

Christopher Smart

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I want to say a few words about Poor Christopher Smart being locked up when he wrote *Jubilate Agno*. Because talking about him only in psychiatric terms diminishes him and makes it easy to dismiss his work as crazy instead of drilling down and seeing what's going on in the poetry.

Kit Smart, as his friends called him, intelligent, witty, and fun, was a mentally ill person – or not – whom people loved. He was not a social pariah. I wish all *my* friends, mentally ill or sane, were as entertaining as Kit Smart.

Smart, after he developed his mild religious mania, started interrupting his friends' activities, calling them into the street to pray with him. He probably took St. Paul's injunction, "Pray without ceasing" literally.

"For I blessed God in St. James's Park till I routed all the company. For the officers of the peace are at variance with me, and the watchman smites me with his staff."

Not poetic hyperbole, but what actually happened, loud praying in St. James's Park. "My poor friend Smart," Samuel Johnson said, "showed the disturbance of his mind, by falling upon his knees, and saying his prayers in the street, or in any other unusual place. I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it (myself)."

But Smart didn't end up in St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics because of praying but because an angry father-in-law, also his publisher, bribed the hospital. Smart wanted

to leave his father-in-law's firm and publish on his own, his father-in-law disagreed; therefore Smart lost seven years of his life.

Locked up, Smart had only his cat Jeffrey, pen, paper, six books and a garden. "For I am in twelve hardships" and "For they work me with their harping-irons, which is a barbarous instrument, because I am more unguarded than others." A harping pin is a barbed hook used for keeping open the mouths of recalcitrant patients to pour medicine down their throats. "Because I am more unguarded" suggests it was used on patients like Smart who answered back. In some madhouses, noisy patients were kept in the dark until they learned to be silent. Talkative Smart might have been treated thus. And he is grateful to be released: "I am not in a dungeon but am allowed the light of the Sun." By the way one scholar suggests that Smart was not mentally ill unless he was drunk, so when he was locked up, away from liquor, he was not a lunatic. Confining a person to a mental hospital then was one way family could rid themselves of drunken relatives.

In the poem, Smart compares himself to Christ in terms of his trials and isolation. He reasoned that the authorities considered them both crazy, and the officers of the peace beat them.

A reformer eventually obtained Smart's release. Then, seven years later, Smart found himself in debtor's prison. Again, friends and relatives helped him qualify for the slight freedom, of St. George's Fields, an area around the prison that included shops, public houses, and open ground for walking. The novelist Fanny Burney's father raised a small fund which gave him "a miserable pittance beyond the prison allowance." Smart's sweetness and generosity of spirit showed itself even in debtor's prison: again from Fanny Burney, "his compassion remained constant; not long before his death he wrote to

her father, pleading for help for a fellow prisoner whom he himself had already “assisted according to his willing poverty.”

Jubilate Agno was discovered in 1939; Britten composed *Rejoice* in 1943, not so long after. How much did Britten love *Jubilate*? So much that he asked that excerpts be read at his memorial service.

In this antiphonal poem, “Let” stands on one side, and “For” on the other. The *Let* verses are impersonal, a choir of creation glorifying God, for example, “Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter”; the *For* verses add comments, topical references, and details of Smart's private life, for example, “For I will consider my cat Jeoffry.”

The six books Smart had in exile might explain the poem's esoteric content: The King James Bible; *Latin Thesaurus*; Guide for London pharmacists (in Latin); *Gardener's Dictionary*; and *Useful Family Herbals*. How's that for a desert island collection? But the poem also thrives on words, wordplay and jokes. (For the Shawm rhymes are lawn fawn moon boon. By the way, the Shawm is a double-reed wood instrument). Reading along about Old Testament heroes or how great are God's flowers, you suddenly read: “For the Scotchman seeks for truth at the bottom of a well, the Englishman in the Heaven of Heavens.” Part of the great fun of Smart. And he meant to be fun and funny, as he did with the title of another poem: *Pretty Poems for the Amusement of Children six Foot High*, satires of public figures.

In *Jubilate Agno*, he sees himself as “the Lord's News-Writer--the scribe-evangelist”; and “for I preach the very GOSPEL of CHRIST without comment.” Smart is taking an early philosophical stand against the evil influence of atheism and scientific materialism, popular and prevalent in the 18th century. This is a stand with which many

agree today – animal lovers, new agers, many spiritual people, not to mention all of us who are dying for a little respite from electronics.

You might be interested in knowing that the formal structure of the original “Praising God” section (in Britten, ending with “For M is musick”) is a complete acrostic with alternate words for God inspired by selected letters of the alphabet.

In listening to “For my cat Geoffrey,” remember Geoffrey was Smart’s only companion. Think of how much time he had to watch Geoffrey, how much he must have loved him. (By the way, the priest who commissioned Britten expressed reservations about the section. “I am afraid Britten wrote, I have gone ahead, and used abit about the cat Jeffrey but I don’t see how it could hurt anyone – he is such a nice cat.”)

Former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky said, “Sincerity by itself and audacity by itself are not necessarily impressive qualities in art. It’s possible to recognize that a work is heartfelt without admiring it, and it’s possible to recognize the bold churning of imagination without feeling much emotion because of it.

“Together, though, sincerity and audacity can be immensely powerful, as in for my cat Jeffry The brio and oddball, manic seriousness of the Jeffry aria are unforgettable. Take this line, for example (not in Britten):

For he can spraggle upon waggle at the word of command.

“These comic sounds could have been achieved by a writer of light verse. But Smart’s line goes beyond, blending comedy with precision and moral conviction: The cat “spraggles,” or sprawls, at the “waggle” of his human owner’s finger. The word “command,” with its overtones of both religion and animal training, suggests the central point: that the sacred is found not by means of ecclesiastical portals but by revering what

may look profane or trivial; and that violating decorum, or demonstrating exceptional fervor (as Smart did), can embody conviction. Smart combines the forms of litany with indecorous content, associating biblical language and allusion with the personal hygiene of his cat.” You can hear how much his cadences resonate from Biblical psalms and Hebraic poetry—the antiphonal structure and those long lists. As an aside, David Lang’s *Teach Your Children* arises from the same Hebraic tradition of litany.

Another Smart line: “Let the Levites of the Lord take the Beavers of the brook alive into the Ark of the Testimony.” Pinsky says either Jeoffry and the beavers of the brook embody holiness, or nothing does: The merely habitual, language of religious ceremony will not suffice. You need live beavers.

“This defiant, far-out poetic and moral principle makes Christopher Smart the first Beat or hippie poet—decades before William Blake.” Or, I would add, Allan Ginsberg, whom Smart probably influenced. “There’s an immediate attraction,” Pinsky said, “in the recklessness, charm, and penetration of Smart’s work and, on rereading it—I find—a sense of revelation.”

Smart died after a year in debtor’s prison. One friend’s valediction said, "I trust he is now at peace; it was not his portion here."