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Sacred Play: Christopher Smart and the Hymn of Jeoffrey the Cat¹⁾

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Abstract

This essay explores Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* in the context of eighteenth-century religious poetry and hymnodies. Written during a time when reason began to overshadow religious fervour, Smart's work stands out for its eccentricity and deep personal expression of faith. The poem, particularly the iconic depiction of his cat Jeoffrey, highlights Smart's unorthodox approach to religious devotion, which diverges from both conventional hymn writing and the Augustan poetic form. The analysis traces the poem's fragmented structure and mystical vision, contrasting it with contemporaneous hymn writers such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, whose works emphasise communal worship. By examining how Smart's fervent religiosity infused *Jubilate Agno* with a unique liturgical and spiritual dimension, it highlights his contribution to the evolution of religious poetry. *Jubilate Agno* challenges the traditional views of hymnody, emphasising individual faith and cosmic praise, and offering new possibilities for religious expression. Furthermore, the essay situates Smart within the broader intellectual landscape, addressing how his poetic innovations reflect a personal and distinct vision of devotion in a rapidly secularising society.

Keywords: Smart, *Jubilate Agno*, hymnody, personal devotion,
the eighteenth-century religious poetry

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, when Christian ideology infused all aspects of life and social institutions, the emerging emphasis on reason began to reshape intellectual and cultural landscapes. Within this transitional milieu, the poet Christopher Smart (1722–71), often dismissed as mad, quietly composed his eccentric yet profound work, *Jubilate Agno*. Though his contributions were largely overlooked during his lifetime, as the literary world shifted from neoclassicism to the nascent movements of Romanticism, *Jubilate Agno* garnered posthumous recognition, particularly for the vivid depiction of his cat Jeoffrey. It is a passage

now celebrated as iconic, eclipsing Smart's otherwise limited literary renown. Unfinished and unpublished during his lifetime, the poem narrowly escaped oblivion, surviving as scattered fragments that remained privately held for decades. It was not until 1939, with the first complete publication titled *Rejoice in the Lamb*, that Smart's idiosyncratic genius found a wider audience.

In 1943, *Jubilate Agno* experienced a resurgence when British composer Benjamin Britten set it to music as a hymn.²⁾ This remarkable hymn not only honoured the occasion but also reevaluated Smart's poem, weaving his verses into a fitting celebration while offering a fresh musical interpretation. The hymn opens with the biblical exhortation, "Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues", set to a "measured and mysterious" tempo, a directive that evokes a mystical atmosphere within the structure of classical religious music (Britten 1). As the solemn chorus unfolds, various solo sections emerge, including a notable soprano solo in "For I will consider my cat Jeoffrey" (Britten 1). This passage, with its light-hearted and agile portrayal of Jeoffrey accompanied by delicate organ music, injects a humorous yet reverent tone into the piece. The inclusion of such a familiar figure at the heart of religious work underscores both the gravity and uniqueness of the composition, further cementing Jeoffrey's position in popular culture.

Consequently, after years of neglect, Smart's name and work have resurfaced in cultural discourse. His life and poetry were deeply intertwined with an intense personal faith, fervent to the point of fanaticism, which diverged from the prevailing religious and literary norms of the eighteenth century. *Jubilate Agno* represents a daring attempt to articulate personal devotion through innovative religious expressions and unconventional poetic techniques, distinguishing Smart from his peers. Although initially overlooked, the poem's expressive form and spiritual depth eventually attracted critical attention.

The first example is where Robert Browning openly praised Smart's work in his *Parleyings* (1887), where he lauded Smart's poetic genius and highlighted how religious insight and emotion lent power to his poetry, even amid madness. This marked the beginning of Smart's re-evaluation. In the twentieth century, Charles David Abbott further advanced this re-evaluation in his 1930 essay "Christopher Smart's Madness", in which he highlighted that Smart's madness was deeply linked to his religious devotion, fuelling more scholarly interest in his religious poetry. In the 1960s, there was a surge of scholarly attention to *Jubilate Agno* and its famous depiction of Jeoffrey the cat, driven partly by Benjamin Britten's composition, *Rejoice in the Lamb*, which accentuated Smart's unique portrayal of his feline companion. Later,

Cowler and Hawes emphasised Smart's "religious madness" as a central theme. More recently, critics such as Vincent Newell have examined *Jubilate Agno* through deconstructionist lenses, exploring Smart's linguistic playfulness and subversion of poetic norms. Through this evolving critical dialogue, *Jubilate Agno* gradually earned recognition for its originality and literary merit, carving out a distinctive place in eighteenth-century English poetry.

The poetry of eighteenth-century England was largely shaped by neoclassical influences, with Augustan poets placing great value on form, reason, sense of order, and moderation. While many poets of the time adhered to these classical ideals, producing works that focused on social criticism and moral instruction, religious poetry declined as Enlightenment thought gained prominence. However, this decline was counterbalanced by notable contributions in hymn-writing, a form of religious expression that thrived during this period and complicated the reductive characterisations of the eighteenth century as merely an "Age of Reason" or an "Age of Theism." Christopher Smart, whose fervent religiosity and poetic eccentricity set him apart from rationalists and conventional religious trends, combined the personal intensity of religious poetry with the structural innovation of hymnody, creating a unique position in the literary landscape. *Jubilate Agno*, a work that defies categorisation within the mainstream canon, is a testament to Smart's passionate devotion and willingness to transcend contemporary poetic conventions. This unique quality invites further examination of Smart's religious poetry.

This essay investigates the distinctive nature of Smart's religious poetry by focusing on the qualities that define *Jubilate Agno*. It explores how the poem expresses religious fervour through its innovative form, and how Smart maintains his devout faith in an increasingly secularised society. Additionally, this analysis explores how Smart's religious poetry, particularly that of *Jubilate Agno*, reflects his distinct vision of devotion, apart from the literary trends of his time. By foregrounding these devotional aspects and situating them within the broader religious and literary currents of the 18th century, this essay contributes a fresh perspective to Smart studies, interpreting *Jubilate Agno* as a unique synthesis of personal devotion and universal worship.

I. Hymn Reform in the Eighteenth Century

Smart's life and poetry are deeply rooted in personal faith and religious practices, which can be described as fervent and bordering on fanaticism. Born to a devout Anglican father

and a Catholic mother, Smart studied at Cambridge University, where he exhibited early signs of literary talent. While still a student, he translated Alexander Pope's *Ode for Musick, on St. Cecilia's Day* into Latin, showcasing his promising future as a poet. However, he gradually succumbed to alcoholism and gambling, which led to a life of debauchery and a loss of social credibility. Despite these personal struggles, his passion for creation remained undiminished, and he produced religious poetry—particularly hymns—out of faith that bordered on religious fervour. During the eighteenth century, when Christian faith became increasingly overshadowed, hymns emerged as a critical means of rekindling religious passion.

The history of hymns, essential to the development of the Christian faith, dates back to the end of the sixth century, when Pope Gregory I unified the liturgy, incorporating psalmody into the liturgical framework as chants. Over time, the tradition evolved with new lyrics added to psalms, counterpoints added to melodies to create polyphony, and the introduction of the organ and its accompaniment. A key feature of these chants, as developed by the Catholic Church, is that they were sung by choirs.

Protestantism, which led the Reformation in the sixteenth century, marked a significant turning point in the history of hymnody. Emphasising the congregation as the primary body of worship, Protestants insisted on the importance of communal singing and the collective praise of God. Martin Luther composed his own hymns and encouraged congregational singing of spectacular cantatas accompanied by the organ. Calvinists also endorsed hymns but limited their lyrics to psalms and preferred solemn choruses without instrumental accompaniment. This reform related to hymns influenced the Anglican Church, which led to numerous works being produced in the seventeenth century by composers such as William Byrd and Henry Purcell. Furthermore, hymns formed an integral part of the worship ritual set out in *the Book of Common Prayer*, the official prayer book of the Church of England, symbolising its independence from the Catholic Church and profoundly impacting literature, culture, and history beyond religious practice. Hymns play a crucial role in facilitating the confession of faith and spiritual communion among the faithful during various services including sacraments, morning and evening prayers, weddings, and funerals. Thus, the hymn is more than just a musical service; it is also a medium for deepening religious practice, theological doctrine, and communal traditions.

In eighteenth-century Britain, hymnody underwent significant development and was spearheaded by figures such as Isaac Watts, an Anglican priest and renowned hymn writer.

Watts lamented the current state of hymnody and emphasised the significance of hymns in his “A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody”:

To speak the Glories of God in a religious Song, or to breathe out the Joys of our own Spirits to God with the Melody of our Voice is an exalted Part of Divine Duty. But so many are the Imperfections in the Practice of this Duty, that the greatest Part of Christians find but little Edification or Comfort in it. There are some Churches that utterly disallow Singing; and I'm persuaded, that the poor Performance of it in the best Societies, with the mistaken Rules to which it is confined, is one great Reason of their entire Neglect; for we are left at a loss (say they) what is the Matter and Manner of this Duty; and therefore they utterly refrain from Singing. (Watts 2)³⁾

Here, he appeals to the importance of hymnody in worship: “It is a sacred faith to speak of the glory of God in religious songs, and to weave the joy of our own souls to God by melodies made up of our voices”. His argument reflects his concerns about the inadequate state of hymn-singing in churches, which led some congregations to abandon it entirely. Watts also paraphrased 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 to underscore the potential of proper hymnody in transforming a congregation into a true assembly of worship.

Watts's hymnbook was revised many times and became widely sung as a vehicle for faith practice. The hymns he reformed aimed to improve upon “psalmody”, or the monotonous chanting of psalms, transforming it into a more melodious form of hymn singing. His masterpiece “Joy to the World”, based on the book of Isaiah and using Handel's music, exemplifies this shift towards a more emotional style of hymnody and has remained a familiar hymn of praise to God among believers and beyond, sung widely as a Christmas song even today.

Inspired by Watts, regarded as the father of hymnody, other hymn writers emerged during the same period. In the eighteenth century, hymnody played a central role in the Methodist movement led by the Wesley brothers. Charles Wesley's seminal work, “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”, created on the occasion of his brother John's ordination, became a widely sung hymn in many English churches. Thus, the eighteenth century, influenced by evolving beliefs and sectarian diversity, witnessed the active participation of numerous hymn writers who produced hymns like “Amazing Grace” and “O Happy Day”, which are still popular today.

Hymns serve as a profound medium for expressing joy and gratitude, enhancing the spiritual experience of the faithful while fostering a sense of communal solidarity. As such, hymn writing thrived as a means of deepening religious devotion, particularly in response to the growing influence of secular values and rationalist thought. Although Enlightenment ideals often undermined traditional religious beliefs, Smart's creation of *Jubilate Agno* appears to align with the eighteenth-century hymn revival movement. His poetry, imbued with a profound sense of praise for God and an unwavering confession of faith, may at first glance seem congruent with the hymnodies of his era. Yet, unlike other hymn writers who sought to unify congregations through song, *Jubilate Agno* diverges in its profoundly personal nature, serving as an expression of inner revelation and mystical vision. This distinct focus underscores that *Jubilate Agno* embodies a religious intent markedly different from that of traditional hymns.

II. The Mad Poet? Smart and the Christian Faith

Jubilate Agno, which remained unpublished until 1939, represents a significant departure from the conventional rigor of Augustan poetry. Poets such as Alexander Pope, strictly adhered to the use of heroic couplets, emphasising balance, clarity, and formal precision. Their work is characterised by a commitment to order and decorum, employing wit and satire as vehicles for social critique while also maintaining stylistic refinement. They prioritised universal themes over personal introspection, situating their verse within a framework of moral and didactic purpose. This disciplined approach reflects the broader intellectual values of the era, privileging reason, propriety, and the elevation of the poetic form. Thomas Parnell and Thomas Gray, while working within the Augustan tradition, introduced a more meditative and introspective tone, engaging with themes of mortality and the sublime aspects of nature, thereby foreshadowing Romantic sensibility.

In contrast to the works of his contemporaries, *Jubilate Agno* eschews the meticulous manipulation of metre, the elegant deployment of figures of speech, and the lyrical qualities that poets considered the pinnacle of poetic craft; nor does it possess the melodiousness that made contemporary hymns suitable for congregational singing. Instead, Smart's poem presents a stark, unadorned connection between the biblical world and the natural world, populated by creatures—mice, birds, insects, flowers, and even particles of matter—depicted not as mere metaphors but as literal participants in a divine order. There is an almost

naturalist, catalogue-like approach to his inclusion of these creatures, as though Smart deconstructs and reconstructs biblical scripture through his own, deeply personal perspective. Though his contemporaries may have found it difficult to understand, Smart's perspective strips away all superfluous elements, including lyricism, to craft a vision of the biblical world where the act of prayer becomes a fundamental, unembellished expression of devotion.

Smart's reputation in the eighteenth-century literary world was complex. He was neither an Anglican clergyman nor an active participant in the Church of England's renewal movement, unlike many other hymn writers. His contemporaries, Samuel Johnson and Thomas Gray, both of whom knew him personally, offered insights into how Smart was perceived. Johnson, a leading literary figure of the time, describes Smart's faith-driven behaviour:

Madness frequently discovers itself merely by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes of the world. Now although rationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all, than to pray as Smart did, I am afraid there are so many who do not pray, that their understanding is not called into question. (Boswell 94–5).

By kneeling and praying anywhere and anytime, Smart was considered mad and marginalised by the standards of the eighteenth century. However, Johnson challenged contemporary notions of madness by questioning what madness is. He criticises the rationalist worldview of the period, which dismissed the importance of prayer and relegated faith to the periphery, suggesting that this lack of faith might be a greater madness than Smart's devout practices.

While Johnson offers a sympathetic view, Gray, a contemporary at Cambridge, adopts a more dismissive stance. In a letter to a friend dated 17 March 1747, Gray wrote:

As to Smart, he must necessarily be abimé, in a very short time. His debts daily increase... He is amusing himself with a Comedy of his own writing...Our friend Lawman, the mad attorney, is his copyist; and truly the author himself is to the full as mad as he. His piece, he says, is inimitable, true sterling wit, and humour by God; and he can't hear the Prologue without being ready to die with laughter...All this, you see, must come to a Jayl, or Bedlam, and that without any help, almost without pity. (Gray 41–2)

Gray's account paints Smart as a figure headed for ruins, driven by debt and erratic behaviour. He dismisses Smart's self-praise of his work as "inimitable" with a sneer, predicting that Smart will ultimately end up in prison or in Bedlam Asylum, a place notorious for its poor conditions and for housing individuals deemed insane in the eighteenth century. Gray's assessment may reflect competitive bitterness; he and Smart, both accomplished scholars at Cambridge, displayed great promise in their early years. Nevertheless, his prediction of Smart's fate was partly fulfilled when Smart eventually died in debtors' prison, although he never actually stayed at Bedlam.

Upon its first publication in 1939, *Jubilate Agno* was given the subtitle *Rejoice in the Lamb: A Song from Bedlam*, likely to exploit the notion of "the work of an insane Smart" to add sensational impact. While some enthusiasts and critics have interpreted Smart's madness as the source of his creative genius, this essay argues that *Jubilate Agno* should not be read merely as a product of madness. Rather, as Johnson puts it, it is a hymn composed by a praying man.

The *Jubilate Agno* manuscript survived in four unfinished sections written between May 1757 and January 1763, while Smart was committed to St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics.⁴⁾ During this period, Smart wrote over 1,300 phrases and couplets and meticulously crafted them daily. The poem's formal structure features phrases that begin with "Let" or "For", which respond to one another. The content spans a wide array of personal names, including biblical characters, names from contemporary obituaries and subscribers to Smart's work, and the names of friends, such as Johnson, who visited him. Additionally, it enumerates all manners of beings with an encyclopaedic quality, from Hebrew letters to natural elements such as animals, birds, fish, mythical creatures, minerals, and plants.

The opening of the poem reveals the conceptual foundation of *Jubilate Agno*:

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the glory to the Lord and the Lamb.

Nations, languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life...

Let Jubal rejoice with Cecilia; the woman and the slow-worm praise the name of the Lord.

For I pray the Lord Jesus to translate my MAGNIFICAT into verse and represent it.

(A 1-2, B 43)

Like Wesley's hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing", which calls for a chorus to praise God, Smart's lines invoke a multitude of voices in worship. However, Smart uniquely focuses on Christ as "the Lamb", a symbol of a sacrificial lamb atoning for humanity's sins, and introduces biblical figures in combination with various animals, a recurring theme in the poem.

These associations allow Smart to reassess and reorganise the biblical worldview. Minor biblical figures are included, but references to figures such as Jubal, a descendant of Adam and Eve, known as the father of music, highlight a deeper musical tradition within the poem. Smart links Jubal to St. Cecilia, who is often invoked as a patron saint by musicians, thereby underscoring the poem's musicality. The invocation of "tongues" to "rejoice" in all of God's creations and Smart's prayer to translate his "MAGNIFICAT" into verse confirms that *Jubilate Agno* is conceived as a hymn.

Smart's designation of his poem *Jubilate Agno* as a Magnificat holds profound significance, as it represents a deliberate effort to align his poetic vision with the traditional themes of divine praise and reverence encapsulated in the biblical canticle. The canticle is characterised by themes of divine mercy, the elevation of the humble, and the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, highlighting God's justice and favour towards the marginalised.⁵⁾ Within *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Magnificat is of particular importance as the primary canticle for Evening Prayer, used throughout the year in Evensong to reflect on God's works and express gratitude at the close of the day. In contrast, the Jubilate Deo, which is directly related to the title of *Jubilate Agno*, is positioned as a key canticle for Morning Prayer, offering a broad call for all creation to join in the praise of God.

Both the Magnificat and the Jubilate Deo share a focus on praise and thanksgiving towards God, yet they emphasise different aspects of worship. The Magnificat centres on personal faith, humility, and a response to God's mighty acts, while the Jubilate Deo offers a more universal invitation for all the earth to join in joyful celebration. Smart's focus on the Magnificat in *Jubilate Agno* reflects his engagement with the essence of *The Book of Common Prayer*, drawing inspiration from the traditional forms of Anglican worship while infusing his own poetic interpretation. This approach suggests an effort to honour the enduring spiritual themes of the Magnificat, merging the deeply personal with a broader, communal expression of divine praise, thus situating *Jubilate Agno* within a rich tradition of worship that culminates in the Magnificat.

Ⅲ. Cat Geoffrey and the Liturgy

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, when Britten created the music for this work, he chose a structure that shifted from a choral setting to a solo voice, thus creating a musical climax. His interpretation reveals that the “For” passages represent a personal prayer spoken in the first person. Within this structure, Geoffrey the cat, the poem’s most prominent figure, emerges.

For I will consider my Cat Geoffrey.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him daily. (B 695–6)

Geoffrey, the cat, Smart’s beloved companion during his confinement, mirrors Smart’s spiritual quest. When Smart states, “I will consider my Cat Geoffrey”, he appears to be observing Geoffrey closely; in reality, the cat serves as an alter ego, reflecting Smart’s own devout aspirations. A detailed description of Geoffrey’s behaviour—wreathing his body, leaping up, rolling, and washing—is depicted as a liturgical act—a ritual of devotion to God.

Smart drew an analogy between Geoffrey’s daily movements and the prayer ritual. The ten stages of Geoffrey’s routine mirror the biblical significance of ten, from the Ten Commandments to King David’s ten-stringed lyre, representing the highest form of worship. Smart, considered mad for his incessant praying, sees Geoffrey as a model for his devotion, believing that every action by the cat is a form of worship.

Geoffrey also performs duties at night:

For when his day’s work is done his business more properly begins.

For he keeps the Lord’s watch in the night against the adversary.

For he counteracts the power of darkness through his electrical skin and glaring eyes.

(B 717–27)

In this depiction, Geoffrey acts as God’s watchman fighting evil at night. Smart presents the cat as a mystical creature that is blessed by God and describes it as an “instrument” teaching children benevolence. Thus, Geoffrey becomes a liturgical figure embodying devotion and service to God.

In *Jubilate Agno*, Smart employs the structure of “Let”/“For” to create a hymn in

which both human and animal voices join in praise. While the hymnody of the eighteenth century, led by figures such as Watts and Wesley, sought to disseminate Christian teaching and reinforce communal faith, Smart's hymns had a different objective. *Jubilate Agno* is not merely a hymn, but a new kind of psalm that catalogues God's creation and praises Him with all that is raised to His glory. It remains a testament to Smart's unique place in the history of religious poetry, challenging traditional views and suggesting new directions for religious expression.

IV. Jeoffrey the Cat and Liturgical Elements

Britten's adaptation of *Jubilate Agno* for his composition amplifies the work's liturgical qualities by shifting from choral passages to solo voices, particularly with the inclusion of the cat Jeoffrey as a central figure. The personal reflection in the "For" sections underscores the significance of individual prayers and devotion within a communal worship context. This approach enriches the poem's liturgical dimension by framing Jeoffrey the cat as a devout creature embodying both humility and reverence, thus allowing him to convey his unique spiritual perspective. This is made evident in the following lines:

For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in a complete cat.
For his tongue is exceeding pure so that it has in purity what it wants in music.
.....
For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to
sustain the bodies both of man and beast.
For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
For, though he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.
For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadruped.
For he can tread to all the measures upon the musik. (B 742-3, 762-6)

Here, Smart describes Jeoffrey as a "complete cat" blessed by the "divine spirit", despite his perceived limitations. The reference to the cat's tongue as "exceeding pure" but lacking in musicality hints at a deeper spiritual significance: Jeoffrey, though imperfect, embodies purity and devotion. Smart uses the concept of "Electrical fire"—a spiritual substance bestowed by God—as a metaphor for the divine inspiration and energy that sustains all living creatures,

both humans and animals. The image of Jeoffrey moving in harmony with the divine music reflects the unity between the sacred and the mundane, where even the simplest creatures contribute to God's cosmic praise.

Smart's use of "Electrical fire" is particularly intriguing in the context of eighteenth-century scientific discovery.⁶⁾ Indeed, Smart was not interested in scientific explanation; instead, he viewed natural phenomena as divine. For Smart, everything in the world belonged to God, and "Electrical fire" symbolised the spiritual energy that animated all creation. Thus, Jeoffrey's movements reflect a form of divine music, with his body acting as an "instrument" that dances to the music of the cosmos.

In the broader context of eighteenth-century hymnody, Smart's work diverges significantly from that of Watts and Wesley, who aimed to unify the congregation in communal worship. While Smart's hymn seeks to praise God, it does so from a deeply personal standpoint, infusing a sense of individual prayer and devotion. This unique approach allows *Jubilate Agno* to offer new possibilities for religious poetry, emphasising a personal encounter with the divine, rather than a strictly communal experience.

Jubilate Agno repeatedly references biblical characters, most notably David, the psalmist who is considered the foundational figure in the tradition of hymn writing. Smart speaks of David in a special way:

Let David bless with the Bear—the beginning of victory to the Lord the perfection of excellence—Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable, and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty. (A 41)

The Psalms, particularly those attributed to King David, were central to eighteenth-century hymnody, and Smart's frequent invocation of David underscores his respect for the biblical figure. However, Smart goes beyond mere invocation; he seeks to place himself in lineage with David, viewing himself as the second David, a hymn-maker inspired directly by the divine mandate. Smart's deliberate use of "Hallelujah", a Hebrew word for praise, connects his work with biblical Psalms, reinforcing its character as a hymn. Furthermore, the phrases "from the heart of God" and "from the hand of the artist inimitable" demonstrate Smart's belief in the divine source of artistic inspiration, aligning himself with the sacred tradition of biblical poetry.

David is mentioned frequently in *Jubilate Agno*, which hints at Smart's identification with biblical kings; he sees himself as continuing David's work by creating new hymns that catalogue and praise God's creations. This focus on reinterpreting and expanding biblical Psalms through his own poetic imagination allows Smart to challenge and redefine traditional hymn forms.

Smart's poem, "A Song to David", composed during the same period as *Jubilate Agno* but published in his lifetime, further highlights his connection to David:

I.

O THOU, that sit'st upon a throne,
With harp of high majestic tone,
To praise the King of kings;
And voice of heav'n-ascending swell,
Which, while its deeper notes excell,
Clear, as a clarion, rings. (1-6)

This passage exalts David as both a king and musician, whose harp and voice fill the heavens with God's praise. This echoes the themes found in *Jubilate Agno*—a combination of music, poetry, and divine praise—while situating David as a spiritual and poetic predecessor. In *A Song to David*, nature itself—valleys, groves, and seashores—joins in worship, just as in *Jubilate Agno*, and herbs, flowers, and trees are listed in detail as bearers of divine presence. The angels are drawn to these songs of praise, gathering in gratitude and echoing the joyful union of all creation in devotion to God.

Smart's approach diverges from that of Watts and Wesley, both churchmen who wrote for congregational worship. While their hymns serve as tools for evangelism and community building, Smart's hymns are marked by a stronger element of personal prayer and a heightened sense of self-consciousness. In this sense, his work represents a unique response to the spiritual challenges of the eighteenth century, a period increasingly characterised by secularisation and rational thought. His poetry, with its unorthodox forms and themes, occupies a distinct space in the broader religious landscape.

Conclusion

Jubilate Agno remains a testament to Smart's deep religious experiences and creative exploration of faith. His work challenges conventional religious expression and offers a unique perspective that blends personal devotion with a cosmic vision of praise. Despite being largely marginalised during his lifetime, Smart's poetry has come to be recognised for its originality, intensity, and literary value. By reimagining the boundaries of religious poetry, Smart has had a lasting impact, inspiring modern approaches to the intersection of faith and literary innovation.

In a period marked by a clash between reason and sensibility, Smart's poetry embodies a deeply felt devotion that not only defies mainstream expectations but also redefines the role of personal faith in a rationalising society. While traditional hymnody emphasises communal worship, Smart's work places equal importance on individual spiritual experiences, revealing the complexity and diversity of religious expression in the eighteenth century. Through works such as *Jubilate Agno* and "A Song to David," Smart has enriched the tradition of religious poetry, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire thought.

Through its unique focus on Smart's innovative use of personal devotion in *Jubilate Agno*, this essay contributes to the growing scholarship on Christopher Smart, providing fresh insights into the dynamic interplay between faith and poetic innovation, thereby deepening our appreciation of Smart's contribution to eighteenth-century literature and beyond.

Notes

- 1) This essay is a revised and expanded version of a presentation titled "Jeoffrey the Cat Fulfilling His Ministry: Christopher Smart and Hymns", delivered at the 23 September 2023 meeting of the Society for Eighteenth-Century British Literature (Kansai Branch of the Johnson Society of Japan).
- 2) During World War II, Benjamin Britten composed several works aimed at supporting the Anglican Church and enhancing national prestige. Among these was *Rejoice in the Lamb*, written for the 50th anniversary of the consecration of St. Matthew's Church in Northampton. W.H. Auden played a pivotal role in the critical reassessment of Smart's poetry. Recognising the distinctiveness of Smart's work and captivated by the pure spiritual passion and religious madness in Smart's work, Auden praised the poet's originality and his relentless pursuit of inner truths and introduced Britten to *Jubilate Agno*. It was through this introduction that Britten was inspired to adapt Smart's poem into a cantata, thereby contributing to the revival of interest in Smart's oeuvre.

3) Watts' essay, "A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody", was published alongside his 1707 hymnbook *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

4) *Jubilate Agno* is composed of four distinct fragments:

- **Fragment A**

Composition Period: Likely between June 1758 and April 1759.

Form: Apart from the opening two lines, each verse begins with "Let".

Content: Enumerates biblical figures, drawing analogies between them and various creatures, including animals, birds, and fish.

- **Fragment B**

Composition Period: Commenced in July 1759.

Form: Alternates between "Let" verses and antiphonal "For" verses, creating a parallel structure; however, in the latter sections, only "For" verses appear.

Content: "Let" verses associate biblical figures with various creatures or body parts, while "For" verses engage in redefinitions of diverse concepts, extending to letters, numbers, and language itself.

- **Fragment C**

Composition Period: 21 February to 12 May, 1761.

Form: Predominantly structured around "Let" / "For" antiphonal parallelism.

Content: Establishes connections between biblical figures and a variety of herbs.

- **Fragment D**

Composition Period: 12 June 1762 to 30 January 1763.

Form: Largely composed of "Let" verses.

Content: Links contemporary figures—including political and literary figures, as well as subscribers to Smart's works (such as Dr. Johnson)—with minerals, herbs, and other natural elements.

5) It opens with the Latin phrase *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, meaning "My soul magnifies the Lord," which gives the hymn its name. In this passage, Mary expresses profound gratitude and reverence towards God upon learning of her role as the mother of Jesus. The Magnificat holds a central place across Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox traditions and is frequently incorporated into worship services, especially in evening prayers like the Anglican *Evensong*. Within the Anglican tradition, as outlined in *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Magnificat serves as a key canticle during Evening Prayer, offering believers a moment to reflect on God's mercy and mighty deeds at the close of the day. Its message of God's favour towards the lowly and fulfilment of divine promises provides a source of comfort and hope, reinforcing the spiritual unity of worshippers.

6) In 1752, Benjamin Franklin's experiments with electricity demystified lightning, but for poets like

Smart, the supernatural implications of lightning and electricity remained compelling.

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