepared to suppress. Smart's treatment of angels in the poem, and the invocation of the dead were among those elements not calculated to appeal to the orthodox eighteenth-century mind.

Robert Brittain suggests that Smart's views on the subject of angels are heretical (p. 287). Smart implies elsewhere (Hymn IX and XXIV) that angels are employed as heavenly messengers - the "ministry" of line one of this stanza. What their reward, "meed" is, however, he does not specify. Though perhaps it is the blessings of the next line. The image of them waiting, "with their citterns," recalls the early task of David to soothe the

troubled spirit of Saul with his playing. One hopes that they are not in the same peril that David was.

Again the scene is Miltonic, most reminiscent of the incredible comic opera scene in the third book of Paradise Lost or perhaps in a Masque. Certainly the vision of Michael bowing with his millions, may strike the modern reader as a visual image of a humorous rather than an awe-inspiring kind.

The concept of the seraph or the cherub having spouse or mate is not only uncanonical but heretical. It appears, however, in some of Smart's hymns also.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps some precedent may be found for Smart's attribution of sex to the celestial beings in Paradise Lost:

Love not the heav'nly Spirits, and how their Love  
Express they, by looks only, or do they mix  
Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?

To whom the Angel with a smile that glow'd  
Celestial rosy red, Love's proper hue,  
Answer'd. Let it suffice thee that thou know'st  
Us happy, and without Love no happiness.

(P.L. VIII, 615-621)

Here Milton brings up the question and does not entirely dismiss the possibility. However, Smart's vivid imagination could have conceived the idea without any conscious source.

XX

The man depicted in stanza XX is more Adam in the garden than man fallen and sinning. The establishment of

man in the garden with dominion over the beasts, "To rule the land, and briny broad," recalls Genesis. Man as the semblance of God is also a concept from Genesis:

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God created he him;

(Genesis i, 27)

That to the Christian man is the "effect of God and Love" is obvious. The theme behind the final lines of the stanza occurs again and again in the work of Smart and in that of other Christian writers; that man is created to serve God. The fifth line is more specifically concerned with man's duty to praise the creator - the impulse behind this poem. The sixth recalls the Old Testament leaders who were "heroes in his cause," and, specifically, David.

## XXI

The creation of the world, the planets, light and shade is recorded in stanza XXI. Smart is not here dealing with the creation in the order of Genesis, though he does so later. The clustering spheres are rather the planets than the more remote heavenly bodies. In all probability the poet has in mind contemporary diagrams of the planets replete with moons, or models of the solar system.

The "glorious light" of the second line anticipates the crescendo in which the poem culminates:



Glorious the sun in mid career;  
 Glorious th'assembled fires appear,  
 Glorious the comet's train:

(S.D. LXXXVI)

The third line, with its attempted all-inclusiveness of landscape, presents, through Smart's choice of idiom, a pastoral scene.

The remainder of the stanza creates quite a different image. This is one of the aphoristic, almost epigrammatic little statements with which the poet intersperses writing of a far more prosaic tenor. The literal reference is presumably to the depths of the ocean bed. But the line is not tied to a specific reference and refers by a fairly common extension to all that is veiled and mysterious. Part of the charm of the lines lies in the personification and the suggestion of preference for seclusion. The source is biblical.

Wisdom is the daughter of God by whom he  
 conceived of the world, and the "discretion"  
 with which He stretched out the heavens.

(Proverbs iii, VII)

In Jeremiah it is written:

He hath made the earth by his power, he  
 hath established the world by his wisdom,  
 and hath stretched out the heavens by his  
 discretion.

(Jeremiah x, 12)

## XXII

The description of the flora is replete with references. The "virtuous root" of the first line of the stanza brings to mind Smart's interests in the varied scientific fields of popular interest in his day - the work of the Royal Society, contemporaneous discoveries in medicine and physics - which are reflected in Jubilate Agno, XVI. The "gem" of line two is a bud,<sup>14</sup> thus a progression is established and depicted - more successful on the level of image than a "still" picture. Smart often depicts his animals in a state of movement; it is interesting that he does the same for the plant kingdom. Smart's use of the word in this form, is not only delightful but singularly apt in that the buds in the garden at the creation were the first buds, and Smart here establishes the scene in time. This sort of specificity imparts something of the brilliance and clarity which is in large measure the success of the Song.

The "choice gums and precious balm" of the third line are related to the "virtuous root" of the first, and the associated herbal and medicinal connotations recall the biblical images of the Nativity associated with "precious balm." With the fourth line the poet breaks his mood and addresses the reader - or perhaps David - asking that the flowers of the valley be blessed.

## XXIII

The "Of" of the first line refers back to the same verb "sung" in stanza XVIII. With this stanza on the birds, Smart utilizes a device, particularly well developed in this poem: the alternation of opposite attributes within a class of beings. The birds that "live in peace or prey" or "that make music, or that mock," wild and domestic, those pertaining to one season or the other, each type is represented. The colour contrast of the last line of the stanza is part of this system of alternatives "The raven, swan and jay."

## XXIV

In this stanza, as in stanza XXI, there is a personification, or a semi-allegorical use of the noun. Here nature is an active force. The inversion in the sentence is less smooth, more contrived than usual:

Of fishes - ev'ry size and shape,  
Which nature frames of light escape,  
Devouring man to shun.

The phrase "of light escape" is curious, though the meaning is clear. It means quick; the analogy is with "light footed," "light fingered," "to trip the light fantastic."

The shells and shoals of lines four and five are the refuge of the fish from the perils of "devouring man." There is a pleasant clarity in the image of the sun "glancing" on the surface - and upon the leaping shoals.

The word "wealthy" has two possible connotations. First, the suggestion of hidden riches (in the pearls and other gems of the ocean bed) or such treasures as have been lost in or may be retrieved from the sea. Secondly, "wealthy" may refer back to "shells" and indicate the countless numbers of them. Possibly both meanings are intended.

## XXV

The alternation of contrasted details is again apparent in this stanza as it was in stanza XXIII. The beaver, friendly and herbivorous is contrasted with the tiger "sublime" and carnivorous - the one working, the other basking. Then the wild rabbit in line four is representative of a movement downward in space; the domesticated goat, of the opposite. The mountain and meadow carry out the pattern of the useful and the untamed.

## XXVI

In this stanza the word "gem" means what we usually associate with the word - a precious stone. The "virtue" of the gem is a reference to various magical or medicinal properties associated with jewels traditionally. "The Jasper of the Master's stamp," this may be a reference to the utilization of the semi-precious rock by the stone-carver as a type of the artist and, thus, of the Creator.

More likely, the association is with Smart's own poem On The Immensity of the Supreme Being, where the Jasper is said to reproduce the patterns of nature, such as the mountains, streams, trees, etc., within the precious rock. In a passage of fanciful imagery, Smart discusses the gems hidden in the earth which "form weak ideas of (their) maker's glory." He writes that he would detect

The Agat and the deep-intrenched gem  
Of kindred Jasper - Nature in them both  
Delights to play the Mimic on herself;  
And in their veins she oft pourtrays the forms  
Of leaning hills, of trees erect, and streams  
Now stealing softly on, now thund'ring down  
In desperate cascade, with flow'rs and beasts  
And all the living landskip of the vale.

The image is surely the same as is implied in the Song.

The poet continues:

In vain thy pencil, Claudio, or Poussin,  
Or thine, immortal Guide, wou'd essay  
Such skill to imitate - it is the hand  
Of God himself - for God Himself is there.<sup>15</sup>

In this sense the stone re-creates nature, that is, God's handiwork. A further possible source is Revelation where God is said to appear in Jasper (Revelation iv, 3). In lines five and six of this stanza, "and topaz blazing like a lamp, among the mines beneath," we have a logical fallacy an unmined and uncut gems do not blaze. Such license is not atypical of the century or of the work of this poet. It is such lines that seem to support Brittain's contention that Smart regards nature always in her unspoiled and "natural" state.

## XXVII

In stanza XXVIII, Smart returns to David. He commends the grace and tenderness which, as a result of the continued favour of the Deity, enabled him to soothe his troubled King. Throughout A Song to David the assumption is implicit that the agonies of Saul are sent by the Adversary; this is contrary to the statement in the Books of Samuel. Smart is engaged in a movement to "Christianize" his biblical source, although the line, "When satan with his hand he quell'd," in all probability refers to David's playing on the harp. The use of the uncapitalized form of "satan" implies one of many evil spirits rather than the arch-fiend, Satan.

## XXVIII

The "furious Foes" of this stanza are again the agents of Saul. Smart makes rather more of David's playing than does Samuel, largely because it is symbolic of the poetic stance represented archetypally by the poet, singer, or musician.

## XXIX

The sequence of events is not chronological as the happenings of this stanza precede those of stanza XVI where David counsels his child. Here Michal is still the young daughter of Saul who fell in love with David while her elder sister was still promised to him. She "chose"

David in that she loved him; and gave "her utmost from her heart," when she risked her life in helping David escape from Saul's rage.

### XXX-XXXVII

The eight stanzas XXX to XXXVII are the greatest critical stumbling block in the canon of Smart. They have been attacked or ignored, and occasionally some attempt at an explication has been attempted.

An anonymous reviewer in The Monthly Review says of the Greek letters of the crucial stanzas:

These, we conjecture, are made choice of, as consecrated for the following reasons. Alpha and Omega, from a well-known text in the Revelation. Iota, Eta, and Sigma because they are used to signify our Saviour on altars and pulpits. Theta, as being the initial of God; and Gamma, as denoting the number three, held sacred by some Christians.<sup>16</sup>

### XXX

This stanza, according to the author, "Shews that the pillars of knowledge are the monuments of God's works in the first week." This theme is continued through the succeeding stanzas. Commencing in stanza XXX, Smart enters upon a passage in which he likens the attributes of God to the days of the first week as the pillars of the Lord. The correspondence of Smart's stanzas, labelled by the Greek letters, to the seven days of Creation, is obvious though rather free. Smart mentions and elaborates upon, the creation of light, the heavens, the land, the

stars and planets, fish and fowl, cattle and man, and the day of rest. All are in the conventional order which we take from Genesis, but in imagery difficult to disentangle.

It is hard to visualize the images suggested by these stanzas. The seven pillars reaching, "From earth to topmost heav'n," form part of some sort of temple dedicated, perhaps, to the wisdom of God. In Proverbs, chapters eight and nine, the earth is established on seven pillars. The creation of the world is associated with the wisdom of the Almighty. The creation is supposed by Smart to have been carried out by Christ, "His WORD accomplished the design." The poet has in mind the opening passage of the Gospel of St. John. The "gem" of the fifth line is, according to Broadbent, a star. Thus the statement becomes one of the extent of God's involvement in the created order - a total coverage is implied, from the highest to the lowest, the all-inclusive statement at which Smart aims repeatedly in the poem.

### XXXI

In the phrase, "Alpha, the cause of causes" Smart is naming the Divine Being. Alpha is a part of the name of God in Revelation, "I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending," (Revelation i, 8). Here Smart speaks of Alpha as a fountain - a generative or phallic image not inconsistent with a consideration of the Creator. This pillar is, "first in station," that is, first of the seven.



Some architectural plan of the possible arrangement of the pillars might be interesting, and revealing of their relationship to each other and to the Deity. From this pillar proceeds, "the burst/of light, and blaze of day." In Genesis God is reputed to have said, "Let there be light: and there was light," this on the first day. Smart adheres to the order of Genesis in these stanzas.

The poet continues with an analogy drawn from his previous statements to the effect that this creation of light by the Deity is the precedent for all "bold" deeds, and upon this act, or rather upon the force which could produce it, even heaven itself depends for its continued existence. In his recent edition of A Song to David, Broadbent has a note to the effect that "...in the introduction at Paradise Lost III, Milton asks whether light may not be coeval with God and, like the Son, a direct effluence of his glory," (Broadbent, p. 36). This is the passage in question:

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,  
Or of th'eternal Co-eternal beam  
May I express thee unblamed? since God is Light,  
And never but in unapproached Light  
Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.  
Or hear'st thou rather pure Etherial stream,  
Whose Fountain who shall tell? before the Sun,  
Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice  
Of God, as with a mantle didst invest  
The rising world of waters dark and deep,  
Won from the void and formless infinite.

(P.L. III, 1-12)

Broadbent has a further note, "The Greek letter may represent a pair of compasses, one of the three pieces of furniture in a masonic lodge, and the Biblical instruments whereby God marked off the universe-to-be from chaos," (Broadbent, p. 36). This editor makes quite plausible the choice of these particular Greek letters as the masonic emblems with which Smart as a mason would be familiar.

## XXXII

The second pillar bears the letter Gamma. The sapphire is associated with it largely on account of colour, one presumes, the colour of the sky. Elsewhere Smart refers to the colour of the sky as sapphire. The references of the final three lines of the stanza are to the sky, rather in terms of the setting for a stage:

Thence the fleet clouds are sent adrift,  
And thence the painted folds that lift  
The crimson veil, are wav'd.

Smart speaks of the skies in similar terms in his translation of Psalm CIV:

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.

(Psalm CIV, st.2)

Here, the poet speaks of the sky in a visual but artificial way, almost as though he were describing the setting of a stage.

Broadbent has a reference for the use of Gamma as the initial of one of the pillars. He writes:

Gamma may represent the number 3, or a set-square. (One of the three moveable jewels of a masonic lodge, symbolising morality). The arch is the firmament of heaven, created on the second day.

(Broadbent, p.36)

That "angelic legions march" upon the arch of the heavens, the "firmament" of Genesis, is as logical as that they should be so militarized elsewhere. Milton's angels perform in ways even less credible.

### XXXIII

The third pillar is a corinthian one, covered with carvings of vegetative luxuriance:

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind....

(Genesis i, 11)

This pillar, representing the third day of creation, is illustrative of the art of cultivation rather than of wild or wasted growth. The scene is the traditional Garden of Eden. The pillar is carved and bears upon its base the "trowel, spade, and loom," perhaps as symbols of husbandry; the tools used to train vegetable nature to man's will.

### XXXIV

The pillar graced with the letter Theta stands next to the Supreme. Perhaps Broadbent's note is revealing. He says, "Theta is the initial of  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ , and with Iota and

Sigma ( I Θ £ - Jesus, God, Saviour) it is used as a monogram in churches, (Broadbent, p. 36). Thus Theta is next to God in that the initial pertains to His name.

Again Smart takes his text, and in part his phrasing, from Genesis. His intimate knowledge of many disparate parts of the biblical record is made apparent by this Song, more than by many of his other devotional poems. The text runs:

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and days, and years.

And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also.

(Genesis i, 14 & 16)

Smart follows his source, but in imagery rather fanciful than exact, as befits the poet. God, "the Supreme,"

...formed, in number, sign, and scheme,  
Th'illustrious lights that are;  
And one addressed his saffron robe,  
And one, clad in a silver globe,  
Held rule with ev'ry star.

Here the poet re-phrases the two verses from Genesis. The "illustrious lights" were formed according to their place and function in the heavens as dispensers of light and as guides to time and season, "...formed in number, sign, and scheme." The "sign" is also a reference to the zodiacal signs which the star clusters would represent, and which Smart mentions again in stanza LXVI. The instruments used by the Deity in marking out the universe are celebrated by

Smart in Hymn VI, ii:

The stars, the firmament, the sun,  
 God's glorious work, God's great design,  
 All, all was finish'd as begun,  
 By rule, by compass, and by line.

There is an assurance of authority here, which is fitting only from one of the elect, the man chosen by an inscrutable Deity to restore the true faith to England.

The second half of the stanza relates to the second of the quoted passages from Genesis. The "saffron robe" is the garment of the sun. The "one clad in a silver globe" is the moon, who "held rule with every star."

XXXV

The fifth pillar, whose letter is Iota, represents "those that fly," and "he that swims." Here the poet has reversed the order of the creatures as they appear in Genesis:

And God said, Let the waters bring forth  
 abundantly the moving creature that hath  
 life, and fowl that may fly above the  
 earth in the open firmament of heaven.

(Genesis i, 20)

That the pillar is "tuned to choral hymns" means merely that it records those praises bestowed upon the Creator by the fish and fowl - the concept of each creature praising God by its very being is implicit. This concept, not too distinct from Hopkins' instress, is concerned with the very existence of the bird or fish - its beauty, colour, song being a paeon to the Almighty. The use of "tuned" suggests

another thought, that each pillar represents one string of the lyre or harp upon which all nature sounds her praises of God. There is a passage in Jubilate Agno which may be a link here:

For GOD the father Almighty plays upon the HARP of  
 stupendous magnitude and melody,  
 For innumerable Angels fly out at every touch and  
 his tune is a work of creation.  
 For at that time malignity ceases and the devils  
 themselves are at peace.  
 For this time is perceptible to man by a remarkable  
 stillness and serenity of soul.  
 For the Aeolian harp is improveable into regularity...

(J.A. B 1, 246-250)

This idea is connected in his mind with the concept of the Aeolian harp, as this passage makes apparent. He treats of that aspect of the idea in stanza LXVI of the Song.

Other examples of God's works are recorded on its foot, its capital, and in the niche, or niches, with which it is graced; presumably in a suitably pictorial fashion, or in a script of sanctioned form or acceptable antiquity. Broadbent further notes, "I may represent the plumb-line, another of the moveable jewels of a masonic lodge, symbolising probity" (Broadbent, p. 36).

#### XXXVI

Sigma depicts "the social droves," that is, the animals that herd, the herbivores, and those useful to man. Nor are those animals that move alone forgotten. The relevant passage from Genesis reads:

And God said, Let the earth bring forth  
the living creature after his kind,  
cattle, the creeping thing, and beast  
of the earth after his kind: and it was so.

(Genesis i, 24)

The remainder of the stanza is less clear. In Jubilate  
Agno the initial S stands for Soul (J.A. B 2, 530) and for  
Salvation (J.A. B 2, 555). Perhaps the reference in the  
lines:

And man of all the chief;  
Fair on whose face, and stately frame,  
Did God impress his hallow'd name,  
For ocular belief.

is in part the statement in Genesis i, 27:

So God created man in his own image, in the  
image of God created he him....

And in part the fact of Messiah's incarnation in the flesh  
of man.

### XXXVII

The seventh pillar, Omega, for "the day of rest,"  
is appropriately also for "gratitude and thought." Omega  
is part of the phrase associated with the name of God in  
Revelation. The seventh day saw the culmination of the  
creation of the world which, in the Miltonic tradition,  
was to supply the lack in heaven created by the defection  
of Satan's forces. In this sense it controlled chaos -  
"the infernal draught." By this time the earth was  
established upon "his pole" or axis. The "goal" of the  
universe, mentioned in the fifth line, is possibly the

"great year" of the ancients when each star and planet will return to the place of its setting forth and the days of the creation will be complete, the millenium at hand. More simply, the line could refer merely to the completion of the creation.

### XXXVIII

Once again, in the thirty-eighth stanza, Smart returns to his praise of David. The psalmist is the "scholar of the Lord" in that he is acquainted with the beneficence of the creator and the multiplicity of the created order. His science is the "natural" science which aims at an understanding of God's works on earth. For this David is to receive, "...reward / And infinite degree." This word "degree," as Broadbent notes, is frequently used by Christopher Smart.. It is a masonic word meaning moral excellence.

The fifth line reiterates the correlation between David and the harp yielding praise to the Creator. The fourth and sixth lines refer to Samson's riddle of the honeycomb in the carcass of a lion: "out of strength cometh forth sweetness."

### XXXIX

In this stanza Smart utters what amounts to an attempted justification of the shortcomings both of his hero and of himself:



There is but One who ne'er rebell'd,  
 But One by passion unimpell'd,  
 By pleasures unintice't;

That is, only God is perfect; next to Him comes David in piety and glory.

We find, in this stanza, something of that serious preoccupation with his own grandeur on the part of Smart's God, which is quite unintentionally humorous, reminiscent of Milton's Father in Paradise Lost, III:

Grand object of his own content,  
 It is a picture of a very human, almost complacent, anthropomorphic deity.

#### XL

The poet takes the words of the Almighty from the Book of Exodus in the first lines of this stanza:

Tell them I am, JEHOVA said  
 To MOSES; while earth heard in dread,  
 And, smitten to the heart,  
 At once above, beneath, around,  
 All Nature, without voice or sound,  
 Replied, 'O Lord, THOU ART.'

The biblical text is as follows:

And Moses said unto God, Behold when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?

And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

(Exodus iii, 13 & 14)

The stanza continues with a dialogue between the Almighty and his creatures which is illustrative of the theme of all nature praising God.

This stanza is introductory to that "exercise upon the decalogue" of which Smart speaks in his "Contents."

(Exodus xx, 1 & 2

Broadbent has a note that the central meaning of Jehovah is "I am." But scholars have never agreed on the actual meaning of the name.

That earth should be "smitten to the heart" upon hearing the voice of the Creator is perhaps only right and fitting. Smart makes reference to Moses as the recipient of the revelation of the Divine Presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai, an honour vouchsafed to few. By his references to Moses the poet is endeavouring to establish the link between David and his spiritual ancestor, Moses, and his descendant, Christ. The attempt is to give David a pedigree more acceptable than the mere choice of Samuel, who after all chose Saul, and to establish David on this basis as a fit moralist, and so preach in his name. The doctrine prescribed is a mixture of the Mosaic law and the Sermon on the Mount.

## XLI

This stanza is a continuation of the previous one and is part of the exercise upon the decalogue. The first statement, that "all flesh" shares the bounty of the

Creator, is followed by a commandment not taken directly from the ten but modified by the New Testament influence which the poet frequently tries to inculcate. The statement, "Thou shalt not call thy brother fool," is a rephrasing of a verse in Leviticus "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart" (Leviticus xix, 17), and peculiarly relevant to the case of Smart after his seven years of being teased and jeered at in various mental institutions. In Jubilate Agno he writes:

For silly fellow! silly fellow! is against me  
and belongeth neither to me nor my family.

(J.A. B 1, 60)

### XLII

The suggestion that man is a creature, "Open, and naked of offence," is possible only from a poet of a child-like naïveté, though it might have applied to man in the Garden of Eden. Was Smart such a one? The second line of this stanza, "Man's made of mercy, soul, and sense" suggests that interest of Smart in angels, and his heretical acceptance of what Robert Brittain calls, "a clear doctrine of trichotomy." In some of his Hymns and Psalms angels appear where they are not in the biblical versions. Then in Hymn XVI on the Holy Trinity Smart writes:

Man, soul and angel join  
To strike up strains divine;

For angel, man and soul  
 Make up upon the whole  
 One individual here,  
 And in the highest sphere;  
 Where with God he shall repose,  
 From whose image first he rose.

(Hymn XVI, st. 5 & 6)

The statement, as Brittain notes, helps with the description in stanza XV of the Song; "Man, soul and angel without peer." Brittain has a great deal to offer on this score.

He writes:

When he says in the Song to David, XLIII, "Man's made of mercy, soul and sense," he reveals in a few words a great deal about his conception of the threefold nature of man. Here "sense" corresponds to "man" in the passages cited above; it is the rational, earth-bound, three-dimensional part of one. "Mercy," corresponding to "Angel," is that part of a human being which is divine, the purely spiritual essence, through which alone one may approach the throne of God; and by the designation "mercy" it is shown that this part of one partakes in an absolute sense of the nature of the Deity. (c.f. Hymn VI, The Presentation, st. 16). Between these two is the "soul," a receptive and communicative agent, bringing to the "sense-man" nature, intuitive glimpses of the eternal and the divine, and judging the flights of the "angel-mercy" by the aid of human reason.

(Brittain, p. 288)

The reference to the snail is possibly as a contrast to the purity of man:

These also shall be unclean unto you among the creeping things that creep upon the earth; ... the snail.

(Leviticus xi, 29-30)

The wheelk (Smart's "wilk") presumably is unclean also. Perhaps it is a further comment on the defencelessness of man among the other creatures, many of whom are "armed." The rest of the stanza is a traslation of a passage in Exodus "Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest" (Exodus xxiii, 12). There is a reference of a similar nature in Jubilate Agno:

For the merciful man is merciful to his beast,  
and to the trees that give them shelter.

(J.A. B 1, 13)

#### XLIII

This stanza takes as its text the fifth commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." The "hoary head" is the sign of age which is to be respected. There is an echo of two verses in Kings which may be intended in an admonitory way by the poet, though they do not redound to the credit of his hero. When David asks Solomon to destroy his enemies he uses the phrases, "...and let not his hoar head go down to the grave in peace," and "...his hoar head bring thou down to the grave in blood" (Kings ii, 6 & 9). This correlation may very well be unintentional. Smart avoids any overt reference to bloodshed in these stanzas on the decalogue.

The fourth line cites Christ as an example of filial obedience, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." The suggestion

that Christ's pattern be followed is explicit. In Luke, Jesus says "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke xxii, 42).

## XLIV

This stanza avoids any discussion of the violence which the sixth commandment prohibits. The poet contents himself with offering the advice that the passions are there to be used, not abused, and that the proper safeguards to abuse exist.

## XLV

The advice offered in this stanza is both moral and simple. The admonition, "Remember thy baptismal bond suggests "Honour thy father and mother." The fifth line does service for "Thou shalt not commit adultery ('...renounce ... the carnal desires of the flesh...')." The third line of the stanza is from Deuteronomy, "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together," (Deuteronomy xxii, 10). This is so obviously "Till not with ass and bull," as to need no further comment. The next verse in the same chapter of the same book yields the sixth line of Christopher Smart's stanza, "Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together" (Deuteronomy xxii, 11).

The second line of the stanza is from the New Testament. It is a saying by now almost proverbial:

Neither do men put new wine into old bottles:  
 else the bottles break, and the wine runneth  
 out, and the bottle perish: but they put new  
 wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.

(Mathew ix, 17)

#### XLVI

In this stanza Smart is dealing with a topic not unusual with him. The Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are filled with references to man's obligation to God and the poor. The responsibility to supply food to the needy is emphasized as a religious duty. Smart makes a frequent demand for charity. In Jubilate Agno he writes:

For God nevertheless is an extravagant Being  
 and generous unto loss.

(J.A. B 2, 380)

Further he says:

For Tully says to be generous you must first  
 be just, but the voice of Christ is  
 distribute at all events.

(J.A. B 2, 386)

#### XLVII

The whole tenor of this section of A Song to David is to the effect that the eye-for-an-eye philosophy of the Hebrew law is to be replaced by the New Testament golden rule. This turning from the Old to the New Testament is made concrete in the fourth line, "Turn from Old Adam to the New." Here Smart insists that only through Christ, and the additional efforts of the Christian, can man live

a worthy life. David, it is true, was half way between the two, but then he was an exception. The reference to Christ as the New Adam is in Corinthians xv, 22, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." More specifically, "And so it was written, the first Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit" (Corinthians xv, 45). The stanza finishes with the admonition to respect history and to learn from it.

#### XLVIII

Here the tenth commandment is hinted at. Again the golden rule is paraphrased. The word "Grutch" is a form of grudge, and is used as such by Smart and his contemporaries. (It was not a printer's error, as some editors have suggested, though it has been corrected as one by some editors of the Song.) The meaning of "Mammon and his leaven" is worldly success and insincerity. The theme is dealt with by Smart in his Parables:

Take heed (said Christ the Word of heav'n)  
To shun the Pharisaic leav'n,  
Ev'n hypocritical disguise:  
For nothing's veiled from human eyes,  
Which shall not in due time be shewn,  
Nor hid, but shall be fully known.

(Parable LI)

#### XLIX

Again, Smart apostrophises David. He asks that David, as teacher, insist on the ways of God. He appends



a comment which appears to have a biographical reference:

Vain are the documents of men,  
And vain the flourish of the pen  
That keeps the fool's conceit.

Can he be referring to the literary war conducted between Dr. Hill and himself, so detrimental to the reputations of both? Certainly the events illustrate his theme. The comments in The Monthly Review for that period are revealing.<sup>17</sup> Smart's note on this stanza suggests a correlation between the first line of the stanza and Psalm CXIX.

L

This stanza is generally on the poet's theme and reiterates his demand for praise of the Creator, a demand interwoven throughout the stuff of the Song. He appends to the plea for an overabundance of praise another moral precept like those which immediately precede. Though it does state the poet's theme, and is in place here, this stanza is rather a transitional than a vital one to the movement of the poem as a whole.

LI-LXXI

With this stanza Smart begins a section of twenty-one stanzas on the theme of Adoration. They are not, as has been suggested, three groups of seven in any integral sense. The first of the group establishes the habit of the celestial beings as regards adoration, with David yielding adoration, "in their midst." In Psalm CXXX the poet

personifies Adoration falling at the throne of God:

And therefore trembling at thy throne  
Shall adoration fall.

With the angels are "God's good poor," invited by Christ to the throne of God. Christ is here addressed as the "blessed bridegroom," his bride being, traditionally, the Church.

### LII

Stanza LII begins a group of twelve in each of which the phrase, "For Adoration," occurs. Each time it is one line further on in the stanza; line one in stanza LII, line two in stanza LIII, etc. The device runs twice completely through the six line stanza pattern, thus completing the twelve of this group. Such playing with the format of the stanza is not typical of the age.

The twelve stanzas are subdivided into four groups of three. Each triplet is devoted to one of the seasons,-- stanzas LII, LIII, LIV to Spring, stanzas LV, LVI, LVII to Summer, and so on. It is not apparently possible to break down each group into the relevant months of the year, though presumably that analogy suggested the pattern.

### LII

The polyanthus "chequing" the grass is not a difficult image to reconcile with spring. It is an example, perhaps, of what has been termed Smart's "miniaturist's eye." Certainly this poem is evidence of a very exact

observation and detailed memory, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the Adoration stanzas. Many explanations have been attempted for the lines:

And polish'd porphyry reflects  
By the descending rill.

Some critics translate "porphyry" as limestone; claim poetic licence either for the poet or themselves, and set the scene in Kent. This is just that sort of conventional eighteenth-century formula which Smart has so successfully avoided in the stanzas. Broadbent suggests that Smart had in mind the basin of an artificial fountain. In the Parables there is such a conjunction of rill and fountain:

The blessed men our Saviour chose  
To hear his doctrine, share his woes,  
Still as they waited by his side  
Were by his glory purified.  
No limpid rill, no polish'd vase,  
But were unclean before his face.

(Parables, 8)

In any case the image is of falling water, suitably rich and spring-like.

#### LIII

The almonds of this stanza are not ripening but blossoming. The phrase, "colour to the prime" should be so read. The "tendrils" refer to the new growth of the (grape) vine. In the clause, "And fruit trees pledge their gems," we have "gem" again in the sense of bud. Smart's own note identifies "Ivis" as the humming bird, though his source is unknown.

## LIV

The tone of this stanza is biblical and treats of the miraculous. Even the growth of the cedar is a yielding of adoration to God. Some distaste or lack of understanding is frequently voiced about the inclusion in this chorus of the mythical mermaid. Smart has the precedent of centuries of gothic church architecture as authority, were it needed, for the interpolation of unreal creatures and their juxtaposition with Christian figures. Devlin mentions that this mermaid forms part of the stone carving of Durham Cathedral where, in all probability, Smart saw her. In any case, the image is justified on another count in that it is, perhaps because of a certain incongruity, one of the most successful visually in this section of A Song to David:

...to the mermaid's pap  
The scaled infant clings.

## LV

The "spotted ounce and playsome cubs" are appropriate enough to summer. The ounce, an asiatic animal resembling a leopard, is among those animals which Smart knew only through his extensive reading. The lizards are at home in that season also. The "feed the moss" is a contrived phrase, calculated in its unfamiliarity. The halcyons, or kingfishers, figure in Greek legend as nesting on the waters. However, in the Christian version at least, they

nest for a fortnight before the winter solstice, when, as the legend has it, the waves are always calm. They became, as J.B. Broadbent notes, emblems of the peace brought about by the Nativity.

The embarking of the beasts was, in all probability, the herding by Noah of the animals into the ark. The rhyme of the following line would seem to support this suggestion. Robert Brittain believes that the extraordinary explanation of the sea-going quadruped in Smart's own notes to the 1765 edition was an after-thought. He writes, "The insertion of this dubious footnote (in an attempt to placate the reviewers?) is the only indication I have found in his later work of lingering traces of his illness," (Brittain, p. 30). It is more pleasant to envisage the poet inserting his footnote reference with tongue in cheek.

#### LVI

The personification of Israel, meaning the Hebrew people, is common in the Old Testament and Smart has merely transposed it to his verse. The fig is a biblical image conveying the ideas of peace and prosperity. It is so used by Smart in his translation of Psalms LXXVIII, CXXVIII, and CXLVII. It has been suggested that this stanza depicts a scene of tribal life with the patriarchal figure of Israel watching over the children of his tribe, the "wean'd advent'rer" sporting with the sprig of amber.

The picture is idealized and pastoral in the tradition of the shepherd king. The gale of the sixth line of the stanza is the breeze rather than anything more robust. It is so used by Thomson in his Seasons (Spring), and Pope uses it in the line: "Where e'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade." The image that the poet creates of the life of the traveller is an optimistic and unreal one.

#### LVII

The spirits tilting in the pink and mottled vault have called down upon the head of the poet suggestions that he was setting a war or tournament in heaven. Probably the reference is to nothing more unorthodox than a cessation of the winds in the sky.

Despite Edmund Gosse's delightful statement that the "coasting reader" is "the courteous reader, while walking along the coast," it is by now accepted that the reference is to the poet himself on a boat coasting on some river and regarding the fish swimming beneath him. Both silverlings and crusions are species of fish. The crusion is the colour of the gold-fish and thus "gilt."

#### LVIII

This stanza presents a picture of the traveller, possibly in the Americas. It is an idealized conception, as was often the case with the European view of the New World in the eighteenth century. The picture called up by

the last two lines - that of a small gathering in an arbor of oranges - is fanciful in the extreme. Presumably the orange could be trained upon a trellis, but it is more usual to find it upon a tree.

## LIX

The figure of labour is not capitalized in this personification. Broadbent suggests that although it was not capitalized in any early edition of the poem it should be so. He submits that many eighteenth-century abstractions are semi-allegorical but suggests that this is full allegory because Christ is "the prince of peace."

The stanza deals with the ripening and harvesting of divers crops and re-emphasizes the bounty of the Creator.

## LX

The scene is again not in the northern clime of England. The "whit'ning rice" suggests that illusory western isle to which Smart has already alluded. The "fenced land" of line four suggests the Promised Land. The West Indies was hailed in these terms when it first began to be colonized. The imagery is, at any rate, rather splendid:

The peaches and pomegranates stand  
Where wild carnations blow.

## LXI

The winter scene of this verse is peculiarly successful in that it is vibrantly alive. The crocus

"burnishes alive" the still wintry garden, and the myrtle, darkly green, preserves the illusion of growth.

## LXII

The pheasant is another example of plenty, of God's bounty. It is not untypical of Smart to regard the bird both as a free living creature offering adoration to its maker, and as a source of food. He does similarly in Jubilate Agno where the field-fare is praised as a source of food in the season of scarcity. The ermine, another symbol of richness, is also an emblem of purity - hence the use of the pelt. The sable makes a dramatic contrast with its funereal coat. The colour of the pheasant is set off by the white of the ermine and the black of the sable. The eighteenth-century diction of the last lines of this stanza is artificial yet, somehow, delightful; there is so little of it in this poem that it does not obtrude.

## LXIII

The last of the group of twelve stanzas moves to the scene of Smart's childhood. Here is the English countryside set out, probably in the season of Christmas. The reference both to holly and yew would reinforce this impression. Even the ceasing of apparent activity is attributable to the glory of the Lord:

And careful nature all her doors  
For ADORATION shuts.



## LXIV

The next eight stanzas re-apply the theme of adoration to Smart's initial theme. David's Psalms are, fairly obviously, "For Adoration." Smart makes a statement near to his own practice, "...he, who kneels and chants, Prevails his passions to control." This is Christopher Smart's contention, and the source of his incarceration. Christopher Hunter, Smart's nephew and the editor of the 1791 edition of the poems, notes that the poet was so impressed with the efficacy of the position of adoration that he wrote some passages of A Song to David upon his knees.

## LXV

The bullfinch trying to imitate the notes of the flute seems to Smart the type of the scholar. The bird is also an instance of adoration. The parable of the red-breast in the thorn bush is of less clear application to the poet's theme, unless it be as an instance of sacrifice.

## LXVI

Smart was intensely interested in the many branches of scientific and pseudo-scientific knowledge with which the cogniscenti of the age amused and employed themselves. His acquaintance with astronomy, natural history and religious philosophy appears in stanzas LXVI, LXVIII, and LXIX. His interest in astronomy is revealed by the lines:

For ADORATION in the skies,  
 The Lord's philosopher espies  
 The Dog, the Ram, and Rose.

The "Dog" is the dog-star, the "Ram", the constellation Aries. The Rose is emblematic of the virgin and, by extension, the constellation of that name. David is "the Lord's philosopher" of the first line of the stanza. One of Dr. Delany's footnotes suggests that there is a linguistic connection between the word "philosopher" and prophet: "....Doctor Patrick thinks that the Greek word Sophos, which was originally the title of astronomers, might be derived from Zoph, which in Hebrew signifies a prophet," (Delany, I, 16). Thus Smart's hero is again brought to the centre of the poetic foreground, without obscuring other figures.

The contrast between "The planet's ring, Orion's sword" and the glow-worm is intended to remind the reader of the multiplicity and variety of the creations of the Deity.

## LXVII

The "strings" of the first line are those of an Aeolian harp being played upon after its fashion. This instrument, first known to Europeans in 1650, made an impression on the men of Smart's generation. Gray commences his Pindaric Ode with a reference to it. The story of David hanging his zither by his bed to listen to its reverberations in the wind impressed Smart. Broadbent

writes, "the Aeolian harp symbolized spiritual harmony, and the praise evoked by divine inspiration," for Smart, (Broadbent, p. 39). The concept of a general Benedicite is here involved with that of nature as a sort of Aeolian harp, "For God the father Almighty plays upon the HARP of stupendous magnitude and melody," (J.A. B 1, 246). The voice of nature, or of God, though not loud to human ears, "makes the cataracts to fall."

#### LXVIII

In this stanza there is established a pattern which obtains in the subsequent group of stanzas. There is a statement of positive value in the quality of an object, followed by a statement that something of a religious nature is better. Here a discussion of incense and rich perfumes is followed by a reference to other spices or perfumes of a more sacred connotation - myrrh - and the suggestion that the "breath of saints" is better.

#### LXIX

The same pattern is repeated here. The down of the "dam'sin" and the crown of the pineapple are representative of the lush richness of these fruit. But "the sense" should control appetite and obviate over-indulgence. The application of this doctrine to other aspects of living is obvious and intended.

## LXX

This stanza is a reminder that God, or the Church, has established ways for the sinner to come to a state of grace. This is followed by the promise that "rays of glory" will reward the individual who overcomes the carnal impulses. These rays are traditionally depicted upon the head of Moses. They were formerly translated as "horns" (cf. Michelangelo's Moses). Smart seems to have taken the legend quite seriously. In Jubilate Agno he writes:

For in the day of David Men as yet had a glorious  
                                   horn upon his forehead.  
 For this horn was a bright substance in colour and  
                                   consistence as the nail of the hand.  
 For it was broad, thick and strong so as to serve  
                                   for defence as well as ornament.  
 For it brightend to the Glory of God, which came  
                                   upon the human face at morning prayer.  
 For it was largest and brightest in the best men.

(J.A. C 19-23)

The passage continues with elements of less obvious relevance to the current theme.

## LXXI

The example of the sparrow and the swallow finding refuge in the house of God, bringing to mind, as it does, the parable of the fallen sparrow, serves as a further reminder that man is not alone in his predicament but has divine help when he seeks it. The "man of God's humility" here addressed is David. Delany makes much of this quality in David. His humility after sinning did much to avert the

wrath of the Almighty.

Next come another twelve stanzas built up of four groups of three. In the first two stanzas of each group various aspects of creation are described as sweet, strong, beauteous or precious; then the third stanza reapplies the adjective to a Christian text.

#### LXXII

"Sweet is the dew," and sweet is the air of Mount Hermon, more popularly known as Sion. Partly in that it is a high mountain perpetually snow-caped, but more because it is the scene of the Lord's transfiguration. Sweet also is the impulse to early prayer.

#### LXXIII

The lines of these stanzas serve best as illustration of their qualities:

Sweet the young nurse, with love intense,  
Which smiles o'er sleeping innocence,  
Sweet when the lost arrive.

Of the first two lines Broadbent writes, "The syntax is doubtful, the baby an abstraction, the alliteration excessive, but the essential impression is made," (Broadbent, xix). In these stanzas which culminate the poem, Smart is no longer drawing in references of great complexity. The verse is by this time simplified and uplifted to the point that it carries the reader with it willy-nilly. Never slow, the speed of A Song to David as a poem here picks up, and the reader is hurled forward to the crescendo of

the final three stanzas.

The third line is a reference, though not limited to that, to the parable of the prodigal son. The phrase "his vague mind" refers to the vagrant mind of the musician seeking the "sweets" of his art.

#### LXXIV

In the third stanza of the group Smart makes his restatement and re-application:

Sweeter, in all the strains of love,  
The language of thy turtle dove,  
Pair'd to the swelling chord.

The reference is, again, to David. In Psalm LXXIV David refers to himself in these terms, "O deliver not the soul of thy turtle-dove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor forever," (Psalm LXXIV, 19).

#### LXXV

This stanza, which is a particularly successful one, moves rapidly and strongly. Smart supplies the gloss for Xiphias as the sword fish. The theme of this and the two following stanzas is strength. There is a reference to the horse as strong in Job: "Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?" (Job xxxix, 19). The ostrich also figures in Job: "Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich? Which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust," (Job xxxix, 13 & 14). Several

more images in this section come from Job. The re-appearance of groups of ideas found in similar arrangements in books of the Old and New Testament suggests not so much that Smart was culling images from memory, or noting down ideas read in previous years, but that he was supplied with books while inscribing the Song, another reason for supposing that he was at liberty, either within or without the institution, when he wrote A Song to David.

## LXXVI

This stanza extends the illustrations of strength:

Strong is the lion - like a coal  
His eyeball - like a bastion's mole  
His chest against the foes:  
Strong the gier-eagle on his sail  
Strong against tide the enormous whale  
Emerges as he goes.

The lion, the eagle, and the whale are untamed creatures, and would be representative of the sublime according to Edmund Burke.

## LXXVII

The syntax is involved here. The phrase, "And far beneath the tide," is part of the syntactic group before the second line. Broadbent suggests that the second half of the stanza refers not only to the Christian promise, "Seek and ye shall find," but also to a masonic initiation ritual.

## LXXVIII

The beauty of this stanza, as of the following one, is apparent. The "meditated wild" of the fifth line is probably a reference to the planned "naturalness" of eighteenth-century landscape-gardening, though a possible interpretation might have it as the wild country being meditated upon.

## LXXIX

The reference to the temple is apparently to Hebrew offerings, though it would apply equally well to a Christian church. It is possible to see the whole stanza as a marriage ceremony, all the images relate well to that theme.

## LXXX

The shepherd king is David, trusting in Jehovah. Many various references are possible from David stooping for pebbles to slay Goliath, to David in his old age praying to his God. The "mute" of the fifth line is a short form of "the mute race" meaning fish. In Jubilate Agno Smart has a phrase which may have suggested the line:

For the praise of God can give to a mute fish  
the notes of a nightingale.

(J.A. B. 1, 24)

The last line recommends the prostrate position for adoration of the Creator, and picks up the idea of man's origin in dust and his eventual descent thereto.



## LXXXI

The "extream delight" in "Largess from the churl" is glossed by Broadbent as refering to Nabal of Carmel. If so, the delight was indeed "extream." Nabal refused provisions to David and his men in the wilderness after they had helped protect his lands. Nabal's wife, fearing David's wrath, not only took much good food to David, but upon the fortuitous death of her husband a week later, married David. She was his second wife.

Alba is "a white stone with a 'new name' (Christ) written in it, given to him that overcometh," in Revelation. Broadbent has a further note which is interesting if not essential to this explication:

The significance is uncertain but the context relates it to manna, with which precious stones were supposed to have fallen. In his hymn for Easter Day Smart relates "The Morning Star (Christ) and pearl of price (kingdom of heaven), And stone of lucid white." He seems to have associated it with Christ as the stone which the builders rejected, the chief cornerstone.

(Broadbent, p. 40)

## LXXXII

The "feast of bow'rs" is the feast of the tabernacles which Smart refers to as "bowers" in his Paraphrase of the Bible. The distinction is made in this stanza between sincere religious observance and that which is performed by rote, or in form only.

## LXXXIII

The character of David is here once more given that credit which Smart held, quite arbitrarily, to be due:

In all extreams, in each event,  
Proof - answering true to true.

## LXXXIV

Hereafter the three culminating verses carry the theme of the exceptionally beautiful in creation:

Glorious the sun in mid career;  
Glorious th'assembled fires appear;  
Glorious the comet's train:  
Glorious the trumpet and alarm;  
Glorious th'Almighty stretched-out arm;  
Glorious th'enraptured main.

The probable date of composition for the Song in 1759-60 makes not unreasonable the suggestion of a specific reference to Halley's comet which appeared in 1758. The splendour of its passage inspired awe and panic among the populace. The "stretched-out arm" is a Biblical phrase for the power of God. Broadbent notes that it is used especially when He retrieved Israel from Egypt; and thus perhaps the "enraptur'd main" is the Red Sea.

## LXXXV

The reference of "hosannah from the den" is presumably to Daniel in the den replete with lions. The last section of A Song to David does not require explication so much as a repeated reading, so perhaps the least said the better. ?

## LXXXVI

The second word in the fourth line, "at," has been changed to "that" by early editors on the assumption that such was the author's intent. This practice has been discontinued. Perhaps the verse is more readily understandable with the alternate phrasing.

There have been arguments and controversies over the meaning of the last three lines of the Song. The entire poem culminates here in the greatest event in the Christian world, the Crucifixion. The idea carries over from the "marty's gore" of the previous stanza and is made specifically a reference to Christ's sacrifice. The person addressed in the fourth line is David. The poem began with an invocation to him, and ends with a statement based on the biblical record - that David believed in, and indeed foretold, the coming of the Saviour. This is the stupendous truth which David asserted. Through this faith he can lay claim to his place in heaven as a Christian. The poet continues "now the matchless deed's atchiev'd;" the Messiah has come and the end of the creation attained with the saving of man.

In this poem, Smart is not merely creating a list of those things in the world which redound to the credit of the Almighty. He is not interested in proselytizing so much as portraying the visible world in the way he saw it. His enthusiasm, his belief, his faith, and his

untroubled acceptance of all good, and of all as good, crowd in upon the reader. The fervor of the man is communicated by way of a verse, successful not in spite of but because of its enthusiasm.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>10</sup>Christopher Smart, A Song to David, The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, ed. Callan (London: 1947). p. 348, st. 1.

<sup>11</sup>John Donne, "La Corona," The Penguin Poets, London, 1950.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Sitwell, The Pleasures of Poetry: A Critical Anthology, Vol. 3, London: 1930-32, p. 76-77.

<sup>13</sup>Edmund Burke, An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, London: 1757.

<sup>14</sup>cf. Johnson's dictionary, BUD. n.s. /bouton, Fr./ The first shoot of a plant; a gem. TO BUD. v.n. 1. To put forth young shoots, or gems. GEM. n.s. 2. The first bud.

<sup>15</sup>On the Immensity of the Supreme Being, The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, ed. Callan, London: 1949, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup>The Monthly Review, April, 1763, vol. XXVIII, p. 320.

<sup>17</sup>A mock-epic poem, "The Hilliad," was published by Smart in 1753.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSION

#### (i) Links with Other Poems by Smart

That A Song to David is not unique in form of theme must appear from an examination of Smart's other devotional poetry. The same form and similar themes recur. Smart repeatedly attempts an integration of Christian with Hebraic and Classical elements. His Psalms were written "in the spirit of Christianity," with instances of violence. Omitted. Smart and the David he creates in his Psalms make frequent references to Christ and appeals to Him for aid. This practice is similar to the poet's re-phrasing of the Decalogue in A Song to David to replace the harsh Hebraic commands with milder New Testament precepts.

The attitude of adoration is, as has been shown, integral to Smart's earlier poetical essays on the attributes of the Supreme Being. Throughout the translations of the Psalms the same theme is taken up, and it is re-worked in the Hymns. The attitude is apparent in Jubilate Agno and it transfigures A Song to David.

Items from Smart's other writings reappear frequently in the Song. Images and phrases from both Jubilate Agno and the Psalms figure prominently. In A Song to David, the angels are said to march upon the "glorious arch" which

is supported by the pillar labelled Gamma. The same rhyme and image are used in Psalm CIV:

His chariots are the rolling clouds  
 Upon th'etherial arch;  
 And on the rapid winds their wings  
 Majestical, the king of Kings  
 Walks in his awful march.

(Psalm CIV, st. 3)

The material of the Psalm has been reformed and re-used in the Song. The image of the Whale is less vitally "impressed" in the Psalm than in the latter poem:

And some of huge enormous bulk  
 The swelling floods surmount.

(Psalm CIV)

Strong against tide, th'enormous whale  
 Emerges as he goes.

(S.D. LXXVI)

Other similar groupings of images occur between Psalm CIV and A Song to David.

In A Song to David, Smart identifies Satan with the evil spirit which torments Saul. The Adversary figures in a similar way in the Psalms. In Psalm XIII the poet says "But I to thy dictates agree, / Which save me from Satan and Saul." The poet is introducing anachronisms here, but is consistent in his practice.

The identification between David and Smart on the one hand, and between David and Christ on the other, an integral part of A Song to David, stems from the poet's work upon the Psalms. In Psalm XXVII the poet is

addressing Christ in his own person in stanza nine, and asking God's continued support of David in stanza ten, without apparent change of mood or break in syntax. The poet so clearly assumes the character of the psalmist that the reader can hardly distinguish between the two persons involved.

The tie between David and Christ as his "son", or descendant, is made evident by Smart in Psalm IV "it was even Thou, a part of David." It is David's claim to the position of eminence which he holds in the Song that he is the type of Christ. His anointing and dedication make David one of the "elect." It seems to be Smart's belief that all that David does is acceptable to God. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination was often interpreted to give the "chosen" license - how could a person accepted at birth by the Deity as one of the elect sin sufficiently to lose his place in heaven? Because he also is one of the elect, David remains in the favour of God during a life of bloodshed and indulgence. Smart, the successor to David as psalmist and a Reviver of Adoration, must also be saved.



(ii)

### Comparison with Some Other Poets

The attempt to make poetry out of biblical story is no longer a popular form of literary endeavour, but in its day it had a lot to recommend it. Not only did the author have before him a model of literary interest and worth - the promptings of piety and the recognition of thematic interest both lent their weight to the choice. Milton's great success with his epic seems rather to have spurred the ambitious on to emulate him, than to have deterred the timorous from the rash attempt.

A comparison with works of a similar nature by other poets makes apparent the great success of Smart in A Song to David. Abraham Cowley drew upon the biblical story of David for his Davideis, Mathew Prior utilized proverbs and Ecclesiastes for his Solomon, and Robert Browning took a part of the Book of Samuel for his poem "Saul." Each poet treats his subject with a certain degree of freedom. None of the poems compares with A Song to David in inspirational achievement or technical excellence.

Abraham Cowley's Davideis (1668) is a poem much slighter than Smart's in scope and execution. Like Milton, the poet invokes a heavenly muse, in this case Christ, asking the Deity to:

Guid my bold steps with thine old trav'elling flame,  
In these untrodden paths to Sacred Fame.1

But Cowley's muse leads him, in most pedestrian fashion through four books of iambic pentameter, rhymed in couplets, and lacking in charm. The poet is ill-equipped to realize his avowed intent:

Lo, this great work, a Temple to thy praise,  
On polisht Pillars of Strong Verse I raise.

(Davideis, p. 243)

The metre often breaks, the rhymes are not always true, the whole is uninspired. Cowley's attempt at an infernal parliament, is a poor thing not to be compared with Milton's success with this traditional Christian epic component. The habit of italicizing the words designed for emphasis, though possibly necessary, is ill-applied. Long passages of ornate description are included apparently to display the "art" of the author.

The care and industry which produced the copious notes following each chapter must win for the author the plaudits of the reader who manages to reach them. They comprise biblical reference and quotations for many lines of the work. They are often more rewarding than the accompanying text but they are frequently unintelligible without reference to the poem.

The charitable reader may suppose the figures to have been considered "poetical" by their author. That is, they are flat, stereotyped, unenlivened by any individual

characteristics.

Like Smart, however, Cowley is intent on portraying David as innocent and meek. The shepherd-king, as the type of Christ, is the central aspect of the Davidian character.

In his poem, Solomon on the Vanity of the World, Matthew Prior expresses a very different philosophy from Smart's. Adopting the character of the son of David, Prior animadverts on the futile nature of the struggle for happiness through Knowledge, Pleasure, or Power. Taking passages from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes for his text, he creates a soliloquy the subject of which is this:

The Pleasures of Life do not compensate the  
Miseries: Age steals upon Us anawares; and  
Death, as the only Cure of our Ills, ought  
to be expected, but not feared.<sup>2</sup>

The motif running through the three books of the poem is "All is Vanity." Prior seems in complete accord with the conclusion to which Solomon comes. Prior has time to enquire in rhetorical fashion into many of the objects of the natural world that interested Smart, including such philosophical, astronomical and agricultural phenomena as are treated by Smart in Jubilate Agno. The discussion ranges through botany:

Why does one Climate, and one Soil endue  
The blushing Poppy with a crimson Hue,  
Yet leave the Lilly pale, and tinge the Violet blue?

(Solomon I, p. 266)

The creatures of the sea intrigue Prior as they do Smart:

Of Fishes next, my Friends, I would enquire,  
How the mute Race engender, or respire;  
From the small Fry that glide on JORDAN'S Stream  
Unmark'd, a Multitude without a name,  
To that Leviathan, who o'er the Seas  
Immense rolls onward his impetuous Ways  
And mocks the Wind, and in the Tempest plays.

(Solomon I, p. 267)

Then Prior's questing mind touches on many of the subjects of David's song - of Birds, and Beasts, and Bees, of instinct, and astronomy. But where Smart and David sing, Prior and Solomon question. The existence of the Deity is postulated, not accepted on faith. Prior reasons that the many things of the world, all unexplained, must have

A First, a Source, a Life, a Deity;  
What has for ever been, and must for ever be.

(Solomon I, p. 274)

There is a similar reaction to the stars on the part of both Prior and Smart:

Yet these great Orbs thus radically bright,  
Primitive Founts, and Origins of Light.

(Solomon I, p. 277)

The poet suggests, as Milton and Pope had, and as Smart does in Jubilate Agno, that other suns may have their own planets and support other races. A reference to God is couched in the same terms from Revelation which Smart utilizes:

This ALPHA and OMEGA, First and Last,  
Who like the Potter in a Mould has cast  
The World's great frame.

(Solomon I, p. 281)

Whereas Smart celebrates all knowledge as a way to a approach nearer to an understanding of the Almighty, Prior writes:

In vain we lift up our presumptuous Eyes  
To what our Maker to their Ken denies.

(Solomon I, p. 283)

The message of the piece is explicit:

Various Discussions tear our heated Brain:  
Opinions often turn; still Doubts remain,  
And who indulges thought, increases Pain.

(Solomon I, p. 283)

In case the obtuse reader has not understood, Prior underlines:

Remember, that the curs'd Desire to know,  
Off-spring of ADAM, was thy Source of Woe.

(Solomon I, p. 284)

Not having found happiness in Knowledge, Solomon turns, in Book Two, to Pleasure. He "concludes that as to the Pursuit of Pleasure, and sensual Delight, ALL is VANITY AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT," (Solomon II, p. 285). In this book, Solomon discourses on gardens, music, dancing, and drinking; all are found wanting. Smart delighted in each of these.

Solomon is scarcely enthusiastic about the life led by his father, David:

My Father's Life was one Long Line of Care,  
A Scene of Danger, and a state of War.

(Solomon II, p. 327)

This is not the view of David's life which Smart wishes to present. Smart emphasizes harmony and enjoyment in the world generally, and in the existence of the great King.

Prior's stand is not jubilant:

The cradle and the Tomb; Alas! so nigh;  
To live is scarce distinguished from to dye.

(Solomon II, p. 330)

In the Third Book Prior or Solomon:

Considers Man through the several Stages and  
Conditions of Life; and concludes in general,  
that We are all Miserable.

(Solomon III, p. 332)

He indulges in melancholy soul-searching:

What Pause from Woe, What Hopes of Comfort bring  
The Name of Wise or Great, of Judge or King?

(Solomon III, p. 333)

The poet concludes:

Avails it then, O Reason, to be Wise?  
To see this cruel scene with quicker Eyes.

(Solomon III, p. 335)

Smart's jubilant approach to a world manifesting the bountiful love of a beneficent Being is foreign to Prior. His religion, as it appears in Solomon, is a lugubrious and dismal one, sufficient, perhaps, to keep man on the approved path through fear, but not pleasant enough for him to like the road he travels. In consequence, the delight of Smart's better verse is lacking.

Other differences between the two poems prevail. Despite his prefatory protestations that "He that writes in Rhimes, dances in Fetters," Prior performs in iambic pentameter rhymed couplets. Each couplet has, as Prior notes, something of the point of an aphorism, but the verse does not move as freely as Pope's exercises in the same form. Although the intellect of the reader is engaged, and his sense approves, his passions are untouched. The poem does not uplift as does A Song to David.

Browning's poem "Saul" proclaims the impression of its author's acquaintance with the work of Smart. Although it is very different in style, and content, the poem shares with Smart's that aura of the miraculous which makes A Song to David a thing apart.

The poem "Saul" consists largely of the songs which David sings to soothe the troubled spirit of his king. Two stanzas of preamble lead into the lyric section in which Browning re-creates the words of David. The songs in question, though more inspired than those of Cowley, do not thrill the reader.

The poetry is not Browning's best. It reveals little of David's character; but that little follows the tradition of depicting David as a mild and Christ-like figure, dedicated to God and to his king. The aura of the miraculous overspreads the last stanzas, and Browning intimates that David is there in direct communication with

his God. The poem does not manage to uplift the reader and remove him to another world.

Of the three poems, Davideis, Solomon, and "Saul," the last is nearest to A Song to David in concept. Browning wishes to suggest the awe-inspired relationship of the poet to his God, which Smart achieves. He attempts to display creation in the magic light of divine beneficence. He almost succeeds.

Few of the great religious poets in the language have achieved the portrait of man at peace and in a state of grace, in direct relationship with his God. Milton managed it, of course, in the Garden of Eden in Paradise Lost. But the exigencies either of character or plot compelled him to loose his hold upon the vision which Smart contrives to retain.

Contemporaries of Smart chose to illustrate the same theme of adoration. The hymns of Watts, the Wesleys, Merrick and many others tell of the glories of the Creator. Few of them do so in the metre of A Song to David. The Benedicite Paraphrased is the most outstanding exception. Written, or at least published, in 1746, this poem was recognized by Robert Brittain as being of the same stuff as Smart's Song. In an article in PMLA (March 1941), he asserts that Smart wrote it. Though he was mistaken, and the poem was subsequently restored to James Merrick, his article brings out the remarkable similarities between



The Benedicite Paraphrased and A Song to David. The theme, the metre, and the syntax are obviously of the same kind.

The poem commences as Smart might have done:

Ye works of God, on him alone,  
In Earth his Footstool, Heaven his Throne,  
Be all your Praise bestow'd;  
Whose Hand the beauteous Fabrick made,  
Whose eye the finish'd Work survey'd,  
And saw that All was Good.<sup>3</sup>

The poet continues to ask angels, Planets, Dews, winds, Floods, Light and various creatures to praise the Deity. Those stanzas that seem least like Smart's work in the Song have a parallel in one of the Psalms or Hymns of Smart. Several verses attain near to the command of the author of A Song to David:

Ye Trees, that fill the rural Scene,  
Ye Flowers, that o'er th' enamel'd Green  
In native Beauty reign,  
O! praise the Ruler of the Skies,  
Whose Hand the genial Sap supplies,  
And clothes the smiling Plain.

Ye secret Springs, ye gentle Rills,  
That murm'ring rise among the Hills,  
Or fill the humble Vale;  
Praise him, at whose Almighty Nod  
The rugged Rock dissolving flow'd  
And form'd a springing Well.

Praise him, ye Floods; and Seas profound,  
Whose Waves the spacious Earth surround,  
And roll from Shore to Shore;  
Aw'd by his Voice, ye Seas, subside,  
Ye Floods, within your Channels glide,  
And tremble and adore.

Ye Whales, that stir the boiling Deep,  
Or in its dark Recesses sleep,  
Remote from human Eye;  
Praise him, by whom ye all are fed,  
Praise him, without whose heavenly Aid  
Ye languish, faint, and die.

Ye Birds, exalt your Maker's Name,  
Begin, and with th'important Theme  
    Your artless Lays improve;  
Wake with your Songs, the rising Day,  
Let Musick sound on ev'ry Spray,  
    And fill the vocal Grove.

Praise him, ye Beasts, that Nightly roam  
Amid the solitary Gloom,  
    Th' expected Prey to seize;  
Ye Slaves of the Laborious Plough,  
Your stubborn Necks submissive bow,  
    and bend your weary'd Knees.

It is understandable that critics should accept Brittain's attribution of these stanzas to Smart. However, although the poem was published anonymously by Dodsley in 1746, it was attributed to Merrick by him in his six-volume collection of 1770, and also printed in contemporary magazines with the author's name. The use of "Ye" to commence the stanzas is atypical of Smart. There is not quite the crispness and clarity of the Song, but only that "impression" to which Smart attained in his last years is lacking.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Abraham Cowley, Davideis, Poems, Miscellanies, The Mistress, Pindaricue Odes, Verses Written on Several Occasions, Cambridge, 1905.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Prior, Solomon on the Vanity of the World, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup>James Merrick, The Benedicite Paraphrased, quoted in "An Early Model for Smart's A Song to David," by Robert Brittain, PMLA, March, 1941, Vol. LVI, p. 165-174.

(iii)            A Song to David is Unique in its  
Aesthetic Achievement

The achievement of A Song to David has been variously estimated since its publication. Few of the literary figures of the day who saw it expressed their liking in print. Boswell saw something in it, but the poem did not give him unalloyed pleasure. The work sank into oblivion for some time. In 1820, a review in The London Magazine suggests that the poem bears "internal evidence of its birth place; or at least, that its author was "of imagination all compact."<sup>4</sup> Similar, and harsher, judgements continued to be printed well into the twentieth century.

It was left to the Pre-Raphaelites to recognize A Song to David as a work of genius. Rossetti termed it "the only great accomplished poem" of the century, (The Atheneum).<sup>5</sup> Browning's reaction is well-known. He alludes to it in a few lines in Paracelsus, and addresses Smart as the recipient of divine inspiration in his Parleyings with Certain People.<sup>6</sup> His eulogies may have restored the poem to the reading public. Browning's own poem, "Saul," owes its inspiration, though not its form, to Smart's influence.

Since Browning wrote, some hundreds of notes and short articles have been written on or about A Song to

David. It has been variously heralded as unique and miraculous, as obscure and mad. Many editions of the poem contain small glosses which help the reader with such words as the editor feels may be unfamiliar. Recent longer articles on Smart have done much to dispel the obscurity which has remained the principal characteristic of the poem for many. The reader who cares to correlate previous glosses, recent explication, and his own enquiries, can create an interpretation of the poem which makes clear at least the salient points and adds much to the reading of the piece.

It is Smart's stand that he, like David, can recognize the praise offered by the creatures of the world to their Creator:

I speak for all - for them that fly,  
 And for the race that swim;  
 For all that dwell in moist and dry,  
 Beasts, reptiles, flow'rs and gems that vie  
 When gratitude begins her hymn.

(Hymn VI, st. 9)

It is the measure of his success that he often manages to catch the spirit of such a universal offering of piety, and convey the impression to his readers. In A Song to David as in Hymn XXXII, Smart makes manifest the presence of his God on earth:

God all-bounteous, all-creative,  
 Whom no ills from good disuade,  
 Is incarnate, and a native  
 Of the very world he made.

It is part of the charm of the Song that it is Smart's God, and the world Smart made, which is alive in the poem. The Deity Smart depicts is not the traditional Church of England abstraction; nor is Smart's David the historical figure. The poet has culled the most joyful and tender aspects of the Christian legend and re-created a loving and joyous Deity, an achievement one hardly expects to find in the writings of a man who went to London where, like the Prodigal Son of the Parable:

soon, inordinately gay,  
He wasted all he did possess  
In rioting and rank excess.

(Parable XXIV, Callan, p.884)

It is precisely because Smart is free with his material, creating his own David, his own God, and his own world, that he is able to portray that air of innocence, joy, and hope which is so large a part of the appeal of the verse. It is an exaggerated position to say that Smart was out of touch with reality. But the man who could write even Jubilate Agno in an asylum, and the Hymns for the Amusement of Children while being hounded and persecuted for debt, is not of the common mass.

Smart gives life and a harmonious vigour to a theme neither original nor popular. The poetry of religious praise makes little appeal to the modern reader, but if he picks up A Song to David, he will often find much to delight and not a little to intrigue him. Although the poem can be

dipped into with enjoyment, it does not yield all its riches to a casual or unthinking perusal. But it repays with a redoubling of delight and an extension of reference the effort required to come to know it.

Many poets have written well on religious subjects; many undoubtedly better than Smart. Few, however, have been better religious poets in the sense that they not only convey the sense of their own devotion, but inspire that response in their readers. The cumulative effect of Smart's masterpiece is one of inspiration and joy. The reader does not have to be a Christian; he is caught up by the poet's enthusiasm and made to see the world as the poet sees it. And that vision is ecstatic and joyful.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>4</sup>The London Magazine, March, 1820, p. 321-22.

<sup>5</sup>William Michael Rossetti, The Atheneum, Feb. 19, 1887.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Browning, Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day, London, 1887, No. 3.



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