The Gravity and Levity of the Reverend Sydney Smith

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THE GREATEST WITS BECOME THEIR GREATEST HITS. Sydney Smith is a case in point. His volumes of artful commentary for the *Edinburgh Review*, his Royal Institution lectures on moral philosophy, or his *Peter Plymley Letters* (on Catholic emancipation) are now rarely read. Smith survives in popular memory, if he survives at all, as a heap of bons mots: (of his clerical living in rural Yorkshire) 'twelve miles from a lemon'; (of Scotland) 'that land of Calvin, oat-cakes and sulphur'; (when told by a doctor to take a walk on an empty stomach) 'whose?'; (of his idea of heaven) '*foie gras* to the sound of trumpets'.[1] Smith's biographer, Alan Bell, calls such sayings 'the common coin of authentic Smith quotations',[2] and the metaphor is well chosen. Witticisms are the currency that the wit – that strange modern culture hero – has at his or her disposal to spend on advancement or praise; in turn, admirers of Smith (or Wilde, or Parker) are always tempted to trade in quotations that have the ring and bear the stamp of their maker. The coin that this essay seeks to set spinning gained popularity from its inclusion in George Russell's 1905 volume for the series *English Men of Letters*, and concerns Smith's elder brother: 'Bobus and I have inverted the laws of nature. He rose by his gravity; I sank by my levity'.[3]

This particular Smith quotation has not always been regarded as authentic. The source of the doubt is that great magpie of Regency conversation, Samuel Rogers. His first

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editor, Alexander Dyce, in his 1856 edition of Rogers's *Table-Talk*, attributes 'he rose by his gravity...' to the etymologist John Horne Tooke.[4] A different claim is made in the diary of Henry Crabb Robinson, who notes, in his entry for 28 August 1849, that 'To-day, or about this time' Rogers told him and a group of friends, over breakfast, that the remark was Sydney Smith's.[5] Since Dyce is also recorded as being present, there is no way of knowing which man's memory was in error. My inclination to believe 'he rose by his gravity...' an authentic remark of Smith's is based less on the sources than on the wider dialogue of gravity and levity at work in Smith's life, work, and conversation; the light it sheds on the shape of his mind, and on the inner life of wit. It is this that is the subject of this essay.

The word 'gravity' in Smith's writings, letters, and biography is very often wielded mischievously against the various forms of seriousness and ponderousness which he saw it as his role to undermine. It is a favourite of Smith's daughter Saba, Lady Holland, when characterising the attitudes that her seemingly perpetually cheerful father opposed or subverted: 'his spirits were often … more like the joyousness and playfulness of a clever schoolboy than the sobriety and gravity of the father of a family'.[6] She typically uses it of her father to describe his deadpan poker face, as in the dinner-table confession that Smith's 'one little weakness, one secret wish' was that 'he should like to *roast a Quaker*':

> 'Good heavens, Mr Smith!' Said Mr ——, full of horror, 'roast a Quaker?'
>
> 'Yes, Sir' (with the greatest gravity), 'roast a Quaker!' 'But do you consider, Mr Smith, the torture?' 'Yes, Sir,' said my father, 'I have considered everything. I may be wrong, as you say: the Quaker would undoubtedly suffer acutely, but every one has his tastes...'[7]

The comic counterpoint is between 'I have considered everything' (solemn, grimly resolved, *Ich kann nicht anders*) and the sudden uplift in 'I may be wrong' (as if to say, 'Then again,

what do I know? And now I come to think of it, how much do I really care?') The moment of apparent buoyancy is somehow darker than the gravity that precedes it, because it calls to mind the voice of someone who could dally uncommittedly with a predilection for torture, as if torture were not something that could only be justified, if at all, by absolute conviction of necessity ('every one has his tastes'), and retrospectively retuning 'I have considered everything' from 'I have carefully weighed all the issues' to 'I have feverishly imagined the whole process'.

More often, 'gravity' appears in Lady Holland's recollections – typically related in Smith's own words – as the immovable object against which her father sets the irresistible force of his wit. It is the ponderous quality that marks out individuals as targets of his provocation:

> 'Heat, Ma'am!' I said; 'it was so dreadful here, that I found there was nothing left for it but to take off all my flesh and sit in my bones.' 'Take off your flesh and sit in your bones, Sir? Oh, Mr Smith! How could you do that?' she exclaimed with the utmost gravity. 'Nothing more easy, Ma'am: come and see next time.'[8]

The gravity of the unnamed lady is met with the different gravity of Smith's deadpanning. Now and again, we hear in Lady Holland's account of her father's apparently relentless joviality the more dissonant notes of someone who, whether from boredom or resentment, finds himself testing the edges of social propriety; the clergyman toying with the earnestness of his parishioners, wondering just how much one might get away with in a dog collar. Smith's joke contains not only the creepiness of the macabre (becoming a skeleton) but a hint of sexual creepiness too, in the invitation to come and see him become, not exactly naked, but even nakeder than naked.[9] The implied gravity of his ecclesiastical office provides a cover for dark fooling. Perhaps it is only human to become impatient with enforced propriety, and whatever humanises the clergy endears them to us; nonetheless, it can also contain the seed of a less attractive cruelty. Smith worried about the

possibility of cruelty in his Royal Institution lecture 'Of Wit and Humour', and hoped that mockery might contain the antidote to its own poison:

> [I]n all such cases [that is, where someone is being laughed *at*, rather than laughed *with*] the laugher is, in his own estimation, the superior man, the person laughed at, the inferior: at the same time, contempt accompanied by laughter, is always diminished by laughter, which seems to diminish hatred, as perspiration diminishes heat.[10]

But there is something in his 'seems to' which can't take its own bland assurance quite seriously, and when Smith goes on to develop the idea that 'the dread of being ridiculous' is a civilising force, because it 'produces an exquisite attention to the feelings and opinions of others',[11] it is hard not to recall that 'exquisite' can describe pain as well as pleasure or refinement, and perhaps even contains a kind of melancholy.[12] At the centre of the pull and counter-pull of gravities here, moral persons are played on, and moral problems played out.[13]

'Gravity' in the *Memoir* – whether the choice of word is Smith's or Lady Holland's – sometimes traces out a kind of comic inertia, but it is never wholly passive, and is itself a provocation: 'Mr —— sat through it all with the utmost gravity. This seemed only to stimulate my father...'.[14] That stimulation might be pleasure or annoyance or something in between. While wit or gaiety is invariably triumphant, there are occasions when 'gravity' signals a less than lumpish quality, especially when Smith is conscious of being, in the same moment, both obliged to maintain gravity and caught off-balance, as in his recollection of Lord Dudley, who

> very nearly upset my gravity once in the pulpit. He was sitting immediately under me, apparently very attentive, when suddenly he took up his stick, as if he had been in the house of Commons, and tapping on the ground with it, cried out in a low but very audible whisper, 'Hear! hear! hear!'[15]

'Many there are that fall, but few can arrive at the facility of falling gracefully', as Pope puts it in his great seriocomic treatise on gravity, *Peri Bathous*.[16] Smith's second lecture, 'Of Wit and Humour', is preoccupied (not unlike Henri Bergson's *Le Rire*, most of a century later) with falling over as a kind of paradigm case of the comic, a pratfall in which the work of literal gravity undermines gravity of a social, ethical, or affective kind.[17] In this story Smith himself is the butt of the joke, the stout party whose gravity has been upset, albeit not quite to the point of collapse: he does not literally fall, but the story opens up a momentary glimpse of 'gravity' not as a solemn failing but a delicate and perilous balancing act.

Smith's evident amusement at Dudley's prank does not amount to a denial that gravity is a necessary attribute of the clergyman. Eyewitness accounts of Smith's preaching paint a consistent picture not of the gaiety and wit that characterised his table talk, but of a plain, serious, earnest style. For all his fun at its expense, Smith was of his time in regarding 'gravity' not just as a quality proper to ministry, but as something necessary for civilised conduct more generally. In other words, Smith's gravity is not always in earnest, but it is rarely entirely *not* in earnest, either. Lady Holland recalls how

> At a large dinner-party my father, or someone else, announced the death of Mr Dugald Stewart … The news was received with so much levity by a lady of rank, who sat by him, that he turned round and said, 'Madam, when we are told of the death of so great a man as Mr Dugald Stewart, it is usual, in civilised society, to look grave for at least the space of five seconds.'[18]

The understatement of the demand ('to *look* grave … *for* … *five seconds*') makes light only to underscore the reality of the offence taken. This story reads like a pre-emptive defence on Lady Holland's part against the attribution of bad character to her father's playful social persona, and the load-bearing word here, 'levity', tends to carry in the writings of Smith and his biographers the sense of 'want

of serious thought or reflexion; frivolity … unbecoming or unseasonable jocularity' (*OED*). When 'gravity' is presented as humourlessness or pomposity, it is typically set against 'gaiety'; 'levity' by contrast signals a less easy, more morally fraught antithesis. Smith wrote to Jeffrey in January 1808 regretting some 'levities' which he found in Thomas Campbell's treatment (in the *Edinburgh Review*) of Hoyle's biblical-Miltonic epic, *Exodus*. The terms in which Smith criticises these 'levities' tellingly unsettle the implicit opposition of levity and gravity: in a weighty turn of phrase he calls these levities '*ponderous* and vulgar as well as indiscreet'.[19] Campbell sinks by his levity, in other words: his high spirits are beneath him. The accusatory charge of the word 'levity' as a critical failing emerges again in his defence of his scathing article on 'Methodism' (by which he meant a wider spread of Evangelical enthusiasms than the term encompasses today): 'I do not understand what you mean by levity of quotation'.[20] We also find the term wielded in self-accusation, as in a letter of June 1802: 'I … am so well aware of that excessive levity into which I am apt to run, that I think I shall correct it'.[21]

Passages of this kind hint at a more troublesome and nuanced tussle of values behind Smith's quip 'he rose by his gravity; I sank by my levity', and a more genuine self-criticism than might be inferred from the knockabout anecdotage of the *Memoir*, in which grave persons are given the run-around by the triumphant gaiety of Smith's wit. We can read Smith's table-talk and his letters as, like Pope's spider, 'liv[ing] along the line'[22] between true gaiety and the 'trifling gaiety' that was Johnson's fifth definition of 'levity',[23] teasing apart true gravity from the merely po-faced. That Smith acknowledged good and proper kinds of 'gravity' hardly diminishes his jokes at its expense: it is his capacity to be in two minds about what he mocks that makes his wit worthy of admiring attention, as in his description of the Grand Duchy of Saxe-Weimar where, as a young man, he initially intended to take his pupil Michael Hicks-Beach before the political situation sent them instead to Scotland: 'The Duke (who is

himself an extremely well informed, sensible man) has drawn to this town some of the most sensible men in Germany, who have by their example diffused there a very strong spirit of Improvement'.[24] The remark works precisely because the earnestness (the 'strong spirit of Improvement') is earnestly felt by Smith as a fully signed-up advocate for Enlightenment, just as the description of those sober men who have drunk deeply of that strong spirit ('some of the most sensible men in Germany') is irresistibly tongue in cheek, both a sideways swipe at Teutonic seriousness and sympathetic teasing of a mother who would prefer her teenage son not be sent somewhere too rowdy.

The physics of bodies in space, their relative proximity, height, and depth, contributes to the comedy of Smith's anecdote about Lord Dudley: Smith's elevated and potentially vertiginous situation high up in his pulpit, and Lord Dudley's position down at his feet, where the description 'in a *low* whisper' has a surprise double meaning. Sudden literalisation of a figurative expression like this is a powerful literary trick,[25] and often carries an uneasy mix of implications (one of the famous hairpin turns in *Antony and Cleopatra* exploits just this resource of the language, where the unceremonious winching of the dying general onto the queen's monument is apostrophised 'Ah, heavy sight!'[26]) The facts of the language conspire to reinforce a metaphorical spatio-mechanics of affective and social life which somehow struggles to remain *entirely* metaphorical. As a parish priest, Smith is a higher-up of a low-ranking kind; he is a hierarch in miniature, or at least the occupant of a place within the hierarchy. It is an etymological accident that the first two syllables of 'hierarchy' sound like 'higher', but etymology is no defence against what C. S. Lewis once called 'the phonetic company [a word] keeps'.[27] The imaginative correlation between social status and the vertical axis of high and low is so deeply ingrained as to feel naturally inevitable. There is also, in the priest's ascending a pulpit, a physical manifestation of the fact that his ordination has set him apart, to speak to and on behalf of his fellow Christians. There is something at the same time theatrical and political in this, and by satirising him with

a parliamentary 'Hear! Hear!', Lord Dudley casts Smith in much the same terms in which William Empson analyses the aristocratic fool of the Restoration stage: 'he "stands for" the group satirised; he has that hint of parliament which is the dignity of the theatre'.[28]

Smith felt the elevational and gravitational pulls of social forces no less acutely for sending them up, and hence naturally inhabited the mental space of double irony, which finds expression in terms in which 'two contradictory feelings [are] satisfied by the same attitude'.[29] As an ambitious Liberal writer and public figure, he criticised the society of his day as a means not to overthrowing it but to rising in it; at the same time, as virtually the only prominent Liberal clergyman of his generation in an otherwise resolutely Tory Church of England, his head was constantly set against the particular current in which he chose to swim. Smith's ecclesiastical career has been something of a mystery to many of his admirers. On the one hand, had he been motivated entirely by worldly ambition, he would hardly have chosen a profession in which he could not hope to flourish, and so the decision cannot have been merely calculating. At the same time, Smith was under no illusion that he had a religious vocation, and W. H. Auden voices a familiar doubt when he reflects on the canon's 'distrust of all religious dogma' and finds himself wondering 'whether Sydney Smith could have explained why he was an Anglican and not, say, a Unitarian'.[30]

Auden is right that theology is not the key to Smith's churchmanship; in fact, it is more helpful to consider the early nineteenth century Church of England as, if not entirely 'a branch of the civil service',[31] certainly a facet of the body politic, its rituals and forms as continuous with those of civil society. Starting from this point, it becomes easier to see why the contrarian Smith should have chosen the Church as the particular lump within which to demonstrate that a little leaven leaveneth the whole.[32] Among his more characteristically Whiggish or Liberal attitudes is his resistance to the forms of obeisance and (often faux) humility that are the gestural language of servitude and subordination. His servant in Yorkshire, 'Bunch', recalled that Smith drew up a list of

'crimes' of which she was frequently guilty: 'Plate-snatching, gravy-spilling, door-slamming, blue-bottle fly-catching, and curtsey-bobbing [i.e.] standing with my mouth open and not attending [and] curtseying to the centre of the earth'.[33] There is, in theory, a Tory shape to this joke: the gravitational pull of deference, the curtsey 'to the centre of the earth', is or is analogous to a law of nature. Humility is understood as no more than recognition of justly ordained authorities which derive their power ultimately from the authority of God.[34] That thought coexists with Smith's amused frustration at Bunch's inability to resist the pull of a social gravity whose deference to the divine feels like lip service; he cannot quite see her obedience to that law simply as admirable humility, any more than he can quite imagine it as not a law. Smith's raillery extends effortlessly from the servants of rural Yorkshire to servants of God, when he defines the Puseyite Oxford Movement as 'inflexion and genuflexion; posture and imposture; bowing to the east, and curtseying to the west'.[35] The two jokes are continuous: the same physical comedy runs through them, with something of the mannered leaping and twirling of Lewis Carroll's Lobster Quadrille ('jumping about like mad things … solemnly dancing round and round … treading on [Alice's] toes when they passed too close'[36]). In moments like this we can see why G. K. Chesterton thought Sydney Smith not so much a wit as 'the real originator of Nonsense'.[37]

Yet the snooks which Smith likes to cock at the formulae of social and religious ceremonial are generally on their guard against that equal and opposite force of gravity, the reforming Liberal's over-earnestness in the analysis of social relations. Smith's sympathies were with reform, not revolution: or, as Auden finely observes, with revolution only in that peculiarly English context in which it is 'an astronomical metaphor, meaning a restoration of balance'.[38] A brief moonlighting as 'Citizen Smith' (in the Jacobin Club of Mont Villiers during what we would now call a 'gap year' between Winchester and Oxford) does not a radical make.[39] It might, however, contribute towards a complicatedly layered set of feelings of irony about the

society of which he was a member, and this lends complexity to those moments in which he turns his wit against forms of conventional *politesse*. His jokes, in other words, hold contradictory feelings simultaneously in play. In part, perhaps, because his own political manner is so Whiggish, Empson offers the indispensable critical frame within which to read Smith's amusement at manners: 'all politeness has an element of irony'.[40] The bow is indeed a potential gesture of mockery in Smith, and Lady Holland brings out the way in which bowing gave a physical embodiment to his need to condescend to condescension: '"Why my Lord," said my father, bowing with *assumed gravity*'.[41] There is a tacit understanding of social inequality here, a noticed disparity of standing which politeness pretends to ameliorate by acknowledging ('as perspiration diminishes heat'), a pretence which can itself be acknowledged.

In such jokes the joker does not stand wholly outside the social structures he mocks. The richest mode of double irony in the pastiche of social relations, Empson writes, is 'full Comic Primness', in which

> the enjoyer gets the joke at both levels – both that which accepts and that which revolts against the convention that the speaker adopts primly. It is a play of judgement which implies not so much doubt as a full understanding of issues between which the enjoyer, with the humility of impertinence, does not propose to decide.[42]

Comic primness is one of Smith's characteristic modes and tends to satirise what he regards as the impertinence of humility, at the same time that it contains an implicit invitation to the 'humility of impertinence', the fraught modesty of declining to take a position on the implied political question. Despite the implication of lowliness in 'humility', it implies, as Empson argues, a 'philosophy of Independence',[43] which, while presented as a kind of Liberal egalitarianism, also contains the seeds of a more vigorous egotism. Richard Monckton Milnes, later Lord Houghton, wrote of Smith

that 'He demanded equality, at least, in every company he entered, and generally got something more'.[44] The truth of this remark can be felt in Smith's observation that 'The Archbishop of York is forced to go down on his knees to converse with the Bishop of Bristol just as an elephant kneels to receive its rider'.[45] Bell interprets this remark as a criticism of the small stature of the Devonshire clergy, Smith revealing his consciousness of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to which he sincerely desired promotion. But, since the archbishop in the analogy is the elephant and not the mahout, the quip leaves open the possibility, at once venially proud and piously orthodox, that the bishop might be in the driving seat, that the mighty might be put down, and the (comparatively) lowly raised up in their place.

One is 'elevated' to a bishopric. When Smith quipped that he sank by his levity, he surely drew attention to his failure to rise in this particular way. His hopes in this direction can be heard as early as his response in 1824 to Richard Heber's invitation to become a founder member of the Athenaeum: 'When my merits are properly understood and rewarded in the Church, I will subscribe to the Athenaeum, or any other club you please – but I have not risen at present (nor shall I ever rise) beyond Mutton Chops at the Gray's Inn Coffee House'.[46] The joke (and the mutton chop) re-emerge almost at the end of Smith's life in a letter to Lady Carlisle, on his recovery from a stomach bug: 'I am in a regular train of promotion. From gruel, vermicelli, and sago, I was promoted to panada – from thence to minced meat, and (such is the effect of good conduct) I was elevated to a mutton-chop'.[47] The language of 'promotion' and 'elevation' echoes the jargon of ecclesiastical advancement, while the move from 'gruel' and 'sago' to 'mutton' contains a less serious-minded reference, to a popular limerick of the day:

> There was an old man of Tobago,
> Liv'd long on rice-gruel and sago;
> But at last to his bliss,
> His physician said this –
> 'To a roast leg of mutton you may go.'[48]

This appeared in the anonymous collection *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen* (1822): it is not, as sometimes asserted, by Edward Lear, though Lear attributed his discovery of the limerick to this very poem. Its more general currency in the middle decades of the nineteenth century can be shown by the role it plays in the second chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, 'The Man from Somewhere', where Dickens's deliberate misquotation of the poem implies that his reader is meant to recognise it.[49] In Smith's letter there is a good-humoured sense that in aspiring higher than a mutton chop he may have become the joke.

Smith's evident desire for worldly advancement is in one sense nothing more than rational self-interest in a world in which fortunes were expressed in gravitational and countergravitational terms. The rise of paper money is tied up, in the literary imagination of the long eighteenth century, with a view of economic speculation as a kind of levity which gravity will inevitably bring crashing down to earth. So, we find in an anxious lightness (or light-fingeredness) in Pope:

> Blest paper-credit! last and best supply!
> That lends Corruption lighter wings to fly![50]

And an inevitable, culpable, rising and falling in Defoe:

> Some in Clandestine Companies combine;
> . . . . . .
> And raise new Credits first, then cry'em down[51]

Charles Mackay catches the long view back over the preceding century or so when he appends these lines of Defoe as an epigraph to his 1841 account of 'The Mississippi Scheme',[52] but, well before the accession of Victoria, economics had become a matter of gravity and levity in the minds of literate Britons. Smith writes in 1801 that 'My poor father … grows heavier and lighter with every post and rises and falls with the stocks';[53] and his father, in turn, writing to Mrs Hicks Beach that his son is 'fearful of sinking in your estimation'.[54] Elsewhere we find Smith commenting that no longer seeing his friend Dr Timothy Thomson is cause for rejoicing because

'it is a proof that he is rising in the world',[55] or earnestly petitioning a politician to help his son:

> The only good the Ministry can do me … is to give my son some emolument in some public office … This is all I wish and want in this world, and this would be a receipt in full for that mitre to which a long life of depression for liberal principles bravely avowed had doomed me at the age of 63.[56]

There is a curious slip of expression here, as his life of 'depression for liberal principles' had doomed him, not to a mitre, but to the *lack* of one. It is hard to explain this except as a kind of Freudian slip, an instance of the topsy-turvy misspeaking or miswriting to which Smith was occasionally prone when discussing something especially painful or close to his heart. Something similar happened when he expressed to Houghton his admiration for 'the good man wearing the mantle of piety over the dress of daily life – walking gaily among men, the secret servant of god'[57] (if the mantle of piety is worn *over* the clothes, the service of God is hardly a secret; the servant appears to have got dressed in the dark). The point, which is clear enough, is that his son's rising in the world would be recompense for his own hopes of episcopal elevation having been crushed. Smith was often depressed, and the sense of the word meaning 'dispirited, dejected' was current in his time, though it was not yet, as it is now, 'the chief current use'.[58] Smith's slip of the pen seems to want to make space for the opposite sense to be made present while uttering something painfully true.

The counterpoint to this language of rising and falling is that of happy equilibrium. Smith liked to imagine the shape of his life in this way, the language of plane and balance tending to emerge when he looked back over his fortunes and those of his family. He ruminated to Milnes about his comparatively lowly origins, 'starting from *the common level* of life';[59] and to his daughter he remarked that the natural competitiveness between himself and his brothers 'was to make us the most intolerable and overbearing set of boys that can well be

imagined, till later in life we *found our level* in the world'.[60] Such expressions communicate a sense of balance analogously related to the judicious negotiations of gravity and levity at work elsewhere in Smith's thinking. The language of rising, falling, and 'finding a level' clearly echoes – alongside market economics – the worldview of Enlightenment science that in Smith's eighteenth century childhood had filtered vividly if imprecisely into popular consciousness. Smith's debt to Scottish rationalism and 'metaphysics' (which included, but was not limited to, things we would now call science) is only one evidence of the appeal that this worldview held for his imagination. His distaste for a curriculum based exclusively on classical languages is well known, and he wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1809 that, if English scholarship might be diversified, 'if some had dedicated themselves to chemistry, some to mathematics, some to experimental philosophy, – … the system of such an University would have been much more valuable'.[61]

In such a university, Smith might have chosen a scientific or mathematical degree. He certainly expressed the view (with perhaps somewhat false confidence) that 'a man might sit down as systematically, and as successfully, to the study of wit, as he might to the study of mathematics':[62] he liked to believe, or to hope, that there were few, if any, areas of life inaccessible to rationalistic methods. His proficiency as an amateur medic is a matter of record, as is his ingenuity as an inventor, from the various 'practical contrivances'[63] with which he augmented his rectory at Foston, including 'Shadrachs' – air-tubes designed to keep the fires burning brightly, and so to maintain the warmth and light that his depressive nature so urgently craved – or the 'Universal Scratcher'[64] he devised for farm animals, upon which he congratulated himself in his 'Imitation of Virgil's Sixth Eclogue':

> That learned scratching-pole that yonder stands
> Owes its existence to my curious hands;
> Framed for all animals, large or small,
> It perfect satisfaction gives to all.[65]

'Smug Sydney', Byron called him.[66] There is something in this hymn to 'perfect satisfaction' of the less attractive side of Enlightenment optimism, a feeling that by the application of a little good sense the world might be fixed. This would be insufferable were it not for the overwhelming note of bathos, the implication, for instance, in the transferred epithet ('that learned scratching-pole') that the inventor himself, for all his erudition, is something ridiculous and gawky and perhaps a little sad ('yonder' bleeding at its edges into 'yonderly'). Smith's ode to the 'Universal Scratcher' reveals his belief in civilisation as, at the same time, a rational and improving force and a rather Heath Robinson affair, a matter of ingenious but flimsy fixes rather than profound leaps forward in self-realisation. As he told his audience at the Royal Institution:

> There are several meanings included under the term civilisation: it means, having better cups and saucers than we had a century or two centuries ago; better laws, better manners; and it means, also, having nothing to do, – and those who have nothing to do, must either be amused, or expire with gaping.[67]

The implied comparison between 'better cups and saucers' and 'better laws and better manners' might ennoble the former, but then again it might diminish the latter: the ambiguity is the ambiguity of the mock-heroic. There is a modesty of hope at work in Smith's admiration of science and invention: real hope, and real modesty.

Scientific thinking was most agreeable to Smith when associated with practical activity, 'the concrete and the immediately possible' which Auden saw as central to his wit.[68] It was connected to the hope that when the soul is incapable of effort – tempted to 'expire with gaping' or to stand by like 'a learned scratching-pole' – the 'curious hands' might nonetheless remain busy. A 'curious' and eclectic borrowing from the language of science – especially the mechanical and mathematical sciences – breaks into his conversation and writings in many small ways. Discovering conceptual connections – as

he saw it, the very definition of wit – was like discovering 'the manner in which a steam-engine opens and shuts its own valves';[69] the language of physics colours his attack on the Yorkshire clergy who had assembled to oppose Catholic emancipation:

> Here we are, a set of obscure country clergymen, at the 'Three Tuns' at Thirsk, like flies on the chariot-wheel; perched upon a question of which we can neither see the diameter, nor control the motion, nor influence the moving force.[70]

Richard Holmes notes Smith's friendship with Humphry Davy, and his sharp-tongued description of the 'chemical "decomposition"' of Davy's marriage.[71] Then there is the superb and oft-quoted admonishment of Jeffrey's tendency to immodest and careless attacks:

> remember my joke against you about the moon and the solar system; – 'Damn the solar system! bad light – planets too distant – pestered with comets – feeble contrivance; – could make a better with great ease.'[72]

Smith was more than usually inclined for a man of his time, let alone a cleric, to reach for the metaphorical language of science in his conversation (another reason to see the stamp of his mind on 'he rose by his gravity'). From this perspective, the play of the physical against the psychological senses of 'gravity' and 'levity' recalls the mechanics of Isaac Newton, who by happy coincidence was a collateral ancestor of Smith's through his maternal grandmother.[73]

Newton's theory of gravity remained strange in Smith's day. As Edward Dolnick points out, 'the theory predicted, but it did not explain'; to answer that rocks fall because of gravity 'only pins a name to our ignorance'.[74] Then, as now, it was less than widely understood that Newton's apple had knocked into his head quite a specific mathematical idea about how astronomical bodies are held in gravitational equipoise, rather than the brute fact that things fall to the ground. The characteristic response to Newton's *Principia*

among early scientists, Dolnick argues, was bafflement, and of all Newton's theories gravity became especially quickly and deeply entangled in controversies over the place of God in the physical universe. Smith's evocation, then, of 'the laws of nature' in relation to himself and Bobus speaks not only of his general approval of scientific rationalism but equally deeply of a sense at once attractive and uneasy of what cannot be understood, the mystery and paradox that also form part of science, or the medium in which the scientist moves. Smith's love of paradox was a way of letting doubts creep into even his best attempts to put his finger on things.

An opponent of Smith's put his finger on this aspect of him:

> We meet him again, as at Thirsk and Beverley, exhibiting, in the cause of catholic emancipation, the same flow of eloquence and wit, the same boldness of assertion, the same love of paradox, the same studied antithesis, the same irrelevancy of simile…[75]

This description belongs to the anonymous author of *The Elector's True Guide*, a pamphlet directly attacking Smith's *Letter to the Electors* in the cause of religious freedom. The hostile author has caught something of the Smith style: 'boldness of assertion' and 'love of paradox' go to the heart of many of his best witticisms, and even to the qualities that animate his journalistic and epistolary prose. Such qualities are present also in his sharply drawn, alliterative contrasts – 'gravity or gaiety, sense or sarcasm', as he writes to Lord Carlisle[76] – as well as in his lifelong courting of analytically minded company: 'I have a breakfast of philosophers tomorrow at ten punctually', he wrote to Thomas Moore in 1841, 'muffins and metaphysics, crumpets and contradiction. Will you come?'[77] Smith shared his near-contemporary Jane Austen's love of phrases that balance opposing words on the fulcrum of alliteration (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Crumpets and Contradiction*) which allows for an accommodation of paradoxical contrast and sameness – 'finding a level' – while admitting a kind of doubt about where exactly that level might be found. There is often in Smith, as in Austen, the sense that,

in these elegant pairings, apparently opposed qualities might somehow meet each other, as Wordsworth wrote in another subtle riff on Newtonian mechanics, 'a connection formed through the subtle process by which, both in the natural and moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other'.[78]

A significant, perhaps distinctively Romantic, insight emerges in Smith's generation: the anti-Cartesian intuition that human agency can be something encountered within and through physical laws, rather than existing independently of or behind them. A great statement of this idea comes in the work of another child of the 1770s, Heinrich von Kleist, who saw the puppets of the marionette theatre as achieving a more-than-human gracefulness of movement, precisely through their absolute obedience to the laws of gravity:

> For affectation is seen, as you know, when the soul, or moving force, appears at some point other than the centre of gravity of the movement. Because the operator controls with his wire or thread only the centre, the attached limbs are just what they should be … lifeless, pure pendulums, governed only by the law of gravity. This is an excellent quality. You'll look for it in vain in most of our dancers.[79]

Smith's 'love of paradox' encompassed a wide range of diametric and schematic oppositions and tensions beyond the narrowly logical sense of the word, and included ideas similar to those worked out at greater length by von Kleist. A play with contrasting forces appears, for instance, in one of the most emotionally complex pieces of wit, his account of the medical treatment he administered to his son Douglas during a serious illness in 1814:

> I darted into him all the mineral and vegetable resources of the shops, cravatted his throat with blisters, and fringed it with leeches, excited now the peristaltic, now the antiperistaltic motion, like the

> *strophe* and *antistrophe* of the tragedies, and set him in five or six hours to play at marbles, breathing gently and inaudibly.[80]

Nervous jokes flicker about this passage, the kind of anxious humour that sometimes offers the only way of speaking directly about the genuinely traumatic. The peristaltic and the antiperistaltic pull back and forth here with the balance and counterbalance of 'he rose by his gravity; I sank by my levity'; and at the same time the description is unnervingly touching, yielding gradually from a sense of the comical indignities of the patient 'cravatted … with blisters, and fringed … with leeches', through the contrary impulses of the body and the solemn traipsing back and forth of the Greek chorus, to the unmistakable love of a father watching his child breathing. Douglas Smith is most alive when he is in the grip of unconscious physical forces, a 'pure pendulum' swinging from breath to breath. The frenzied creativity of the amateur doctor, and the spasmodic motions of the body, seem to dissolve happily into Douglas Smith's playing at marbles, an activity in which willed pleasure meets pure Newtonian physics. The description is all the more tender looking with hindsight of Douglas's early death in 1829, which Smith called 'the first real misfortune which ever befell me'.[81]

The paradox of 'he rose by his gravity; I sank by my levity' is continuous not only with the psychological, moral, and political negotiations at work in his writing and conversation, but with an ambivalence that ran extremely deep within the man himself. Smith's capacity and taste for emotional contrast were noted by Jane Marcet: 'He who at one moment inspired his readers with such awe and reverence by the solemn piety of his manner … at others, by the brilliancy of his wit, made us die laughing'.[82] In his dig at his brother, I suspect that Smith is externalising a tension in his own character between his inclination to levity and the gravitational pull of his depressive temperament, his love of clever solutions and his sense of the insolubly complex. Mood was, then as now, subject to its own Newtonian mechanics of elevation and depression, gravity and levity, and Smith's justly

famous note to Lady Morpeth offering advice on 'low' spirits is unmistakably the letter of one depressive individual to another: 'Nobody has suffered more from low spirits than I have done'.[83] The remark demands taking seriously. That is, to feel the inner emotional tensions of 'he rose by his gravity; I sank by my levity' we have to feel 'levity' as not only a confession and a guilty pleasure, but as something achieved in the face of a powerful psychological gravitational pull. We don't tend to become aware of gravity until we somehow begin to resist it. Smith imagined himself in terms of such opposed forces when he responded to Sir George Philips's attempts to jolly him out of his low spirits: 'You say I have many comic ideas rising in my mind: this may be true; but the champagne-bottle is no better for holding the champagne'.[84] Smith contained, or attempted to contain within himself, not only an irrepressible force of levity, but also the forces which acted on it, the action, and the equal and opposite reaction, of Newton's laws of motion.

Before the Wright Brothers, the only reliable form of human flight was the balloon, and hot air the only way to slip the surly bonds of earth. If Smith joked that he 'sank' by his levity, his joke nonetheless keeps an eye, both sardonic and optimistic, on the 'law of nature' that it claims to invert. In his bravura account of the activities of the British Association in Bristol in 1836, Smith draws them with Swiftian relish, as a kind of Academy of Laputa:

> On Monday they dissected a frog; on Tuesday they galvanized a goose; on Wednesday they dissected a little pig … On Thursday they tried to go up in a balloon: but the balloon would not stir. The causes of the failure were, however, pointed out in a most satisfactory manner.[85]

Could 'most satisfactory' mean that, in garrulously analysing the failure of the balloon to rise, they produced so much hot air that it actually did? (If so, this moment would be of a piece with Smith's advice on how to fix the wooden pavement around St Paul's: 'Let the Canons once lay their heads

together, and the thing will be done'.[86]) Or does gravity win out over the skyward aspirations of the over-inflated 'Wise Men of Bristol'? The depth of Smith's ironising wit can be marked by the presence of this doubt beneath the certainty that in the telling of the story, levity has won out 'in a most satisfactory manner'.

Wit is a pleasure of life, and all life is gravity-defying in that gravity signals not only the pull towards the earth, but into the earth, into the grave. Mortality is that form of gravity from which the Christian hopes for a resurrection and ascension. 'All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity', thought Simone Weil. 'Grace is the only exception.'[87] Sydney Smith rarely sounds like Simone Weil, but perhaps he did when, seeing the first crocus of the spring appearing from the ground, and pointing at it with his walking stick, he exclaimed: 'See, the Resurrection of the World!'[88] (Weil: 'The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because it is a mark of existence'.[89]) 'He rose by his gravity...' recalls Weil too ('Moral gravity makes us fall towards the heights'[90]) without really sounding like her, because Smith needs to attribute that paradox to Bobus, and hold back a better punchline for himself. The question of Smith's religion is vexed: an ordained clergyman, disdainful of religious enthusiasms of every stripe, some of his play with gravity and humility shows that 'playing off against one another … two different standards of morality', pagan and Christian, that Empson heard in Thomas Gray.[91] He needed to subordinate religion to reason in order to allow himself to advocate it to others: 'Be firm and constant in the exercise of *rational* religion', he wrote in his famous letter to Lady Morpeth giving advice on 'low spirits'.[92] He can be thought of in what Houghton called the 'tradition of the Church of England to take a "*via media*" in manner as in doctrine, which should keep clear of lightness and of solemnity'.[93] But that doesn't completely describe it, because it commits the error of seeing *mediocritas* as golden mean rather than no mean feat; all balance and no tension. It fails to allow for the complexity at work in keeping one's balance. Within the layered ironies of Smith's wit is a commitment to reason so

powerful it can open up cracks in its own internal coherence, cracks through which strange glimmers can be seen of the religious mysticism that he so explicitly downplayed.

Smith wrote of his first curacy on Salisbury Plain that 'Nothing can equal the profound, the unmeasurable, the awful dulness of this place, in the which I lie dead and buried, in the hopes of a joyful resurrection in the year 1796'.[94] And again bored in the country, this time in Gloucestershire: 'I behave myself quietly and decently as becomes a corpse, and hope to retain the rational and immortal part of my composition about the 20th of this month'.[95] 'As becomes a corpse' is so good you might miss it. By 1838, writing of his final living in Somerset, the joke had mellowed out into further paradox: the country was 'a sort of healthy grave'.[96] This kind of wordplay, in its commitment to, and its refusal to be conquered by, paradox, represents a form of ambivalence that is neither fully religious nor fully secular, and which can be either only due to the framework offered by the other: the consciousness of mortality is the very same gesture or joke as 'the presage or fore-feeling of immortality' that Wordsworth saw as the impetus of demotic English churchyard piety.[97] Smith knew that in the midst of life we are in death, but his humane wit could hope that the same might true vice versa; and it is built on the intuition that, whether rising or falling, low or high, the only way through the paradox of gravity and levity is the route of unassuming, practical happiness. As he wrote to Lady Holland in 1809: 'In short, if it be my lot to crawl, I will crawl contentedly; if to fly, I will fly with alacrity; but as long as I can possibly avoid it I will never be unhappy'.[98]

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NOTES

[1] Often recycled in biographies and collections of quotations, but for 'lemon' and 'sulphur' see Saba, Lady Holland, *A Memoir of the Reverend Sydney Smith, by his Daughter … with a Selection from his Letters, edited by Mrs Austin*,

new edn. (1874), pp. 174, 18; for 'whose?' and '*foie gras*', see *Recollections of the Table-Talk of Samuel Rogers; to which is added, Porsoniana*, ed. Alexander Dyce (1856), p. 287.

[2] Alan Bell, *Sydney Smith: A Biography* (Oxford, 1980), p. 193.

[3] George W. E. Russell, *English Men of Letters: Sydney Smith* (1905), p. 29.

[4] *Recollections*, pp. 122-3. The attribution to Horne Tooke is repeated in the second collection of Rogers, *Recollections. By Samuel Rogers*, ed. William Sharpe (1859), pp. 148-9. On Dyce see also Christopher Ricks, in his selection of Rogers's *Table-Talk & Recollections* (2011), pp. ix-xiii.

[5] See *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, Barrister-at-Law, F.S.A.*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3 vols., 2nd edn. (1869), iii. 343-4.

[6] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 78.

[7] Ibid., p. 108.

[8] Ibid., p. 177.

[9] The possible double entendres of 'bone' and 'boner' are too late to be in play for Smith.

[10] Sydney Smith, *Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy, Delivered at the Royal Institution in the Years 1804, 1805, and 1806*, 2nd edn. (1850), p. 143.

[11] Ibid., p. 144.

[12] For some good remarks on 'exquisite', including its relationship to melancholia, see Grace Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton, 2019), pp. 1-19.

[13] On this line of thinking in Smith's time, see Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago, 1960), especially pp. 68-87.

[14] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 177.

[15] Ibid., p. 235.

[16] In *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. ii: *The Major Works, 1725-1744*, ed. Rosemary Cowler (Oxford, 1986), p. 191.

[17] E.g. *Elementary Sketches*, pp. 138-9. For *Le Rire*, see the line of discussion that begins 'A man, running along the street,

stumbles and falls...': *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Mineola, NY, 2005), p. 4.

[18] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 178.

[19] *The Letters of Sydney Smith*, ed. Nowell C. Smith, 2 vols., continuously paginated (Oxford, 1953), p. 124.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 287.

[22] 'The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine! / Feels at each thread, and lives along the line': Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle 1, ll. 217-18, in *The Twickenham Edition of the Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. iii (i): *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (1950), p. 42.

[23] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (1755), ii, s.v. (n.p.).

[24] *Letters*, p. 10.

[25] See Christopher Ricks on cliché in *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 78-89: 'A cliché is a dead piece of language, of which one cliché might be that it is dead but won't lie down' (p. 78).

[26] *Antony and Cleopatra*, V. xv. 42, ed. John Wilders (1995), p. 267.

[27] C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 141.

[28] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford, 2020), p. 136.

[29] Ibid., p. 137.

[30] *Selected Writings of Sydney Smith*, ed. W. H. Auden (1957), p. vii.

[31] Hesketh Pearson, *The Smith of Smiths* (1984), p. 226.

[32] See Galatians 5: 9.

[33] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 130.

[34] The origin of this line of thinking is Romans 13: 1.

[35] *Bon-Mots of Sydney Smith and R. Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Walter Jerrold (1893), p. 110.

[36] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (1971), pp. 89-90.

[37] Chesterton, Preface to Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 13.

[38] *Selected Writings*, p. xvi.
[39] See Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 6.
[40] Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 157.
[41] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 125.
[42] Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 144.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Lord Houghton, *Monographs: Personal and Social* (1873), p. 259.
[45] *Letters*, p. 518.
[46] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 144.
[47] Ibid., p. 217.
[48] The poem is widely anthologised, e.g. in *The Penguin Book of Limericks*, ed. E. O. Parrott (1983), p. 24.
[49] 'except our friend who long lived on rice-pudding and isinglass, till at length to his something or other, his physician said something else, and a leg of mutton somehow ended in daygo'. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865; 1952), p. 11.
[50] Pope, 'Epistle to Bathurst", ll. 69-70, in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. iii (ii): *Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays)*, ed. F. W. Bateson (1961), p. 93.
[51] Daniel Defoe, *Reformation of Manners, A Satyr* (1702), ll. 303, 306, in *Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural*, ed. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 8 vols. (2003), i. 165.
[52] Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, 3 vols. (1841), i. 4. My remarks on economic metaphors are indebted to E. J. Clery, 'Literary and Economic Exchanges in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 50-66.
[53] *Letters*, p. 60.
[54] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 31.
[55] Ibid., p. 45.
[56] *Letters*, p. 734.
[57] Houghton, *Monographs*, p. 286.
[58] *OED*, s.v. 'depress', 6.
[59] Houghton, *Monographs*, p. 271, my emphasis.
[60] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 3, my emphasis.

[61] Review of R. L. Edgeworth, *Essays on Professional Education*, the *Edinburgh Review* (1809), in *The Works of Sydney Smith*, 3 vols. (1854), i. 368.
[62] Smith, *Elementary Sketches*, p. 129.
[63] Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 151. See also Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 90.
[64] Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 151.
[65] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 116.
[66] Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 15.
[67] Smith, *Elementary Sketches*, p. 148.
[68] *Selected Writings*, p. vii.
[69] Smith, *Elementary Sketches*, p. 123.
[70] *Works*, iii. 200-1.
[71] Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder* (2008), p. 376.
[72] *Letters*, p. 113.
[73] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 3.
[74] Edward Dolnick, *The Clockwork Universe* (New York, 2011), p. 301.
[75] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 124.
[76] Ibid., p. 135.
[77] *Letters*, p. 861.
[78] William Wordsworth, 'Essay on Epitaphs, I', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), ii. 53.
[79] Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Marionette Theatre' ['Über das Marionettentheater'], in Kenneth Gross (ed.), *On Dolls* (2012), p. 5.
[80] *Letters*, p. 244.
[81] Ibid., p. 540.
[82] Holland, *Memoir*, p. 70.
[83] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 137.
[84] *Letters*, p. 712.
[85] Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 202.
[86] Houghton, *Monographs*, p. 267.
[87] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (2002), p. 1.
[88] Peter Virgin, *Sydney Smith* (1994), p. 4.
[89] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 108.

[90] Ibid., p. 4.
[91] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; 1991), pp. 122-3.
[92] Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 164.
[93] Houghton, *Monographs*, p. 286.
[94] *Letters*, p. 4.
[95] Pearson, *Smith of Smiths*, p. 92.
[96] *Letters*, p. 750.
[97] Wordsworth, 'Essay on Epitaphs I', p. 50.
[98] *Letters*, p. 158.