

THE WHOLE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNITY:
A STUDY OF THEMATIC STRUCTURE
IN THE PLAYS OF CHRISTOPHER FRY

by

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ABSTRACT

In Curtmantle, William Marshal recalls that Henry's appointment of Becket to Canterbury promised unity, but "the whole significance of unity was not debated." Christopher Fry is constantly exploring the nature of unity and seeking its significance. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how the themes of his plays are structured in language and patterns of action which both exemplify unity and reach for ontological meaning in terms of a vision of a unified universe.

Fry's work concentrates on a group of closely related themes: the positive power of love, both eros and agapé; the wonder, paradoxes and unity of existence; the cycle of life, death and renewal; the operation of necessity and the nature of individuality; and man's relationship with the universe and with God. A direct approach could be made on a thematic basis, but the emphasis of this dissertation is on the structural integration of each separate play, and on the way in which these themes are expressed through aspects of structure. Many of the themes are common to several plays, and the variety of forms which Fry develops to express them is one indication of his stature as a dramatist.

Another possible organization of material would be to group the plays under the headings "secular" and "religious." This method would make an arbitrary distinction between plays that have an

overt religious content and those that do not. One of the important results of these analyses is that the "secular" plays exhibit patterns that make religious statements as positive as those that deal directly with religious subjects.

The chronological play-by-play approach chosen contains the built-in danger of fragmentation. Against this disadvantage stands the advantage that the development of Fry's ideas, techniques and skill can be observed. A unifying factor is that themes and configurations--particularly in character relationships--recur and are reworked in fresh contexts. The dominant direction of Fry's work is in a dual quest for meaning and for God. Each play is, in Fry's own phrase from A Sleep of Prisoners, an "exploration into God," and the analyses aim to show how this quest is pursued in each play.

Critical attention has tended to focus on Fry's verse at the expense of a broader view of his plays. The poetry is only one means--albeit an extremely important one--through which the themes are expressed. They also receive implicit expression through other aspects of the dramatic structure, dealt with where appropriate. Part of the introduction, which first places Fry in a general historical and cultural perspective, deals with the function of poetry in modern drama, and with Fry's views on the subject. The choice of poetry as a vehicle for dramatic expression stems from his world view: it is a natural mode for a man who sees existence as a complex mystery to be comprehended intuitively rather than rationally. He is acutely aware that existence is not

only mysterious and complex, but that it also has a shape or pattern in which meaning can be found. For Fry, the combination of mystery and pattern finds its best expression in the form of poetic drama.

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Preface

In Curtmantle, William Marshal recalls that Henry's appointment of Becket to Canterbury promised unity, but "the whole significance of unity was not debated." Christopher Fry is constantly exploring the nature of unity and seeking its significance. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how the themes of his plays are structured in language and patterns of action which both exemplify unity and reach for ontological meaning in terms of a vision of a unified universe.

Fry's work concentrates on a group of closely related themes: the positive power of love, both eros and agapé; the wonder, paradoxes and unity of existence; the cycle of life, death and renewal; the operation of necessity and the nature of individuality; and man's relationship with the universe and with God. A direct approach could be made on a thematic basis, but I have chosen to place the emphasis of my dissertation on the structural integration of each separate play, and to show how these themes are expressed through aspects of structure. Many of the themes are common to several plays, and the variety of forms which Fry develops to express them is one indication of his stature as a dramatist.

Another possible organization of material would be to group the plays under the headings "secular" and "religious." This method would make an arbitrary distinction between plays that have an overt religious content and those that do not. One of the

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existence is not only mysterious and complex, but that it also has a shape or pattern in which meaning can be found. For Fry, the combination of mystery and pattern finds its best expression in the form of poetic drama.

List of Plays and Abbreviations

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| <u>The Boy with a Cart</u> (1939) | <u>Boy</u> |
| <u>The Firstborn</u> (1946) | <u>Firstborn</u> |
| <u>A Phoenix Too Frequent</u> (1946) | <u>Phoenix</u> |
| <u>Thor, with Angels</u> (1948) | <u>Thor</u> |
| <u>The Lady's Not for Burning</u> (1949) | <u>Lady</u> |
| <u>Venus Observed</u> (1950) | <u>Venus</u> |
| <u>A Sleep of Prisoners</u> (1951) | <u>Sleep</u> |
| <u>The Dark Is Light Enough</u> (1954) | <u>Dark</u> |
| <u>Curtmantle</u> (1961) | <u>Curtmantle</u> |
| <u>A Yard of Sun</u> (1970) | <u>Yard</u> |

In each chapter after the Introduction, a play is given its full title when first mentioned; thereafter, the abbreviated title is used.

Chapter One

Introduction

Christopher Fry was born at Bristol on Dec. 18, 1907, to Charles John Harris and Emma Marguerite Hammond, the daughter of Emma Louise Fry. Charles Harris, an ex-architect Anglican lay preacher, died in 1910. Derek Stanford records that Fry "retained deep and powerful impressions of his father. The faith and personality of his parent...constituted a kind of subconscious ideal."¹ Stanford suggests that Cuthman's recollections of his father in The Boy with a Cart reflect Fry's own filial emotions, and that the "missionary urgency" of some of Fry's plays is related to this early influence. Sources for Fry's religious outlook are also to be found in the relationship on his mother's side to the Quaker Fry family, after which he chose to be named, and to the influence of two strongly religious aunts who shared his upbringing. Fry's dramatic career, although late in flowering, began at the age of fourteen when he wrote his first play, an unpublished and unperformed verse-drama. Another play followed a few years later entitled "Youth and Peregrines;" this was performed in 1934 on the same bill as Shaw's A Village Wooing in which Fry played the lead. Fry taught at Hazlewood Preparatory School, Limpsfield, Surrey, from

¹ Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry, British Council Pamphlet No.54 (London, 1954), p. 11. Biographical information also obtained from Who's Who, Stanford's Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London, 1952), and Emil Roy's Christopher Fry (Carbondale, 1968).

1924 to 1931, except for a brief and unsuccessful excursion into repertory in 1925. In 1932 he became director of the Tunbridge Wells Repertory Players, and, but for war service, has remained with the theatre ever since. During the 1930's Fry wrote several unpublished pieces: a comedy, "Siege," in 1931; music and lyrics for a musical comedy, "She Shall Have Music," which played at the Savoy in 1934; a widely performed dramatization of the life of Dr. Thomas Barnardo entitled "The Open Door;" and two pageants in 1939, "The Tower" for the Tewkesbury Festival, and "Thursday's Child" for the Royal Albert Hall. Finally he achieved publication in 1939 with The Boy with a Cart, which had been written in 1937. This decade was crucial for Fry in giving him an essential grounding in all aspects of theatre. After the war, he completed The Firstborn, which had been started in 1939, and it received its first performance at the Edinburgh Festival on Sept. 6, 1948. By 1955 Fry had written six more plays. He had translated Anouilh's L'Invitation au Chateau (Ring Round the Moon) and L'Alouette (The Lark), and La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu (Tiger at the Gates) by Giraudoux. Also he had continued his musical ventures by writing music for a production of A Winter's Tale in 1951, and extra lyrics for a film version of The Beggar's Opera in 1952. Film work began to take up more and more of Fry's time: he wrote a commentary for the Coronation film "The Queen Is Crowned," and from 1956 onwards he participated in writing several scripts including "Ben Hur," "Barrabas" and "The Bible." Fry's film work is not relevant to this study because an evaluation of the scripts could be misleading rather than helpful. The medium is different, and the writer's imagination is subordinated to that of the director--as Fry

found when two changes of director for "The Bible" involved two drastic revisions of the script. Despite film work, he found time to translate two more plays by Giraudoux, Pour Lucrèce (Duel of Angels) in 1958, and Judith in 1963. He also wrote Curtmantle, which was first performed in Dutch in 1961, and A Yard of Sun, which appeared after a long silence in 1970.

From this brief outline of Fry's career it can be seen that he is a man of diversified talents, and that he has a wide range of theatrical experience. Events and achievements in Fry's life are not difficult to enumerate: influences on his ideas and work are more elusive. His basic attitudes to life were firmly formed in his youth: by the example of his family, the Bible, Bunyan (read to him regularly by his aunt), Shakespeare, classical myths, and Wordsworth. Later in life literary and philosophical influences ranged from T.S. Eliot and Charles Williams (both of whom Fry knew personally) to Bergson to Teilhard de Chardin (in whom Fry found an eloquent expression of his own ideas). Dramatic influences, through practical work in the theatre as well as wide reading, included most major modern dramatists from Ibsen onwards. It is not surprising that he chose to translate plays by Anouilh and Giraudoux. Their lyrical language, their theatricalism, and their creation of fantasy worlds with contemporary reference form a style similar to Fry's. As is evident in A Sleep of Prisoners and in Curtmantle, Fry later benefited from their flexible stage technique. Because Fry is an eclectic in both ideas and techniques it serves little purpose--and could be

invalid--to identify specific influences in the details of his plays, except where there is an obvious debt, like the echoes of Eliot in The Boy with a Cart. As Fry admits in a letter to Emil Roy, "we are like jackdaws: we catch at bright objects everywhere."²

Before examining the plays of Christopher Fry in detail, I shall place him in his historical context within the sub-genre of poetic drama, that is to say drama written in verse form with all the expectations of image, rhythm and emotion that poetry arouses. This historical sketch identifies Fry as one of several writers in a resurgent Christian poetic drama movement, and thereby provides a pertinent frame of reference for the discussion of the plays. It also leads to a look at Fry's own philosophical position and at some of his critical statements, particularly those concerned with poetry in the theatre, and to a brief discussion of the function and possibilities of poetry in the theatre. Poetry is seen as an aspect of a general anti-realistic trend in the twentieth-century theatre, and some criteria for the evaluation of dramatic poetry are established, but more important, a corrective is applied to the usual approach to Fry which concentrates on his language--much in the manner of a good deal of Shakespearian criticism--by recognizing that language functions within the larger structure of the total drama.

The golden age of English poetic drama was the early seventeenth century. Since that time there have been several attempts

² Roy, Christopher Fry, p. 12.

to re-establish the form as viable theatre, but they have met with limited success. The heroic couplets of Dryden's era achieved brief popularity but did not stand the test of time. During the eighteenth century the form virtually disappeared, and in the early nineteenth century, despite the fact that several romantic poets utilized the dramatic form, few achieved any success on the stage although their plays were enjoyed as closet drama.³ Both Browning and Tennyson wrote poetic drama for the stage, but neither succeeded in finding a style that was simultaneously poetic, dramatic and appealing to their audience, and their plays have rarely been revived. The chief flaw of the nineteenth century poets stemmed from the fact that they were poets first and dramatists second. Successful poetic drama demands the combination of the talents of both dramatist and poet--in that order of priority--and the foundation of a good dramatist invariably lies in his close association with the live theatre. In the early part of the present century the poetic drama of Stephen Phillips and James Elroy Flecker achieved some success largely because the audience responded to their delight in the exotic and spectacular, not to any poetic or dramatic quality in their work. The plays of Gordon

³ Coleridge's Remorse enjoyed a week at Drury Lane in 1813, and according to Nicoll's Hand-list, only Byron's Marino Faliero was performed during his lifetime (Drury Lane, 1821). Nicoll suggests that not only were prevailing conditions in the theatre discouraging to the serious writer, but that also the Romantic temperament was too introspective for live dramatic form. See Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900 (Cambridge, 1955), IV, 58 ff.

Bottomley, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Masefield, and John Drinkwater appealed largely to amateur groups, and again their work has not stood the test of time. During a period which sought social realism, exemplified in Galsworthy's Strife and Justice, it was not surprising that an essentially unrealistic form found little favour. However, the early years of the century saw a growing revolt against realism because of the limitations it imposed on the exploration of the inner reality that lies behind the surface mask of events and characters. Realism seeks truth through the scientific and impersonal observation of reality. In art it aims for a literal representation of everyday life, and although such exponents of realism as Chekhov can transcend its limitations to achieve a "poetic" statement, the reverse does not occur: dialogue cast in the form of verse is antithetical to realism.

At the same time that the realists were seeking truth in one direction, the symbolists were seeking it in the other. Writers such as Maeterlinck and Hofmannsthal strove for lyric expression of the inner condition, and later W.B. Yeats sought a similar truth in his symbolic, ritualistic and somewhat esoteric plays. As early as 1902 Strindberg's Dream Play pointed the way towards the expressionism of the 1920's and the experimental theatre of the inter-war years, when the growing revolt against realism absorbed symbolism into a mode that sought subjective reality through the distortion of surface reality. That experimentation included the use of poetry because poetry, as a medium for exploring inner

reality, communicates at both a verbal and a supra-verbal level. However, despite these international trends in drama, in England it was not until the 1930's, when the Church of England encouraged the Christian verse dramatists, that a popular though still limited audience was found for poetic drama. It is not surprising that poetry and drama join forces in the expression and presentation of religious themes because the action, as in the history of Becket in Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935) or of Chelmsford in Williams' Judgement at Chelmsford (1939), can demonstrate the events and the language can explore the religious meaning and mystery behind those events.

T.S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers and Charles Williams were among those whose plays were commissioned for various church festivals, particularly at Canterbury, and in 1937 Christopher Fry's The Boy with a Cart was written at the request of the vicar of Coleman's Hatch to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Steyning Church. After the 1939-45 war, the Christian verse drama movement--for there were enough major writers involved with similar aims to warrant this description--entered a second phase in which the overt Christian themes of the 1930's became subdued or disguised in secular drama.⁴ In a programme note Fry wrote for the 1968 Chichester production of The Cocktail Party, he recognizes that Eliot "takes the great

⁴ William V. Spanos, The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama: the Poetics of Sacramental Time (New Brunswick, N.J., 1967), p. 16.

classical institutions of the human psyche and relates them to the Christian revelation, and then...he presents the sacramental in secular action."⁵ Similar examples of the modification or abandonment of religious action in favour of the secular, but retention of the sacramental in the patterns of action and in the implications of poetic language, occur in Williams' The House of the Octopus (1945), Ronald Duncan's This Way to the Tomb (1946) and, as I shall show, in the bulk of Fry's own plays.

William Spanos, in The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama, subjects the movement to sophisticated religious and aesthetic analysis, and provides an invaluable frame of reference. His treatment of Fry is limited to one play, A Sleep of Prisoners, but his general argument is relevant to the explication of many of Fry's other plays. He posits a "sacramental aesthetic" based on the implications of the Incarnation:

since the Incarnation occurs in time, in a moment of history, it absorbs the temporal into the eternal order, extending itself within history.... This theological concept of an eternal Presence requires a sacramental interpretation of history in which time is viewed as an eternal present and events, no matter how distant from one another in time, are perpetually relevant symbolic actions.⁶

This view is closely linked to Erich Auerbach's discussion in Mimesis of the figura, a concept in which the first of two or more

⁵ Christopher Fry, Programme Notes for The Cocktail Party (Chichester, 1968).

⁶ Spanos, pp. 27-28.

events or persons in time signifies not only itself but also those that follow, and the subsequent events or persons encompass or fulfill the first. Therefore, "since one thing stands for another, since one thing represents and signifies the other, figural interpretation is 'allegorical' in the widest sense,"⁷ and of course is closely related to the world of myth. For the Christian dramatist, the Incarnation, the figura and myth provide "the imagery of poetry and the action of drama with transcendent meaning without denying their existential validity."⁸ By relating the immediate context to paradigmatic or archetypal events, actions and persons, he is able to embrace a transcendent dimension within a secular plot. In A Sleep of Prisoners, Fry directly combines Biblical and modern action, but even in his least religious plays a sacramental order of experience can be recognized.

In the Incarnation the divine word becomes human flesh, and therefore Christ's body redeems man's soul and "man and nature are reunited with the transcendent form from which they have been separated."⁹ The eternal-temporal antithesis is thereby resolved, and by extension, the Incarnation functions to redeem nature and time. Charles Williams uses the term "co-inherence" to describe the "organic and sacramental order created by [this] reconciliation

⁷ Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton, N.J., 1953), p. 73.

⁸ Spanos, p. 22.

⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

of the things of time and eternity."¹⁰ The concept is expressed by Cranmer in Williams' Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury:

King Henry had in mind to make
a ritual for communion, that men should find,
by nourishment on the supernatural, the natural
moving all ways into the supernatural,
and the things that are below as those above.¹¹

From the same play comes another significant and relevant passage. Cranmer, in his moment of realization, kneels to God and declares:

Into thee now do I run, into thy love,
that which is all the cause thou wert man for us,
and we are nothing but that for which thou wert man,
these horrible sins the cause of thy being man,
these sins to thy love the cause of motion in love.¹²

In the Incarnation, Christ became man through love, because man's sins drew forth God's grace--in effect, the "fortunate fall." By extension, all love acquires sacramental status because it repeats the pattern of an eternal mystery, although in a temporal context. This view is expressed by Williams in Judgement at Chelmsford:
through "our...incarnate lord," God makes

the love and the loving,
the lover and the beloved, the beloved and the lover,
into a glorious mystery of himself--¹³

In the same manner, the stage action of Christian drama is a sacramental process that is multivocal because the pattern of action is simultaneously susceptible of many meanings which extend the action,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

¹¹ Charles Williams, Collected Plays (London, 1963), p. 26.

¹² Ibid., p. 57.

¹³ Ibid., p. 137.

whether in the past or the present, to the eternal via the intrinsic myth, and thereby achieves--providing it is successful--both unity and universality. It is not necessary to accept Christian doctrine in order to accept the Christian drama because its myths are far from isolated. They are repeated in many different ages and cultures, and by definition, a myth is something that all men recognize as exemplifying a valid truth of existence. Furthermore, the multivocal nature of art is familiar, and its degree of resonance is a measure of its greatness: the sacramental aesthetic enhances this process by providing a pattern of relationships between the particular and the general that leads directly to the divine.

The sacramental view of history endows every separate human action with permanent significance within the larger pattern of time without any loss of its unique individual importance. Most great drama, of course, suggests a similar relationship because, whether sacramental or not, it is impelled by what might be termed a "religious impulse" to find or express significance in man's actions. The sacramental view takes the combination of uniqueness, significance and unity as its a priori assumption. Another view which seeks to express a sense of the unity between diverse things is expressed in Myth and the Christian Tradition by Alan Watts, who declares:

the world of conventional, everyday experience appears as a multitude of separate things extended in space and succeeding one another in time. Their existence is always

realized by contrast or opposition. That is to say, we realize or isolate the experience of light by contrast with darkness, pleasure with pain, life with death, good with evil, subject with object. Opposition, duality, is therefore the inevitable condition of this world.... However, this world of opposites is conventional and 'seeming', it is not the real world. For reality is neither multiple, temporal, spatial, nor dual. Figuratively speaking it is the One rather than the Many.¹⁴

Although the philosophical assumptions of Watts' statement may be questioned in that he appears to deny both the possibility of an experience having value for its own sake, and the realization of an experience except through contrast and opposition, his assertion that manifestations of the One give the illusion of multiplicity is particularly useful with regard to Fry, whose expressions of antitheses and emphasis on the multiple wonders of the world tend to attract more attention than his fundamental belief in the unity of all things. For Fry it is in the repeated patterns of life and death cycles and duality that the singleness of created things lies, and it is in the myth that these patterns are best expressed. The Bible provides Fry with his chief source of myths. Biblical events are not merely history that once happened, or are believed to have happened, but are also endowed with "the tremendous dignity of myth, which is 'once upon a time' in the sense that [myths are] behind all time."¹⁵ Watts describes a myth as

a complex of stories--some no doubt fact, and some fantasy--which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and

¹⁴ Alan W. Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity (London, 1954), pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

of human life....the form of the myth is always concrete--consisting of vivid, sensually intelligible, narratives, images, rites, ceremonies, and symbols.¹⁶

Fry repeatedly uses myths both directly as narrative bases for his plots and indirectly as points or patterns of reference. In some plays, The Firstborn and A Sleep of Prisoners for example, the Bible is the direct source, but in others, such as A Phoenix Too Frequent, the action is analogous to Biblical events, or (as in The Boy with a Cart and Thor, with Angels) takes its shape from Christian patterns evolved out of Christian teaching or hagiography. Even in the comedies apparently far removed from such sources, the patterns remain, especially those of death and rebirth and redemption through love. Such patterns are not uniquely Christian, but as I will show, Fry's frame of reference is predominantly Christian.

The assumptions of the sacramental aesthetic and the concepts of myth both posit order, unity and purpose as principles of the universe. These three principles underlie Fry's own philosophy and his concepts of drama, as is evident from his plays and confirmed by his critical statements. Commenting on Eliot's assertion, made in 1928, that "the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature," Fry argued: "it follows that human nature has a sense of an order governing life, or at least a taste for it. Order, and its agents form and rhythm, are the reason, flesh and heart-beat of poetic drama."¹⁷ Eliot's assertion may be open to

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷ Fry, Cocktail Party Notes.

question, but the evidence of art suggests the validity of Fry's argument, which is almost a declaration of his credo. With Eliot, much of his critical comment regarding the poetic drama preceded the practice: Fry reversed the process. He had the advantage of being a man of the theatre as well as a poet, and was able to write some successful verse plays, then defend the critical position which evolved out of them. With Fry, critical theory and philosophical outlook are inseparable. He is neither a literary critic nor a philosopher, but an artist: his main concern is with feeling, not with theory. His non-dramatic statements, therefore, do not always stand close analysis, but they do indicate his own particular "angle of perception," and establish a context in which the plays may be understood and evaluated. Fry's pronouncements on poetic drama stem from a philosophic attitude which combines existential doubts and questions with intuitive faith. He declares:

the inescapable dramatic situation for us all is that we have no idea what our situation is. We may be mortal. What then? We may be immortal. What then? We are plunged into an existence fantastic to the point of nightmare, and however hard we rationalize, or however firm our religious faith, however closely we dog the heels of science or wheel among the stars of mysticism, we cannot really make head or tail of it.¹⁸

In an age of scientific and intellectual sophistication it is unusual, and somewhat refreshing, to have the basic problems of existence expressed in so naive a manner. Yet, while he shares the existential perspective, he also recognizes the dangers in a

¹⁸ Fry, "A Playwright Speaks," The Listener, 43 (23 Feb. 1950), 331.

world without God, in which anxiety is inevitably dominant:

the vision of an anxious man is likely to dwindle; his anxiety becomes his world, and his world of anxiety may become despair.... At such a time he needs all his senses and perceptions to keep him aware of what his existence represents.¹⁹

Fry feels that his position of faith does not constitute a barrier between him and his audience, because

we are all involved in a process which it is simpler to call God than anything else; and if I can manage to write about--not theories--but what it feels like to be a living man in fact, I am writing about what every man feels, even if in doubt or rejection.²⁰

He believes the individual is on a "brief visitation" to the world, and is

a continuation of an age-long process.... And the theatre we should always be trying to achieve is one where the persons and events have the recognizable ring of an old truth, and yet seem to occur in a lightning spasm of discovery. That...is the province of poetry.²¹

Behind all the tragedy and comedy of life, the old truth and the new discovery, Fry sees "the fundamental drama of his [man's] ever existing at all,"²² which is also the "province of poetry". These statements indicate Fry's aims which are to renew our sense of faith and wonder and to encourage a new perspective on the world. One critic observes that by shadowing the known with the unknown,

¹⁹ Fry, "The Play of Ideas," New Statesman and Nation, XXXIX (22 April, 1950), 458.

²⁰ Fry, "Talking of Henry," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (Feb., 1961), 189.

²¹ Fry, Listener, 332.

²² Ibid., 331.

and by "placing the ordinary in a cosmic setting,"²³ Fry suggests that "fundamental drama" of existence. In his opinion, Fry falls short of dramatizing it, but this is a matter to be evaluated in the examination of the plays.

Fry recognizes that "the race of time and the brooding of eternity are continually at war" in the playwright, and because "each is an essential part of our story...so each is an essential part of the theatre."²⁴ He believes that while an audience is entertained it must "also feel there is more going on than we have yet had time to discover,"²⁵ and that poetry in the theatre can suggest this deeper mystery while at the same time it can help "us to see ourselves and the world freshly."²⁶ Also, by setting his plays in the past, Fry believes he can sharpen this perspective by getting a "clearer look at what you might call the permanent condition of man."²⁷ His historic settings are not realistic recreations of the past, nor are they "pegs on which to hang costumes, but [they] are genuinely significant; for each play embodies the spiritual climate of a historical period."²⁸ But

²³ Eleazar Lecky, "Mystery in the Plays of Christopher Fry," Tulane Drama Review, IV, iii (1960), 84.

²⁴ Fry, "Author's Struggle," New York Times, Sec.II (6 Feb., 1955), 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Fry, Listener, 331.

²⁷ Fry, Twentieth Century, 189.

²⁸ Monroe K. Spears, "Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," Poetry, LXXVIII (April, 1951), 37.

the climate is not exclusive to that period, it is only the dominant mode at that time, and is present in some degree at all times, and therefore relevant to our own day. Another aspect of history which relates to Fry's preference for historical settings is indicated in a comment on T.S. Eliot by Ronald Peacock, who sees the modern sense of history characterized by "the voracious expansion of all historical knowledge regarding human civilization...the awareness of time's accumulations, or the past in the present."²⁹ He notes that in the drama the method of allusiveness and literary reference is abandoned as unsuitable, and that the same sense of history is conveyed in ritual: Eliot, he declares, integrates "drama into the framework of ritual."³⁰ Peacock's comments might also be applied to Fry (especially with regard to the utilization of Christian and pagan myths and legends), and when they are combined with Fry's own sense of a conflict between time and eternity and the historical implications of the sacramental aesthetic discussed earlier, the possibility arises that the significance of the historical setting of each play may be not only a "spiritual climate" as Spears suggests, but also a vital statement of Fry's perspective of "the permanent condition of man."

Fry's perspective of wonder, the way in which he uses the past, his ritual patterns, and his use of verse, all tend away

²⁹ Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (New York, 1946), pp. 12-14.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

from formal realism.³¹ Fry rejects the "surface reality" of post-Ibsenite drama, which deals with the "domestication of the enormous miracle" of existence, and he turns to poetry because in "a world so wildly unprosaic as this one is, what else can be done, if we mean to be realistic?"³² This is a somewhat sophisticated defence of a medium recognized as artificial in relation to everyday speech. Eliot argues that there are three levels of speech--prose, verse and ordinary speech--and that "prose on the stage is as artificial as verse: or alternatively, verse can be as natural as prose."³³ Fry recognizes the essential unreality and artificiality of the stage, which no amount of simulated realism can disguise, and he exploits it to come to terms with the paradoxical unreality of real life. He declares that "reality is incredible, reality is a whirlwind. What we call reality is a false god, the dull eye of custom."³⁴ We have, therefore, two kinds of reality in the theatre: realism or verisimilitude--the surface reality, what Archibald MacLeish terms the "illusion of the actual"³⁵--as distinct from "the illusion of the real," the higher reality.

³¹ I use the term "realism" to identify those elements common to the schools of Realism and Naturalism, particularly the emphasis on objectivity and the literal representation of actual life.

³² Fry, cited by Stanford, Christopher Fry, p. 23.

³³ T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London, 1957), p. 73.

³⁴ Fry, Listener, 331.

³⁵ Archibald MacLeish, "The Poet as Playwright," American Playwrights on the Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York, 1965), pp. 105-108. Written in 1955.

Despite his declarations rejecting the realistic theatre, Fry tends to follow the example of many of his contemporaries--James Bridie, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Anouilh, to name a few--who blend the two forms of realism by incorporating extra dimensions into the realistic framework.

For Fry, the most important dimension--or aspect of structure--for extending what Una Ellis-Fermor terms the "frontiers" of drama, is poetry. He contends that in the theatre, poetry "must have a direct surface meaning, an immediate impact of sense, but half its work should be going on beneath that meaning, drawing the ear, consciously or unconsciously, into a certain experience of being."³⁶ It is only poetry, he believes, that can express that deeper experience, because

poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement. It is the language in which he says heaven and earth in one word.... And if you accept my proposition that reality is altogether different from our stale view of it, we can say that poetry is the language of reality.³⁷

In the drama, he says, poetry is part of the larger pattern of action which

should have a meaning in itself, above and beyond the story; the kind of meaning which gives everlasting truth to myths and legends...a meaning not so conscious as a parable or so contrived as an allegory, but as it were tracing a figure which the poetry can naturally and inevitably fill.³⁸

³⁶ Fry, "Why Verse?" Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. T. Cole (New York, 1961), p. 127. Written in March, 1955.

³⁷ Fry, Listener, 331.

³⁸ Fry, "Why Verse?" p. 129.

The assumptions behind these and similar statements are that the language itself is "in action" and that verse, through the richness of poetic images and the throb of rhythm, can rank beside myth and such elements as the chorus, masks, settings, and music, in expressing the inner reality of dramatic action.

It is one thing to set up claims for the role and potential of poetic drama, but another to overcome the problems of making the form acceptable to a modern audience. William Archer, writing in 1923, welcomed the fact that "the two elements of the old drama, imitation and lyrical passion, have at last consummated their divorce. For lyrical passion we go to opera and music drama, for interpretation through imitation we go to the modern realistic play."³⁹ In the twenties and thirties it was also believed that ballet or expressionistic "spectacle" techniques could best communicate emotion too deep for words. The aim was to create, in Cocteau's terms, "poésie du théâtre" rather than to have merely "poésie au théâtre." Recognizing the psychological barrier as well as the technical problems involved, Fry remarked that

as there is no present [1961] established tradition of verse in the theatre, you seem to have to start to make it every time you start a new play: not only creating the finished article, as it were, but also the tool you are going to create it with. You have to find language which is right in texture and speed for the subject, and which at the same time has the colloquial rhythms of our time.⁴⁰

³⁹ William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (Boston, 1923), p. 387.

⁴⁰ Fry, Twentieth Century, 188.

Eliot had already stressed the need for poetry to be close to the idiom of its own day, especially in dramatic verse where the poet speaks through his "third voice," his characters.⁴¹ Fry questions Eliot "with diffidence" because he feels that "if we are to use form at all we have to adjust the rhythm of common speech to the rhythms of our form,"⁴² and although in practice he modified his style, he never followed Eliot's path away from verse. Fry believes that "a verse play is not a prose play which happens to be written in verse. It has its own nature."⁴³ Quoting himself, he continues: "the poetry and the construction are inseparate... the poetry is the action, and the action--even apart from the words--is the figure of the poetry...." In other words, the verse is a structural element, not a mere decoration, and it must justify itself accordingly in a unified action where the "figure" expresses a rhythm of form. Verse then constitutes a subtle link rather than an intrusive barrier between author and audience. The practical problems of the modern theatre also impose certain demands on the language. Fry, with his wide experience in the theatre, is acutely aware of the possibility of distracting noises or actions, inaudibility, or the spectator's tendency to dwell on a striking phrase and lose what follows. Consequently, he says, the playwright

⁴¹ Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, p. 34.

⁴² Fry, "Poetry and the Theatre," Adam, XIX, 214-215 (1951), 10.

⁴³ Fry, An Experience of Critics (New York, 1953), pp. 26-27. The embedded quotation is from "Poetry and the Theatre," 10.

must make the "main theme, or conflict of his play as bold as he dare,"⁴⁴ but he must not descend into didacticism because poetry works by implication. He believes that the present environment keeps "words flying past us at an enormous rate, so that to deal with them at all our understanding has to take them in broadly, by phrases or by paragraphs."⁴⁵ It will be seen that Fry's technique of a "tide of sound," with its tendency to repeat, expand and play with an idea, is a style of poetry especially suited to the dramatic form.

In one of his earliest pronouncements on poetic drama, Eliot advocated the method of adapting existing forms. The poet, he said, should "take a form of entertainment and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art."⁴⁶ Although there are times when his verse may be accused of intruding, Eliot's own plays after Murder in the Cathedral exemplify this process. The Family Reunion, for example, has the form of the familiar house-party and murder "whodunit", and The Cocktail Party utilizes the form of drawing-room comedy. Both plays are "a form of art" because they embrace dimensions beyond the mere working out of plot. Peacock declares that Eliot's reuniting of verse and drama "was a restoration to drama of poetic conventions that intensify its 'degree of form,' to use Eliot's phrase. The field of verse

⁴⁴ Fry, Listener, 332.

⁴⁵ Fry, "Author's Struggle," 3.

⁴⁶ T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (London, 1960), p. 70.

is widened again; the form of drama heightened."⁴⁷ There is, therefore, a reciprocal benefit to poetry and drama. There are two senses in which the term "form" is used in these quotations. The first is the mechanical, or conventional form in which the work is moulded; the second is the innate or organic form that grows from within. It is intended that the following discussion of Fry's plays will arrive at an appreciation of their organic form through a study of the organization and inter-relationship of some of the more mechanical aspects of structure.

Despite Fry's critical condemnation of the modern "stale" view of reality, and the limitations of realistic theatre, he does not discard the framework of fourth-wall realism, particularly as conventionalized in "bourgeois" drawing-room comedy. Like Eliot, but with greater popular success, he utilizes its forms. This is most evident in the three "comedy of seasons" plays, where, as I will show later, he imbues the form with a vital sense of inner life and of wider significance. Because Fry's artistic vision of life is one of a "unity of difference," a sense of unity lies behind his pronouncements on form. For example, he sees a precarious, narrow bridge between tragedy and comedy, and he explains:

when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as tragedy.... If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy.... [They] have to unmortify themselves:

⁴⁷ Peacock, p. 5.

to affirm life and assimilate death and persevere
in joy.⁴⁸

No matter what overall form the play takes--tragedy, comedy or even farce--each, he declares, "has its own particular conflict, tension and shape, which...will point the way to the play's purpose."⁴⁹

Fry thereby narrows the gap between definitions of form by implying that a dramatic action not only has its own organic form, but it also creates its own mechanical form. Between tragedy and comedy Fry sees a qualitative difference, a

difference between experience and intuition. In the experience we strive against every condition of our animal life.... In the intuition we trust to the arduous eccentricities we're born to, and see the oddness of a creature who has never got acclimatized to being created.⁵⁰

Comedy does more than recognize man's eccentricities. Fry perceives that

there is an angle of perception where the dark [of tragedy] is distilled into light...where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says, in effect, that, groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery.⁵¹

For Fry, comedy and faith are inseparable, and he sees comedy as an agent of good against evil, a means of redeeming joy from the

⁴⁸ Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review, IV, iii (1960), 78.

⁴⁹ Fry, Listener, 332.

⁵⁰ Fry, TDR., 78.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

devil's side: "comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith."⁵² Fry may assert his belief in the perceptive and redemptive properties of the comic mode, but because of his awareness of the "tragic experience" he frequently incorporates tragic elements in comic structures, and the result is a distinctly ironic pattern which is reinforced by his fondness for contrast, enigma and paradox. Fry's essay on "Comedy" concludes that laughter "is a truth, not a fantasy, a truth voluble of good which comedy maintains."⁵³ The ironies of the plays tend to contradict such relatively simple, optimistic assertions: through their dramatic form the plays reveal a more complex understanding of life's realities.

One of the reasons for Fry's success is that he succeeded in bringing verse to familiar dramatic forms without restricting his appeal to a narrow, esoteric group. The challenge of bridging the gap between realistic plays designed for the commercial theatre and verse plays designed for the closet or for a limited cultural audience has stimulated a wide range of comments. Archibald MacLeish says that the poet-dramatist must not write reflective poetry, but must "people the stage again with actions that are at once poetry and drama."⁵⁴ Maxwell Anderson believes he must create

⁵² Ibid., 77.

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ MacLeish, p. 111.

a fable which will be of immediate interest to his time and hour, and relate it in a fashion acceptable to his neighbours.... He will also try to make that fable coincide with something within himself that he wants to put into words.⁵⁵

Anderson goes on to assert that it is the poet-dramatist's duty to

take up again the consideration of man's place and destiny in prophetic rather than prosaic terms. It is incumbent on the dramatist to be a poet, and incumbent on the poet to be a prophet, dreamer and interpreter of the racial dream.⁵⁶

Eliot sees the poet-dramatist reaching to the fringe of expressible emotions and motivations, into a range of sensibility only music can express, and presenting simultaneously "the two aspects of dramatic and musical order,"⁵⁷ yet without losing contact with the daily world. His art, Eliot continues, must impose order on reality and thereby show the order in reality and "bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation."⁵⁸ This catalogue of high aims for the poet-dramatist, which specifies the nature of poetic vision in relation to the drama, can be supplemented by more practical criteria. Eliot has set up over a period a series of almost unassailable precepts. One prime law is "that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear.... [It] cannot afford to lose its contact with the

⁵⁵ Maxwell Anderson, "Poetry in the Theatre," American Playwrights on the Drama, p. 16. Written in 1939.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁷ Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, pp. 86-87.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

changing language of common intercourse."⁵⁹ It must also "justify itself dramatically" so that the audience is "too intent on the play to be wholly conscious of the medium."⁶⁰ The test of the dramatic quality of a passage is that "it does not interrupt, but intensifies the dramatic situation."⁶¹ The author must "try to extract the poetry from the character, rather than impose his poetry upon it."⁶² Eliot's emphasis on the dramatic situation and action is an important corrective to the tendency to view the language as something distinct from the rest of the play. The success of the drama depends on the coherence of all the separate elements as parts of an organized whole. Another critic sums up the problem:

if poetic drama is to be reinstated as a living genre, it must be as an experience in which language is one of the formal elements working with all its resources in conjunction with other structural elements.⁶³

I have outlined Fry's historical context, the "sacramental aesthetic" of Christian verse drama, the unifying quality of myth, Fry's own philosophical and critical attitudes, and some of the aims of and criteria for verse drama as propounded by Eliot and others, in order to establish a frame of reference for the

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶² Ibid., p. 95.

⁶³ Donna Gerstenberger, "Perspectives of Modern Verse Drama," Modern Drama, III, i (1960), 26.

examination of Fry's plays. My examination of the thematic structure of each play which follows will bear in mind the integral nature of all the elements in drama, and will therefore include consideration of dramatic structures and devices to the extent that they contribute to the expression of theme. My discussions will be directed towards an appreciation of the way in which Fry consistently explores several central themes in an overall search for meaning and significance in a complex universe, and ultimately, for God.

Chapter Two

The Boy with a Cart: Faith and Quest

Fry's first published play, The Boy with a Cart, is a "festival play" written on request for a church occasion.¹ The commission provided Fry with an opportunity to explore a theme that was to remain central in his subsequent work: "the joint action of root and sky, of man/And God."² This interaction is asserted in the opening lines by the Chorus of The People of South England, and the story of Cuthman shows it in operation. The People have discerned it from their doorways in April evenings, in first and last twilight, and on October nights when they "experienced alteration/Beyond experience" (2). They have

Guessed at divinity working above the wind,
Working under our feet (1),

and "have almost known" the touch of divinity in their daily labours. Their knowledge is intuitive, a simple faith confirmed by a simple account of miraculous events in the life of a saint. The Chorus of People, which always speaks in verse, is a timeless commentator, both Cuthman's contemporary and our own, and it functions as intermediary between the legend and the audience. It serves to introduce the specific account of Cuthman, to offer the general experience and to suggest a universal significance for the action. The shifts

¹ See Introduction, p.7.

² Christopher Fry, The Boy with a Cart, 2nd ed. (London, 1945), p. 1. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

between Chorus and action ensure that the specific in the general and the general in the specific are both given adequate expression, because an understanding of this interaction helps towards an understanding of the nature of the divine hand in the terrestrial world. The action in the story of Cuthman is a simple illustration of the divine at work in the life of one individual endowed with an unshakeable faith. Fry does not expect his modern audience to accept the account literally--hence the humorous treatment of the Mowers and Mrs. Fipps--but he does ask them to accept a pattern of interaction between God and man. This chapter examines how this pattern is expressed both in the language and in the structure of the play.

Boy has proved a success, especially with amateur groups, despite certain structural weaknesses such as a thin plot line, inadequate conflict and the resolution of problems mainly by supernatural intervention. However, it does have strengths of structure that help to compensate for these flaws and for the dramatic weakness of the material supplied by the account of Cuthman in Fry's source, The Worthies of Sussex. Because the legend offers little scope for anything except a direct, simple treatment, Fry focuses on the pattern of experience represented by Cuthman's "sorrows" and the triumph of his faith. The Play relates how Cuthman, an immature innocent, has his idyllic life shattered by the unexpected death of his father and consequent loss of home and lack of money. His choice to move away from his native village takes him on a

journey towards a new home, the construction of a church, and personal maturity. Along the way he encounters obstacles which are dramatized in a series of crises culminating in that of the king-post. The obstacles are overcome by a combination of his own will and supernatural intervention, and a satisfactory resolution is achieved. Fry recognizes that he is retelling a legend in which the pattern of experience is more important than the narrative of events, so he deliberately eliminates suspense by revealing the outline and the conclusion of the plot in the opening chorus.

The theme of interaction is expressed in an episodic structure which takes Cuthman on a physical journey from his native village to Steyning, on a moral journey from youth to maturity, and on a spiritual journey from nature to God. In the first episode, Cuthman launches into a breathless description of spring which is appropriate to him at this point because he is a child-like innocent, although he does possess an unusual awareness. We know from the prediction of "three sorrows" to come upon him that his joy is not to last, and can detect ironies in the "Lenten choirboys" who must mourn a time of death and suffering before they celebrate rebirth, a suggestion reinforced by the death reference a few lines later to "the webs of winter" which have passed away. The Old King, Cuthman's father, has died, and Cuthman, unaware of his new role, ironically declares, "I've king'd/Myself on the rock" (3). Through repetition, attention is focused on the word "rock", and because the audience already knows that Cuthman is going to be seen "building

at last a church," an immediate association is set up between Cuthman and the rock which is a traditional symbol for the Church of God. The rock image is subsequently transmuted into images of stones, walls, pillars, and the church at Steyning.

The action is precipitated by the death of Cuthman's father. His first reaction to the reality of the event is one of guilt:

Did I steal God away
From my father to guard my sheep?...
...Was it a boast on the rock,
The garrulous game? What have I done to him? (6)

The Chorus comments in images of a dying day "pulled up by the root" while "Heaven is quarried with cries," and thereby elevates the disturbance of individual death to a macrocosmic level. Cuthman turns from guilt to self-reproach for being unaware of the event, for not perceiving the omens and going to his father

to see
How he put down his cup and dried his mouth
And turned as heaven shut behind him (7).

The Chorus asks, "How is your faith now, Cuthman?" This focuses on a question which the play fails to develop as an internal conflict: can faith, especially when nurtured in comfort, withstand the trial of adversity? In Fry's terms,³ the words of the Chorus are "in action," expressing an eternal conflict between faith and doubt in natural images:

You see how sorrow rises, Cuthman,
How sorrow rises like the heat
Even up to the plumed hills
And the quickest feet (7).

³ See Introduction, p.20, and "Why Verse?", p. 126.

The active voice dominates the language: faith "spread[s]", sorrow "rises," and pain "grows." The short verses give a sense of immediacy which is complemented by direct statements that people are "afraid," "sleepless," "cold," and "desperate." Cuthman survives his first trial through recognizing he has "stayed too long with the children... [having] only ventured the reflection/And not the substance" of life (8), and he takes his first step towards manhood by praying for a more mature perception:

Let me see now with truer sight, O God
 Of root and sky; let me at last be faithful
 In perception, and in action that is born
 Of perception, even as I have been faithful
 In the green recklessness of little knowledge (8).

The first episode concludes with a passage savouring strongly of Eliot, in which the Chorus comments on the pattern of action:

Out of this, out of the first incision
 Of mortality on mortality, there comes
 The genuflexion, and the partition of pain
 Between man and God; there grows the mutual action,
 The perspective to the vision (10).

At this point there is a shift to prose, which helps to bring out the change in Cuthman. He is no longer the enthusiastic youth, but a young man conscious of his responsibility and opportunity. He has a rational explanation for the move which appeals to his mother's vanity and sense of respectability, but the real impulse is inexplicable, because it arises from the faith that "God will look after us" (14). The shift to prose marks a shift in tone, which indicates a shift to a comic level of action, an opportunity for the audience to relax and enjoy the humour. As Cuthman and

his mother set off on their journey, the Chorus provides a verse bridge to the next episode. The tone of the verse indicates that this is no ordinary journey, but an archetypal journey which forms part of Cuthman's rites de passage. A series of images evokes Cuthman's labours: the repetition of the phrase^a "stone over stone;" the physical strain of his "jarring muscle and aching/Back" (15) which "crunch the fading country into/Dust;" the natural obstacles to be overcome like "the pot-hole [which] tugs the foot;" the isolation in which

the shut door and the ministering fire
Have shrunk across the fields to a dog's bark (15);

and the deprivation of basic comforts, like having to sleep on the ground "Where limbs and prayers could stretch between root and/Root" (16).

The scene with the Mowers, when the rope breaks, signifies both the human opposition and the physical problems that obstruct Cuthman's purpose. Counter to these are the rain which punishes the Mowers and the renewal of vision Cuthman receives by the stream. The punishment of the Mowers seems somewhat severe because their laughter would appear warranted by the comical tumble of Cuthman's mother from the cart, and her indignant protests: "Of course I'm hurt. I'm more than hurt, I'm injured" (17). However, they make no effort to assist and continue to jeer at Cuthman. The incident illustrates the tension between faith and unbelief, and the Mowers' punishment serves to show the divine hand at work on Cuthman's behalf. It also prepares the way for the moment of vision. The

Chorus comments on the rain in five stanzas that vividly render the physical fact so that the audience can see and feel the "Rain riding suddenly out of the air" (19). Down at the stream where Cuthman cut the withies, he says "there wasn't even a shower," but sunshine and a sense of divine presence:

I felt the mood
Of the meadow change, as though a tide
Had turned in the sap, or heaven from the balance
Of creation had shifted a degree (21).

Again, the shift to verse is a shift in tone which indicates the transition from the humorous and mundane to the serious and spiritual. Cuthman's vision tells him that where God breaks the withies, he must settle and build a church. Cuthman is aware he has taken another step towards manhood, but still has further to go:

The church
And I shall be built together; and together
Find our significance (22).

The Chorus indicates how this purpose takes hold of Cuthman's mind. Following Cuthman as he journeys, it sees

the small dogged
Pinhead of dust, by whose desire
A church shall struggle into the air (23).

There is a further identification of Cuthman with the church, for

Already the bell climbs in the steeple,
The belfry of his shaggy head,
And the choir over and over again
Sings in the chancel of his brain (23).

At Steyning, Cuthman rededicates himself to his purpose. Now no longer the sorrow, but

The consummation climbs on to the hill.
.

...God guide the hammer and the plane.
As the root is guided. Let there be a church - (29).

The tension between faith and unbelief is reintroduced when Demi-wulf and Alfred Fipps, like the Mowers who jeered at the "baby boy," object to this "ninny hammer of a boy" who has diverted the village from its amusements to building a church, and later the incident of the yoking of the Fipps brothers indicates Cuthman's growing strength. Their direct interference with the work of building the church touches his core: "there's one fire in me that no man shall put out. I am dangerous as I stand over the foundations of the church" (32). The spell he puts on them is as much an exercise of his will as evidence of supernatural interference. It is an example of the power of faith which strips malice, silences "surly tongues" and puts the devil to God's use. Forecasting the action, a neighbour comments:

It is the same stress that we see
Knotting his forearm and kneading his forehead
To drops of sweat when he wrestles
With timber in the framework of the church (33).

The supernatural intervenes again to remove the indignant Mrs. Fipps, a comic scene which is given a symbolic perspective by the Chorus, who declares that the upheaval of Mrs. Fipps indicates the turmoil caused by the "turbulent boy.../Who has stampeded into his manhood" (34). The stage action is expanded in the verse to extend the range and to present vivid action in words:

[Cuthman] has slammed back the ocean's stable-doors
And slapped the sturdy bases of the earth,
Wrenched and worried into the heart of heaven
And dragged a bellowing Lucifer to ground (35).

If we are surprised and sceptical about the supernatural or irrational, the Chorus reminds us that

We're apt to take the meticulous
Intervention of the sun, the strict
Moon and the seasons much too much for granted (36).

As the Chorus declares, events are "huddling together," the poet is increasing the tempo of "the tune of the tale" and the crisis approaches. At first there is a slackening of tension as Cuthman's mother announces her engagement to Tawm and assures everyone that the church is "getting on nicely," then it tightens with the terse despair of the villagers:

1ST NEIGHBOUR: It'll never be done.

2ND NEIGHBOUR: It'll never be finished now.

1ST NEIGHBOUR: There'll be no church...The king-post
has beaten us (37).

The first Neighbour describes the nature of the problem in clear, economical prose, and the second gives a vivid description of Cuthman's struggle:

For days he has tugged and tusselled with us, with the blood in his face and the veins pushing in his head. And now he has gone into a ghost. He smoothes [sic] the stone with his hand as though it were in a fever and sleepless. He pats it as though it were a horse that had brought him safely through battle. And then he stands heavily in the aisle with his misery staring to the east (38).

Cuthman enters running in the manner of a Greek messenger to describe the off-stage events. His vision of "the carpenter" is the climax to which the whole play has been working. The earlier supernatural events and constant reiteration of "root and sky"

imagery have established a pattern of interaction between the divine and the human. The final vision is an event of far greater intensity than the vision by the stream or the defeat of the Fipps family. Cuthman has experienced a unique manifestation of the divine:

There under the bare walls of our labour
Death and life were knotted in one strength
Indivisible as root and sky (39).

There is no need for the Chorus to elaborate this experience because Cuthman has acquired a stature which enables him to express the full significance of the event himself. The closing lines of the Chorus, which has constantly acted as interpreter in the translation of the action into terms acceptable to a modern audience, remind us that the truth of Cuthman's experience is eternal, that the modern man, no less than the medieval, desires understanding of the mystery of life and communion with his source of being.

The play is characterized by a strong sense of progression. The first section moves towards the point where Cuthman and his mother leave their village, the second is the journey to Steyning, and the third section progresses towards completion of the church. Uniting each section is the movement towards Cuthman's maturity and towards an expression of stronger faith and deeper understanding. The three-part structure can also be seen in a broad sense as Cuthman's three sorrows: the sad events which precipitate his departure from his home village; the trial of his journey; and the labours of building the church. A progressive concentration

of the action and the language also occurs. In the first section there is a celebration of the breadth and glory of nature, of God's created world, which is expressed by the Chorus in its opening account of the glories of the cycle of the seasons and in Cuthman's joy at the arrival of spring. The language of the first section, even when not directly describing the natural scene, contains a multitude of natural images. Cuthman's sorrow and self-reproach are couched in such terms:

I have ears stopped with earth
Not to have heard the door-catch as he went,
The raven gulping dew, the crow on the stock,
Nor grasped the warning of the howling dog...(7).⁴

The choral comment on his sorrow is similarly informed with images drawn from the world of nature:

The day is pulled up by the root and dries,
And the sun drains to the hollow sea.
Heaven is quarried with cries.
Song dies on the tree (6).

Nature is predominately sympathetic to man, and man living close to nature is intuitively aware of "the grip/Of the hand on earth and sky in careful coupling" (2). Cuthman's contact with nature in spring feels like "laying [his] face on gold," and he sees himself as a "lutanist...playing the responsive hills" (3) which lie friendly at his feet "like collies." His father's death disturbs this idyllic rapport: "The circle is broken and the sheep wander"(8). Now that he realizes he has seen only "the reflection/And not the

⁴ Mr. Fry pointed out that "guling dew" in the text is a misprint.

substance" (8), the superficial magic of nature is shattered and he must proceed to a new awareness.

The journey towards this awareness leads him through a very different experience of nature. It is no longer sympathetic, but antagonistic:

the thirsty bramble
Begs at the sleeve, the pot-hole tugs the foot (15).

The Mowers' song reminds us that

Grass, the year, and a merry friend
All at last come to an end (16),

and the hostile aspect of nature is evident in the "flagellant rain" which flattens the Mowers' crops. Cuthman achieves a resolution of the conflicting aspects of the natural world when by the stream he senses a change of mood in his surroundings:

the balance
Of creation had shifted a degree.

 ...timber
And flesh seemed of equal and old significance (21).

From this point on, there is a shift away from concern with the natural world towards an increasing concentration in action and language on the task of building the church. After the vision there is an important passage in which the chorus bridges the end of the journey and the commencement of the last section. The line length shortens to indicate concentration of purpose and "the evening battlement of hills" is a transitional image which indicates the shift of focus away from the natural to the concern with building which fills Cuthman's head and dominates the action and

language of part three.

The arrival at Steyning, conversations with new neighbours and the interlude with the Fipps brothers, are all in prose because of the focus on physical action, but the problem of building the church remains central. In the crisis of the king-post there is a concentration of language, both prose and verse, that is in marked contrast to the more general style of the first section. The narrative is superbly economical:

I told him: it is the king-post.
He stretched his hand upon it. At his touch
It lifted to its place. There was no sound.
I cried out, and I cried at last "Who are you?"
I heard him say "I was a carpenter"...(39).

Images of confinement and destruction are contrasted with images of escape and creation: the "bereaved air" lay "between walls"; Cuthman's voice "slid to the ground/Like a crashed pediment;"⁵ and he envisages dogs and picnic parties despoiling the collapsed stones. But on the appearance of a man "carved out of sunlight" the air leaps up, the sun "flooded its banks" and the early passage when Cuthman laid his "face on gold" in the hills is echoed by the man's voice, which

drew itself up from a chine of silence
As though it had longtime lain in a vein of gold (39).

The break in the circle has been repaired, and in a new awareness Cuthman knows that God, man and nature are once again "indivisible as root and sky."

⁵ Text prints "crushed pediment" in error.

Parallel with the progressive concentration of action and language is the progressive maturing of Cuthman. His first step from childhood to early manhood has already been noted (p.33). It is marked in action by the building of his cart and departure from home, and in language by a change in tone from effusiveness to troubled sincerity. The second step comes from his vision by the stream. He acquires a purpose, and realizes that

the church
And I shall be built together; and together
Find our significance (22).

His initiation into full manhood, the journey in quest of an achieved self and the building of the church are mutually dependent objectives. When Cuthman arrives at Steyning, he is recognized as a charismatic leader, despite his youth, but he cannot reach full stature until the church is completed and he has experienced a revelation. This final achievement is what distinguishes the saint from ordinary mortals, who can only hope with the Chorus of People that

Between
Our birth and death we may touch understanding
As a moth brushes a window with its wing (40).

In addition to the horizontal movement of the play, there is a constant vertical movement between root and sky. In terms of the action, this movement is evident in the supernatural elements when the rain from above punishes the Mowers and the wind carries Mrs. Fipps away. In the final vision, Cuthman's declaration that the figure he saw was "carved out of sunlight" and as it approached

him "the sun/Flooded its banks and flowed across the shadow" (39), suggests that the figure is part of the sun and comes down from above. The dominant sense of vertical integration comes from the language. The opening Chorus sees in spring "Sky and root in joint action," an image repeated five times in the opening paragraphs and several times in the course of the play. As sky and root work together, so God and man interact. Death and destruction are aspects of life that must be accepted. The Chorus sees the hand of God in action,

Despite the jibbing, man destroying, denying,
Disputing, or the late frost looting the land
Of green (2).

The natural cycle prepares the way for an acceptance of Cuthman's father's death. Just as winter must destroy, so it too dies in turn to allow the birth of spring, and the father must die before the son can reach fulfillment. Out of the pain of his father's death, "there grows the mutual action,/The perspective to the vision" (10). The father's death not only permits the son to mature, but also brings him closer to God. The breaking of the rope on the cart is an action which symbolizes the process. The first time it occurs, it leads directly to Cuthman's first vision, and the second time he knows that where God breaks the withies,

He shall build his answer in plank and brick,

 ...Breaking and building
 In the progression of this world go hand in hand (22).

The breaking of Cuthman's father leads to the building of the cart, and the breaking of the cart's ropes to the construction of the

church. The completion of the church is a consummation of God's plan, because

when creation's tide crawled on its first
Advance across the sand of the air, and earth
Tossed its tentative hills, this place of idle
Grass where we are idling took the imprint
Of a dedication...(29).

God's hand has worked to bring together all elements required to complete His purpose--the site, the materials, and the builders.

Cuthman prays:

God guide the hammer and the plane.
As the root is guided. Let there be a church - (29).

And the church is the supreme symbol of the interaction of root and sky because its foundations are "deep and rugged" in the earth, and its steeple reaches into the air and holds "in its sanctuary the last light" of the sun.

Through an account of Cuthman's life, Boy exemplifies a pattern of development from childhood to maturity, from naive belief through experience and faith to passionate conviction. It can be regarded as an allegory, with Cuthman in the role of Faith striving to build God's Church. Early calamity shakes him, but through prayer he strengthens his resolution. On his journey he must bear a symbolic burden in the form of his mother and the cart. He must overcome both the physical obstacles which impede the pilgrim on life's journey, and the human opposition of the Mockers of the world. The task of building the church is opposed by the devil's agents, the brothers Fipps and their mother, but firm faith removes these. Final success is not obtained until man's physical efforts

have been combined with prayer and bring the direct assistance of God. Such an assertion of faith in action and language suggests that this is a thesis play, but it does not have the didactic elements that this term suggests. It is non-didactic partly because of the simple miracle structure. There is no overt attempt to persuade the audience: the evidence is presented in the action and expanded in the language. As Eliot has observed, trying to persuade people to religion is the task of the preacher, not the artist, who can only show what it is like to feel religious experience. Fry does not attempt to persuade, nor does he attempt a thesis that faith leads to specific rewards. His proposition is that through faith we glimpse something of the reality of God. The miracle sequence of Boy is a simple statement of this reality, which is supplemented by the poetry in direct images and in passages of incantation by the Chorus. The play is weak dramatically because the plot lacks conflict--both internal and external--and consequently the audience is not involved either emotionally or intellectually. It is also weak because it is lacking in human relationships, a deficiency which is not fully rectified until A Phoenix Too Frequent. The language of the play tends to be derivative, especially in the echoes of Eliot, but in its energy, felicity and concentration of imagery it adumbrates the later work. The main theme of interaction between God and man, which is well structured in language and in action, also looks forward to the later plays in which Fry continues to explore this vital relation-

ship--an exploration he repeatedly structures in the form of a journey or quest. In Boy the quest for meaning is not disturbed by the existential doubts evident in the later plays, which are more complex both in structure and in content. The miracle-legend framework of Boy is a non-realistic attempt to portray a pattern of real experience, and the dramatic experience is a simple encounter with faith which expresses an uncomplicated mode of spiritual awareness.

Chapter Three

The Firstborn: Antithesis and Enigma

The Firstborn was begun in 1938 at a time when the conflict between the ideology of absolute power vested in a dictatorship and that of democratic individualism was reaching an explosive point. The war that intervened before the play's completion made the theme of authority and the individual no less imperative. Firstborn was completed in 1945, first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1948, revised after this production, and revised again for the New York production in 1958. The main reason for the revisions was to increase the dramatic impact by removing superfluous lines and thereby to accelerate the action. The last scene in particular was shortened to heighten the dramatic effect of Ramases' death. Fry omitted statements by Anath and Seti concerning their feelings towards Ramases so that the focus fell on the wider meaning of his death. Fry's foreword to the second edition explains that he intended "the figure of life which Ramases represents...to take a central place from his first entrance to the end."¹ The death of all Egypt's firstborn liberates the Hebrews, and Fry intends that the death of Ramases should provide a parallel action on an individual basis leading to Moses' resurrection, after a "momentary physical death," into a rebirth that "carries with it

¹ Christopher Fry, The Firstborn, 3rd ed. (London, 1962), p. vii. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

something of the life of Rameses" (vii). There were no major revisions made in the play, and although Fry succeeded in sharpening some of the language and dramatic effects, he made no changes radical enough to alter the dramatic dominance of Moses. Rameses may stand for the good qualities on the enemy's side, but in the dramatic conflict he is overshadowed by his father as well as by Moses, and he remains a peripheral rather than a central character. At his death, Seti crumbles, and the focus of attention falls on Rameses as the morning light reaches him, but by then it is too late to alter the balance of relationships. This balance is structured as a series of oscillations and antitheses which cast all but the two major contenders into subordinate positions, and reflect complexities and faith that Boy barely suggests. Boy has a simple progressive structure which expresses a simple faith: Firstborn has a more complex structure which searches for meaning in the face of a problematic life and an enigmatic God. In this play, Fry begins to grapple with paradoxes that suggest the apparent irrationality--or absurdity--of existence, and to seek solutions to the metaphysical problems that arise out of an awareness of mystery in terms of an acceptance of wonder and a faith in man's purpose as an individual.

The mechanical structure of the play establishes a pattern of oscillation between palace and tent. The seven scenes are set alternately in the Egyptian Royal Palace and in Miriam's tent among the Hebrews. The characters are similarly balanced in two groups,

each of four complementary figures: Moses and Seti, Miriam and Anath, Shendi and Rameses, and Aaron and Teusret. Each group is closely related by blood and the public actions of its members are determined by or are in conflict with their feelings of family affection or responsibility. Moses appears in every scene, which indicates his possible function as a bridge between the two groups. He dominates the play because he appears on stage far more than any other character and because his passage between the two groups results in a clearly defined internal conflict. Emil Roy notes that the play has an "X" structure, the upward stroke representing Moses' career, the downward Seti's.² The fall of a man from high estate to low is a traditional tragic pattern, as is the death of a hero whose potential is cut off by a fate over which he has no control. The fall of the house of Egypt is therefore a tragic line, but it is subordinate to the upward movement comprising the maturation of Moses and the release of the Hebrews. This anti-thetical pattern of movement is also evident in the language and staging, where tragic motifs of darkness and death are counter-balanced by positive motifs of light and resurrection. Fry may have failed to express a concept in his mind indicated by the title and the preface, which indicate an emphasis on Rameses, but the play succeeds on its own terms because it fully integrates a series

² Emil Roy, "Structure, Characterization and Language in the Drama of Christopher Fry," Diss., U. of Southern California (1961), p. 73.

of related antitheses in action, theme and language.

The opening scene immediately establishes the theme of death. The background shows "an incompleated pyramid", Seti's future tomb, which Anath ironically thinks "will cast a pretty shadow when it's done" (1). The pyramid-tomb is an important visual image, present in each of the palace scenes either directly from the terrace or through the window that overlooks it. A scream precedes the entrance of Anath and Teusret, who are to be innocent bystanders to death throughout the play. Anath realizes that "Some man is dead. That scream was password to a grave" (1). The scream is echoed by Miriam when she describes the life of slavery:

The shout of command kicking at the ribs,
All human words torn to a scream (22).

It is effectively repeated twice in III, ii, when a "wild cry" rips the darkness (79) before Moses' arrival, and when Anath reports the arrival of the Angel of Death at the palace:

An owl in mid-air
Has wrenched itself upward screaming, and smashed
Down in the yard...(84).

The association of a bird's flight and death has also been established early in the play to suggest that even the greatest of physical freedoms may possess an ambiguity wherein it contains its own antithesis. Birds are associated with the first death when they fly up startled by the scream. Death and rising birds are linked again when Rameses describes "all the indignant wings of the marshes" (9) seeking to escape his spear, and the birds-

death-darkness groups of images are brought together a few lines later as Rameses describes the speared bird:

I watched his nerves flinching
As they felt how dark that darkness was.
I found myself trying to peer into his death (9).

The expanding pattern of death images becomes associated not with Seti, but with Moses. The opening incident leads Anath to recollect Moses and the reason for his departure--he had killed an Egyptian who had beaten a Jew. Rameses hunting in the marsh connects with Moses, because he passes by, and Rameses recalls seeing Moses there "walking ahead of us, as absolute/As a man's death" (32). Moses appears to be between two worlds, or two selves. The first is dead,

...he killed
His Egyptian self in the self of that Egyptian
And buried that self in the sand (6),

and to Seti his appearance is "so ghostly a homecoming" (11). Moses' second self is not yet born, and the action of the play traces the anguish of that birth. Moses' declared purpose is

...to appease the unconsummated
Resourceless dead, to join life to the living (42).

His double purpose indicates the antithesis of life and death that forms a central concept of the play. The release of the Hebrews from a living death is equated with birth: "it's time for parturition," declares Moses, and after the first plagues, Anath bewails "no birth is worth this labour." The deliverance of the Hebrews is not only a release from captivity but also a rebirth into a new

life, ironically achieved through death and symbolized in the Passover ritual. There is also a life-death irony in the prospect of marriage between Ramases and Phippa. Her arrival is predicted in terms of a new life which the audience knows is never to be fulfilled. For Ramases, she is the alternative future to Moses (32), a symbol of love, life and hope, yet her arrival coincides with his death. In this final action, the antithesis of life and death is reconciled because "death and life are moving to a call" (87), and the death of the firstborn is simultaneously the moment of deliverance for the Hebrews and of rebirth for Moses into a new self.

The opening scene, with its somewhat long-winded exposition, directs all interest towards the arrival of Moses. The incident of the Israelite's death triggers Anath's recollection of him, and in response to Teusret's aroused curiosity, she relates his history. Fry takes many liberties with Exodus, especially in making Moses a "General of Egypt"³ who had led her armies to victory until he witnessed the beating of a Jewish bricklayer. Then, in a moment of recognition, "it was/As though an inward knife scraped his eyes clean" (5), and in a surge of tribal knowledge, "he knew his own seed" (6). Moses' former role is a skilful dramatic slanting of the story because it opens the way to a temptation for Moses and possible internal conflict, to the parallel action of Shendi's

³ In a marginal note to my first draft, Mr. Fry wrote: "An idea found in my research reading for the play."

commission in the Egyptian army, and to an intimacy with the palace that enables him to move freely between it and the Hebrew tents.

After Anath has aroused considerable interest in the figure of Moses, Seti enters with the immediate question: "Where is Moses?"

(6). He needs him for political reasons, because he is "a general of excellent perception" (7), and Seti is prepared "to comb Midian to its shadows" to find him. He is prepared to forget the past, to welcome Moses as a "prince of Egypt," and to restore his position. Moses spurns the offer because

The prince of Egypt died. I am the Hebrew
Smitten out of the shadow of that prince,
Vomited out of his dry lips, the cry
Whipped off the sanded tongue of that prince of Egypt (12).

Rameses puts the temptation in persuasive terms:

You'll become inseparable from Egypt's safety;
Then he [Seti] will listen. Then you can direct
His goodwill past yourself to these Israelites (24).

Aaron sees this course as "a reality of a kind," but Moses recognizes it as "adultery." Moses is not to be tempted, and Fry discards the possibilities of inner conflict in favour of an objective dramatization of the alternative in Shendi's defection. Shendi seizes the opportunity of co-operating with the Egyptians for purely selfish reasons, not even on the basis of a promise to treat his people well. He sees Moses' advice to refuse the commission as evidence of Moses' pride, and even suspects Moses of planning to interfere and prevent his success. His mother, astonished at the two events of the evening, unwittingly defines

his act by association:

Shendi an officer!
Will this be what we want at last? As the Nile
Happens into blood. Shendi an officer (49).

Shendi develops from a frightened boy into an arrogant youth. He abuses Moses for making the Hebrew labourers "undisciplined/With his raving of freedom which they'll never get" (71), and he is completely incapable of comprehending the quality in Moses that elevates him above ordinary men. The fear of death finally leads him to tear off his Egyptian uniform, but too late, and he runs into the darkness to his death. Shendi's career provides an antithetical movement to that of Moses. He is nurtured by his Hebrew mother, defects to the Egyptians to a "new life" that is a betrayal of his own kind, turns against his own people and "drives the Hebrews harder than any Egyptian" (60), and finally brings death on himself. Moses is nurtured in the Egyptian royal palace, gives up his position of greatness in the cause of his own people, becomes the upholder of their rights, and finally achieves a re-birth for himself when he delivers them.

The most important effect in casting Moses in the role of ex-general is that it enables Fry to unify the plot development by giving Moses adequate stature to deal with Seti and his family on a basis of equality. His background also provides the basis of his sense of affinity with Rameses, and gives him credible motivation for trying to save Rameses from death. Moses' physical movement from palace to tent is part of the play's rhythm of

antithesis. In both places he meets an opposing reaction, Shendi in one, Seti in the other. Seti's chief failing is his reluctance "to outgrow the security of partial blindness" (14), and his great evil is that he takes away life in the belief that he has

...put men to a purpose who otherwise
Would have had not the least meaning (15).

Moses retorts:

Not the least meaning, except the meaning
Of the breath in your lungs, the mystery of existing
At all (15).

Seti's failure to recognize the worth of each individual life is the basis of his conflict with Moses, whose plea for life in its fullest extent for the Hebrews is a plea for the recognition of the sanctity of the individual. Stanford notes that, although the play deals with the tyranny of power, it "does not oversimplify things by making the Pharaoh the villain of the piece. Instead, it shows him as a dedicated man dominated by imperial abstractions--by notions which history was seeking to transcend."⁴ Seti is concerned with the maintenance of order and with the perpetuation of his dynasty. His blindness, which results in such "merciless mischief," is that his methods bring about inevitable destruction. His knowledge is that of the sun, the hot, merciless Egyptian sun that maddens and kills, as opposed to that of the darkness, Moses' spiritual knowledge which inspires and brings life. Seti is a

⁴ Derek Stanford, "Comedy and Tragedy in the Drama of Christopher Fry," Modern Drama, II,i (May, 1959), 7.

prosaic materialist. Like Shendi, he is unable to believe that Moses is the instrument of God, and he scorns Ramesses for being "afraid of magic" and for believing "that this tall Moses can make a business/Out of curses" (58). Seti believes the calamities that beset Egypt are "a chain/Of black coincidences" which Moses takes advantage of, and thereby "presumes upon the eternal" (56). Their conflict represents the antithesis of authority versus the individual and of everyday, practical reality versus the miraculous, true reality.

As in most of Fry's plays, the characters can be differentiated according to the degree in which they possess a sense of wonder. Moses and Seti represent opposite poles--the fully awakened man who is in touch with the numinous and the unamazed pragmatist. Anath is close to Moses in intuitive awareness. Her role is choric when she recounts Moses' history and when she comments on the action, and rises to the prophetic when she condemns Seti (53-57). Her account of the plagues is a superb incantation of "sweet made foul" by the stubbornness of Seti. He accuses her of being the victim of superstition. "I am superstitious," she replies,

We are born too inexplicably out
Of one night's pleasure, and have too little security:
No more than a beating heart to keep us probable (56).

The same sense of the wonder and precariousness of existence is expressed by Teusret when she asks:

What are flowers?
What is the bridge to be crossed, I wonder,
From a petal to being a wing or a hand? (37)

Her awareness is limited by her innocence and lack of experience, but Ramesses, on the threshold of manhood, is acutely aware of the possible depths of existence. He has an introspective temperament that enables him to empathize with the bird killed in the marsh, and to be acutely conscious of the uniqueness of any given moment which

...is true for us now, but not till now, and never
To be again. I want it for myself.
This is my life (33).

It is this aspect of his nature that renders him unable to rule according to his father's pragmatic policy. He cannot subordinate himself, as Seti does, to the demands of Egypt, and asks desperately,

Is there nowhere
Where I can come upon my own shape
Between these overbearing ends of Egypt?
Where am I to look for life? (80)

Ramesses' assertion of individuality, Anath's prophetic intuition and Teusret's simple wonder form an antithetical movement against Seti within the palace group. This complements Moses' demand for freedom for the Hebrews in which to fulfill themselves as individuals in both physical and spiritual terms. The balance in favour of Moses is offset dramatically by a counter-motion in his own group. Miriam believes that the Hebrews "no longer have the spirit to support a God," and she is sunk in apathy:

We have
A way of living. We have the habit. Well?
It becomes a kind of pleasantness (21).

In fact, she withdraws from any kind of reality other than a

mechanical day-to-day existence, and opposes any suggestion of change. The main opposition to Moses among the Hebrews comes from Shendi, who can see no further than his own immediate selfish existence. He is an example of the state of degradation into which a man can fall when in a state of slavery. He has no ideals and no sense of wonder. He summarizes his outlook when he asks,

...how can we be scrupulous
In a life which, from birth onwards, is so determined
To wring us dry of any serenity at all? (70)

Aaron is initially part of the balance against Moses in the Hebrew tents. His awareness is at first restricted to practical reason and everyday realism. Even the miracle of water into blood is

A contradiction of what we have always known
To be conclusive: an ugly and impossible
Mistake in nature (46),

and when Moses asserts "we live in mystery," Aaron begs him to "stay with reality." Moses' reply, "If I can penetrate so far," silences him, and from then on, as Aaron sees Moses manipulate "man after man into consciousness" (69), his own outlook changes, and he declares,

I've begun to believe that the reasonable
Is an invention of man, altogether in opposition
To the facts of creation...(69).

Man's inability to understand the apparent irrationality of existence is a central concept in all Fry's work. His sense of irrationality, which goes hand in hand with his sense of wonder, is not confined to the material world, but extends to man's relationship with God. It is this wider aspect that leads Fry

to choose material for many of his plays from the Bible, legend and myth. These sources provide him with an established base where the wonders they contain are part of an accepted tradition, and therefore do not need further validation in terms of plot credibility. His aim, in Aristotelian terms, is to build a probable plot on the framework of a given (rational) impossibility. In Boy he uses a little known legend, and is obliged to recount it initially through the chorus. In Firstborn he does not need to recount the story of the miracles, but assumes the final outcome to be known. It is generally recognized that "the repetition of a known plot distracts attention from the credibility of the story, and places a convenient emphasis on its values."⁵ Foreknowledge of the outcome also enhances the audience's sense of inevitability, whether tragic or not, and the playwright can exploit situations for tragic irony. The emphasis on values in Firstborn is evident in the dominant pattern of life and death already discussed. The balancing of the two groups, so that neither is all white or all black, directs attention away from the issue of plot to that of the fundamental problem of good and evil. Moses is faced with the moral paradox that the "good" of the Hebrews' release is to be achieved through the "evil" of harm to the innocent of Egypt. Early in the play, Moses sees the issue simply. He knows

We have a God who will support the spirit,

⁵ J.L. Styan, Dark Comedy (Cambridge, 1962), p. 288.

two through their similar boyhoods. If regarded as a desperate attempt to expiate a sense of guilt, the meaning of the action becomes clear. Fry has established a strong sense of guilt in Moses over the killing which sent him into exile: "does one deed then/Become our immortal shape?" (74). The responsibility for more death and destruction burdens an already guilty conscience, and the attempt to save Rameses becomes part of the ritual pattern of recognition of sin, confession and expiation before absolution and renewal. The violence is--unfortunately for Fry, who abhors it--inherent in the story: no amount of explanation can justify it, nor solve the problem of the intertwining of good and evil. Working on the multiple levels of action, language and myth, the play explores the apparent irrationality of the operation of violence and evil in a good cause, but offers no solution, and we are referred finally to "the necessity of God" (86).

The resolution of the play in a submission to "necessity" is a logical outcome of its direction. Despite the appearance of choice and the pattern of oscillation, Moses is governed by an external force beyond his control. The opening scene, which provides a dramatic build-up for Moses' entrance, also establishes a sense of the inevitable. Anath's recollections and Seti's sudden desire to find Moses are followed by Rameses' report of a tall, strange, yet unaccountably familiar Jew, who can be none other than Moses. By exploiting a known myth, Fry eliminates suspense regarding the outcome of the plot, but by introducing a

pattern of compelling necessity he creates a tension between that necessity and the aspirations of his characters which provides an alternative to plot suspense. This tension is especially apparent in the career of Moses. He feels the call to return to Egypt in his blood, which "heard my blood weeping/Far off like the swimming of fear under the sea" (13). The call of blood is part of a mystical compulsion which controls him. Seti refers to "the frantic compulsion which first fetched man forming/And breathing out of the earth's dust" (35), and Moses sees his task of liberation in similar terms:

I was born this action.
Despite you [Seti], through you, upon you,
I am compelled (42).

A "long cracking sound of thunder" (an old but effective theatrical cliché), follows this declaration as though the Creator was confirming his divine plan. When the first of the plagues occurs, Moses believes that

We with our five bare fingers
Have caused the strings of God to sound (45).

God may respond to men, but Moses comes to recognize that it is he who is God's instrument:

You appeal to Moses,
But Moses is now only a name and an obedience.
It is the God of the Hebrews, a vigour moving
In a great shadow, who draws the bow
Of his mystery, to loose this punishing arrow
Feathered with my fate...(64).

Moses scorns Rameses' suggestion that he himself is a god (23).

He is, however, in "a terrible neighbourhood," a "space between/The

human and the inhuman" acting as a "go-between for God" (75).

As such, he has no control over the outcome of events, and can only play a given role in the operation of God's necessity.

Moses is not alone in recognizing a necessity operating in the affairs of men, but its nature varies according to viewpoint. Political "necessity" was the cause Anath gives for the slaughter of "all the boys of Jewdom" (4), and a similar political reason makes Moses' return "necessary" to Seti (7). Anath herself recognizes that "it isn't we who make the bargains/In this life, but chance and time" (58), echoing Aaron's belief that "time/Is preparing for us with timely unrest" (48). Their view of necessity is a type of fatalism, and even Moses is aware of this passive form: "what we are is sinking/Under the disposition of what will be" (71). Ramesses finds a necessity inherent in the outcome of an action:

I did not know
How the things we do, take their own life
After they are done...(60).

He discovers the consequences of power and is appalled by the responsibility which devolves upon him for the ultimate results of his actions. His reaction is in contrast to Seti who denies the process of ultimate responsibility, and asks:

Why am I to be blamed
For all the elemental poisons that come up fungoid
Out of the damps and shadows which our existence
Moves in? (54).

He cannot see that his obstinacy and his deceit are bringing the plagues upon Egypt. Ramesses' awareness of the discrepancies between idea and action foreshadows that of Moses when he is brought

face to face with the consequences of his actions and realizes the price of revolt even in a noble cause. Necessity, therefore, may be a force impelling man's actions, or one to which he must submit passively, or one that directs the consequences of his actions far differently and far beyond his intentions. Firstborn considers each of these possibilities and finally embraces them all in the ultimate "necessity of God" which directs all things, good and evil, to the divine purpose.

Despite the ultimate reliance on the purpose of God, a central problem the play presents, and fails to resolve, is the perplexing ambiguity of God. The ambiguities of creation are seen as "a quarrel in God's nature" (27), but God's nature itself is open to question. Seti warns Moses that the gods' creative plan "is/Not to count the cost but enormously/To bring about" (41), and it is ironic that the non-spiritual pragmatist strikes a truth Moses fails to realize until the end of the play. Anath challenges Moses and the God he represents by asking,

What is this divinity
Which with no more dexterity than a man
Rips up good things to make a different kind of good? (65)

Moses has no answer, other than to accept the severance of personal ties that his course demands, because of God's inscrutable distance from man. Moses' God is always presented in distant terms: the "infinite eavesdropper" (42), "eternity's birdsmith" (27), "a vigour moving/In a great shadow" (64). He is essentially a mysterious creator to be regarded with great awe, and even Moses is

reduced to admitting "I do not know why the necessity of God/ Should feed on grief; but it seems so" (86). God's ambiguity is evident in the paradox that he must destroy to create and that he must work apparent evil to bring about good. There is also a second concept of God in the play which is not that of an Old Testament God of Wrath, but one closer to Fry's personal view. Moses demands release for his people in order that they might fulfill the demands of a form of life force:

Deny
Life to itself and life will harness and ride you
To its purpose. My people shall become themselves,
By reason of their own god who speaks within them (41).

This concept is not distant, but personal, and is amplified in the later plays. Divinity is seen in terms of the fulfillment of the individual, but the biblical narrative forces Fry to accept an external God, transcendental and mysterious, whose existence-- rather than the evidence of the action--leads to Moses' optimism: "And what does eternity bear witness to/If not at last to hope?" (86). But as Moses declares in the beginning,

We're not concerned with hope,
Or with despair; our need is something different:
To confront ourselves, to create within ourselves
Existence which cannot fail to be fulfilled (31).

The play may be, as Roy sees it, "a quest for God,"⁶ but the God Fry seeks in Firstborn is the God within. As individuals,

We must each find our separate meaning
In the persuasion of our days
Until we meet in the meaning of the world (87).

⁶ Roy, "Structure...", p.107.

The resolution of the conflicts, tensions and ambiguities of life finally rests in the individual self.

In the course of the preceding account of the structure and themes of Firstborn, many quotations have been used to show how the language explicitly states the antitheses and to show how certain images operate to reinforce the action and themes. Recurrent motifs of birth and death, sun and darkness, and good and evil dominate the language, and such symbols as the sun, birds, heat, and darkness are particularly effective because of their ambiguity. The sun, for example, causes the heat that inflames violence and makes men mad, yet towards the end of the play it signifies freedom. Black clouds obscure the sun, and Moses declares "only Seti can let the sun free again" (66). Seti visualizes Rameses as "the male sunrise" which will protect Teusret, and he admits he has "grown too tall and [keeps] out the sun" (79). The release of the Hebrews is therefore a release into sunlight, but sun of a different order from the deadly sun of Egypt. Similarly the darkness is ambiguous. Moses dwells in a spiritual darkness in which he "sees" more than those whose inward eye has not yet been scraped clean. His darkness is a "shadow" that threatens Egypt and is objectified in the dark clouds of the plagues and in the darkness that descends at the end of Act II. Moses expresses the paradox when he hopes that "Seti/May see better without the light of day" (65). In an early speech, Moses refers paradoxically to the "drouthy overwatered world," and he summarizes

the paradox of creation in the example of a hawk:

What spirit made the hawk? a bird obedient
To grace, a bright lash on the cheek of the wind
And drawn and ringed with feathered earth and sun,
An achievement of eternity's birdsmith. But did he
Also bleak the glittering charcoal of the eyes
And sharpen beak and claws on his hone of lust? (27)

The hawk image is echoed in the final act:

Tonight, at midnight,
God will unfasten the hawk of death from his
Grave wrist, to let it rake our world...(72).

The same dilemma underlies Anath's disgust at "the primal putrescence/
We keep hidden under our thin dress of health" (55), and it is
objectified in the earwig that drops from the garland Teusret gives
Rameses. The garland itself is ambiguous, as is her song, because
both are as applicable to death as to marriage. In the last act
brightness within darkness becomes objectified in the image of a
star. Aaron is aware of a difference in the night:

there's such a brightness
Such a swinging stillness, the sky has transfixed itself;
As though it hung with every vigorous star...(70).

Anath's first statement in the next scene links her with Aaron in
awareness: "How the stars have taken possession of the sky tonight"
(77). The traditional symbol of hope is also treated ambiguously,
because the stars are associated with the angel of death. Shendi
ignores Aaron's warning to keep himself "unseen/By that inquisition
of stars out there" (75), and once the angel has passed, "the sound
of wings is quiet/And the stars are fading in silence" (85) as
though their work is done. Fry's manipulation of repeated images

serves both to suggest the ambiguities inherent in all creation and to unify the structure of the play. Another unifying device is his fondness for linking speeches by having a speaker seize on the last word, phrase or idea expressed by the previous speaker, and then expand its meaning:

SETI. men...Would have had not the least meaning.

MOSES. Not the least meaning, except...(15).

AARON. In the belly of our misfortune
 We find our hope.

MOSES. We're not concerned with hope...(31).

MIRIAM. He came back from Midian a madman.

AARON. His madness seems to be a kind of extended sanity (69).

These brief examples may serve to show how this catching of a previous idea serves to forward the action within the language. A fuller example shows how a group of images and ideas expands and takes on the forward movement of poetic action.

MOSES. We have agonized
 This land with anger for too many days.

ANATH. You
 And he together. No birth is worth this labour.

MOSES. For three hundred years the pangs of this coming
 deliverance
 Have been suffered by my people, while Egypt played.
 But now Egypt suffers, and she says
 This is a new hell. But hell is old;
 And you yourself sitting in the sunlight
 Embroidered on it with your needle. Hell
 Is old, but until now
 It fed on other women, that is all.

ANATH. And all is the innocent as well the guilty;
 All is the small farmer and the singing fisherman

And the wife who sweeps; tomorrow's boy as well
 As yesterday's. All these, while Seti twists
 To have his way, must go to your fire like sticks;
 (63-64).

This passage illustrates the expansion of the idea of suffering and birth which are then associated with hell and fire on the one hand, and with elementary family life on the other. The simplest individual action is thereby placed on the same level as the national action and is given equal significance within a wider frame. The action lies in the expanding significance which is presented through the language--not only in the immediate passage, but also in frequent references to the same ideas throughout the play.

A unity of tone is evident in the ^tstyle of verse which consistently utilizes deliberate rhythms. Frequently the verse rises to incantation, which is particularly appropriate for conveying a sense of awe and for underscoring the sense of anti-realism essential to the myth structure. Incantation suggests the quality of numinous experience:

It is the God of the Hebrews, a vigour moving
 In a great shadow, who draws the bow
 Of his mystery, to loose this punishing arrow
 Feathered with my fate; he who in his hour
 Broke the irreparable dam which kept his thought,
 Released the cataract of birth and death
 To storm across time and the world;
 He who in his morning
 Drew open the furious petals of the sun;
 He who through his iron fingers
 Lets all go, lets all waste and go,
 Except, dearly retained in his palm, the soul:
 He, the God of my living, the God of the Hebrews,
 Has stooped beside Israel
 And wept my life like a tear of passion
 On to the iniquity of Egypt (64-65).

This is a passage of fine rhetorical cadence and diction. The sequence of "he...he...he" plus the active verbs "draw...broke...released...drew...stooped...wept" combine to suggest a succession of great actions, culminating in "a tear of passion." The active metaphors of "bow...arrow...fate" and "dam...cataract...storm" are contained within an overall metaphor of God as a force moving with great speed and power. Thematically the beat and movement of the verse equates with the concept of "necessity" impelling actions and events. Another example occurs earlier:

My blood heard my blood weeping
Far off like the swimming of fear under the sea,
The sobbing at night below the garden. I heard
My blood weeping. It is here it wept and weeps.
It was from here I heard coming this drum of despair,
Under your shoes, under your smile, and under
The foundations of your tomb. From Egypt (13).

All aspects of language--meaning, image, rhythm, diction, and sound--are here unified for maximum dramatic effect. The poetry in Firstborn functions to unify the play at a verbal and conceptual level, but above all both figurative language and rhythm suggest a pattern of experience and mode of consciousness that exist on a less specific, metaphysical plane above and beyond the immediate action of the play.

In Firstborn both the mechanical and the organic structure present the same patterns of antithesis and ambiguity. Stanford believes that the key impression of the play is that "the individual is the authentic pivot of existence"⁷ within the context of an

⁷ Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry, An Appreciation (London, 1951), p. 89.

impregnable mystery. The principle of individuality is something which is perhaps asserted in successive statements rather than shown in the action. It is a concept that Fry is formulating at this stage and is to reveal in dramatic action later (especially in The Lady's Not for Burning and The Dark Is Light Enough). The final statement of Firstborn lies in the presentation of a series of antitheses in language and action that portray man's relationship with God and the universe. This statement certainly includes an assertion of individuality, particularly in the rebirth of Moses, but the dominant impression is a sense of the paradoxes and perplexities of life which are objectified in the many antitheses presented and cut through by the inevitability of the historic process, which is the working out of the divine purpose of a God whose authority impinges on the quest for freedom for the individual in a manner little different from that of Seti on his vassals. The justification of evil in terms of ultimate good--whether that of society or of a divine plan--is the argument of tragedy. As suggested earlier, Firstborn has a partly tragic shape in the fall of Seti and the death of Rameses. However, despite the misfortunes and sufferings of Egypt, because the focus is on Moses the pattern of action is one of triumph rather than despair, of gain rather than loss, of comedy rather than tragedy. Northrop Frye suggests that "in comedy the moral norm is not morality but deliverance."⁸ The operations of the divine will in Firstborn certainly confound any

⁸ Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," English Institute Essays. 1948, ed. D.A. Robertson Jnr. (New York, 1965), p. 71.

humanistic morality, but the perplexities are resolved in the deliverance of the Hebrews which is a definitive moral norm that completes the Dante-like Commedia with a figural resurrection-- a resolution that concludes almost all of Fry's plays.

Chapter Four

A Phoenix Too Frequent: Exchange

A Phoenix Too Frequent was written soon after Fry completed The Firstborn. The two plays share a central concern with the theme of death and resurrection, but in Phoenix Fry's perspective undergoes some important changes. The earlier play receives a distinctly tragic treatment, but then Fry crosses the narrow bridge into comedy,¹ and despite the moment of horror when Tegeus returns to the tomb, Phoenix sets up and maintains a comic expectation. The key factor in the appeal of Fry's comedy is its sense of vitality. The characters in Phoenix, as in The Lady's Not for Burning, Venus Observed, and even the less comic The Dark Is Light Enough, are engaged in the fundamental activities of self-preservation or self-assertion. As Susanne Langer points out, these activities are part of the biological "organic processes that produce the life rhythm,"² and comedy celebrates life in its triumph over the vicissitudes of fortune and over death in its patterns of triumphant victim, fertility and rebirth. Fry also moves from a direct treatment of the Old Testament to an indirect treatment of the New. Such a sequence is not altogether accidental or unusual as it reflects the traditional Christian practice of

¹ See Chapter One, p.23.

² Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (London, 1953), p. 346.

setting events with similar symbolic content side by side. In the medieval illuminated manuscripts, for example, "the Tree of Knowledge stands opposite the Tree of the Cross, the Exodus opposite the Resurrection, the assumptions of Enoch and Elijah opposite the Ascension, and so forth."³ These juxtapositions indicate something of the Christian attitude to time: the past is part of the vital present because the meaning of events transcends their historical context to inform the present and the future. Such a transcendence of time is the quality possessed by a myth. Both The Boy with a Cart and Firstborn utilized myths, and by focusing on the pattern of events tried to express the meaning and the truth of the pattern for a modern audience. Nevertheless, the plot was provided by the events recounted in the myth. Phoenix differs in that the plot itself, although based on an old story, is not a myth: the patterns of myth are implicit in the play's actions and associations. This chapter intends to establish the mythic pattern, especially the Christian, in the action, structure and language of the play, and to show how the material is made relevant to the modern audience. The success of the play with both critics and audiences indicates the degree to which Fry has caught the eternal in the particular, the modern relevance in the past event.

In a chapter on "Myth and the Literary Scruple," Francis

³ Watts, p. 24. See also Auerbach, Mimesis, pp. 42-43, 64-67, for the concept of the figura.

Fergusson turns to Malinowski for a rough classification of myths into three categories: Legends, which are stories of the past deemed to be based on historical fact; Folk or Fairy Tales, told for entertainment without reference to truth; and Religious Myths which represent "basic elements in the creed, the morals and the social structure of [a] people."⁴ Phoenix embraces all three levels. The historical legend, as Fry states, "was got from Jeremy Taylor who had it from Petronius."⁵ The story of the Ephesian woman no doubt does have some historical basis of fact, but the legend has more of the qualities of a fable of ingenuity than any suggestion of mythic properties on the grander scale. In the hands of Jeremy Taylor, the legend becomes material for a moral exemplum on the fickle nature of a woman's passion. The soldier "escaped the present danger, to possess a love which might change as violently as her grief had done."⁶ As will be shown, Fry draws a somewhat different conclusion from the same set of facts. At the level of Fairy Tale, the title indicates the traditional pattern Fry wishes to evoke in the mind of the audience of the fabulous bird, the symbol of love, which is consumed in flames only to emerge from its ashes with renewed youth to live out a

⁴ Francis Fergusson, "Myth and the Literary Scruple," The Human Image in Dramatic Literature, (New York, 1957), p. 163.

⁵ Christopher Fry, A Phoenix Too Frequent (London, 1964), n.n. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

⁶ Jeremy Taylor, The Whole Works, ed. Rev. Reginald Heber, revd. Rev. Charles P. Eden, (10 vols.; London, 1862), III, 449.

further cycle. Also in the Fairy Tale tradition, Dynamene is a Sleeping Beauty awakened by her Prince. On the level of Religious Myth, Phoenix is a comic analogue for the Christian pattern of atonement and resurrection.

The action of the play takes place at and shortly before dawn on the third day in the tomb, the time of Christ's rising. The removed body is taken from a holly tree, symbolic of the cross, and there is also a "eucharistic intertwining of feast and sacrifice,"⁷ the taking of wine and bread with a background of death. Finally Doto drinks to "The Master. Both the masters" (43), dead and living simultaneously. Working on the clue "section six, paragraph/Three in the Regulations" (40), Stanley M. Wiersma relates Phoenix to Romans 6 which is usually divided into three paragraphs, 1-11, 12-22 and 23.⁸ He sees Fry's themes related to Paul's, and finds significant Christian patterns in the focus on naming and renaming:

Just as baptism is a symbol of death and resurrection, just as the resurrection of baptism confers a new identity to the object of it, and just as Christian dogma and practice associate baptism with naming, so the three characters of Fry's play undergo burial and resurrection, so each gains a new identity, and so each either has his name exchanged for another or has a change in the name's meaning.⁹

⁷ Nelvin Vos, The Drama of Comedy: Victim and Victor (Richmond, Va., 1966), pp. 81-82.

⁸ Stanley M. Wiersma, "A Phoenix Too Frequent: A Study in Source and Symbol," Modern Drama, VIII, iii (Dec. 1965), 293-302.

⁹ Wiersma, 299.

The obvious example is Tegeus, whose name suggests "tedious."

This reflects his disenchantment with a corrupt world, but, as with the ironically named Virilius, is the opposite of his nature. The root of his name is the Latin tego, to cover. When he tells Dynamene his name, she remarks "That's very thin for you/It hardly covers your bones" (20). She refuses, however, to tell Tegeus her name, and condemns the human preoccupation with naming:

The genius of dumb things, that they are nameless.
Have I found the seat of the weevil in human brains?
Our names. They make us broody...(20).

However, she does rename him Chromis, the Greek for colour, and with his change in name comes a change in personality from relative reserve to self-assertion. Changes in character and the relationship of such changes to names and the process of rebirth are matters to be considered elsewhere in the chapter. Wiersma identifies Paul's themes as the problem of doing evil and omitting good and that of "the law of the members warring against the law of the mind; there is a moral ambivalence, but also a psychological one."¹⁰ He sees each of Fry's characters conscious of a moral and/or psychological ambivalence, and notes the relevance of the adjacent Romans 5 and 7, the former concerned with sin, death and grace, and the latter opening with a specific statement on marriage:

Do you know, brethren...that the law is binding on a person only during his life. Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law

¹⁰ Wiersma, 295.

concerning her husband...if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Romans 7:1-3.

Wiersma's contentions, although stretched concerning the moral and psychological ambivalence in each character, certainly illuminate some of the specifically Christian patterns of the play. Vos outlines the general pattern of atonement and redemption:

for Fry, the operation of grace is not in some ethereal realm, but in the finite itself. It is through the flesh that all is mediated. The usual action in his plays therefore is a portrayal of sacrificial love of one individual who atones for the other, or, in literary terms, one who provides the comic redemption for the other.¹¹

The Christian pattern inevitably has parallels in other mythologies. Tegeus, for example, comes to resemble "a persona which simultaneously fulfills the archetypes of Adam, Prometheus and Christ. Allusions to apples and dust, fire and chains, and Tegeus' fear of crucifixion appear often enough to link Tegeus with these mythic characters."¹² The effect of these mythic associations is to suggest that behind the surface comic action lies a pattern of meaning which has a timeless significance. The Christian cycle is not isolated, but is a recurring phoenix-like pattern with modern relevance.

It is not, however, sufficient for a playwright to rely on mythic patterns or references in themselves to carry the weight of a universal truth to his modern audience. Francis Fergusson

¹¹ Vos, p. 96.

¹² Roy, "Structure...", p. 52.

observes that "one of the most striking properties of myths is that they generate new forms (like the differing children of one parent) in the imaginations of those who try to grasp them."¹³ The myth nourishes the writer's imagination, and in turn "fecundates"--to use Fergusson's term--that of the audience or reader. The writer's first problem is the presentation of his time factor when it is not entirely set in the present. The action may take place at an indeterminate time or place in the past, and thereby suggest a perennial significance--the method of the Fairy Tale. Alternatively, past events and present action may be juxtaposed and interrelated--the method adopted in Eliot's The Rock, Charles Williams' Judgement at Chelmsford and Fry's A Sleep of Prisoners. A third method is to make the time and place specific, but to endow the action with a cyclical pattern and to avoid mere historical romance by making the past as relevant as possible to the present--the method of Murder in the Cathedral up to the epilogue, Williams' Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, Firstborn to a certain extent, and Phoenix.

The most obvious means of making a past event alive to a contemporary or future audience is to provide well-motivated, vital characters whose actions transcend the limitations of their social milieu. A great deal of the success of Phoenix lies in Fry's creation of such characters, whose internal changes and external relationships capture the imagination of the audience. The play

¹³ Fergusson, pp. 162-163.

opens with a recognizable stock comic character, the somewhat bawdy female servant, introducing serious themes of love, life, and death in a comic manner despite the portentous surroundings of "an underground tomb...[and] a line of trees on which hang the bodies of several men" (1). Doto's name, as well as suggesting her "doting" nature, has the connotation of the foolish Dodo and, as Wiersma suggests, of the Latin for a dowry.¹⁴ She is a widow's dowry from Virilius to Dynamene, and becomes a bride's dowry to the new master. The earthy humour of her discourse is completely independent of time and place, and ensures her a sympathetic reception from all but the most prudish audience. Doto's humour is a foil for Dynamene's intellectual sentiments and she functions as the structural antithesis of her mistress. Dynamene is also an attractive, credible character. Her romantic nature has obviously been thwarted by the prosaic Virilius. Her attempts to praise his virtues all reveal his limitations:

Where is the punctual eye
And where is the cautious voice which made
Balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound
Like balance-sheets? (5)

She seizes the opportunity of his death to cast herself in the romantic role of a Juliet choosing death rather than life without her Romeo. The tone and unconscious manner in which she undercuts her early statements create the impression that she is playing a role in which her true emotions are not really engaged. This

¹⁴ Wiersma, 300.

impression is endorsed by her delight in intellectual sparring with Tegeus, and her transfer of love to him is an inevitable exploitation of her situation. Tegeus is a romantic of more intense nature. Like his successor Thomas in Lady, he is deeply moved by the sight of beauty in distress, and he immediately idealizes the woman who can sacrifice all for love. He had become disillusioned with the world, which he had "begun to see as mildew, verdigris,/ Rust, woodrot..." (12). Despite his ability to idealize, Tegeus has a practical side which provokes him to interrupt Dynamene's "perfection of purpose" (24) in the interest of his growing love for her, and he prevails on her to give up her attempt to die by rationalizing: "I,/If I had been your husband, would never dream/ Of expecting you" (31). Dynamene and Tegeus both possess a vitality which expresses itself in their speech, and a desire for deep emotional experience which has been frustrated, so that they must express it by romanticizing their actions and situations. The movement of the play is satisfying because it shows them passing from this stage through a developing awareness of each other to a "love for each other...Infused with life, and life infused with...love" (31).

In a pamphlet on Charles Williams, Fry's friend and mentor, J. Heath-Stubbs says that Williams held that all

personal relationships involved sacrifice--a free giving to others of part of the personality--and exchange. The idea of exchange finds its supreme embodiment in Christ's giving of Himself as a

sacrifice for Man's sin. But it is the type of
all other relationships...¹⁵

This concept of exchange, with the religious background made explicit by means of ritual, informs the structure of movement in Phoenix. Tegeus and Dynamene start at a distance: she is asleep and he regards her completely dispassionately, although he declares an intuitive sympathy for her action. It is

Not curious;
I've had thoughts like it. Death is a kind of love.
Not anything I can explain (8).

Their relationship develops in a pattern of movement that brings them closer together at each step, but not in a steady direction.

He asks her,

What is your opinion of Progress? Does it, for example,
Exist? Is there ever progression without retrogression?
(25)

On the plane of personal relationships, the answer is obviously negative. "Would you consider we go round and round?" (26),

Dynamene asks him, and he replies,

We concertina, I think; taking each time
A larger breath, so that the farther we go out
The farther we have to go in (26).

Their relationship concertinas as they approach and withdraw, culminating in a kiss which is followed by a separation threatened by the ultimate separation of death. Each coming together involves an exchange of "part of the personality" and a consequent revitalizing of one another. Dynamene has given up her will to live and has

¹⁵ John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams, Writers and Their Work: No. 63 (London, 1955), p. 26.

chosen to die. One interpretation of her name suggests a fusion of the words "die" and "mean": she means to die. Tegeus also admits to a lack of the will to live, but the sight of her is

something, it's more than something,
It's regeneration, to see how a human cheek
Can become as pale as a pool (12),

and he declares she has "renewed [his] faith in human nature" (24)-- his first step in finding "a reason for living" (25). Despite the harmony that builds up in their dialogue, and in the joint recollections of childhood scenes in Pyxa,¹⁶ Dynamene reasserts her desire to join Virilius:

I'm going to my husband, I'm too far on the way
To admit myself to life again(30).

This separation requires a deep breath from Tegeus and an eloquent appeal where he casts himself in the role of the dead husband. "Stop, stop," she cries, "I shall be dragged apart" (31), but she closes with him in an embrace. Tegeus arouses in Dynamene her latent "dynamic" life force, which he indicates he fears by his reluctance to pronounce her name. But the force, once aroused in her, arouses passion in him, and the exchange turns Tegeus into Chromis. His love redeems her from death, and she replaces her idealism with some of his more practical aspects of personality. This exchange is exemplified in her scheme to utilize the body of Virilius to save Tegeus in a final "sacrifice" which gives "death/

¹⁶ The name "Pyxa" suggests "pixie-land", the world of childhood and fantasy, but an associated connotation is the "pyx", a vessel in which the consecrated bread of the sacrament is placed.

The power of life" (43). The reported relationship between Dynamene and Virilius is also one of exchange, but is limited by his lack of human qualities. Virilius was Dynamene's moral (in the sense of conventional) mentor, the "peroration of nature," who exemplified a rigid code of conduct and taught facts. In exchange, Dynamene declares to his spirit, "I taught you/In your perceptive moments to appreciate me" (5). The final irony is that Virilius, who denied the living qualities and experiences of life, is the sacrificial exchange through which Tegeus is saved and Dynamene enjoys a love denied to her during Virilius' life. In this final exchange Virilius, whose name hitherto has been ironic, is the agent of life, and he earns Dynamene's true, emotional love, for she commands Tegeus to love her as she loves him and Virilius.

Whereas the first method by which Phoenix is made relevant to a modern audience is through the provision of "well-motivated, vital characters whose actions transcend the limitations of their social milieu," the second method is through the use of an accepted mythological pattern of death and resurrection which incorporates Christian rituals. The relationship between the characters indicates a pattern of atonement. Dynamene and Tegeus attain a reconciliation through the sacrifice of Virilius in reparation for Tegeus' sin of losing the body and for Dynamene's sin of choosing to die and condemning her servant to do so "without/Any fair reason" (36). The atonement brings resurrection after death,

but not before a series of rituals have been enacted signifying the process. Four of the Seven Sacraments¹⁷ are performed during the play. Baptism is explicit in the renaming of Tegeus, and forms an essential step in his regeneration. His new name, Chromis, "has a bread-like sound" (22) which associates him with the taking of bread and wine at Mass:

Here's a new roll with honey. In the gods' names
Let us sober ourselves (26).

When Dynamene first takes the wine, she drinks to "My husband, and all he stood for" (19). Tegeus corrects her to the present tense, "Stands for": the dead master is still a living presence. There is a suggestion of Penance in Dynamene's regrets that she was guilty of "not having made a better marriage of it; she carries her self-punishment to the point of wanting to die."¹⁸ Holy Matrimony is symbolized when the lovers kiss, and is blessed in the final action when they pledge their love with a sacramental toast to Virilius which confers grace on their marriage. These rituals form part of our modern consciousness, and their effect is to suggest a deeper content in the play's action.

The interfusion of death, life and love forms the central concern of the play. Doto associates the three in her opening

¹⁷ Watts, p. 200. The Seven Sacraments are Baptism, Holy Chrism or Confirmation, The Mass, Penance or Absolution, Holy Matrimony, Holy Order, and Extreme Unction.

¹⁸ Wiersma, 297.

speech:

...life and death
Is cat and dog in this double bed of the world (1).

Tegeus declares "death is a kind of love" (8), and later admits that death "may be life's reason" (25). Dynamene, whose love for Virilius expresses itself in the desire to join him in death, comes to realize the adumbration of the Christian message in the sacrifice of Virilius:

I loved
His life not his death. And now we can give his death
The power of life. Not horrible: wonderful! (43).

Phoenix and Firstborn have a similar death-and-resurrection pattern, but an essential difference in Phoenix, in addition to the comic rather than the tragic expectation, is the emphasis on love. The regenerative power of love is suggested in Firstborn in the potential which is implicit in the union of Ramases and Phippa, and Seti asserts that

Love is the dominant of life, to which all our changes
Of key are subdued in the end (81),

but the idea is not expanded or fulfilled in the action. In Phoenix the whole pattern of action evolves from the burgeoning love between Dynamene and Tegeus. "Love is the only discipline," she declares, "And we're disciples of love" (41-42). Just as Moses is driven by a force of fate, so Tegeus feels a force impelling his footsteps: "O...why/Was I led here? What stigmatism has got/Into my stars?" (15), and he says his arrival "was more than coming. I followed my future here..." (21). Love is a

prime agent of fate:

We're set upon by love
To make us incompetent to steer ourselves,
To make us docile to fate (38-39).

Through the suggestion that love is a cosmic force, Fry links the eros of sexual love with the agape of brotherly or divine love. Similarly, an appreciation of the world of the senses is not opposed to an appreciation of the spiritual world--rather it is an essential step towards it. "Rendering to living its rightful poise is not/Unimportant" (19), declares Tegeus, and Dynamene replies;

A mystery's in the world
Where a little liquid, with flavour, quality, and fume
Can be as no other, can hint and flute our senses
As though a music played in harvest hollows
And a movement was in the swathes of our memory.
Why should scent, why should flavour come
With such wings upon us? Parsley, for instance (20).

Fry's attitude is that of the Affirmative Way, that God is immanent as well as transcendent, and "mystery and goodness and beauty are primarily mediated through created things, if not wholly through them."¹⁹ Although the world of the body and the senses often "confuses/The nature of the mind" (18), it is fortunate for us that Nature "winds her furtive stream all through/Our reason" (24), because we can then act not in accordance with the doubtful dictates of our conscious minds, but through the impulses of sub-conscious life-forces. We then avoid being deceived by the

¹⁹ Carnell, "Creation's Lonely Flesh: T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry on the Life of the Senses," Modern Drama, VI, ii (June, 1961), 145.

discrepancy between appearance and reality,

And what is madness
To those who only observe, is often wisdom
To those to whom it happens (31).

The literal reality of the phoenix may be questioned, but the reality of the love-phoenix rising from its ashes, of the inter-relationship of life, death and love, is an unquestionable pattern of truth which the play reasserts.

Despite the Roman setting, Fry succeeds in giving the play a distinctly modern flavour. The language captures the contemporary speech idiom demanded by Eliot, broken only by references to the gods--Zeus, Aphrodite, "Koeos, Krios, Iapetos, Kronos, and so on" (16)--whose names are valuable mainly for their humorous and euphonic effects. Fry is extremely successful in combining the poetic and colloquial styles. For example, Dynamene declares:

For me
The world is all with Charon, all, all,
Even the metal and plume of the rose garden,
And the forest where the sea fumes overhead
In vegetable tides, and particularly
The entrance to the warm baths in Arcite Street
Where we first met;--all!--the sun itself
Trails an evening hand in the sultry river
Far away down by Acheron (5).

Here poetic imagery and association shift smoothly into the mundane and back to the poetic. The movement in language between the two styles parallels the concertina-like structure of the action. There is no harsh juxtaposition for effects of contrast, rather a blending of style with style and subject with subject to show the essential unity in diversity: an exchange of levels of language in

which the poetic acquires an everyday quality and the colloquial some of the stature of poetry. Another example is Dynamene's berating of Tegeus:

If I were still of the world, and not cloistered
 In a colourless landscape of winter thought
 Where the approaching Spring is desired oblivion,
 I should write sharply to your commanding officer.
 It should be done, it should be done. If my fingers
 Weren't so cold I would do it now. But they are,
 Horribly cold. And why should insolence matter
 When my colour of life is unreal, a blush on death,
 A partial mere diaphane? I don't know
 Why it should matter. Oafish, non-commissioned
 Young man! The boots of your conscience will pinch
 for ever

If life's dignity has any self-protection.
 Oh, I have to sit down. The tomb's going round (14-15).

Fry also gives the events of a past era modern connotations. For example, Doto explains how Dynamene circumvented the eternal official mind:

...at first
 Madam had difficulty with the Town Council. They said
 They couldn't have a tomb used as a private residence.
 But madam told them she wouldn't be eating here,
 Only suffering, and they thought that would be all
 right(9).

This comic encounter with authority foreshadows the more serious life-and-death matter of the missing body. The Regulations of social institutions can "snuff the great/Candles of creation" (42), as they have done with the six men hung on the thinnest of pretexts: both the ludicrousness and the inhumanity of institutions, Fry implies, are by no means confined to past eras. The materialism of Virilius, who even died "checking the pence column as he went" (6), is another facet of life that is both ancient and modern. His

inability to appreciate the world of emotion, art and nature--the wonder of existence--is the deficiency in modern life that Fry is constantly endeavouring to rectify. The assertion of Phoenix is that in any era, love can transcend senseless killing, the oppression of institutions and deadening materialism.

It has already been suggested that the flow of language parallels the structural movement between antithetical positions, and results in a blending of the oppositions. A further language-structure-theme parallel is the manner in which the imagery reinforces the comic pattern of action by affirming a positive view of the world. Dynamene exults;

What a mad blacksmith creation is
Who blows his furnaces until the stars fly upward
And iron Time is hot and politicians glow
And bulbs and roots sizzle into hyacinth
And orchis... (6).

The dialogue between Dynamene and Tegeus when she first drinks some wine indicates a multiple harmony in nature between antitheses, between the couple and nature in their awareness, and between each other in their rapport:

DYNAMENE. How good [the wine] is
How it sings to the throat, purling with summer.

TEGEUS. It has a twin nature, winter and warmth in one,
Moon and meadow. Do you agree?

DYNAMENE. Perfectly;
A cold bell sounding in a golden month.

TEGEUS. Crystal in harvest.

DYNAMENE. Perhaps a nightingale
Sobbing among the pears.

TEGEUS. In an old autumnal midnight (19).

Just as the action is predominantly comic but includes a real threat, so the pattern of imagery stresses the positive aspect of antithesis but recognizes the negative as a distinct alternative. Contrasts of death-life, dark-light, cold-hot, and down-up, pervade the language, revealing the tensions of which life is comprised, yet always asserting the positive. It is this assertion that helps to establish the comic tone and avoids any sense of anxiety concerning the outcome. The opening lines of the play establish that the dark is "Nothing but the harmless day gone into black" (1). It is soon dispersed by the Promethean lamp flame. The same speech indicates which side of the life-death antithesis is to be weighted: "life and death/Is cat and dog in this double-bed of a world" (1). The negative thought of death is outweighed by the humour of the metaphor and by the positive sexual connotations of the "double-bed". As the play develops, the outside darkness comes to represent the evils of society, epitomized by the six bodies, but moonlight so bright that Dynamene thinks it is dawn that relieves this darkness. Tegeus becomes associated with the moon because he appears out of the dark and uses "the lamplight and the moon so skilfully" (29) to enhance his appearance. Dynamene is constantly associated with bright light and the sun. At first, asleep, she is "all dark," but Tegeus soon sees her as "luminous with sorrow," and as their love grows her light dazzles him. Coming to her, he leaves the darkness and cold of "wrenching ice/To walk in the sun" (30). The design on his drinking bowl, which echoes Dynamene's dream,

also symbolizes the action of the play and encapsulates the imagery:

The corded god, tied also by the rays
Of the sun, and the astonished ship erupting
Into vines and vine-leaves, inverted pyramids
Of grapes, the uplifted hands of the men (the raiders),
And here the headlong sea, itself almost
Venturing into leaves and tendrils, and Proteus
With his beard braiding the wind, and this
Held by other hands is the drowned sailor - (17).

The "corded god" is Tegeus himself, tied by the rays of Dynamene's sun. Virilius has already been described as a ship which "flew figurehead foremost into the sun" (2) and his eruption into vines and grapes forecasts the fruitful outcome, despite the threat of the raiders who represent society and the real possibility of death in the drowned sailor who represents the executed men. Dynamene picks up the images and adds the mind-body dichotomy to emphasize the tenacity of life:

Oh, how the inveterate body,
Even when cut from the heart, insists on leaf,
Puts out, with a separate meaningless will,
Fronds to intercept the thankless sun.
How it does, oh, how it does. And how it confuses
The nature of the mind....
.
When the thoughts would die, the instincts will set sail
For life. And when the thoughts are alert for life
The instincts will rage to be destroyed on the rocks
(17-18).

The description of the bowl, and the manner in which the images in it are echoed and reworked, is characteristic of Fry's poetic method of treatment by expansion, as noted in Chapter Three, and of his integration of language, theme and structure.

In Phoenix, as in Firstborn, Fry is manipulating antitheses

to show that ultimately they form a unity which transcends their difference. The alternatives are not mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent. Death and resurrection form the overriding pattern, but the treatment is different from the anguished manner of Firstborn. The deeper concern is distanced by the comic pattern, and less vital antitheses present figural patterns of the basic archetype. It is therefore quite valid to regard the play as "a debate between convention and the life force"²⁰ as Stanford does, provided the relationship to a more intense level is not forgotten. In the characters, convention is presented in terms of rational and social expectation, and the particular sensibility this produces. It clashes with the intuitive desires of the individuals who find in the reality of personal relationships a more valid mode of feeling and perception. The differences in class between the characters serve to objectify the modes. Doto represents a lower class--"I was born nether, madam" (36)--whose amoral conduct is guided entirely by her "lower centres," to use Lawrence's term. Dynamene represents the other end of the social scale, an upper, patrician class, guided by social etiquette and convention rather than intuition. Tegeus is neither a common soldier nor an officer; he is almost independent of class, and his attitude is a successful via media in which his intuition is not a slave to his passion, nor his intellect a prohibitor of sensual enjoyment. He therefore represents a balance between

²⁰ Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry, An Appreciation (London, 1951), p. 60.

antithetical modes in which the tension of opposites is resolved. The internal tensions of the play lead to a series of delightfully comic ironies, which Spears observes are

neat and symmetrical: her perfection of purpose revives his faith in human nature and desire to live; his love makes her give up her perfection of purpose; he converts her so completely that she volunteers to negate her former faith...so that they may live and love. Thus the love-phoenix rises from its ashes; cosmic laughter affirms joy.²¹

The "cosmic laughter" is perhaps the audience satisfaction at witnessing a neat resolution of the tension and an affirmation of life which enables them, like Tegeus, "to feel as the gods feel" (32). The experience of Phoenix is one in which the dark is "distilled into light,"²² night gives way to dawn. The movement of the play does trace "the figure of a dance" as Dynamene and Tegeus concertina, and the "outline of the mystery" of life is traced in the eternal pattern of death and resurrection which is embodied in both the Christian and the Phoenix myths, and signifies the unity of being that underlies all creation.

Fry's shift from the religious to the secular, from the Old Testament to the New, from the direct religious myth to the indirect echoes of mythic patterns, and from tragedy to comedy, all indicate the general shift in the direction of human relationships which characterizes his "middle" plays. The divine is never

²¹ Monroe K. Spears, "Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," Poetry, LXXVIII (April, 1951), 34.

²² See Chapter One, p. 24.

very far out of sight, but the implicit statement of Phoenix and the plays that follow is that meaning and redemption are to be sought in terms of human individuality and relationships within a context of unity of being that underlies all creation.

Chapter Five

Thor, with Angels: Sacrifice

In the festival play, Thor, with Angels, written for the Canterbury Festival in 1948, Fry returns to the direct treatment of the spread of Christianity which he began in The Boy with a Cart. The plot of Thor is a series of episodes structured in a similar manner to those in Boy. Each episode leads to its own climax which resolves it, and the play moves on to the next. Both plays reach a final climax close to the end which is both the high point in the plot and the moment of highest religious illumination. In Boy the forward movement is sustained by the journey and the quest to build a church: in Thor the same quest motif is evident in Cymen's desire to discover the nature of his spiritual disturbance, to "Rid the brain of uncertainty, rid the heart/Of its fears,"¹ and to "learn what it is I've learnt to dread" (26). In addition to the unifying quest pattern, Thor contains plot suspense, absent in Boy, first because of the constant opposition to Hoel by those desiring his death, and second because of the unknown nature of the outcome. The play's action does more than suggest the possible patterns of Christian conversion in pagan communities because, like A Phoenix Too Frequent, it also adumbrates the sacrifice of Christ and its language explores the problems of life,

¹ Christopher Fry, Thor, with Angels (London, 1957), p. 1. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

death and resurrection. Despite the similarities of structure, and to some extent theme, Thor is a work of greater maturity and sophistication than Boy. In Boy, Fry's chorus, language and versification imitate the Eliot of The Rock (1934) and Murder in the Cathedral (1935) without emulating him. By the time of Thor Fry has found that he can dispense with a stylized chorus, as Eliot did in The Family Reunion (1939), although, like Eliot, he does still require someone to perform a choric function, which is assigned to Merlin. He also has found his own "voice" in a verse medium that can move freely between the colloquial and the poetic and bears a characteristic stamp in style, image and content. In Boy Fry's concern is with a pattern of miraculous experience that illustrates the "root and sky" interaction of God and man. Thor recounts a similar interaction in which Cymen, through a series of unnatural experiences bordering on the miraculous, moves from a vague awareness of spiritual forces operating on him to a firm "courage to exist in God" (54). In Boy the reported vision of the "carpenter" is a rather weak dramatic device because it places the most vital action of the play offstage. In Thor Fry avoids this error by re-enacting the crucifixion of Christ on stage with Hoel as surrogate, thereby gaining dramatic intensity and thematic focus on the question of man's relationship to Christ's sacrifice.

The play opens with a humorous exchange between Quichelm and Colgrin that raises comic expectations through both its action--Colgrin looking for his sword--and its language, where Fry displays

his skill with alliterative abuse. However, Colgrin senses that "there's trouble coming" (3), and the reiteration of "cloud" and "mist" suggests that complexities are to follow in which some truth is veiled. Quichelm relates the first of the miraculous happenings which precipitate Cymen on the path to spiritual awareness. His father, he declares, behaved "like a madman"--the term in Fry becomes almost synonymous with those who have greater spiritual awareness than their fellows. To save the Briton, Cymen

Burst in among us, blaspheming against Woden,
Broke his sword in the air--he swore it broke
Against a staggering light--and stood roaring,
Swaying in a sweat of wax, bestraddled
Over the fallen Briton (4).

Cymen enters in a disagreeable temper, and the account of his actions brings him to "tears of rage" and to a Thor-like thundering and cursing against the land that had deceived his forefathers. Despite his rage and the urging of his family, Cymen refuses to kill Hoel because he fears something which he believes Hoel can identify for him:

I say I fear myself, or rather
That not-myself which took my will,
Which forced a third strange eye into my head
So that I saw the world's dimensions altered (11).

The clash of this quest for knowledge with the desire for a blood sacrifice to appease the offended gods forms the central dialectic of the play and informs each climactic incident. Opposing forces within the play group themselves around the two polarities

of peace and violence, of the angelic and Thor, good and evil, life and death. On the one hand there is Cymen's desire for spiritual knowledge and peace of mind, Hoel's love of life, the love between Hoel and Martina, Merlin's love of nature, St. Augustine's mission, and the pervading plea for pacifism: on the other there is the background of war and its irrational hates, the lust for sacrifice, the violence of the wolves, and the fear of the unknown.

The first movement towards knowledge reaches a climax when Cymen's internal conflict whether to sacrifice or spare Hoel is miraculously resolved by the culmination of his long paeon to the sun in the astonishing toast to the gods--"Let us love one another" (14). This is followed by the even more surprising attack on his own son in the belief that he is attacking Hoel. Clodesuida urges Cymen to rest, but ironically does so in terms that suggest baptism:

Dip him
In sleep, that blue well where shadows walk
In water over their heads, and he'll be washed
Into reason (15).

The cleansing process of baptism is an essential first step in the attainment of spiritual knowledge. Watts explains that

what is necessary for Baptism is not at all the acquisition of knowledge but rather the getting rid of it--"knowledge" in this sense meaning the taking seriously of the conventional vision of life. It requires, too, not the making of an effort, but the giving up of every effort--in the sense of effort made to cling to the past, to hold on to death.²

² Watts, p. 182.

This is precisely what Cymen is required to do before he can "master this mystery" in which the "distinction [of former knowledge] has gone" (15).

The second movement of the play focuses on Hoel and on his developing relationship with Martina. Her pacific nature is shown when she urges her brother not to beat Colgrin: "Let's be affable" (3) she pleads. Later it is confirmed by her kindness to the ancient Merlin and to the prisoner. Martina, Hoel and Merlin establish a positive harmony which counteracts the negative, quarrelsome Jute family, and starts to build up a respect for Christian values in Cymen. The "Christian land" that Merlin recalls is condemned as weak by Cymen because its God had allowed it to be destroyed. Cymen declares:

What I'm afflicted with
Is strong, destroying me with a cry of love,
A violence of humility arrogantly
Demanding all I am or possess or have ambitions for,

 ...This doesn't come
From any watery light of what you think you remember.
A lashing logic draws me away from my gods.
Let it face me like a man! (28-29)

He is aware of a power Merlin's mysticism fails to account for. The incident of the wolves' attack fails to grow out of the dramatic situation, but it functions to deny Cymen's criticism of weakness because Hoel, who had been baptised and imbued with the force of Christianity, is shown to possess great strength and courage which he does not hesitate to employ in defence of his avowed enemies, an indication to the fearful pagan mind that his

god is not weak. Anna's announcement of the wolves' attack indicates its metaphoric value:

So many wolves, the fields
Are a bear-garden--ma'am your brothers!--grey,
Snarling, vicious, a terrible pack...(30).

The brothers are thereby associated with the wolves, and Hoel's defeat of the "grimmet" foreshadows his ultimate triumph over the brothers and the wider triumph of the Christian world over the pagan. In terms of organized plot, the incident appears imposed, but in terms of the pattern of meaning that the play illustrates it is part of the organic shape because concrete evidence must be provided in the plot to show the hidden strength of Christianity. The fact that Hoel has long lost direct contact with active Christian faith establishes the power that lies in its first baptismal touch: "The spirit is very tenacious of such water" (30). Hoel's action does not bring mercy but a renewed determination for his sacrifice to propitiate the gods and prevent further retribution. However, Cyren is now ready for the next step in his conversion: the rejection of the old. He denies the value of sacrifice because "the fears go on" (37), and man remains separate from the gods and an "eternal alien/In [his] own world" (38). In a promethean act of defiance he destroys the altar and challenges the gods: "Come down and silence me!" (38). The answer comes as an anti-climax: not a thunderbolt, but a summons to attend the king and hear the word of Augustine. Cyren, in his growing awareness, recognizes that

We're in the path
Of change. And I must go to meet the change,
Being unable to live unaltered (40-41).

The final movement of the play is in two directions. Just as Ramases dies before Moses can achieve rebirth for himself and the Hebrews, so Hoel is sacrificed before Cymen achieves a complete conversion to and rebirth in the new faith. This counterbalancing of death with life, of the tragic with the comic, is a frequent pattern in Fry.³ In The Firstborn and later in The Dark is Light Enough, the emphasis tends to fall on the tragic aspect, in A Phoenix Too Frequent on the comic, but in Thor a balance is achieved whereby the anguish of a sacrifice is immediately converted into the triumph of a spiritual truth. One of the main reasons that Hoel's death does not arouse too much feeling in an audience is that his character is not developed in the play: he is a somewhat negative victim, despite his action against the wolves--reported, not seen--and the budding romance with Martina. The audience can therefore retain a detachment which enables them to focus on the significance of the pattern of action: the re-enactment of Christ's crucifixion leading to a closer interaction of God and man. The downward movement of Hoel's fate is counterpointed by the rising movement in Cymen's awareness. He leaves the farmstead cleansed of the old, his mind ready for the message of the "One God" in the

³ Robert B. Sharpe, in Irony in the Drama (Chapel Hill, 1959), p. xi, argues that drama characteristically reaches "beyond the discord, the mockery, the pain, of life's contradictions into a loftier harmony, a vision of two warring truths reconciled by a divine third, a high irony of compassion." See Chapter Eleven, pp. 228-229.

mouth of "a man from Rome," and returns having "heard/Word of [Hoel's] God" (51-52) and seen a vision of the crucifixion. The significance of Hoel's death lies in Cymen's acceptance of guilt for his death by crucifixion, and thereby all men's for Christ's. "Forgive me for the sorrow of this world," he asks Hoel, for "All make all" (53).

The play's movement in terms of religious ideas shows the displacement of the old, pagan religion by the new faith of Christianity. However, Fry does not merely label the old "bad" and the new "good," but shows how the faults of pagan concepts of worship are precisely those of modern distortions of religious belief and practice. At first this is done humorously: Quichelm swears by "Woden" and asks for his "Wodenfearing mother," and Colgrin demands "where the Valhalla" his sword is. The direct transpositions of Woden for God and Valhalla for Hell are easy laughs, but when Clodesuida is seen to conceive her spiritual life as merely a matter of conforming to ritual with the aim of being "well-thought-of by the gods" (5), the implicit criticism of modern attitudes is apparent. Clodesuida represents those whose religion today consists merely in conforming to external rituals. She declares:

I wear myself out securing us to the gods
With every device that's orthodox, sacrificing
To the hour, to the split minute of the risen sun (21).

Her main concern is to keep on the right side of the gods, and she lacks any spiritual, moral or ethical basis for her conduct:

"Guilt, forgiveness, humility? What next?/Are you mad?" (7).

The chief means of placating the gods is sacrifice, not of the self in a spiritual cause, but of animals at appropriate occasions and of human life. She calls for Hoel's death: "A sacrifice, Cymen,/ This one sacrifice for our peace of mind" (12). Her brothers and sons constantly reinforce the demand for Hoel's sacrifice, but Cymen has begun to realize the futility of "sacrifice without end" (26) because it brings no peace. The reason, Merlin declares, is that "Death is what conquers the killer, not the killed"(27).

"What do I do by sacrifice?" Cymen demands of the gods,

The blood flows, the ground soaks it up,
The poisoned nightshade grows, the fears go on,
The sacrifice is despair and desperation! (37)

Hoel's death is designed both in action and in words to simulate that of Christ. He is "fastened to a tree with his arms spread" (50) and when Martina calls "Father! Father!" he cries "Son and the brooding dove./Call him again" (50), but the ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat cannot be prevented:

OSMER. We set this house
Free from fear and guilt and the working of darkness.

QUICHELM. We clean our hearts.

TADFRID. The sun flows on the spear.
The spear answers the sun. They are one, and go
To the act in the concord of a sacrifice (50).

Cymen returns imbued with the new knowledge of Christianity that teaches

never again need we sacrifice, on and on
And on, greedy of the gods' goodwill

But always uncertain; for sacrifice
 Can only perfectly be made by God
 And sacrifice has so been made by God
 To God in the body of God with man...(52).

All men share in the guilt for that act, because

The sacrifice of God was brought about
 By the blind anger of men, and yet God made
 Their blindness their own saving and lonely flesh
 Welcome to creation (53).

This is the argument of the "fortunate fall," that man's sins draw forth God's grace--particularly in the Incarnation and subsequent sacrifice of Christ.⁴ Watts asserts that

In the Old Testament the self-offering of man to God represented in the burning of bulls and goats upon the altar was, from the Christian standpoint, an ineffectual shadow of the only offering which can restore human nature to its proper union with God. For the perverted human will cannot make a genuine surrender of itself to the divine will, so that there can be no true sacrifice unless God himself enters into man, and, as man, makes the "full, perfect, and sufficient," sacrifice" which was consummated in the death of the God-man upon the Cross.⁵

Coming after Christ, the sacrifice of Hoel would be a futile act except for the fact that it re-enacts that of Christ and operates as a typological symbol. In so far as Hoel's death is a factor in confirming Cyren's conversion, it is the ultimate gift in a pattern of exchange, similar to that between Tegeus, Virilius and Dynamene in Phoenix,⁶ whereby Hoel's spiritual power is transferred to Cyren. From their first encounter, Cyren is aware of a "light

⁴ See Chapter One, pp. 8-9.

⁵ Watts, p. 95.

⁶ See Chapter Four, p. 82.

flung" to him from Hoel, and he describes the experience

As though a spirit in you [Hoel], like
A wild fowl hiding in the mere of your flesh,
Heard the sound far off and flew up clamouring
Rousing a spirit in me (40).

He is aware of a "third strange eye" (11) forced into his head which alters his perception. Hoel in turn has a similar experience:

I've known nothing except
Your mercy; that indeed was a kind of light to me (29),
and when he is about to be killed he prays for further illumination:

Death, be to me like a hand that shades
My eyes, helping me to see
Into the light (50).

Through their relationship, and the pattern of exchange it exemplifies, each experiences a new perception and a spiritual awakening: Hoel's dormant faith is revived and Cymen is prepared for conversion.

Although Hoel's death leads Cymen to an awareness of guilt, it is ironic because it serves so little purpose. Dramatically, the effect is powerful because his death conveys a sense of tragic inevitability and waste, and thematically, in addition to expanding the Christian pattern, it exemplifies the mode of violence which the play condemns. A mysterious, almost supernatural force leads Cymen to protect Hoel in the battle, and causes him to act strangely, but there are also human forces at work in the cause of peace. Martina is a peacemaker, Hoel's own desire is to live, even Clodesuida is in favour of mercy after the wolves' attack, and Merlin sees the pettiness and futility of man's squabbles:

Who, apart
 From ourselves, can see any difference between
 Our victories and our defeats...?
 Not beast nor bird,...

.
 All indifferent. Much more so your gods
 Who live without the world, who never feel
 As the world feels in springtime the stab of the spear
 And the spurt of golden blood,
 Winter's wound-in-the-side, the place where life begins
 (26-27).

Metaphorically, Merlin makes the connection between the violent mode of the old gods who live outside the world and the Christian mode of love and peace which Christ, living in this world, established on the Cross. Merlin has seen the cycles of war, love and religion many times:

And men broke their swords in the love of battle,
 And broke their hearts in the love of women,
 And broke the holy bread in the love of God (28),

but now his perception has become too dimmed

To be able to distinguish one thing from another,
 The storm-swollen river from the tear-swollen eyes,
 Or the bare cracked earth from the burnt-out face,
 Or the forest sighing from the sighing heart.
 What is in one is in the other...(32).

The first step, therefore, in ending violence is to perceive things in a different manner. Cymen, having had his vision changed, can see the "huge debt of pain" on earth, and above all the "blundering cruelty/Of man" (53), and his final speech is a pacifist plea for "forgiveness,/Mercy, and compassion" (53). Hoel's death, ironically precipitated by Martina's display of affection, is at once the culmination of violence and an expression of the futility, waste and sheer inhumanity of such acts. The mode of perception

which can avoid the course of violence is that

of Augustine
Sent by Gregory of Rome who on a market-day
Saw angels where we see our enemies (39).

Similarly, Hoel declares:

What simple things the affections are,
That can't perceive that people are enemies
Or friends (48).

Despite the fact that he is an enemy, Martina is attracted to him and their relationship indicates the harmony that a new perception could bring to the affairs of men.

Thor not only demonstrates the possibilities for man's peace and for his communion with nature and God that are inherent in the Christian perception, but also indicates both structurally and verbally the forces at work on behalf of the new dispensation. The force that moves Cymen to act in strange ways is the same force that Merlin sees persuading men to their destiny:

I observe the very obdurate pressure
Edging men towards a shape beyond
The shape they know (46).

The action of the play, with its reliance on acceptance of the supernatural, bears out the theme announced and expanded in Merlin's central speech. Merlin is given a double task: first to present a pantheistic mode as an alternative to the pagan and a prelude to the Christian, and second to act as a choral commentator who transcends time and elaborates the meaning of the action. He views the whole of creation in a semi-Platonic manner in which the things of nature are

All dreams out of the slumbering rock
 Each dream answering to a shape
 Which was in dream before the shapes were shapen;

 And above the shapes of life, the shape
 Of death, the singular shape of the dream dissolving,
 Into which all obediently come.
 And above the shape of death, the shape of the will
 Of the slumbering rock, the end of the throes of sleep
 Where the stream of the dream wakes in the open eyes
 Of the sea of the love of the morning of the God (45-46).

Merlin is "more than half/A pagan" because, although his avenue to God is the earth rather than the spirit, his philosophy is an essential aspect of the concept of "co-inherence"⁷ and presents a positive answer to Cyren's questioning of the "Silence upon silence upon silence" (35) that forms an impenetrable barrier between man and the gods. One weakness in the pattern of Cyren's conversion is that he does not appear to accept Merlin's position before attaining his full conversion: it is a stage that is presented at the verbal level to the audience, but is not incorporated into action or character. Cyren returns to the farm having heard the

Word of [Hoel's] God, and felt our lonely flesh
 Welcome to creation. The fearful silence
 Became the silence of great sympathy,
 The quiet of God and man in the mutual word (52).

His final illumination of the love of God operating within the world complements Merlin's lineal view of the goal of creation. Not only is man integral and "welcome to creation;" a participant in the "root and sky" interaction of God and His universe, but he is also involved in a purposeful process that is developing by

⁷ See Chapter One, p. 9.

stages--"The gods reformed according to the shape" (46)--towards a divine destiny.

Although the structure of Thor is episodic, the incidents are set up in a parallel manner, the first foreshadowing the second or the two complementing one another. Colgrin's attempt to find his sword and kill Quichelm comically foreshadows Cymen's assault on his son. Similarly, the attack of the wolves relates to the Jute's attack and the killing of Hoel. Martina's humane action in feeding Merlin is followed by her feeding of Hoel, and Cymen's inability to sleep is parallel to Merlin's inability to die. Cymen's first return, when he is confused and cursing, forms a significant contrast to his second return from hearing Augustine when his vision has been clarified and his mind enlightened. Cymen's brief rest, when in his turmoil

No sleep came [only]
 An occasional shadow across my bed from a cloud
 Of weariness, [and] the glare of the brain persisted
 (24),

is contrasted with Hoel's sleep from which he wakes with a heavy heart but without the uncertainty and fear that harass Cymen.

The effect of paralleling events is to set up an alternative pattern to a strict lineal development of action. In the same manner that knowledge of the outcome in Boy and Firstborn focuses attention on the process rather than the plot, so this method of paralleling--which is perhaps part compensation for a weak plot--? focuses attention on the significance of events in relation to the pattern of existence they represent rather than on their function

in a logical sequence of cause and effect. There is no internal logic for the appearance of the wolves, for example, nor for the messenger that calls Cymen away, nor for the "mad" actions of Cymen, but each appears to be externally controlled and therefore reinforces the assertion of an "obdurate pressure," an external divine force, compelling the affairs of men.

The language of the play indicates a pattern of interpenetration that stands as a metaphor for the co-inherence of man, time, nature, and God. As Roy observes, the sun and its attributes form the "focal centre" of the play's imagery in contrast to its polarities of darkness, cold and winter.⁸ The religious connotations of the "sun" are traditional, and from the opening scene onwards, the natural action of the sun rising and clearing the mists is recognizably multivocal. Quichelm arrives "blaspheming in the thick of the mist" (1), then Colgrin announces "The sun's risen" (2), and Cymen, after the account of his Saul-like experience when his sword "broke/Against a staggering light" (4), declares "the sun puts down/The mist at last and looks out across the day" (13). In the ritual killing of Hoel, Tadfrid echoes Hoel's cry, "Son and the brooding dove," when he sees that "The sun flows on the spear./The spear answers the sun" (50). These lines play on the sun-Son association and subsume the pagan attributes of the sun into a Christian context in a manner similar to Cymen's apostrophe to the sun that culminates not in a pagan toast, but in

⁸ Roy, "Structure...", p. 170.

the command of Christ: "Let us love one another" (14). The time of the action is spring. Merlin recalls the Christian Arthurian era, the time of such events as "old Joseph's faithful staff/
Breaking into scarlet bud in the falling snow" (38), but miracles no different from the "commonplace" miracle which "staves of chestnut wood/And maywood and the like perform...every year" (28). The period between Arthur's era and A.D. 596 had been one of winter: Merlin has a vision of

the men of Rome
Returning, bringing God, winter over, a breath
Of green exhaled from the hedges...(33).

The return of Christianity is a spring renewal, a rebirth after the death of winter, when once again men like the "primrose and violet...[can] Gather like pilgrims in the aisles of the sun" (33). Fry indicates two possible false attitudes or relationships to the sun. Clodesuida relies on the ritual of "sacrificing/To the hour, to the split minute of the risen sun" (21) without any comprehension of spiritual meaning, and the exiled Britons have "for years...lain furtively in the setting sun" (19), possessing the knowledge but, like Hoel, allowing it to lie dormant. Water, in rain, rivers and wells, is associated with light in the regenerative process. Cyren's need for sleep, for example, is expressed in baptismal terms of washing in water, and Hoel welcomes sleep in similar terms:

Sleep, yes. My fields need rain. Sleep
Can drench down and welcome (45).

Merlin, in his near-sighted old age, recognizes the identity of the

natural and the human: he is unable

to distinguish one thing from another,
The storm-swollen river from the tear-swollen eyes...
(32).

Metaphors from nature are, therefore, the most appropriate to describe human experience, and by extension, because the world of nature is a manifestation of the divine, the human world is linked to the divine through the natural, and the spiritual knowledge that "our lonely flesh [is]/Welcome to creation" (52) is reinforced by awareness of our involvement in the total process of creation: life, death and resurrection.

In Thor Fry straddles the narrow bridge between the comic and the tragic, which would suggest that the mode is tragicomic. Roy sees the tragicomic effect in this play dependent on symmetrical contrasts:

Cymen's gradual, humane enlightenment is balanced against his superstitious relatives' wrong-headed normalcy, Merlin's lofty, enlightened mysticism with the lively earthiness of Colgrin.... Colgrin's sloth, cowardice and irreverent wit obliquely confirm Merlin's vision.... Reason and emotion, ecstasy and ridicule are tenuously weighed, each qualifying the extremes of its opposite.⁹

These effects, however, do not in themselves establish a tragicomic mode, which Guthke, in his book Modern Tragicomedy, declares is not a mere juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic or playing with contrasts, but the identity of tragic fear and comic laughter which the audience perceives simultaneously in the one experience.¹⁰

⁹ Emil Roy, "Christopher Fry as Tragicomedian," Modern Drama, XI, i (May, 1968), 42.

¹⁰ Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy (New York, 1966), pp. 25, 44.

In Hoel's death there is something of this duality because there is what Ionesco terms a "dramatic synthesis" of the two modes,¹¹ the tragic death and the comic ending being achieved almost simultaneously with the resultant dramatic impression one of ambivalence. Even here, the two are sequential rather than simultaneous. It is more valuable, perhaps, to see the structure of Thor as ironic. Guthke sees one form of the tragicomic utilizing an "irony of the course of events"¹² which victimizes the protagonists--who do not rise to tragic stature. Hoel fits this category, but this is the only aspect of Thor which does align it with the modern tragicomic. The result of Martina's love for Hoel is the culmination of a series of ironies in the play. Fry is constantly playing on the discrepancy between the spoken assertion and the evidence in action, or between expectation and realization. For example, Colgrin's bold words while he searches for his sword ironically parody the oaths and actions of war:

Frog-man, fen-fiend, werewolf, owl, elf,
Or whatever unnatural thing you are

Stand away from the swiping of my sword.
(Where the thunder did I put it?) (1)

The initial comic expectation is not fulfilled, despite recurring moments of humour with Colgrin and the promise of romantic comedy in the Hoel-Martina relationship. Cyren's words repeatedly lead

¹¹ Ionesco, quoted in Guthke, p. 51.

¹² Guthke, p. 82.

up to one expectation but the action is a marked ironic contrast. His toast to the gods is "Let us love one another" (14); his attempt to kill Hoel is directed against his own son; his sacrifice to the gods turns to destruction of the altar; and his defiance of them brings the unexpected, anticlimactic messenger from the king. The implications of the language also contain ironic reversals. For example, it is ironic that Hoel is "Too black for a swan" (49), that Martina's whiteness should be called "Leper-flesh!" (49), and that Osmer should assert that by sacrificing Hoel they "set this house/Free from fear and guilt and the working of darkness" (50). Similarly, there is irony in Cymen's "golden future our fathers died for" (9) because the promised land is a mirage. In his discussion of the Tragic Mode, Northrop Frye identifies the hero of the ironic form as "a man who deprecates himself," who appears less than he is, who "gets isolated from his society,"¹³ and who becomes a scapegoat that is neither innocent nor guilty:

He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes.... He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence.¹⁴

Like Adam, he may be "inevitably" ironic by virtue of "being human nature under sentence of death," and like Christ he may be "incongruously" ironic by being "the perfectly innocent victim excluded

¹³ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1967), pp. 40-41.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

from human society." Hoel's role fits this pattern perfectly, so that the play, in one aspect or another, incorporates a complete range of irony. Furthermore, irony is the most effective means of illustrating paradox, so that the structuring of Thor in a series of ironies in both language and action serves to illuminate the ultimate paradox of sacrifice where a death is required to ensure rebirth: Hoel's death for that of Cymen and the Jutes, Christ's for all men.

Thor does not assert the same vitality and redemptive qualities of close human relationships as exemplified in Phoenix, but it does repeat to some extent the same pattern of exchange, although in a manner that recalls Firstborn, where Ramases' life is given for Moses' rebirth. Thor shares aspects of tragedy with Firstborn, and as in the earlier play, the emphasis is on the redemptive, liberating pattern of death followed by rebirth. Because Thor repeats some of the themes and structural aspects of Boy and Firstborn without following up the developments of Phoenix, it may be seen as a step backwards for Fry, but it does continue his "exploration into God" in its concern with the mysteries of sacrifice and in its expansion of the concept of co-inherence adumbrated in Boy.

Chapter Six

The Lady's Not for Burning: Harlequinade

The Lady's Not for Burning follows the pattern of antitheses which characterizes the structure of the preceding plays. The underlying pattern of action also has much in common with the earlier work because Lady is a reworking of the death-and-resurrection cycle which is fundamental to the structure of The Firstborn and A Phoenix Too Frequent. The climate is one of comedy, with tragedy a thundercloud on the horizon, as in Phoenix, but to the comedy Fry adds a stronger breeze of lyricism than in any of his earlier plays--although, of course, they do include lyrical passages. Lady also shares with Phoenix an underlying allegorical structure which juxtaposes Christian and pagan myth. Christian concepts of damnation and salvation, and sin, guilt and expiation, are interwoven with the superstitions of witchcraft and with pagan attitudes to nature. The play reconciles these antitheses both in terms of narrative outcome and in terms of language.

Despite the fact that the action and language of the play uphold the unconventional, the structure is conventional romantic comedy built on the "well-made-play" scheme of a sequence of heightening tensions and complications leading to a happy, comic outcome. Act I builds up to the entry of Jennet and ends with a cry from Thomas that indicates the direction of subsequent events:

"For God's sake hang me, before I love that woman!"¹ Half of Act II is taken up with the developing relationship between Jennet and Thomas, but culminates in the "confession" crisis. Act III resolves the complications with something of a deus ex machina in the reborn Skipps, and the play ends with a conventional uniting of lovers. Time's reviewer declares that "the play is not to be dredged for large meanings.... Its forte is fireworks, not illumination."² However, within the framework of comic structure and incorporated in the display of fireworks the antitheses are again worked out in terms of analogous action and metaphor. The Time article on Fry which accompanies the review recognizes that "Fry's chosen topics are not social problems. They are perhaps smaller, perhaps much larger."³ They are smaller in that the topics concern individuals, not social dynamics, and larger in that they are universal rather than parochial. The conventional comic form is not a Shavian "sugaring of the pill," nor is it uncritical optimism, but it is an expression of Fry's fundamental attitude that comedy is "an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith."⁴ The "larger meanings" are contained

¹ Christopher Fry, The Lady's Not for Burning, 2nd ed. (London, 1950), p. 35. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

² "The Lady's Not for Burning," Time, LVI (Nov. 20, 1950), 46.

³ Ibid., 48-49.

⁴ Fry, "Comedy," 77.

in the attitudes which underlie the play and become evident when the patterns of action and language which Fry is manipulating are recognized.

The central conflict of the play is between two groups, the "outsiders" and the "insiders." Those outside Tyson's house who come in, bringing magic, enchantment and revelation, find their unorthodoxy opposed by the orthodoxy of officialdom. Their unconventional desires or actions clash with the propriety of the establishment because they pose a threat to it. Although the comedy treats Tyson, Tappercoom, Margaret, the Devize brothers, and the Chaplain gently, it nonetheless ridicules them in their vain attempts to maintain authority, position or convention. The weight of approval falls on the comic victims who triumph and emerge as victors in the end. As Vos points out, the victim-victor pattern is a Christian analogy: "amid sacrifice and festivity, the central movement of both Thomas and Jennet from victim to victor is embodied in an action analogical to the nuances of the atonement of Jesus Christ."⁵ No one character in the play represents Christ. There is no need for a Christ surrogate because it is the pattern which is vital. Jennet is perhaps the closest because she is a victim of both the ignorant mob and the unimaginative officials. Her death is demanded as a sacrifice to expurgate evil from the community and thereby atone for its sins. Thomas is also a victim of a society which has brought about in him a disillusionment with

⁵ Vos, p. 97.

the nature of the world, despite his appreciation of its exterior beauty. Like Tegeus in Phoenix he is a disillusioned romantic, but his greater self-awareness leads to a voluntary atonement because, he declares,

I
Am a figure of vice and crime--
...Guilty
Of mankind. I have perpetrated human nature (58).

Richard and Alizon are both involved in the pattern because they are outside victims forced to conform to authority. Richard's "miraculous" birth is a comic analogy for the incarnation of a god: "I wasn't born," he declares,

I was come across. In the dusk of one Septuagesima
A priest found an infant, about ten inches long,
Crammed into the poor-box (5).

His "purgatory-colour" indicates his position "on the way to grace" (6) in a quest for salvation. Although Alizon says she is "quite usual," her birth was "a great surprise to [her] parents" (5), and she was at first married to God. Her divine associations are reinforced by her appearance which evokes the exclamation "Whsst! Revelation!" (3) from Thomas. The last of the outside group is ^tMathew Skipps, whose miraculous resurrection is both a parody of Christ's and an affirmation of the pattern for all degrees of mankind.

Opposing the outsiders are the insiders: Tyson and Tappercoom representing authority; Humphrey and Nicholas representing man's baser nature; Margaret representing convention; and the

Chaplain representing those whose natural instincts have been suppressed into conformity with the current mores of society. The official mind is ridiculed in Tyson's comic repetitions-- "This will all be gone into/At the proper time" (23)--his fear of being laughed at and his horror at "Awful unorthodoxy" (26). He is quite helpless in the face of a situation for which the rules have not been laid down, and his inadequacy is exemplified in the cold--"tiresome catarrh" (17)--from which he suffers. Tappercoom's physical condition similarly exemplifies the nature of officialdom as he "mountainously [rolls] up and down the room" (36). A dominant reason for the acceptance of authority is expressed by Humphrey:

What is official
Is incontestable. It undercuts
The problematical world and sells us life
At a discount (15).

Officially prescribed or conventional action or thought relieves the individual of the problem of thinking for himself, and provides a sense of security. When this sense of security is disturbed, as it is by Jennet and Thomas, the reaction is violent. The reaction of the officials to Jennet's plea for protection is seen to be of the same order as that of the "credulous children in the street" (27) to Jennet's unorthodox behaviour. When she cries,

What, does everyone still knuckle
And suckle at the big breast of irrational fears? (27),

superstition and the mystique of officialdom are associated and condemned as identical manifestations of irrationality. The deadening, soul-destroying attitude of officialdom is revealed by

Tyson:

The standard soul
Must mercilessly be maintained. No
Two ways of life. One God, one point of view.
A general acquiescence to the mean (71).

The Chaplain is an example of one who has acquiesced. He is a comic, sympathetic figure, who would "like/To have been a musician but others decreed otherwise" (60). He is guilty, not as he feels for allowing his viol to "Commit such sins of sound" (73) and for permitting his natural feelings to get the better of him, but for conforming to the dictates of "Those in authority over us" (60) who suppress his impulses to joy and justice. Margaret is similarly guilty of suppressing all natural feeling, which she avoids by hiding it behind the masks of placidity and convention. Her indifference to the witch-hunt prompts Thomas to appeal:

Oh, be disturbed,
Be disturbed, madam, to the extent of a tut
And I will thank God for civilization (13).

The unusual disturbs her faith in propriety, and the appearance of a heretic--whether spiritual or secular--contains the threat of making "orthodoxy seem almost irrelevant" (79). Her two sons indicate the perversions of feeling which occur in a conformist society. Nicholas kills his brother out of jealousy in comic parody of Cain, yet even that jealousy is not based on any real love for Alizon, but rather on rivalry with his brother. "I loved her once," he declares, "I thought you wanted her..." (65). Humphrey abuses the power his position on the local council gives

him to forward his lechery. All those inside are contaminated by the evil inherent in a society which represses feelings and condemns the individual to conformity. It is this evil which constitutes the underlying source of conflict with those from outside whose good lies in their awareness of the complexity and variety of life and in their desire to live in an unfettered mode.

The good-evil antithesis is illustrated in the contrast between outsider and insider in their capacity for and attitude to love and laughter, and in their degrees of awareness. The antithesis is perhaps better defined in terms of positive and negative attitudes: the positive is applauded as good, the negative condemned as evil. Margaret, Tyson and Tappercoom are untouched by love in any form, except for the stirrings of physical attraction Tyson feels for Jennet. "Your love," Thomas tells Tyson, "Is the fear of your single self" (28), egocentric and negative. Similarly, Humphrey is capable of lechery, not love, and Nicholas "Loved [Alizon] with a passionate misapprehension" (65) because he thought Humphrey wanted her. Lechery is condemned in Tappercoom's rebuke to Tyson, "Blow your nose/And avoid lechery" (37), and in Jennet's rejection of Humphrey's offer. She declares:

What is deep, as love is deep, I'll have
Deeply. What is good, as love is good,
I'll have well. Then if time and space
Have any purpose, I shall belong to it (85).

Love is equated with good, and physical love is more than "merely an exchange/Of compliments," as Humphrey suggests. Love is an

irresistible cosmic force: Jennet declares:

Something compels us into
The terrible fallacy that man is desirable
And there's no escaping into truth. The crimes
And cruelties [of men] leave us longing, and campaigning
Love still pitches his tent of light among
The suns and moons (59).

This force overcomes Richard immediately he sees Alizon:

O God, God,
God, God, God. I can see such trouble!
Is life sending a flame to nest in my flax?
For pity's sake! (4),

and despite his recognition of the possible pain it brings, he makes no attempt to resist it. Thomas's response to Jennet is the same, but he attempts to avoid his fate: "For God's sake hang me, before I love that woman!" (35). He believes love to be one of man's "less lethal appetites" (58), but finally through love he is willing to endure the evil of the world to be with Jennet, and tells her:

I shall be loath to forgo one day of you,
Even for the sake of my ultimate friendly death (97).

Thomas's conversion from a sceptic rejecting love to a sceptic accepting it constitutes a central movement of the play. His very awareness of the attractions of love, a paradoxical "Sweet noose," indicates his own vulnerability, and despite his scepticism, "by preserving the magnetism of mystery/And [his] curious passion for death" (57), he makes himself "A breeding ground for love and must take the consequences." It is as though his whole personality is driven by the life-force that, according to Jennet, "compels" women.

None of those inside are moved by this cosmic compulsion, and consequently none of them undergoes the process of regeneration that Alizon, Richard, Jennet, and Thomas experience through the agency of love. There is a similar division between outsider and insider with relation to laughter. Jennet declares she has come to Tyson's house "to have the protection...of laughter" (24), but laughter requires a sense of balance, proportion and flexibility alien to those inside. Margaret is incapable of laughter, being utterly incapable of perceiving anything in non-literal terms. Humphrey and Nicholas are too self-centred to be capable of generous laughter. Tyson will "not have any frivolity" (26), and he considers it "unwise/To tempt providence with humour" (40). To him, "A sense of humour [is] /Incompatible with good citizenship" (17), whereas to Thomas, laughter "is an irrelevancy/Which almost amounts to revelation" (50). Here Thomas is acting as Fry's spokesman to justify the comic mode in terms of the illumination it can cast on the human condition. This principle has always been the modus operandi of the satirist. Fry's mode is not one of satire, but in Lady, within the framework of a Romantic Comedy, Fry does satirize the "humours" of his blocking characters. The Horatian treatment of these characters places them on the evil end of the good-evil continuum, yet not too far along to be beyond redemption. Tyson's cold indicates the vulnerable humanity beneath the pompous exterior, and he finally withdraws "to be alone with [his] own convictions" (74), sensing the wrong of his attitude, and does not reappear;

the brothers are ridiculed in their squabbling and are shown as misguided and ineffectual rather than evil, and they too withdraw when they realize "it's all over with us" (89); and Tappercoom shows redeeming human qualities when he withdraws, noting "a certain mildness/In the night, a kind of somnolent inattention" (95-96), and pointing the way of escape.

As well as being negative in their blocking roles and with regard to laughter, the insiders also reveal negative attitudes to the wonder of existence. Tyson refuses to recognize anything that is not official and orthodox. His rigid outlook is revealed when he declares, "The standard soul/Must mercilessly be maintained" (71), and when he tells Thomas;

Dear Sir, I haven't yet been notified
Of your existence. As far as I am concerned
You don't exist (17).

Tappercoom takes similar refuge behind the "Absolute" of the law when confronted with the unusual: "You've got to be dispassionate/Calm and civilized" (72), he tells Tyson. Their closed, phlegmatic attitudes form a marked contrast to the open sense of wonder expressed so volubly by Thomas, and so simply by the Chaplain: "everything astonishes me,/Myself most of all" (41). Paradoxically, Thomas is entranced by the wonder, beauty and mystery of the world, yet overwhelmed by the "stench of the plague-pit" (57) and the "boomerang rages and lunacies" (58) which are unavoidable aspects of the human condition. His recognition of the dual aspects of creation, "glittering with conflicts" (54), is the source of his

redemption, for recognition is an essential prerequisite to the reconciliation of opposites. Jennet inherits her father's desire for scientific knowledge. Thomas asks her:

what greater superstition
Is there than the mumbo-jumbo of believing
In reality? (54)

However, the spirit is one of quest, of desire to discover, so that when she recognizes a realm of mystery beyond "the essential fact" (53), another reconciliation takes place between the apparent antitheses of fact and mystery. The agent of reconciliation is love, and the process, as in Phoenix, exemplifies the pattern of exchange discussed in Chapter Four (pp. 82-84).

Both Thomas and Jennet enter Tyson's house on a quest, although with opposite aims. Thomas seeks death: "I only wanted to be hanged" (3), he declares. He desires escape from a life which has turned sour for him. He is disgusted with the "dung" of humanity, with the evil he sees beneath the superficial beauty of nature, and with the irrationality of man. Jennet seeks life through an appeal to reason. She inherits her father's faith in reason, and declares, "I believe in the human mind" (27), but because he "broke on the wheel of a dream," she chooses "the actual....the essential fact" (53). Just as Thomas finds his quest frustrated in Tyson's house, so Jennet finds not life but the threat of death. In their frustration the two discover that their opposing desires for death and life become united in a common desire to "begin again." Their relationship develops into a conflict in which his death-wish is

displaced by her life-urge, and her objectivism is displaced by his poetic vision. The vital phase of the exchange occurs in Act II in the discussion, which is strategically placed mid-point in the play. In place of Jennet's "essential fact" Thomas offers "Creation's vast and exquisite/Dilemma" (54). She begins "to feel [her] life increasing" (56) as she absorbs his attitude, and in return, growing love works a similar conversion in him. The movement of mutual awareness leading to exchange and mutual dependence is almost identical with that of Tegeus and Dynamene in Phoenix. There is not the same "concertina" pattern because Thomas attempts to hold off Jennet: there is rather an irresistible, magnetic attraction which draws them inevitably together. During this movement, a conversion takes place in which each becomes regenerated by taking on the stronger qualities of the other and discarding his own weaknesses. In Charles Williams' terms, their exchange is a "compact of substitution" in which each bears the burdens of the other.⁶ The exchange is objectified when Jennet romanticizes the moon in Thomas's idiom (68), and in turn Thomas finds he has "begun to talk like that soulless girl" (75). The exchange is shown not only in statement, but also in action. When tempted by Humphrey, Jennet refuses to accept a rational, practical way out of her situation because of an irrational conviction. Thomas is prepared to exchange his life for hers, and despite his assertion that "the

⁶ Charles Williams, Selected Writings, ed. Anne Ridler (London, 1961), pp. 127-128.

world's not changed" (96), he commits himself to humanity when he leaves the house with her. The destruction of their former selves and birth of their new life is signified by the "pickaxe voice of a cock, beginning/To break up the night" (97) and heralding the creation of a new day.

This process of death and rebirth and renewal through love is worked out on many levels in the play, and is interrelated with themes of sacrifice and atonement, miraculous birth and the victim-victorious. They are woven through the play to establish a structural pattern that both expresses Fry's metaphysical faith and provides the framework for a comic treatment. This faith is exemplified in the natural cycle. Death and rebirth are explicit in the spring motif which provides the climate, or mood, of Lady. The season is established by Alizon when she enters with "an April blindness" (4) caused by the sun sparkling on fresh rain. Frequent reminders of the season occur during the play: for example, "This is properly April" (10), love is "an April anarchy" (16), and an "April fit of exasperating nonsense" (19). Palingenesis, "the indomitable/Perseverance of Persephone" (49), is exemplified in the "generations of roses" which live in a "wrinkled berry" (56), and a further natural cycle is indicated in the passage of time from afternoon to evening, night and dawn. The subject of death is introduced by Thomas who wants to be hanged, but in characteristic fashion, Fry turns a conceit on the concept when he has Thomas accuse Richard of being

desperate
To fly into any noose of the sun that should dangle
Down from the sky (3),

and a death-noose-love association is established when Thomas comments on Richard's immediate infatuation with Alizon: "Sweet noose, nice noose" (4). Ironically, the desire for a noose leads to the same outcome for Thomas. The subject of death is anti-thetically balanced by that of birth. Richard and Alizon both recount the circumstances of their birth, and the theme is continued when Nicholas claims he was "conceived as a hammer/And born in a rising wind" (8). Nicholas also claims to be "reborn" after killing Humphrey, whose resurrection foreshadows that of Skipps and establishes a pattern of action which parallels the spring motif of rebirth after the death of winter. The resurrections of Humphrey and Skipps are incidents which receive almost burlesque treatment, but other rebirths take place on the more serious romantic level. Alizon and Richard are both committed to a form of death in the sentences which condemn her to a loveless marriage with Humphrey--"a winter in [her] head" (77)--and him to slavery in Tyson's house. Alizon's death is also that of an innocent who undergoes the rites de passage into maturity. She declares;

I have become
A woman, Richard, because I love you. I know
I was a child three hours ago (77).

Richard, too, is "newly born" (78) by the same regenerating agency--love. As already suggested, Thomas and Jennet also experience the death of their former selves in the course of a renewal through

love. Jennet in fact "dies" when she faints at the end of Act II. The fate of death at the stake with which she is threatened is not only that of a witch, but also that of a martyr. She is condemned both as a witch for her sins of witchcraft and as a pharmakos for the sins of society. Recognizing this, Thomas accuses Tyson:

What bliss to sin by proxy
And do penance by way of someone else! (27-28)

He goes on to assert his own superior qualifications for the role:

But here am I, the true phenomenon
Of acknowledged guilt, steaming with the blood
Of the pimp and the rag-and-bone man, Crime
Transparent (28).

The pattern of vicarious atonement is repeated in the death, disappearance and resurrection of Old Skipps which form a comic analogue for the passion of Christ. The analogy is reinforced by the atonement that his reappearance^a brings about and by the parody of the catechism and other liturgies which he recites. The pattern of death and rebirth, with the victim rising victorious, is repeated in several different keys to indicate a harmony of creation in which nature, man and God are seen to be engaged in a universal process which objectifies Fry's oft-quoted assertion that "we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery."⁷

The pattern of death and rebirth is closely related to the outside-inside-outside movement of the characters in relation to

⁷ Fry, "Comedy," 77.

Tyson's house. Both Thomas and Jennet enter on a quest involving an escape from a hostile outside world and a search for sanctuary. Alizon and Richard embark on a quest which starts with an escape from the house in search of "safety, peace,/And a good world" (79). Tyson's house is a transition point, a purgatory in which sins are expiated through punishment and suffering. The first word of the play, addressed by Thomas to Richard, is "Soul!" and a few moments later, Richard admits to being "Purgatory-colour" (6). Watts explains that a soul consigned to Purgatory

is delivered temporarily to the tortures of the demons, or to the fires which burn upon the mountain of Purgatory.... Yet the punishments of Purgatory are not always by fire. Some souls are sent to haunt the scenes of their crimes upon earth, or to undertake various labours symbolically connected with their misdeeds. Although their tortures are of an agony far more extreme than we can imagine, they nevertheless enjoy the consolations and ministrations of the angels, as well as the clear certainty of eventual Heaven.⁸

The purgatorial nature of Tyson's house is well indicated by the threatened fires for Jennet and the "blazing log" which causes Margaret to rush in at the beginning of Act II crying:

Who has the tongs?
The tongs, Hebble, the tongs, dear! Sweet
Elijah, we shall all go up in flames! (37)

The burning log is comically confused with the torturing of Thomas who has, however, only been put "to the merest thumbscrew" (36)--a symbolic punishment, perhaps, for one who is guilty of "prising open ribs" (20). The later mock-punishment of making him

⁸ Watts, p. 214.

spend
 The evening joyously, sociably, taking part
 In the pleasures of his fellow men (61),

is even more appropriate for one whose sin is to deny life.

Richard is also punished in an appropriate manner by being made to go down on his knees and scrub the floor for rebellion. Purgatorial overtones are further established by the demonic nature of Humphrey and Nicholas. Humphrey is "very nearly black./Swart" (6), and falls "like Lucifer" (11) into the flower bed. Thomas calls Nicholas "Nick," a common euphemism for the devil, and the two brothers, like the Fipps brothers in The Boy with a Cart, function as minor tormentors. The "ministrations of angels" are clearly represented by the saintly Chaplain with his "angel" viol. The "certainty of eventual heaven" is implicit in the comic mode which despite the threat of danger and pain indicates a certain happy outcome by its tone. The outside world is ambiguous. At first it is "festering with damnation" and possessed by a "hooting and howling" mob, but the garden and peaceful evening indicate the possibility of tranquility. For Richard and Alizon, escape into the outside world is one into a blissful paradise, but Thomas and Jennet are less naive in their expectations. Thomas recognizes that despite their love, "the world's not changed" (96), and Jennet admits:

The world is looking frozen
 And forbidding under the moon (97).

Finally they depart through the garden and into the world much like Milton's Adam and Eve, "to begin again." The pattern of movement

through Tyson's house is both a physical and a moral or spiritual action. The overtones of Purgatory, like the patterns of death and rebirth and sin and redemption, indicate the operation of several interrelated mythical patterns.

Before the mythic levels of Lady can be examined, it is necessary to add a fourth category to the three noted in Chapter Four (p.75). In addition to legend, fairy tale and religious myth, the archetypal myth--spring in this case--must be included. "The indomitable/Perseverance of Persephone" has already been partly discussed in its aspects of death and rebirth. John Woodbury points out that "on the level of plot, the form is the tension and final reconciliation of a romantic spring myth and a Christian myth of redemption."⁹ As in Phoenix, there is a fusion of Christian and pagan myth. Woodbury identifies the pagan as an Orpheus myth in which a prince, Richard, rescues a fairy princess, Alizon, from an ogre. In Malinowski's categories, this is obviously the fairy-tale level. This sub-plot is a parallel action to the main plot and is integrated with it at the point when Richard and Alizon, in the course of their elopement, discover Old Skipps and feel obliged to return to save Jennet. Thomas and Jennet belong to the demonic world: "They say he's the Devil" (30), declares Humphrey, and she is assigned to it as a suspected witch. Spring ambiguously brings forth both the nun and the witch, and inevitably

⁹ John Woodbury, "The Witch and the Nun," Manitoba Arts Review, X, iii (Winter, 1956), 43.

Eliot's April, "breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land," is recalled in the threat of pain and suffering facing Jennet. April also mixes "memory and desire" by reminding Margaret of her youth, "young in and out of season.... What a martyrdom it was!" (10), by arousing lechery in Tyson, a "belated visit of the wanton flesh" (72), and by disturbing him when Jennet appears in Margaret's old dress--"I am disturbing/His days gone by," she declares, and "I rustle with his memories!" (70). The spring myth is essentially a fertility myth, and the play contains a plethora of appropriate images: the fertilizing rain; references to conception and birth; "Machinations of nature;/As April does to the earth" (7); the cuckoo, "hatching egg after egg" (11); the creation, when "vastiness lusted...And the mountain belly of Time laboured/ And brought forth man" (32-33); the moon,

a circumambulating aphrodisiac
Divinely subsidized to provoke the world
Into a rising birth-rate (68-69);

and many more. Roy identifies three underlying rituals, exorcism (witchcraft), invocation (prayers) and fertility (nuptials).¹⁰

Each ritual has both Christian and pagan associations. The exorcism of evil can be either a public or a private act pertaining to tribal rites, community conscience as in the case of witchcraft, or individual purification as, for example, required of an initiate prior to the sacrament of baptism.¹¹ The sacrament of baptism is

¹⁰ Roy, "Structure....," pp. 145-146.

¹¹ Watts, pp. 170 ff.

made explicit in a typical fusion of the Christian and the pagan:

Thomas looks outside as the Chaplain exits, and declares:

You would think by the holy scent of it our friend
Had been baptizing the garden. But it's only
The heathen rainfall (48).

The ritual of prayer is a sophistication of primitive man's desire to engage supernatural agencies to help control his environment. Jennet apologizes for breaking "in on the quiet circle of a family/ At prayers" (22), and the form of prayer that develops is as much a pagan invocation--especially to the much-mentioned moon--as a Christian address to God. Recognition of sin and confession form an essential part of prayer, and both are present in the play, although in line with the general comic treatment they are parodied in Thomas's false avowals and confessions and in the interpretation placed upon Jennet's innocent words. Prayer is implicit in the victims' desire for a state of grace, and the final line of the play is that of the benediction, "And God have mercy on our souls" (97), which is also, ironically, the final part of a judge's pronouncement of the death sentence. Skipps' drunken garbling of the catechism and other liturgies repeats the pattern of prayer. The parody here, as in the case of Thomas's confessions, satirizes the speaker rather than the form, and Skipps' lines recall those of Shakespeare's fools, whose "madness" contains much method: for example, "Peace on earth and good tall women. And give us our trespassers as trespassers will be prosecuted for us" (93). The third ritual of fertility has already been discussed in terms of

birth and spring. The opening of the play coincides with the arrival of Alizon, first assigned to "marry God," but now destined for Humphrey. Act III takes place with the festivities to celebrate the forthcoming wedding occurring off-stage, but the true unions are formed not by arrangement but by love and consent. Marriage of the lovers is implicit in the mutual dedication of Alizon and Richard and Jennet and Thomas, rather than explicit in any final komos as in As You Like It, for example. Fry is working in a mode that Northrop Frye terms "ironic comedy" where the "hero does not transform a humorous society but simply runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before."¹² This pattern may well help to account for the immediate popularity of Lady in 1949 when, sickened by war and the threats of the cold war, people desired escape but were not prepared to convulse a society struggling to renew itself after the second major upheaval in thirty years. However, through a complex of allied myths and rituals, the play expresses a positive assertion of rebirth at all levels of existence, which, combined with its zest for life, endues it with qualities that enable it to transcend the immediate historical context of its first appearance, and to have claims to universal appeal.

As suggested in the opening remarks to this chapter, the language in Lady is consistently more lyrical than in the earlier plays. The song-like effusions of Thomas in particular set a tone appropriate to the spring mood of the play. For example:

¹² Frye, Anatomy, p. 180.

Out here is a sky so gentle
 Five stars are ventured on it. I can see
 The sky's pale belly glowing and growing big,
 Soon to deliver the moon. And I can see
 A glittering smear, the snail-trail of the sun
 Where it crawled with its golden shell into the hills.
 A darkening land sunk into prayer
 Lucidly in dewdrops of one syllable,
 Nunc dimittis. I see twilight, madam (49).

Raymond Williams condemns Fry's verse because it is a mere "embellishment" of the "familiar naturalist [sic] comedy," and does not represent "an innovation in dramatic method."¹³ Fry denies the accusation of "embellishment." He declares: "I have meant the ornament to be, dramatically or comedically, an essential part of my meaning.... I think the words are as exact to my purpose as I could make them at the time of writing."¹⁴ Williams appears to demand that verse drama should be an entirely different form, whereas what Fry intends and does is to adapt an existing form by adding an extra dimension to the structure.¹⁵ Alternatively, it may be argued that Fry revives the style of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Jacob Adler, in his article "Shakespeare and Christopher Fry,"¹⁶ points out Fry's many Shakespearian echoes--the seasonal focus, the fondness for orphaned innocent girls, the skill in vituperation, the delightful imaginary and Arcadian world with its

¹³ Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 288.

¹⁴ Fry, An Experience..., p. 24.

¹⁵ See Chapter One, p. 21-22.

¹⁶ Jacob H. Adler, "Shakespeare and Christopher Fry," Educational Theatre Journal, XI (May, 1959), 85-98.

remote dangers, the similar situations--and stresses the extent to which sheer joy in language is an integral aspect of the mode. In Lady the gush of language, in addition to arousing the expectations of romantic comedy, expresses the gush of spring: its sheer pace, vitality and profusion establish an essential correlative to the mood or climate of the play. For example, the content of Thomas's opening lines, which describe a world "festering with damnation," condemn the flesh and dwell on death, reveal his character in the discrepancy between the pessimism of what he says and the vitality with which he says it. His speech is brilliantly counterbalanced by Alizon's lines:

Coming in from the light, I am all out at the eyes.
 Such white doves were paddling in the sunshine
 And the trees were as bright as a shower of broken glass.
 Out there, in the sparkling air, the sun and the rain
 Clash together like the cymbals clashing
 When David did his dance. I've an April blindness.
 You're hidden in a cloud of crimson catherine wheels (4).

This passage moves at a pace because of the repeated runs of unstressed syllables--"C^omⁱng iⁿ f^rom t^he lⁱght, I a^m a^ll o^ut a^t t^he e^yes"--but are slowed down for emphasis by the alliteration of "d" and "c" in the last two lines. Williams criticizes some of the images in this passage for "straining after effect...because no real balance of imagination is achieved in the language."¹⁷ But the images in this passage, while perhaps lacking profundity, do portray the impact of spring in a vivid visual manner appropriate to the speaker. Roy states that

¹⁷ Williams, p. 291.

the whole of the imagery in The Lady's Not For Burning forms three dominant clusters, all taking their sources from metonyms of the sun's attributes: light-dark, heat-cold, and wet-dry. The interaction between polarities, Fry's habit of inverting traditional value symbolism, and the presence of the love-death paradox all reinforce the imaginative complexity of the imagery as a whole.¹⁸

Alizon's speech bears out many of Roy's observations: the light-dark of the sunshine and blindness; the wet-dry of rain and sun which also illustrates the interaction of polarities; and the love-death theme which is suggested in the story of David. This last theme is invariably associated with the dominant spring motif of palingenesis:

A world unable to die sits on and on
In spring sunlight, hatching egg after egg...(11),

and

I can see
The sky's pale belly glowing and growing big,
Soon to deliver the moon (49),

and in the womb image when Nicholas declares that Jennet carries

a sense of that cavernous
Night folded in night, where Creation sleeps
And dreams of men (81).

The natural cycle of birth, death and rebirth is constantly associated with the human condition where love is the fertilizing agent with a role parallel to that of the sun and rain. All are bound together in one mystery of existence which give us

Creation's vast and exquisite
Dilemma! where altercation thrums
In every granule of the Milky Way,
Persisting still in the dead sleep of the moon (54).

¹⁸ Roy, "Structure....," p. 136.

The images constantly embrace antitheses with the result that totally different orders are related and shown to be as significant as each other in the complex of creation. For example, "the snail-trail of the sun" (49), "a brief rainfall of diamonds" (67), "the seraphic strawberry" (58), and the juxtaposition in Margaret's report:

I'm sure
There was blood in the gutter from somebody's head
Or else it was sunset in a puddle (39).

Characteristically, Fry works in images which reveal the paradoxical nature of existence:

Nothing can be seen
In the thistle-down, but the rough-head thistle comes.
Rest in that riddle. I can pass to you
Generations of roses in this wrinkled berry (56).

The life-death antitheses in such images are certainly not merely embellishing the play, but are carefully integrated with action, character and themes. Similarly, the cosmic images which connect man's life with the universe reinforce a metaphysic which sees man as a part of nature and in tune with its rhythms. For example, to feel a passion which endures after death

is the sort of thing
That causes sun-spots, and the lord knows what
Infirmities in the firmament (57),

and men undergo "Machinations of nature;/As April does to the earth" (7). Fry loves to indulge in word games which provide no small measure of the entertainment in Lady. He uses alliteration freely, especially for additional effect in flows of invective

such as:

You bubble-mouthing, fog-blathering,
Chin-chuntering, chap-flapping, liturgical,
Turgidical, base old man! (27)

Thomas is undoubtedly Fry's spokesman when he declares, "What a wonderful thing is metaphor" (3). Perhaps the best example of sustained metaphor is Jennet's account of her father:

When he was born he gave an algebraic
Cry; at one glance measured the cubic content
Of that ivory cone his mother's breast
And multiplied his appetite by five.
So he matured by a progression, gained
Experience by correlation, expanded
Into a marriage by contraction, and by
Certain physical dynamics
Formulated me (51).

Such use of metaphor, invective, puns like "the seine of insanity," verbal jokes like "Sanctus fumus," are all part of the verbal fireworks which are displayed partly for their own sake but primarily because the language not only asserts and reinforces the various themes, but also plays a leading role in conveying the dominant impression of the play--the vitality of life.

Fry's zest for life is essentially concerned with the individual per se rather than in relation to society and its problems. As indicated in the conclusion to Chapter Three (p. 71), he exhibits a characteristic twentieth century existential concern for the fulfillment of the individual. The characters in Lady exhibit a range of attempts at self-definition. Richard, Alizon, Thomas, Jennet, and even Nicholas give details of their birth in order to establish their identity. Some have roles imposed by others:

Jennet is labelled a witch and treated as a scapegoat; Alizon is dedicated to be a nun and later bride for Humphrey; and Richard is designated a servant. Thomas adopts several masks which are removed in turn, miles gloriosus, devil, or devil's advocate, and cynic. His death wish has been brought about by a loss of identity. He is disillusioned with the world that gives him a name that is of "no earthly use" (2), then sends him "unidentifiably/Floundering in Flanders" (20). He asserts the physical evidence of this existence in parody of Descartes, "I breathe,/I spit, I am" (4), and is infuriated by Tyson's official attitude:

As far as I'm concerned
You don't exist....

.
Have you filled in the necessary forms?-(17)

Thomas attempts to define himself by the action of murder, but this fails as there is no evidence of the act. His "gesture of death" (96) may not change the world, but it is a self-definition by the assertion of choice, and in its certainty, however negative, a proof of his existence. Jennet is faced clearly with a self-defining choice when Humphrey proposes his solution, "an exchange of compliments" (84). Like Thomas, she prefers to die rather than compromise the beliefs and feelings by which she defines herself. She tells the insensitive Humphrey:

I am interested
In my feelings. I seem to wish to have some importance
In the play of time. If not,
Then sad was my mother's pain, sad my breath,
Sad the articulation of my bones,
Sad, sad my alacritous web of nerves,

Woefully, woefully sad my wondering brain,
 To be shaped and sharpened into such tendrils
 Of anticipation, to feed the swamp of space.
 What is deep, as love is deep, I'll have
 deeply. What is good, as love is good,
 I'll have well. Then if time and space
 Have any purpose, I shall belong to it (85).

In this passage, Fry outlines the existential dilemma in which man, faced with the awful possibility of nothingness, seeks self-definition and meaning for his existence in terms of his own awareness in a context of space and time. Both Jennet and Thomas reject the intellectualized and collective life, and by refusing to conform assert their own authentic existence. In Sartre's terms, self-definition cannot be achieved adequately by definition through "the other", but Fry shows how it can be aided by relationship with another, particularly one who possesses charismatic qualities. Jennet is a pivotal figure who acts like a catalyst to precipitate awareness in those she meets. No character in the play is unaffected by her presence, which even Margaret recognizes has "a kind of enchantment" (23). Thomas possesses similar qualities. Richard thinks he may be "a little drunk," but says "I like you as much as I've liked anybody" (2), and even Humphrey admits, "I strongly resent finding you slightly pleasant" (64). Thomas's appeal lies in his irrepressible, harlequin-like joie-de-vivre which keeps him "nodding in" with his wit. It is by no means unusual to find that where there is a great zest for life and a high value placed on the sanctity of the individual, there is a complementary preoccupation with death. Thomas's personality

exhibits this duality, which is characteristic of Fry's whole approach. The life-death antithesis is the central mystery of existence, and for Fry its resolution lies in increasing individual awareness of the wonder and value of existence coupled with a faith that recognizes the manifestations of God in the universe. Lady, like Phoenix, is not ostensibly religious, but it throbs with the religious impulse, and the patterns of action, character and language indicate that Christian assumptions of love, sacrifice, atonement, grace, and salvation underlie the play.

Chapter Seven

Venus Observed: Eros

Venus Observed was commissioned by Sir Lawrence Olivier for the fashionable opening of the St. James Theatre in January, 1950. Its country house setting and sophisticated style place it firmly in the West End tradition of modern mannered comedy, following such exponents as Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan and N.C. Hunter. For Fry, it marks the end of a development away from directly religious concerns towards lighter social comedy. In The Lady's Not for Burning it was noted how the religious impulse informs the structure of the play and how the temporal patterns are analogous to the eternal. The same double plane is evident in Venus despite the surface tendency to whimsy which invites dismissal of the play as mere light entertainment. It is a mark of Fry's genius that he is capable of underpinning his improbable plot and apparently casual high spirits with a structural framework that once again incorporates mythical and sacramental elements in both action and language.

The action takes place at the Duke of Altair's country home, Stellmere Park, but not in the customary location of drawing room and terrace. The scenes alternate in a manner reminiscent of The Firstborn between the Observatory, one-time bedroom of the Duke at the top of the house, and the Temple of the Ancient Virtues in the grounds, where the wife of the third Duke

played the part of the Delphic Oracle,
 A way she had of informing the Duke of her pregnancy,
 Which she did on twenty-seven separate occasions.¹

The name Stellmere indicates the antithesis which these two locations represent: on the one hand the detachment, isolation and essential loneliness of the heavens, and on the other the fecund involvement in the life process of the world. The Duke is a Prospero figure who has withdrawn into the "magic" of his island-observatory, and who wishes to manipulate the lives of others.² The movement of the play shows him returning to society, but also resigning his power to youth, to Miranda/Perpetua and Ferdinand/Edgar. As in A Phoenix Too Frequent and Lady, love is the motivating force which brings about the change. Rosabel recognizes that in his observatory the Duke travels "farther and farther/Away from living people" (21). She becomes obsessed by the urge to destroy the observatory, because

Nothing matters
 Except that he should be made to feel. He hurts
 Whoever he touches. He has to be touched by fire
 To make a human of him, and only a woman
 Who loves him can dare to do it (57).

The fire she lights is the culminating event of the play and its central symbol. Here again is the phoenix symbol which associates fire and love, death and rebirth. The pristine nature of love presented in Lady is somewhat modified by the mellow, autumnal

¹ Christopher Fry, Venus Observed (London, 1950), p. 36. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

² Adler, 89-90.

character of the Duke, but Rosabel's feeling for him and the compulsion that drives Edgar and Perpetua together share the spring-like quality of Lady. The Duke now may be capable of no more than a comfortable "sharing two solitudes" (99), but once he had experienced a love that was intuitive, "high above the spires/Of common sense" (61), and he is aware of the pervasiveness of love which may come "on us while we walk, or in mid-sentence" (61). In Venus the concept of agapé, the love of humanity, which becomes the dominant theme in The Dark Is Light Enough is developed alongside eros. The Duke declares that Reedbeck's love "absolves him/From any defect on earth" (68), and the Duke's "grace" is based on understanding, tolerance and love of humanity. Hilda's discovery of "Roderick-phenomenon" (92) is a complementary recognition of the essential uniqueness of every man which inevitably leads to the love of humanity for its own sake. As though to counterpoint the shift to agapé Fry places more emphasis than before on the erotic aspect of individual love: the title suggests both the erotic and the scientific; the bedroom, used for "experiments," now contains the telescope which has an inevitable phallic association; and the Duke's mistresses have each provided ambiguous "moments of revelation" (22). The erotic is also implicit in the sexual rivalry between the Duke and Edgar, in the judgement of Paris, in the archery episode, and in such images as "the copulation of Jove" (17) for the eclipse.

Agapé and eros are both recognized as part of the life process

on earth. The Duke's desire to marry is an indication that his "heavenly" isolation is an unnatural state of existence for man.

In what amounts to a confession to Edgar, he declares:

I exist to know that I exist
Interrogatively....

.
What is the note of this interrogation?
Loneliness. The note, my son, is loneliness (52).

The pattern of movement from isolation to integration is characteristic of comedy. Frequently, the comic pattern is one in which the "odd man out" is isolated, then forgiven for his sins and reintegrated with society. The process of isolation is one of conflict. In Venus a fragmented group is depicted in which each member creates his own isolation through his dominant "humour" which brings him into conflict with one or more of the others. Most of the characters are as isolated as the Duke, and each moves as he does towards a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life. This movement is coupled with a quest in search of the complete self. Despite the Duke's mellow years, he is still in a state of prolonged youth, "the same boy...not a day older" (11), and his desire to rediscover love is in large part a search for his own identity. The play traces his transition from boyhood to maturity as much as it does that of his son. Edgar is introduced as the Duke's "extension in time" (14), he feels himself "a redundancy," lacking in individual identity and isolated--as his preference for the company of the stables indicates. Spurred by love he asserts himself in the archery contest and finally, in

winning Perpetua, he discovers both his own identity and an end to isolation in an involvement with others. Perpetua follows a similar path. Isolated, and with no identity other than a number, she tells how she left America, and "came home to England/Simply to trace myself, in my own way" (31). Her passage through the fire in which fear and love become confused leads to a paradox of self-hood and interdependence:

No one is separate from another; how difficult
That is. I move, and the movement goes from life
To life all round me. And yet I have to be
Myself. And what is my freedom becomes
Another person's compulsion. What are we to make
Of this dilemma? (95-96)

Several other characters find themselves isolated and in conflict: Reedbeck suffers from "a myopia in [his] moral vision" (87) which scandalizes and antagonizes his son; Dominic, the "guilt-corroded child" (87), whose over-conscious morality leads him to "think more of the sin than of the sinner" (93), finds himself alone in his views and opposed by his father, his sister and the Duke; the Reddleman's aggressiveness, which is a compensation for his lost courage, antagonizes ex-burglar Bates; Rosabel becomes obsessed with hate for the telescope, and her sense of guilt after the fire drives her away from the Duke, whom she loves; and Hilda's habit of suppressing her feelings has led to a superficial life with "no particular heights or depths" (45), an isolation of apathy. Except in the case of Hilda, whose reconciliation to Roderick is an externally imposed event, the "humour" of each character is

cured and his isolation ended as a result of the organic evolution of the plot. Rosabel's fire effectively brings the Duke down to earth and humanity. In the course of his attempted seduction of Perpetua he reveals his knowledge of Reedbeck's peccadilloes, and when the fire temporarily unites him with Perpetua, he reveals the existence of the document legalizing the agent's "percentages." Reedbeck's errors are thereby corrected and, forgiven, he avoids the threat of social banishment. Dominic's realization that "ethics are very difficult" (94) and his admission of responsibility for Perpetua's danger indicate the possibility of his redemption and future integration. The fire enables the Reddleman to regain his lost courage, Bates to justify his compulsion to climb ladders, and in the aftermath of general forgiveness, the two servants are reconciled. The resolution of the plot, therefore, brings the characters into a state of harmony in which each has not only discovered his true self but has also moved from isolation to integration with society.

In keeping with the autumnal mood of the play, the conclusion is quiet, almost elegiac. Despite the promise of spring in the union of Edgar and Perpetua, winter and death must come before renewal. The autumn climate is established early in the play. The action takes place on "the twenty-ninth of October...[when] The leaves [are] transfigured by the thought of death" (5). The Duke declares:

We're here this morning to watch
The sun annulled and renewed, and to sit affectionately
Over the year's dilapidation. 'Mellow'
Is the keynote of the hour (13).

The eclipse pattern of the sun's "death" and "renewal" is a phenomenon associated with the cycle of the seasons and with the sexual "act itself.../The copulation of Jove, magnificent in/Mid-air" (17). When Perpetua arrives, the Duke apologizes that

We have only autumn
To offer you, England's moist and misty devotion,
But spring may come in time to reconcile you
If you'll wait so long (25).

The Duke has reached the autumnal years of his life, he has begun to "decline with the sun" (12), so that his offer of autumn to Perpetua foreshadows his offer of union with her. Ironically, spring is present in the Duke's "extension in time," Edgar, just as it is inevitable in the cycle of seasons. The eclipse of the sun/son is a temporary event in which "Nature/Is...made a fool of" (18), and the natural order must reassert itself. As in Lady, Fry constantly interrelates the human and the natural, so that when the natural is described, the human is implied. Surveying the rural scene, the Duke sees his own condition as though in a mirror:

mile by mile

It's all a unison of ageing,
The landscape's all in tune, in a falling cadence,
All decaying (97),

and his love is recognized as a last fire that flames like the
colours of autumn, "a golden desuetude" (98). There is a sense

of desperation in the Duke's attempt to rekindle the fires of love which is paralleled by Rosabel's desperate cry, "He has to be touched by fire" (57), her determination to "blaze a trail" for him and her act of firing the East Wing. When the fire occurs, the Duke seeks to transform the pain into a phoenix and turtle "union/Of beauty born and beauty reft away" (73), but he is unable to arouse a reciprocal romantic passion in Perpetua, and when Edgar invites her to "go/And see how the last of the flames dance down/ To sleep among the ruins" (97), the Duke's phase of love and life is explicit.

At another level, the fire functions as a process of purification in a sub-structure of sin, penance and absolution. In describing the forthcoming eclipse, the Duke prophesies:

darkness will cover
The face of the earth. In that moment
All women will be as one (3).

The Biblical echoes suggest a Day of Judgement which is reinforced when Reedbeck says "tonight feels very latter-day;/Wrath of God" (87). Each character undergoes an exposure of his sins, which are virtually synonymous with his humour: the Duke's egotism, Perpetua's destructiveness, Reedbeck's cheating, Dominic's guilt complex, and Hilda's denial of feeling. Several confessions take place in which the person acknowledges his sins and asks forgiveness. Perpetua confesses the history of her revolt after shooting the apple (30), and later, recognizing her error in believing that "fear could seem/Like love" (88), asks the Duke "to forgive her."

The Duke plays a dual role in the process of atonement. Although he is a sinner whose redemption from egotism is traced in the action, he is also constantly addressed as "your Grace" and dispenses forgiveness in a divine manner. His isolation, association with the heavens and qualities of eternal youth, help to suggest the attributes of a god. In a display of grace, he forgives all things:

I forgive
Both of us for being born of the flesh,

 ...I forgive even
The unrevealing revelation of love

 ...I forgive
Everything...(89).

The effect of the fire is that it purges sin: it puts the Reddleman "back/In the way of salvation" (74), and the remorse it arouses in Rosabel leads her to confess the crime to Dominic. In turn, even he recognizes he "had fallen into error" (78), and he thanks her for revealing it to him. After the fire, the "eschatalogical rain" (2) starts to fall, and the motif of baptism and renewal is repeated when the Duke, on lighting the lanterns, declares, "The first astonishment/Of creation" (83). His words repeat those of his scene with Perpetua in the Observatory (59) to suggest the recurring pattern of creative renewal. The fire is also one of several trials which suggest the ordeals of a grail-like quest or initiation. Edgar's steps to maturity involve first a judgement of Paris, in which he appears to fail as he rescinds his choice, and second the archery contest in which he challenges and out-

shoots his father. In the third, vital contest for Perpetua's love, he defeats his father and thus completes his initiation into manhood. Edgar is not involved in the actual fire, only in the metaphorical fire of love, but his final words indicate a fusion of the fire-light-love cluster:

PERPETUA. I'll find my way to bed.

EDGAR. I shall take the liberty to light you there (97). These undertones of sin and atonement and quest and initiation suggest multiple levels of meaning beneath the surface action. They are further expanded by numerous mythological associations. The Duke, whose divine possibilities have been noted, is associated with Saturn, Edgar with Paris and the "three handsome women" (1) with Aphrodite, Hera and Athene. Perpetua "emerged/Like Venus from the sea" (28), her name suggests eternal womanhood, "any girl: Perpetua/Perpetual" (65), and she sees herself a rival to Artemis. The myths of the phoenix, Paris, Venus, Artemis, Cupid, Endymion, and Saturn, place the action within a context of the timeless battle between the sexes, and combine with the Christian pattern of sin and salvation to provide the play with dimensions that expand it beyond the frontiers of an action merely involving character types in an unusual love triangle.

A further structural dimension is provided by language and symbol. The cosmic imagery, which may appear incidental or decorative in Lady, is now given direct dramatic relevance by the observatory motif. It is coupled with elemental images of earth,

mankind. The element of fire is a property of the "brandishing sun" and provides the symbolic force, associated with love, that is both fuser and energiser, causing the sun to incite "the earth/ To revolution and rotation--" (10). The Duke's observatory indicates man's Faustian quest for knowledge, but his relative insignificance is suggested by Reedbeck:

...here we are
Looking such weak vessels and so temporary
Among the four terrible elements...(87).

The observatory motif results naturally in a cluster of star images. The stars share the qualities of light and fire associated with the sun, and are part of the eternal order, which transcends time. The creation was accompanied by "An access of starlight" (59), and Perpetua, viewing Saturn, realizes that she is looking on the same star that shone on both Noah's ark and Charlemagne (60). The continued influence of the stars is suggested in Reedbeck's belief that Perpetua's beauty is due to "The state of the zodiac when she was conceived" (41). The Duke possessively refers to "my stars." He associates himself with "Senator Saturn, white-/ Hot with gravity" (60), and Perpetua with

The star which, when it's rising, is called Venus,
Setting is Lucifer, the goddess
Graduating into demon (72).

The language constantly associates man with the processes of nature, particularly in passages as noted which relate the Duke and the "year's dilapidation." The dissolution theme extends from nature to the Duke and to man's civilization. Perpetua has

rebelled against "the unsightly,/The gimcrack, the tedious, the hideous, the spurious,/The harmful" (30), and she sets out to destroy them. Her father similarly desires "civilization...you can keep your progress" (10). He believes that the Duke's property "can have more beauty" in his hands than in the Duke's. Reedbeck's scheme, like Perpetua's, is revealed to be folly, a "myopia in [his] moral vision" (87), and the Duke's attempt to defy the natural order ends in similar failure. Dissolution is part of the natural process, but so is renewal--provided that the new naturally supplants the old as part of a continuing process, not as a violent upheaval. "You must make good before you break the bad" (31), Perpetua discovers. Fry's imagery and patterns of association assert that humanity shares in the continuing processes of nature and of the year,

whose arrow
Singing from the April bow crossed over the width
Of summer straight for the gold (39)

of autumn. The focus in Venus is on the autumnal stage, but despite the fact that the decaying landscape does not have "to hear/
The quips of spring...[or] bear the merry mirth of May" (93), renewal is implicit in the cycle--and explicit in the union of Edgar and Perpetua. Renewal is further indicated by the almost symbolic movement of action in time through a night of trial to dawn with its prospect of a new day and new life. The same sequence has been observed in Firstborn, Phoenix and Lady. By the time the potentially tragic scene occurs both the action and

the language have established a comic tone. This tone is primarily a matter of language, and as pointed out in the previous chapter (p. 139), the style of verbal profusion has its parallels in Shakespearean romantic comedy and helps to create the appropriate expectations. Edgar, given the task of choosing his mother, says "I sweat with embarrassment" (1), and the Duke's reply, "You have been too much with horses," sets the pattern of verbal humour that characterizes the play. The Duke's verbal facility is a prime weapon in his game of seduction. He admits,

Syntax, like original sin, grows vastier
In the dark (59),

and with delicious irony, Fry gives Perpetua the weapon of words in self-defence. The Duke advises her "To use long sentences" (62) in order to feel "the fumbling in the quiver" as love disturbs the train of thought. Perpetua meets his challenge by reciting an "endlessly moving" sentence that parodies his manner, and because of its smoothness, denies any feeling of love for him:

DUKE. Now point me out the comma
Where you loved me.

PERPETUA. Not at any.

DUKE. Let me see;
Was there a colon somewhere?

PERPETUA. Perhaps one;
But if so we passed it without any trouble
Of any sort (63).

The sentence itself is an example of the range of ideas that words can encompass and relate, thereby suggesting the identity of

diverse things. Writing on the qualities of poetry, Fry declares:

In prose we convey the eccentricity of things; in poetry their concentricity, the sense of relationship between them: a belief that all things express the same identity, are all contained in one discipline of revelation; the bird and tree are aspects one of the other, and both belong to the form in which we live as men, to the pattern of moral law and the shape of historic event. No event is understandable in its prose sense alone. Its ultimate meaning (that is to say, the complete life of the event, seen in its eternal context) is a poetic meaning.³

The manipulation of words, images and symbols is as much an "action" in the theatre as the manoeuvring of characters in conflict. It involves repetitions and the reordering of associations because only by keeping the process in constant motion can the total involvement of all things be shown.

Just as language explores meaning in a succession of variations, so patterns of action are worked and reworked in order to explore their possibilities. Fry's fondness for doubling situations, actions or relationships has already been noted in the earlier plays. For example, there are the two parallel groups in Firstborn, and the two pairs of lovers and the repeated "deaths" in Lady. In Venus, the relationship between the Duke and Edgar is paralleled by that between Reedbeck and Dominic. The Duke dominates his son, and in a comic inversion of the natural order makes him perform a "judgement of Paris" and choose his own mother. Edgar is reluctant to play "the heavy son" but does tend to be somewhat

³ Christopher Fry, Unpublished Lecture on "Communication" to a Conference of Deans and Provosts of England, Chichester Cathedral (Oct., 1968), pp. 9-10.

puritanical in his attitude and condemnatory towards his father. Dominic, as his name suggests, tries to dominate his father and the relationship inverts that between the Duke and Edgar because Dominic imposes demands on his father. The relationships are exploited both for their comic effects and for their exemplification of a recurring human situation in which, as the Duke expresses it, "the generations join/In a life-and-death struggle"(51). Another repetition is the reappearance of light, first after the eclipse when the sun comes out, then on the two occasions when the Duke lights the lamps. The lighting patterns also extend to the fire and the lighting of love's flames, and reinforce the theme of renewal. Another repeated action is that of shooting, first when Perpetua destroys the apple and then in the archery scene. Perpetua's shot is a setback to the Duke's plans of conquest, and foreshadows Edgar's arrow which symbolizes the challenge of youth. Perpetua's rebellion and destruction of things she hates are repeated by Rosabel, and the same sense of aggression born out of frustration is comically repeated in the Reddleman's assaults on Bates. As noted, confessions recur throughout the play, with subsequent absolutions. There are also several occasions where thanks are given for mercies received. Reedbeck offers "only thanksgiving" (4) for the messenger who brings the news of Perpetua's return, and then acknowledges his "astounding fortune/To beget her" (5). The Duke's recollections of his "vintage years of love" (1) and of his marriage are also expressed in a tone of thanksgiving,

as is his celebration of nature's beauty and the "rich world of sensation" (97) he has enjoyed. The repetitions function as unifying devices in the play, emphasize themes and help to suggest the cyclic and repetitive nature of existence.

In addition to certain patterns of life, the play posits certain special qualities of life that Fry asserts consistently throughout his work. The Duke's speech at the end of Act I focuses on the "wonder of existence" theme when he declares that he sees "nothing strange" in the day's events:

If we can move and talk
Under the sun at all, we must have accepted
The incredible as commonplace long ago (32).

Later, he is

amazed
That we can live in such a condition of mystery
And not be exasperated out of our flesh (81).

Awareness of the incredible nature of existence increases with contemplation of the universe, and as Perpetua realizes,

You can't
Throw someone against the sky and not expect
A certain vapour of magic to condense
In moisture on their lashes (61).

The Duke is both aware of the magic and in possession of some of the quality of magic himself. All-Hallows Eve, especially, is a night "when magic's wisdom/Comes rolling in across our sedate equation" (64), and when they test the old superstition of a mirror possessing magic on that night, it is proved right. Man's problem is to find a place for himself within the universe with its

paradox of observable fact and unfathomable explanation. The Duke declares that

being alive is a question, heaven-bent
For an answer, and the question is a man's
Estrangement in a world
Where everything else conforms (53).

Man's sense of his separateness from nature concurrent with his recognition that he is also part of it, offers another paradox, as does the conflict between his need to find and assert his own identity and the necessity of living interrelatedness with others. He needs "the courage that makes a person come true" (57), but cannot achieve a true identity in isolation because "no one is separate from another" (96). Because of the paradoxes and mysteries with which man is surrounded, he must exercise the human qualities of tolerance and understanding and must strive for the divine qualities of forgiveness and love. This emphasis on the theme of forgiveness and love reasserts the faith expressed in Phoenix and Lady that the way to individual fulfillment lies in redemption through love: the religious patterns that underlie the secular mode of action indicate how man must take his model from the divine, and the implications of the action are that by doing so, he will not only achieve a sense of his own identity but will also come to an awareness of his place within the cosmic frame and instead of being an observer, will become an integral part of it.

Chapter Eight

A Sleep of Prisoners: Exploration

The Religious Drama Association commissioned Fry to write a play to be performed in churches for the 1951 Festival of Britain. Fry accepted the challenge posed by such a setting, which would place severe limitations on the nature and scope of the play, and would demand a change in direction because his work since Thor, with Angels had become increasingly secular. In A Sleep of Prisoners Fry breaks away not only from the secular action back to the religious, but also from the mood or climate of comedy and from the structure that had served him so well in A Phoenix Too Frequent, The Lady's Not for Burning and Venus Observed, where language and setting had functioned to complement and resonate the action of a progressive plot. Sleep may be open to criticism on the grounds that it lacks progressive plot and that it places too great a demand on the actors who have to convey action almost entirely through language, and on the audience who have to respond to a verbally complex play without help of scenery, costume or props. However, when it is well performed these apparent deficiencies are obviated, as I shall show, by Fry's exploitation of the expectations aroused by a church setting, by his characteristic technique of repetition in both language and events, by the fusion of the modern and the Biblical, and by the unifying structure of the quest for meaning and for God.

Michael MacOwen, who became the first producer of Sleep, suggested that a play with the action set in a church would be most appropriate, and Fry relates that

in Burford in 1649, six Cromwellian soldiers were imprisoned in the church, and one carved his name on the font--Antony Sedley Prisner 1649. So the seed of "A Sleep" was sown.¹

Although the play can be performed in a regular theatre, the church setting is an important factor both in the demands and limitations it places on the author and in the appreciation of the play by reader or audience. The setting functions almost expressionistically to intensify the emotional content and to assert the author's point of view. The play is expressionistic also in its use of the dream sequences. As Strindberg says in his preface to A Dream Play, "anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist."² The aim of such drama is emotional and psychological, and the devices used have the dual function of heightening the emotions and exploring the psyche in depth. Fry's methods and intentions clearly show the expressionistic influence: recalling the early planning of the play, he declares:

It has always seemed to me that the differences and conflicts between men spring often...from the differences between the outward armour, the facades behind which we hide our spirits. Perhaps the design of the play could be to show first of all a group of men as they seemed on the surface to each other,

¹ Christopher Fry, "Drama in a House of Worship," New York Times, Sec. II (Oct. 14, 1951), 1.

² August Strindberg, Author's note to A Dream Play, Six Plays of Strindberg, tr. Elizabeth Sprigge (New York, 1965), p. 193.

and then let them sleep and dream, each man dreaming of the other three and himself, so that each character would be seen four times over.³

It would be wrong to assume that Fry's object is the exfoliation of character in the sense of "knowing" David or Peter as individuals. It is again the pattern of human action and interaction which concerns him. The figures are modern men re-enacting archetypal roles and the expressionistic exploration is combined with medieval mystery technique where the characters are either Biblical archetypes or abstractions. The names of the men in Sleep--King, Able, Adams--and the obvious humour which each represents, clearly indicate this tradition. Fry accepted the challenge of the imposed limitations and exploited them by recognizing the possibilities involved in a fusion of medieval and modern.

As in many modern plays--those of Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter, for example--plot is subordinate to situation. The incarceration of four military prisoners in a church provides a framework of reality for the dream sequences, which explore not only the situation and problems of the men but also those of everyman in the twentieth century. Fry declared:

I wanted to move from division to unity, to say that we are all souls in one sorrow, and above all to say that the answer is in ourselves...and that each individual has in him the elements of God.⁴

The movement towards unity is not, however, a progressive movement,

³ Fry, "Drama....," 1.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

nor is it progressively shown that "each individual has in him the elements of God." The pattern is closer to one of "theme and variations," in which the theme is stated in the first episode and the dream episodes are variations on it. Walter Kerr observes that

narrative is subordinate to moral or physical point...the action, instead of climbing to a resounding climax, begins over again no fewer than four times so that we may examine its spiritual implications from various points of view.⁵

There is little or no linear development. John Ferguson sees a message of hope in the optimistic progression of stories,⁶ and there is some evidence for this view in that Isaac is reprieved and the final dream ends in spiritual triumph, but Emil Roy's view of a "progression through variation"⁷ in which the initial crucial episode is reworked in the minds of the characters seems a more accurate analysis of the structure. This view agrees with Fry's own statement in the introductory letter addressed to his friend, Robert Gittings, in which he declares his belief "that progress is the growth of vision: the increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death."⁸ The progression is in the audience, who by sharing the writer's perceptions of the multivocal

⁵ Walter Kerr, Pieces of Eight (New York, 1957), p. 142.

⁶ John Ferguson, "Christopher Fry's A Sleep of Prisoners," English, X (Summer, 1954), 46.

⁷ Emil Roy, "Structure....," p. 223.

⁸ Christopher Fry, A Sleep of Prisoners (London, 1951), n.n. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

nature of one action are able to expand their own perceptions.

The episodic structure presents variations on the conflict between David King and Peter Able, who represent antithetical attitudes. David is the physical man, whose mode of living is action, and whose frustrations explode in violence. Peter is the passive, intellectual man who questions and derides, and releases his frustrations in words. Each role they play displays the antithetical qualities they possess or attitudes which these qualities create. Adams functions as the instrument of authority, divine or secular, and represents a third alternative of unquestioning obedience, of servility to the prevailing "necessity." The figure of Meadows is mainly symbolic: he is a paternal sage whose dream roles endow him with qualities of divine mystery and his final function is to reconcile the human conflict. The first scene establishes the fraternal conflict between David and Peter. The tensions of confinement exacerbate the hostility between them. Peter's passive acquiescence, his facility for making himself at home, his inability to get worked up about anything, and his derisive humour, provoke David into an attempt to throttle him, which is only prevented by the intervention of Adams and Meadows. Afterwards, David's concern--"I didn't hurt you, did I/Pete?" (7)--and penitence, indicated by the unlacing of Peter's boots and removing of his socks, reveal the potential of love which underlies the passions. The pattern of theme and variations leads to a very dense texture, for as well as establishing the conflict and pointing

the way to the resolution, the first scene introduces the material for the dream episodes and almost every line provides a motif that is reworked later in the play. For example, the play opens with Peter playing "Now the day is over" in the organ loft. David calls him down, and in answer to Peter's question, "Why, what for?" replies, "because I said so" (1). These details are repeated in Meadows' dream (12), and the unspoken words of the hymn foreshadow the darkness, the vision of the night and the purified awakening. Peter also plays "Three blind mice," an image indirectly echoed when Meadows/God urges Cain to "Run on...Can you feel [my words] carved on your body?" (19), and directly recalled in the fourth dream when Peter recites "Three blind mice of Gotham" (40), which associates the prisoners with the mice and with the three in the fire who are blinded by smoke (44). Other early details that are used later include the Biblical passages, especially the "sons of David" (3), the theme of the Fall--"Say 'Fall out' and watch me/Fall" (6), says Peter--and Adams' sleep-death association when he declares that Peter "Couldn't be more [asleep] if he died" (9). David's attempt to kill Peter is recognized by Meadows in the first dream as the archetypal fratricide, which is then re-enacted. King becomes Cain and Able becomes Abel. Meadows reluctantly sees himself in the role of God and Adams as his servant Adam who is lost, facing an unpredictable future for which he has "no instructions" (11). In David's dream, the conflict of brothers is transmuted into the father-son conflict of King David and Absalom,

and murder is distanced as a political assassination carried out by Joab/Adams. In Peter's dream, the father-son relationship is retained but the degree of conflict is muted. Peter/Isaac is a completely submissive victim, and David/Abraham acts out of compulsion, "history's wish," rather than out of passion. Nevertheless, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice another human being, by identification with the murder of Cain and assassination of Absalom, is equally condemned. The progression to optimism noted by John Ferguson is evident in the intervention of God through his angel-messenger Adams, and in the Christ associations of "Old Meadows,/ The donkey man" (34) and promise of the millenium. The three dreams of Meadows, David and Peter show that the passive man is not the only victim, that passion, necessity, expediency, compulsion, self-preservation--all the labels attached to actions to justify them--make victims of the agent as well as the sufferer. The final dream in which Adams, David and Peter become equal victims as Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego in the fire, shows all men as victims of one another: "The flames are men: all human. There's no fire!" (48). The optimism progresses to a climax of assertion by Meadows, whose final role is a fusion of prophet, God, Christ, and Man. Some critics have deplored that the variations in action culminate in a sermon. This view loses sight of the point stressed at the beginning of this chapter that the play was written for performance in churches, where a liturgical pattern of question and answer, sermon and final benediction--"God bless" (51)--is an appropriate

resolution of the drama. Wherever staged, it must evoke the atmosphere of a church, and following the climax of action and emotion in the fire, the verbal reinforcement of theme provides a transition from the dream climax in which the men are awakened to truth to the physical awakening at dawn.

In Sleep, Fry employs two prime strategies: the dream and the myth. The dream, as mentioned, frees the individual from the limits of time and space, and releases his psyche from the restrictions placed on it by the masks he wears during his waking hours. As Fry puts it in his introductory letter, the dreamer "speaks as at heart he is, not as he believes himself to be." The assumption is that in the dream a truer "self" is expressed. An aspect of the dream which is especially valuable for drama is the projection of other characters by the dreamer in roles which reveal his view of them, and thereby a further definition is obtained of the relationships seen in the waking action. Fry works dramatically rather than clinically with the dream process. He utilizes the freedom of place and time, and the "day residue" of events and ideas that are carried into dreams--the prisoners' march and the Bible stories--but within each dream he maintains a logical progression that is uncharacteristic of the dream state. The fluidity offered by the dream technique enables Fry to move freely in time (David's dream is even interrupted by a sequence in the present), and to merge present and past in action and in modes of expression. For example, Meadows/God urges Cain to

Run on, keep your head down, cross at the double
 The bursts of open day between the nights.
 My word is bring him in alive (19).

The modern battle image is used again when Adams/Joab "cuts
 [Absalom] down with a tommy gun" (25), and the ram to be sacrificed
 by Abraham is "caught...In the barbed wire of the briar bush" (33).
 Such amalgamations reinforce the relevance of the past analogy to
 the present situation. The past events chosen are more than mere
 historical parallels: they are myths which establish a timeless
 reference in which we recognize contemporary experience. The
 myth strategy reaches beyond a personal truth to a universal truth,
 and in acting out their personal conceptions in terms of archetypal
 actions, the four men show the extent to which life is the repetition
 of an eternal process. William Spanos sees that the special
 quality informing Fry's use of myth is the "aesthetic of sacra-
 mental time" (see Introduction, p. 8). This aesthetic is shared
 by other modern Christian verse dramatists, notably T.S. Eliot,
 whose quest, Spanos writes,

for the essential principle of the popular English dramatic
 tradition...culminates in the discovery that this principle
 lay in what I call the sacramental realism of the medieval
 Miracle Plays; that it is grounded in the doctrine of the
 Incarnation, the Word made Flesh, which reconciles time and
 eternity and salvages the past from the refuge heap of
 history,⁹

which then becomes an "eternal present." The sacramental view
 leads to the concept of the figura in which one thing or person
 stands for, or pre-figures, another: Noah's Ark--the Church,

⁹ William Spanos, p. 13.

Abel--Christ, Adam--all mankind, Christ's resurrection--the resurrection of all after death. In Sleep the Biblical archetype is integrated into the modern consciousness, and through the dream form a series of analogous actions and characters are shown to be both historically unique and eternally recurrent. It is a technique similar to such Mystery Plays as The Second Shepherd's Play, where both the present and the historical, the profane and the spiritual, are blended. The dream-vision also has deep roots in the medieval tradition. The unique quality of Sleep is that it successfully integrates these separate elements into a powerful modern statement concerning man's condition internally, his relationship with others, and his relationship with the universe and God.

The dominant characteristic of modern man is his existential questioning and rebellion. The core of the problem is expressed by Peter: "I know I do not know" (15). He rebels intellectually by sneering at action that is inevitably futile and takes refuge in a form of magnanimous apathy:

How can I help it if I can't work myself up
 About the way things go? It's a mystery to me.

 ...Dearly beloved brothers
 In a general muck-up, towzers included...(4-5).

Meadows as God in his dream sees Peter as Abel, the passive but articulate victim. Abel's meekness prompts David/Cain to scorn:

DAVID. You don't deserve to inherit the earth.
 Am I supposed to carry the place alone?

PETER. Where will you carry it?
 Where do you think you're going to take it to,
 This prolific indifference?
 Show me an ending great enough
 To hold the passion of this beginning
 And raise me to it.
 Day and night, the sun and the moon
 Spirit us, we wonder where. Meanwhile
 Here we are, we lean on our lives
 Expecting purpose to keep her date,
 Get cold waiting, watch the overworlds
 Come and go, question the need to stay
 But do, in an obstinate anticipation of love (12-13).

David's rebellion is intuitive and inarticulate. He hits out at the immediate and concrete representations of frustration. After the attack on Peter, Meadows says:

I see the world in you [David] very well. 'Tisn't
 Your meaning, but you're a clumsy, wall-eyed bulldozer.
 You don't know what you're hitting (5).

As Cain, David's refuge is in the physical: "Amplify the animal is Cain...a huskular strapling/With all his passions about him" (13). He rebels against a God who has created him with impulses and passions he is expected to deny. He declares, "Flesh is my birthplace" (16), and asks God, "How was I expected to guess/That what I am you didn't want?" The actions of Cain bring down God's curse that the hunter shall become the hunted. Cain will "nowhere/Escape the fear of what men fear in [him]" (19). This theme is carried into David's dream in which he sees himself as King David, beset by fears, "Everlastingly/Thinking of enemies" (22), and desperately trying to maintain order against evil and the threat of anarchy. Peter/Absalom is again the questioner of accepted values, rebelling against authority and escaping commitment in the negative

philosophy that there is no harm in "A little evil here and there between friends" (22). In Peter's dream, David's protest modulates into Abraham's Adams-like acquiescence to authority in the shape of the presumed will of God and the necessity of the historical process. Like Moses in Firstborn, Abraham has to accept the paradox of evil: God

Takes evil to inoculate our lives
Against infectious evil. We'll go on.
I am history's wish and must come true,
And I shall hate so long as hate
Is history, though, God, it drives
My life away like a beaten dog (31).

Peter's rebellion similarly modulates into acquiescence, but his appreciation of life and nature increases:

Everything
Grows over the fresh inclination
Every day. You and I are both
Immeasurably living (30).

He fails to see the paradox that the beauty of nature veils "The long scars from the nails of the warring hearts" (30). The existential protest is reasserted in Adams' dream. David despairs that "There's nowhere to go" (39), and rages against man's impotence:

Let me, dear God, be active
And seem to do right, whatever damned result.
Let me have some part in what goes on
Or I shall go mad! (41).

Peter is seen again in his flippant, cynical mood, mocking the Scriptures and making Joycean puns: "Police on earth. Aggression is the better/Part of Allah.... Freedoom" (43). David and Peter are both involved in a struggle for selfhood and meaning in an

apparently meaningless universe. In a bare, existential sense, they are both right in that each rebels in his own way against the forces that make us prisoners of ourselves and of our environment. But in the religious sense, as Ferguson points out, both are wrong:

David is wrong in that he externalizes evil and refuses to recognize it within himself. Peter is wrong because his failure to commit himself is not constructive and positive, but fundamentally escapist. David lives after the flesh, Peter tries not even to live in the flesh; therefore, neither is incarnational. Each is wrong.¹⁰

In David and Peter, Fry outlines two antithetical modes of existential rebellion, and shows how the internal revolt against man's condition leads to strife among men. Peter's epiphany in the fire is a recognition that man is the source of his own sorrow:

Look, how intense
The place is now, with swaying and troubled figures.
The flames are men: all human. There's no fire!
Breath and blood chokes and burns us (48).

David's epiphany is similar to Eliot's assertion that "suffering is action, action suffering," when he declares that "To be strong beyond all action is the strength/To have" (47). The preceding episodes have shown the futility of "the cures which never cure" (47). The path to harmony among men has been foreshadowed in Peter's "anticipation of love," in David's feelings after his attack on Peter and in the rejection and condemnation of violence: it lies in patience, love and honesty, and in a recognition of the community of mankind where "men with men/Are knotted like the sea" (33), and, echoing Donne,

whatever happens on the farthest pitch,
To the sand-man in the desert or the island-man in the sea,
Concerns us very soon (46).

¹⁰ Ferguson, 47.

In keeping with the injunction to hate the sin, not the sinner, Meadows urges the others to hate "The deeds, not those who do" (48). Where Sartre would see a man defined by his actions, Fry sees actions as confirming or betraying a pre-existing concept of man: "where we fail as men/We fail as deeds of time" (48). The methods of "expedience and self-preservation" corrupt both the internal condition of a man and his relationship with others, and must be supplanted by trust in the "good" which is God.

In the first dream, God is represented as the traditional anthropomorphic father-figure. He is a retributive God of Wrath, "God the jailer, God the gun" (19), with whom Adam, in losing his innocence, has lost contact. The father-son pattern is repeated with Adam and his sons, and Adam's powerlessness to prevent Cain from killing Abel repeats God's non-involvement in the affairs of men. God is absent in the David and Absalom dream, where David assumes he is God's viceroy: "Who's against us," he cries, "Reeks to God" (32). In Peter's dream, Abraham believes he is acquiescing in "God's will," and this adoption of a Negative Way brings the angel-messenger from God with "new instructions." In Thor, the sacrifice of Hoel re-enacts that of Christ: in Sleep, the sacrifice of Isaac, although incomplete, pre-figures that of Christ. The connection is clearly indicated when Meadows appears as "the donkey man," and the scene resounds with Christ associations--the donkey, the "two stale loaves," the phrase "for the sake of the world," the millenium, and the stable. In the final dream Adams, Peter

and David each appeal to God for help and release (41), and when the intense heat of the fire reaches them, they fall on their knees. Their supplications and their humility bring release from their bonds, and the figure of Meadows emerges symbolically crowing like a cock. He says he is "Man," but again the Christ associations are strong because he appears in a kind of resurrection in the fire, he is called "the crowing son of heaven" (48), he preaches a message of love, and his prime function is to show the way to God. The vision expressed by Meadows is a humanistic assertion of the Affirmative Way. It is an affirmation of the created world and of the potential within man himself to achieve God: "The human heart can go to the lengths of God" (49). The play's structure, therefore, traces man's path from loss of innocence, through deeper involvement in sin to acknowledgement of God's will and to a climactic assertion of faith in which man's potential is acclaimed:

Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God (49).

Like several earlier plays, notably Thor, Sleep follows a pattern of quest. The action again takes place overnight and ends at dawn. The night is a "long dark night of the soul" experienced in a "chapel perilous." The four men are involved in trials in which the ultimate triumph of man over evil and death is asserted in the repeated patterns of sleeping and waking, dying and re-appearing. The church is one place in one time, yet functions as several places at different times. Similarly, the single, separate

stories are one action contained in the play's totality. Each separate stage in time, place and action is part of the larger action of quest, of "exploration into God." Adams/Adam has "lost something"--the innocence of mankind and with it the knowledge of God and the state of Paradise. The same loss is apparent in the modern man of the opening scene, who still retains childhood memories of the Scriptures and worship, but religion has lost its value and meaning. The latent desire for spiritual knowledge is released in dreams which embark on a Grail-like quest for God. It is interesting to note the Grail legend parallels in Sleep. The Grail quest has a dual aspect: the lower, a form of physical initiation; the higher, an initiation into the "Secrets of the Mysteries, that of regeneration and spiritual life."¹¹ The initiate undergoes physical trials on his way which require spiritual strength to overcome, and the Grail itself is both a physical object (varying according to the version of the legend), and ultimately the spiritual revelation of God. The experiences of Peter, David and Adams are those of initiates who journey on their quest, undergo physical trials, fail some tests, are involved in a symbolic game of dice, and reach their illumination in a state of trance or sleep. The Chapel Perilous episode includes a test in which the initiate "is brought into contact with the horrors of physical death,"¹² and immediately precedes the final vision which

¹¹ Jessie L. Weston, The Quest of the Holy Grail (1913; rpt. New York, 1965), p. 90.

¹² Ibid., p. 90.

takes place in a castle near the sea. The pattern of Sleep is surprisingly similar, with the horrors of death made explicit in the Cain episode and the sea passages forming a transition into the final vision. The parallels continue: Miss Weston writes:

the culmination of initiation was reached in a trance during which the candidate was supposed to pass through the dangers of the lower world and receive definite instructions and enlightenment; the soul, at the expiration of the trance, which sometimes lasted three days, returning, purified and regenerated, to reanimate the body.¹³

In Sleep, the dream-trance of the men, the fire of the lower world, the instruction and enlightenment given by Meadows, and the final purified reanimation, conform to this account. The figure of Meadows is a further link with the Grail legends as he corresponds to the maimed vegetable god whose restoration is dependent on the quester's success. His name associates him with the earth, as does his recollection of "dunging a marrow bed" (8). His limp, his mysterious birth--he has "only [his] mother's word for it" (8)--and his divine associations already noted, reinforce the correspondence. The first two dreams indicate the separation of man from God, but the quest takes shape in Adam's search for what he has lost and in Absalom's journey to "the other side of the river" (24). The quest pattern strengthens with Abraham and Isaac climbing the hill towards God, the trial of Abraham's will, and the subsequent journey on the donkey "Across the sands and into the sea" (35). Adams' dream carries the journey onto the sea and

¹³ Ibid., p. 107.

merges with the prisoners' march where Peter is "half-seas overboard" (38). The difficulty of the journey increases: they trudge without moving forward, find themselves on logs which are "slimy and keep moving apart" (39), are imprisoned, and finally are "tied hand and foot" (43) in the fire and unable to move. The fire is the final test and purgation in which the cords burn off "Like snakes of soot" when they place themselves in God's hands, and they are then able to "Stand: move: as though [they] were living" (45). The imprisoning fire becomes the agent of their release and of the fulfillment of their quest, and Meadows appears as the restored God who answers the questers' questions.

This paradox of imprisonment and release is also the culmination of the prisoner motif. The concrete image of four military prisoners held in a church is developed during the play to symbolic proportions in which their imprisonment becomes a metaphor for the state of man. Through their dream re-enactments, the four prisoners come to stand for mankind. A series of images expands the imprisonment theme: the "smell of cooped-up angels/Worries [David]" (3); Adams/Adam is "pinioned", unable to part Cain and Abel; "The cage of the world/Holds [Cain's] prowling" (18), with "God the jailer" (19) watching; "A dream/Has got [David] prisoner...like/The world has got us all" (27); Peter/Isaac, bound for sacrifice, cries,

Surely there's no need for us to be
The prisoners of the dark (32)

of death or ignorance; and finally the incarceration in the fire.

The church functions as a flexible setting: on the literal level it is a church and a prison, yet in the dreams it becomes both a variety of settings for the action and a theatre of the mind for each character in turn. As the play unfolds, the variations of image and situation form a single statement. On waking from his dream, Adams asks, "Where's this place?" (49), and Meadows replies "You were born here, chum." Speaking for mankind, Meadows says we are

In a sort of a universe in a bit of a fix.
It's what they call flesh we're in.
And a fine old dance it is (50).

Man's soul is imprisoned in his flesh, which in turn is imprisoned in its physical environment, yet the dance image is a reminder of the cosmic dance of all creation, which, as suggested in Chapter Four (p. 94) and elsewhere, is expressed in the comic pattern. Fry's assertion that comedy "says...groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery"¹⁴ of creation, is exemplified in the patterns of action and language in Phoenix, Lady and Venus. At first glance, Sleep appears to be a play of a different order, but just as the comedies contain implicit religious patterns, so Sleep contains an implicit comic pattern. William Spanos maintains that "Fry's definition of comedy...paradoxically, is more applicable to Sleep than to the seasonal comedies,"¹⁵ because Sleep contains a truly sacramental

¹⁴ Fry, "Comedy," 78.

¹⁵ Spanos, p. 305.

vision which recognizes

the doctrine of the Incarnation, which by redeeming the fallen world and transfiguring the horror of evil into a paradoxical good or in Fry's words, by distilling the dark into light, establishes the Way of Affirmation as the way of comedy.¹⁶

A further image in Sleep which confirms the fusion of flesh and spirit is the familiar Christmas carol, "God rest ye merry gentlemen" which runs:

God rest ye merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born this Christmas day....

The phrase "nothing you dismay" is caught in Peter's speech, "We are all pain-fellows, but nothing you dismay,/Man is to prosper" (14), and the play's penultimate line is "Rest you merry" (51), which coming after Meadows' image of "the end of the world/With all your bunks giving up their dead," establishes a final image of release from imprisonment in the birth of Christ and in ultimate resurrection. The simultaneous striking of the church clock and sounding of a bugle conclude the play and reassert the potential fusion of spirit and flesh, of action and suffering, of God and Man.

Seen in relation to Fry's earlier work, both religious and secular, the episodes of Sleep are almost a recapitulation of Fry's own phases of exploration for meaning as expressed through his plays. The dominance of the quest motif, for example, echoes Boy and Thor;

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 306.

the movement from the concept of God in the Cain episode as a distant God of Wrath to the concept of a personal God parallels the pattern of Firstborn (Chapter Three, p.65); David's dream echoes the fear of God's absence or non-involvement expressed in Thor, and continues the quest; the focus on sacrifice that follows in the Abraham and Isaac episode recalls the sacrifice in Thor and the ritualistic pattern of purgation represented in Phoenix and Lady; the final purgation through fire reasserts the motif of Phoenix and the fire in Venus which provides a secular parallel for the spiritual pattern. Furthermore, the insistence in Sleep on the uniqueness and spiritual potential of the individual and of the supremacy of love--agapé here, rather than eros--is the culmination of a series of assertions which was first noted in the chapters on Firstborn and Phoenix, and was seen operating particularly in Lady and Venus. Throughout all the plays examined so far runs Fry's concern to find meaning and his constant sense of amazement at the wonder and complexity of existence: the phenomena of creation are accepted simply in Boy; perplexity is expressed in Firstborn and Thor; the paradoxes are asserted in Lady; and the desire to question and probe is indicated in the observatory motif of Venus. Sleep starts by expressing an existential denial of meaning but concludes with the image of the dance, which is an attempt to resolve the complexity and represent meaning for man in an oracular assertion of his unity with the cosmos and the divine.

Chapter Nine

The Dark Is Light Enough: Agapé

The Dark Is Light Enough re-examines the themes of agapé and the sanctity of the individual treated in A Sleep of Prisoners. Sleep may be accused of lacking dramatic structure in the shape of progressive plot, but Dark has a plot which keeps the audience intensely interested in "what happens next," and instead of interwoven episodes, it presents a continuous development. Fry maintains an atmosphere of suspense from the opening, with the mysterious disappearance of the Countess, through a series of rising tensions to the final scene where Gettner turns to face the Austrians. It has been described as being "akin to romantic melodrama,"¹ and if all the play contained was plot, this label would be valid. However, as in all Fry's secular plays, the religious impulse informs the whole pattern of action and the plot functions as a vehicle for allegory or analogy and for the assertion of Fry's eschatology. The action is set in a specific place at a specific time, but the historical events are mere pegs on which to hang an action that has a timeless reference and the focus falls on the human universals: the confrontation of war, love, death, man's identity, and his spiritual quest.

William Becker, writing in The Hudson Review, senses the allegorical qualities of Dark, but concludes that the allegory of

¹ Denis Donoghue, The Third Voice (Princeton, N.J., 1959), p. 187.

Gettner representing wayward mankind with the Countess dying like Christ to redeem him, "remains rather irrelevantly inert."² This type of equational allegory cannot be imposed on any of Fry's work; it is for this reason that the term "analogy" is more useful and apposite. Once the action and relationships are seen as analogous to other patterns of action and other relationships, the allegorical overtones come alive. The key metaphor of Dark is contained in the title, and in the epigraph from Fabre: "the darkness is light enough" for the butterfly to complete its pilgrimage through the storm.³ The theme of journey or quest is once more central to the play, and it is again combined with the existential problem of blindness. In addition to the journey allegory, there is also the suggestion that the Countess has divine attributes which invites allegorical speculation, and a further possibility of allegory lies in the more abstract sphere of spiritual faith and good versus evil. Because of the central role of the Countess, it is best to discuss her first, then examine the journey theme and abstractions.

Dramatic interest is immediately focused on the absent Countess when the play opens with Jakob, Belmann and Kassel discussing her surprise journey in the snow from which she has not yet returned. Her absence is especially unexpected as it is the day of her weekly

² William Becker, "Reflections on Three New Plays," Hudson Review, VIII (Summer, 1955), 261.

³ Epigraph to The Dark Is Light Enough (London, 1954), n.n. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

soirée. Belmann declares:

This Thursday world of ours is now
More like the world than ever.
The goddess of it, in her Godlike way,
Is God knows where. We can only hope
She will condescend to appear in her own time (4).

The divine aspects of the Countess are immediately reinforced when he continues:

...the Countess has the qualities of true divinity.
For instance: how apparently undemandingly
She moves among us; and yet
Lives make and unmake themselves in her neighbourhood
As nowhere else. There are many names I could name
Who would have been remarkably otherwise
Except for her divine non-interference (4-5).

Her country house becomes a microcosm of the world, with her divine status reiterated verbally and displayed in her relationships with her children, her disciples--notably Peter--and finally her converts, Janik and Gettner. Fry does not allow the Countess to escape from her human condition: she is not infallible, witness her error in encouraging the marriage of Gelda and Richard; she is mortal although her "great spirit" (85) enables her to transcend her illness; and she has a disarming "woman's logic" (53) as her negotiations with Janik indicate. Her role, therefore, in her world is analogous to that of God in the larger world. The setting reinforces the parallel because her entrances are made from above down the "great staircase" (1). Despite her policy of "divine non-interference,"

She has a touching way
Of backing a man up against eternity
Until he hardly has the nerve to remain mortal (5),

and, like God, she can resolve man's dilemmas. She is like the hub of a wheel, or the "still point in a turning world." Her relationships with the points on the wheel are like spokes which, by passing through the centre, resolve the contraries of opposite points, of Gettner and Peter, social etiquette and the demands of war, doubt and faith, intuition and reason, anarchy and stability. The identification of the Countess and God implies a concept of God in terms of her actions and attitudes. Despite their respect for her, the other characters do not understand her: the workings of God's mind are beyond comprehension. God moves in a mysterious way: regarding her journey, she declares that

One must have talent to go from a place to a place,
But divination to go so deviously
...and yet to arrive (17).

Her non-interference does not prevent her from deeply affecting everyone who comes into contact with her, as God touches the lives of men, and like Gettner, they strive to "root" themselves in the divine "radiance" (45).

The hub-like, centrifugal pattern of structure in which events and people revolve around the Countess is extended to her home. The Countess, Stephen, Gettner, Peter, Janik, and the Hungarian army, each depart from the house only to return almost by compulsion. Their journeys resolve into a series of quests, and the repeated pattern of excursion and return takes on an allegoric, or symbolic, value, suggesting man's inevitable return to his spiritual home. As noted in preceding chapters, repetitions are a favourite

device of Fry's for exploring or asserting a theme--in this case, the journey of life in both its physical and spiritual aspects. In her description of her journey to save Gettner, the Countess integrates the two aspects, the natural and the supernatural: she drove

Into a redeemed land, uncrossed by any soul
Or sound, and always the falling perfection
Covering where we came, so that the land
Lay perfect behind us, as though we were perpetually
Forgiven the journey (16).

Her journey through "a short experience of eternity" (17) becomes a parable for life's journey, when informed by spiritual awareness, towards redemption. Stefan duplicates his mother's journey, but lacking her attributes, fails in his quest to find her. Janik and the army have an idealistic faith which sustains them on their journey, but their political idealism lacks both the spirituality and the humanity of the Countess, and is inconsistent because

Is it not a quaint freedom, that let us
Make up our minds and not be free to change them? (30)

The road to Vienna becomes "A river of drifting, hopeless,/Dangerous men" (81) as the army's journey ends in defeat. In the last act, Janik returns a fugitive, ironically adopting Gettner's role, and is brought to the house by faith in its power for good. The house is an intellectual haven for the members of the Thursday soirée, a physical haven for Gettner and Janik, and finally becomes a spiritual haven for Gettner when he turns his back on the faithless journey he "was making/In no direction in particular" (101) and

faces the Austrians. The journey allegory shows the triumph of spiritual faith over physical hazards, over the brute strength of military force, and over intellectual disenchantment: in effect, immanent good prevails against manifest evil.

The play is structured in a series of conflicts that arise out of antitheses of character, viewpoint or interest. Jakob and Belmann set the pattern in the opening scene when in defence of the Countess's name, Jakob challenges Belmann to a duel--foreshadowing the later more serious encounter between Stefan and Gettner. The Countess is defined positively by a series of productive relationships, but Gettner negatively by a series of oppositions. His duel with Stefan arises out of the conflict between his disillusionment and Stefan's youthful groping for meaning and purpose. His lack of purpose and interest in self rather than a cause is opposed to Janik's concern with the welfare of his country and his men, and Gettner's worthlessness is the antithesis of Peter's value and reliability: the former is an

invertebrate,
...self-drunk, drunken, shiftless, heartless,
Lying malingerer (6),

the latter is "Count Peter the sturdy" (8), the "Great Protector" (5). A conflict of interest develops when the Countess gives protection to Gettner, who is a victim of society not unlike Hoel in Thor and Jennet in Lady. Her friends urge her to get rid of him for the safety of all: Gettner is desperate for his own life and asserts a claim to protection in the name of life itself. The arrival of

Janik, who admits to being "a divided man" (52) between the courtesies of social convention and the demands of war, precipitates a crisis in which Peter becomes a hostage for Gettner.

Thematically, the anarchy of war represented by the fugitive Gettner and the transformed geologist, Janik, encounters the polarity of stability in the spiritual and humanitarian convictions of the Countess and the rock-like morality of Peter. A further thematic polarity is between desertion and responsibility. Gettner deserts in turn art, Gelda, the army, and the Countess. His actions represent universal human weaknesses:

Three incorrigible traitors,...
The heart, that's one, the brain, that's the second,
And the will, old will-power, deserters to the death (63).

Responsibility is represented in Janik's concern for his men, the need "to find a new heart" (53) for them, for his country and for the effects of the Austrian reprisals. Peter is acutely aware of failing in his responsibility to remain in Vienna where he could have done most good. Responsibility and guilt are interconnected. Stefan is consumed with guilt because he feels responsible for bringing Peter away from Vienna, and the Countess declares, "I am always perfectly guilty of what I do" (20). Gelda's sense of responsibility leads her to feel guilty for the failure of her marriage to Gettner, and guilty again for allowing her "curiosity... pride...ambition" (81) to delude her into an experiment to rectify the first failure. There is a constant balancing of selfish and unselfish motivation, with Gettner and the Countess at the two

poles and other characters striving to find a balance between their inner conflicting tendencies. As suggested in the wheel metaphor, the resolution of conflicts, whether internal or with other characters, is attained through relationship with the Countess. An example of her influence is how all present in the house when the Hungarians arrive combine to save Gettner because of their regard for her concern for human life per se, although they recognize their own danger. The ultimate triumph of her spiritual way is the conversion of Gettner who finds that in spite of his cynicism his self-centredness is transformed by her charisma.

The success of the play is heavily dependent on the credibility of Gettner's conversion. Initially he is portrayed as utterly worthless, rather like Shaw's Dubedat (Doctor's Dilemma) without the compensating virtue of artistic excellence. Once a poet, he has allowed his awareness of the vastness and complexity of the universe to frustrate him to the point where he is unable "To recreate one fit word to stand/Beside reality" (46). He is drawn as completely worthless--and even admits no redeeming qualities--in order to make the Countess's action in saving him a purely disinterested act of love for humanity. She recognizes that "Life has a hope of him/Or he would never have lived.... Richard lives/In his own right" (54). Gettner's suggestion of marriage indicates that he misunderstands the Countess's feelings and believes eros to be at work. She denies ever having loved him, and he finds it difficult to understand her motivations:

GETTNER. What in God's name was it I meant to you?

COUNTESS. Simply what any life may mean (100).

This is an expression of true agapé, the love of mankind for its own sake, and establishes the rationale for the Countess's action. Gettner's apparently sudden conversion, moments after he has declared his intention of going "back to the journey [he] was making" (101), has in fact been well prepared. He has already indicated a degree of faith in the Countess, first when he married Gelda, and later when he turns to her in the situation that precipitates the play's action. He is also a man susceptible to a "moment of conversion" as indicated by his sudden espousal of the Hungarian cause. He recalls:

All I could do for my self-esteem
Was to swear to cherish all hearts that are oppressed;
To give myself to liberty, justice, and the revolution
(15).

His admission to the Countess that he returned because "They said you were dying" (93) indicates both the magnetic attraction she exercises upon him and the inexorable process of conversion which he is helpless to fight. After her expression of agapé, which confounds Richard, she makes the enigmatic promise not to leave him until she can love him, "not necessarily here" (101), intimating the possibility of love-after-death, but when Gettner discovers that in death she has provided him with an opportunity of redemption, he realizes the divine nature of her love. His redemption suggests a Christ-like sacrifice on her part, a pattern of sacrifice he in

turn will repeat, and his adoption of her role and spiritual strength is another example of exchange in personal relationships. Her death is not one of atonement because she does not take his sins upon her shoulders, but is one of "a beginning" in which Gettner is renewed. The conclusion of Dark differs from the other comedies in that the exchange is not mutual, but more in the nature of a gift of grace. It also differs because it involves a non-tragic death that illustrates how comedy may simultaneously "affirm life and assimilate death and persevere in joy."⁴

The play presents a plea for love, tolerance and peace in a world divided by strife which ranges from the petty quarrel of Belmann and Jakob on a point of "honour" to the war between idealistic revolutionaries and a tyrannous order capable of wholesale executions. The range is one of degree rather than kind, and by showing how the different degrees of disruption interpenetrate, Fry asserts both man's individual and his collective responsibility. Even before he appears, the iconoclastic Gettner disrupts the relationship between Belmann and Jakob, whose quarrel is sparked by Belmann's condemnation of the Countess for promoting the marriage between Gettner and Gelda. Gettner continues to be the active force of disruption, endangering the Countess with the Hungarians, causing Peter to leave Vienna, provoking Stefan into challenging him to a duel, threatening the marriage of Peter and Gelda, and through all these events contributing substantially towards the

⁴ Christopher Fry, "Comedy," 78.

Countess's death. Also on the side of strife stand Janik and the Hungarian army whose futile violence displays the disruption of Gettner on a wider scale. Through all this the Countess retains her love of humanity and her tolerance. She realizes that

We are all confused, incomprehensible,
 Dangerous, contemptible, corrupt,

 ...In our plain defects
 We already know the brotherhood of man (21).

She recognizes the interrelationships of men, and in a passage that recalls several statements in Sleep, declares that "there is nothing on the earth/Which doesn't happen in your hearts" (74). The tightly plotted action of the play reflects this interrelationship and the mutual responsibility of man for man. As noted, the play also stresses the theme of the sanctity of the individual. Together, these concepts express one of the key factors in the existentialist approach that views man as a unique individual responsible to himself for his own actions and definition, yet simultaneously responsible for all men. In Dark, without the preaching that concludes Sleep, Fry manages to convey through the qualities of the Countess the spiritual dimension that without reference to specific orthodoxies places his work in the stream of religious existentialism flowing from Kirkegaard through such figures as Tillich, Marcel and Teilhard de Chardin. This is not to suggest that he is a disciple of any of these figures, but relates the primarily intuitive work of the artist to the primarily intellectual endeavour of the philosopher.

As in Sleep, the language in Dark is pruned of the word-play that characterizes the earlier comedies, and in place of a plethora of images Fry employs a few which are closely related: snow, rain, sea, light, and dark. The language has a winter bareness that is thematically appropriate and marks another step in Fry's movement towards a more direct and forceful style--a movement which also characterizes the successive plays of T.S. Eliot. The snow establishes the winter context of the play, which in turn subsumes the cycle of death and rebirth. Paradoxically, the snow is both benevolent and hostile: it is a "falling perfection" (16), a benediction "as soft as a bishop's hand" (13), but the Countess's search is "complicated by the weather" (19), and the soldiers' heels are "lumped with snow" (25) that impedes them. The all-pervading snow becomes symbolic of the ambiguous nature of man's experience and of a phase in the cycle of life. In Act III the snow changes to rain. Gelda declares:

The revolution's over,
 I'm sure it's over. The whole of yesterday
 We heard the guns, and today there's nothing
 But the noise of rain. All night I was hearing
 The scattered solitary horseman
 Galloping down the road; there was no
 Dead-march drum of the guns any longer.
 I heard the wind, and I heard the hail,
 And I heard the hoof-beats, and otherwise
 There was peace (78).

Revolution, winter and death are supplanted by peace and rain which may not "wash the last few days away" (79), but do hold the promise of renewal in both the natural and the human cycle. The cycle of

renewal is repeated in the death-birth juxtaposition when Dr. Kassel is summoned to deliver the ostler's wife's baby against a background of war, executions and the death of the Countess. Despite the absence of the sea as a physical aspect of the setting, it provides the motif for a series of images and metaphors that dominate the second half of the play. The sea provides an analogy for life: "Deep water is for those/Who can swim" (34), declares Peter. Gettner is like a man who "Strips to swim, and then seems powerless/To advance or retire" (56), and he complains that when a man takes "the cold sea in a courageous plunge" (65) he is thought a fool. Gelda confesses an instinct

to put out with a lifeboat
For Richard, but on to it scrambled
Such a crew of pirates
.
We all began to sink (81). . . .

The life-as-ocean metaphor is sustained in such passages as "this marooned sort of life" (83), souls in "their barren islands" (93) and "a body without death... being outcast, like a rock in the sea" (89). The ocean motif is allied to that of the journey. The Countess, unable to undo the past, is anxious to move on:

Music would unground us best,
As a tide in the dark comes to boats at anchor
And they begin to dance (67),

and Belmann, caught in the spell of the moment, recalls watching

A fishing boat outwit the rocks and a very
Unbenevolent sea. It did at last
Gain the shore (86).

As the Countess draws near the end of her journey, Gettner appeals

to her to remember that although she

can exist
Beside the still waters...out here
The drowning still goes on (97).

This passage continues the sea-journey metaphor and echoes the Hebrews' tears of lamentation, an idea arising out of the tears-water association of her eyelids closing calmly in death. This example illustrates the controlling economy in Dark in which Fry uses figurative language both sparingly and for the greatest multiple effect. In the same way that water in all its forms has both specific attributes and a general relationship to the journey theme, images of light and dark are also unified with the dominant structural motif of the journey. The Countess left "before light" (1) in the morning, having harnessed the horses "by the confusing light/Of one lantern" (16), and returns after dark, so that the two ends of her journey are analogous to the journey of life from darkness back to darkness. The faith of the butterfly that "the darkness is light enough" is implicit in the pattern. The faithless Gettner would "dare anything for a ha'penny night-light" (62), but is also afraid of the light because he prefers a journey "Where the dark makes no false promises" (101). However, he is unable to escape the "radiance" that emanates from the Countess and illuminates the spiritual path he must follow. The darkness of man's ignorance is light enough for him to pursue the journey of life's pilgrimage because all are gifted, to a greater or lesser extent, with an inner light of spiritual intuition.

Although the play's sub-title, "A Winter Comedy," suggests that Dark is another romantic comedy, Fry's language indicates that he has departed from the mode of Lady and Venus. The death of the Countess, the implied sacrifice of Gettner and the moral assertion of immanent good against manifest evil suggest a tragic pattern, but the play never arouses tragic expectations or exhibits tragic modes of awareness. The Countess may find herself displaced or thwarted, but at no stage is evil triumphing, and the victory of good is never in doubt. The dramatic impression, even in death, is one of the vitality of human life and of the continuity of that vitality which is taken over by another in a pattern of exchange when one person dies. This mixture of tragic and comic elements is similar to that in Firstborn and Thor, particularly the latter where the mode was identified as ironic (Chapter Five, p. 114). Gettner conforms to Frye's description of the hero of the ironic form--a self-deprecating, isolated scapegoat. He is late achieving hero status, but qualifies, particularly in existential terms, by his final choice which is a heroic act of self-definition. Alternatively, Gettner may be seen as demonstrating what Raymond Williams sees as a tragic thrust for individual fulfillment and self-identification that results in destructive relationship with others and in ultimate self-destruction in the realization that fulfillment without others is impossible:⁵ this concept of the tragic is fraught with irony. The ironic mode is established in

⁵ Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy (London, 1966), pp. 87-105.

Dark, as in Thor, by a series of ironies throughout the play: the worthy Peter is hostage for the worthless Gettner; Janik the guest becomes the usurper; the dance and disarming of the guards leads to the shooting of Stefan by Gettner; Peter, who opposes violence, becomes "the very passion [he] opposed" (59); the Countess's non-interference affects everyone around her; and the positions of Gettner and Janik are ironically reversed. As Jacob Adler suggests, Dark is a step away from the romantic comedy of Lady and Venus in the direction of the problem play--Fry's Measure for Measure, with Gettner/Claudio and Countess/Isabella.⁶ It occupies a place on that narrow bridge Fry sees between tragedy and comedy,⁷ yet as in all Fry's plays except Curtmantle, the final affirmation is one of joy, of comic assertion, because the exploration of life and meaning, even when expressed in ostensibly secular shape, makes its discoveries in terms of man's relationship to the divine through the divine potential within himself and in the sacramental nature of his relationships with others.

⁶ Adler, 97.

⁷ See Introduction, p. 23.

Chapter Ten

Curtmantle: the Form of Unity

In Fry's search for meaning, whether he focuses on the secular or the religious, he always asserts the parallels or interaction between the two. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should be inspired by the near-mythical contest between Henry II and Becket over the respective demands of State and Church. Their struggle exemplifies the clash of the secular and the spiritual and, although unresolved historically except by death, invites the artist to explore its shape. Fry's exploration in Curtmantle takes the path of a dual quest. One aspect is "the progression towards a portrait of Henry, a search for his reality,"¹ which is indicated in the play by Richard Anesty's repeated question at the end of the Prologue: "Where is the King?" Structurally, this theme is explored in a series of episodes which are linked by the process of history and by the controlling consciousness of William Marshal's memory. The other half of the quest is also firmly established in the Prologue: the search for "Law, or rather the interplay of different laws: civil, canon, moral, aesthetic, and the laws of God; and how they belong and do not belong to each other" (ix). This second quest is inextricably allied with the artist's desire to find form: just as Henry's energy "was giving form to England's

¹ Christopher Fry, Curtmantle, 2nd ed. (London, 1965), p.viii. Subsequent page references in parentheses.

chaos" (1), so Fry is attempting to structure action, character and language in a form that will express the "permanent condition of man" and will yield meaning for the modern audience from the barren facts of history.

The controlling framework of the play is William Marshal's mind. The memory device is not used as in The Glass Menagerie to explore the narrator's experience, but to endow Marshal with a choric function which enables him both to recount the action, "[doing] away with time and place" (viii) as Fry intended, and to comment on its significance. Marshal's name suggests his function: he is a high official of the court close to the king; he marshals the facts in order for the audience; and he records the passing of time and events. Another function is to manipulate the response of the audience in favour of Henry, a role which is an important corrective to history, especially as recorded in the dramatic interpretations of Tennyson, Eliot and even Anouilh, where the dramatic focus, and inevitably sympathy, lie with Becket rather than Henry. Marshal respects Henry's energy and his determination to replace anarchy with order on behalf of the people he governs. His respect and that of the common folk indicate the range of the governed, and give a reference point for the facts of church exploitation that lead to the division between Church and State, Becket and Henry. Marshal's mind and attitudes express the "Pugnacious reality" (1) that lies behind the facts of history.

Another structural means of exploring this inner reality is

through the use of expressionistic and cinematic devices which reject the surface reality in favour of a stylized, or even distorted presentation of the stage action and its setting. Both the turbulent action and the storm setting of the Prologue indicate the chaotic state of the kingdom to which Henry is attempting to bring order. Paradoxically, it shows disorder under Henry's very nose, and thematically the storm foreshadows the turbulence of his reign. There is a smooth scenic transition into Act I, when the wind drops to a calm and the darkness changes to light. Anest's final question at the camp, "Where is the King?" (8) is answered by Marshal in Westminster: "The King's arrived in the yard..." (9). This non-realistic merging of time, place and action characterizes the sequences of the play, and helps to produce tight dramatic unity. A further device, associated with the memory design, is the use of central spots of light for ongoing action with figures in the shadows on the fringe awaiting their turn in the process of memory. For example, Marshal "peers into the shadows" (25) to discover Blae, as though groping in his memory, and the impact of Becket's death is enhanced by being delivered to Henry when he is in the shadows, whereupon "suddenly he steps into the light like a madman" (74), a scene which suggests Marshal's distance from Henry's emotional core, but his vivid awareness of the external manifestations of the King's moods. An expressionistic sequence builds up from the beginning of Act II, when

...sounds and voices are half creations of the fog
Which move like men but fade like spirits (37),

to a climax at the Council of Clarendon. The events of the Council are compressed, but its significance is eloquently conveyed when "an unnatural light begins to penetrate the fog. Faces are distorted by it. Shadows gesticulate at a great height above the MEN of the Court, who rage against the PRIESTS, some advancing towards them waving axes" (43). Such stage effects owe something to the influence of Anouilh, but more, probably, to Fry's experience in film work during the decade prior to Curtmantle. The exploitation of stage effects to express inner reality is also a logical step--although it took ten years to make--from the dream distortions of A Sleep of Prisoners, where technical devices were not available.

The telescoping of historic events leads to an exciting dramatic pace which asserts the inevitability of Henry's tragic downfall. Once he decides to appoint Becket Archbishop, and "co-ordinate the two worlds" (18) of Church and State, all subsequent decisions partake of the same quality of hamartia, or tragic error. The combination of the device of memory and the technique of expressionism, by enabling Fry to escape the limitations of a realistic chronological approach which would break the action, carries the audience through a sequence of decisions and outcomes that drive Henry inexorably down the path of tragic descent. The episodes, which lend themselves to a Brechtian Epic treatment of disjunction, are thereby bridged rather than broken, and the plot unfolds in one continuous movement interrupted only at the end of Act I at a climactic point where Henry squares for

a fight, and at the end of Act II where an appropriate pause occurs at Becket's death. As tragic hero, Henry fulfils the classical Aristotelian pattern of the great man of wasted potential whose fall, brought about by hubris and flawed decisions, involves his realm, which sinks in power and prestige with its king. Henry's first decision, because it is an attempt to reconcile two "goods," does not precipitate a chain of evil, as occurs in Hamlet for instance, and one can well sympathize with him when he protests, "What is my crime?" (82), but progressively he assumes the role of divinity ascribed to him by his subjects, and it is this defiance of the ontological order that constitutes his major crime. Henry's gradual--and unconscious--movement towards this self-concept is skilfully dramatized by Fry in both language and action. Henry possesses a charisma not unlike that of the Countess Rosmarin, yet more positive than hers. In The Dark Is Light Enough, Fry endows the human Countess with divine attributes: in Curtmantle, he humanizes the mythical king who is credited with, and assumes divinity. The populace apotheosize him; Anesty seeks him as the divine embodiment of "A law that's just and merciful" (8); a beggar addresses him as "Dear lord of justice" (10); and even Eleanor comments on the cloak incident--somewhat ironically--"A deed of grace, gracefully done" (10); he is the omnipresent dispenser of justice in the kingdom; and he is the creator not only of law and order, but as Eleanor recalls, was also "ready/To start creating the world" (17) at their first meeting. Henry comes to

believe he is the chosen recipient of God's grace: "four good boys to me/There's God articulate" (12). He envisages himself in a Christ-role, driven to "a harrowing of hell" (12), believes that "the future is waiting to be blessed by us" (22), maintains regarding his subjects that he can "bless them better [than the Archbishop] in their daily lives" (51), and even as he lies dying he recalls his marriage in terms which suggest a self-image of divinity: "We've got the lustrous Queen. We can start creating the world" (94). The demonic nature of Henry's divinity is suggested by Eleanor when she tells Becket:

The free and fallen
Spirits we may think we are,
You and I and the nest of young eagles,
Have our future state only in a world of Henry (24),

and the same Satanic allusion is made by Richard:

But only Lucifer knew how to fall and then
Come back into a kingdom. My father is only
Demon by descent (90-91).

Henry's action of appointing Becket to the dual post of Chancellor and Archbishop in order to reconcile the conflicting interests of Church and State to his own advantage, is one which Becket warns him is

a kind of intrusion on the human mystery,
Where we may not know what it is we're doing,
What powers we are serving, or what is being made of us
(22).

By his action, Henry sets up a counter movement against himself which is exemplified in the rise in the fortunes of Louis, whom Henry despises. Fry repeatedly draws parallels and comparisons

between the two kings. Some examples include: Becket's reminder to Henry that combining a secular and a spiritual post

is what Louis tried to do:

Insisting on his Chancellor for a bishopric (19), and that he had to concede to the Pope's demands; Henry's pride in begetting sons on the woman who could give Louis daughters only (19); Louis' subservience to the Church in contrast to Henry's hostility; the arrival of the news from Paris of Louis' heir at the moment Becket defies the King by riding away from his trial (51); and finally to complete the pattern of Louis' gains being Henry's losses, the alliance of Henry's sons with Philip of France which brings about Henry's defeat in battle as well as on the moral and personal levels. Their respective fortunes form a contrapuntal 'X' pattern not unlike that of Hoel and Cymen in Thor, with Angels, or Rameses and Moses in The Firstborn.

A further confirmation of the tragic pattern is found in the concatenation of events. When the events and their outcome are known, the dramatist who wishes to do more than merely chronicle them must seek some inner dynamic within the historical context. Just as in Firstborn Fry creates a tension between necessity and the desires of the characters to provide this dynamic and an alternative to plot suspense, so in Curtmantle he creates a similar tension between the declared aims of his characters and the grip of events which once initiated take on an autonomous inevitability. Becket's warning to Henry, quoted above, goes on to presage dire events as "universal workings" (22) take control of men, and

ironically Henry himself declares:

We have done with privilege of person. None of us
Is anything more than the purpose of our time (48).

Eleanor, who is as much chorus as participant, continues the theme:

When the glorious battle turns into the vendetta
The great issues, no longer controlled by men,
Themselves take over command (48).

Men become the tools of destiny and although they may rage and defy, as Henry does, they eventually succumb. Paradoxically, it is this refusal to bow down before the inevitable, even when as guilty as a Macbeth, that is one of the chief characteristics of the tragic hero, and here Fry's Henry shares tragic aspects with such figures as Oedipus and Lear. Another shared characteristic is loneliness: Henry is successively separated from or deserted by friends and family, except for his Kent, Marshal, and his Cordelia, Roger, until he dies completely isolated. He descends from the role of quasi-divine ruler to that of an expelled pharmakos, ritualistically stripped of his possessions in the catalogue of reparations demanded by Philip (91) and in the actions of the two peasants who strip his body (98). The pattern of renewal that justifies the suffering and waste of tragedy is not strongly asserted, despite a gesture in that direction by Roger who attempts to rally his dying father by urging him:

Sir, believe what you have accomplished.
Your laws are fixed on England...accepted
As a source of strength (94).

The end of the play does not suggest any revitalization through Henry's agon, but carries negative implications as the Old Woman

fatalistically drags off her mattress, which is both her comfort and her burden. The play follows the pattern of Henry's concern as expressed by Marshal, "beginning and ending...with the people he governed" (1), but in both the Prologue and the last scene he is shown to be their scourge rather than their benefactor. The full tragic cycle, therefore, is not completed in Curtmantle, but here the author's respect for the facts of history does impose a certain limitation. Fry's search for the King reveals a complex man of paradoxes, as the Foreword state (ix), but subsumes these complexities within the tragic mould. Henry's struggle becomes an expression of man's struggle with forces in the environment that challenge any attempts by man to define his own destiny in defiance of the higher powers.

The second theme, or quest of the play is that of Law which is dramatized primarily in the conflict between Henry and Becket, which in turn represents that of State and Church, physical and spiritual, and ultimately Man and God. In a key speech Becket declares:

There is a true and living
Dialectic between the Church and the state
Which has to be argued for ever in good part (21).

He goes on to assert the traditional dichotomy of body and spirit:

It's the nature of man that argues;
The deep roots of disputation
Which dug in the dust, and formed Adam's body (21).

In Henry's character, Fry shows how the conflicting pressures can exist side by side unresolved. Henry is an idealist dedicated

to give England
An incorruptible scaffolding of law
To last her longer than her cliffs (23),

yet the action in the prologue and the evidence of Blae's relationship with the King indicate the validity of Eleanor's words when she scorns Henry: "You who so struggle for order everywhere/Except in your own life" (53). In the struggle between Henry and Becket it is the dramatic conflict of character, the way each presents his argument rather than the respective merits of each side, that expresses the dichotomy in a dialectic of minds: the practical and realistic versus the philosophic and idealistic. For example, when challenged by Henry to account for his "part in the process of life," Becket answers with Eliotic abstruseness:

To protect us from going aground on deceptive time,
To keep our course in the deep reality.
As time is contained in eternity
So is temporal action contained in eternal truth.
And that truth can't be put at the mercy of time (38).

Henry counters in terms of practical specifics:

Laymen brought up for trial before a bishop
Must be given in every instance legal witnesses.
No archbishop, bishop, or beneficed clerk
To leave this kingdom without my authority (39).

Merchant declares that "a central tragic irony" in Curtmantle is

that Henry II works for due process of law which is ultimately an expression of God's order, and that Becket, subdued to God's will which is precisely the law towards which Henry's ambitions are directed, finds himself in personal opposition to Henry.²

Henry's affirmative way clashes with the negative way of Becket who

² William Moelwyn Merchant, Creed and Drama (Philadelphia, 1966), pp. 103-104.

"realizes the essential instrumentality of man's will as, at its highest form, wholly submissive to the ways of providence."³

Eleanor appears to be acting as Fry's spokesman when she urges Henry to "Consider complexity, delight in difference" (47), and later when she asserts that

The true law hides like the marrow of the bone,
Feeding us in secret. And this hidden law may prove to be
Not your single world, not unity but diversity (81).

Eleanor's own "Love Court of Poitou" which makes "laws for sport and love" (61), is almost a parody of Henry's courts. Her position is one of the balance rather than polarity where the tension of oppositions stimulates the creative force. "Oh, never define!" (45), she cries, and although later guilty of attempting to "define the world of woman/And man" (78)--and despite the dubious evidence of her court--her declarations affirm Fry's recurrent theme of the essential multitude of existence.

The dialectic of Curtmantle, therefore, takes on a familiar thesis-antithesis-synthesis form. The synthesis is weak because the two main protagonists remain polarized, and the synthesis proposed by Eleanor is inadequately structured dramatically, although strongly expressed verbally. Because Henry is the common factor in all the conflicts--against Becket, Eleanor, his sons, and Louis--and because he receives Marshal's approbation, the dramatic balance lies with him. However, the tragic form adumbrates the lost opportunity: "if only..." If only Henry and Becket could

³ Ibid., p. 104.

have seen how in fact they sought a common goal, as Merchant suggests, and if only they could have attained the flexibility advocated by Eleanor, then a resolution of their differences would have been possible. It is thus that the dramatic form, the shape of tragedy plus the shape of the ideas expressed, asserts the writer's meaning. In a letter written in 1950 Fry declared that

we should simplify towards a unity...towards an admission that everything and everyone is a member of one another, a unity of difference where all things meet in gradation....⁴

Ten years later he asserted:

we are part of a universe of patterns, and tensions, and conflicts, and balances, which seem to demand to be expressed in form, in a kind of coiled spring of energy, within an architectural shape which expresses that energy.⁵

As indicated in the first chapter, Fry believes that the form of poetry is such a shape, and therefore when it is incorporated into the further shaping of drama, a doubly expressive form is obtained.

In Curtmantle, Fry's language attains a degree of clarity, economy and flexibility rarely equalled in his earlier plays. It was noted in the last chapter how in Dark Fry's figurative language is used sparingly and with economy. This tendency is continued in Curtmantle without going to the extent of Eliot where, in The Elder Statesman particularly, verse all but disappears. Again there are interwoven clusters of images: light and darkness;

⁴ Christopher Fry, "The Play of Ideas," New Statesman and Nation, XXXIX (22 Apr., 1950), 458.

⁵ Christopher Fry, unpublished address, "Communication," Conference of Deans and Provosts of England (Chichester, 1968).

cold and hot, especially fire; water in various forms; animals, particularly horses; building; and the journey. There is a general movement in the metaphors of both language and action from darkness to light, through fog, back to darkness, and a parallel movement from cold, through warmth and intense heat, back to the icy cold of death. The Prologue opens at night with the Juggler's cry for light paralleling the kingdom's need for illumination of its darkness. At the end of the scene, the increasing light heralds the glow of warmth and optimism at Becket's successful return. The second act opens in fog. In answer to Becket's echoing question, "Where is the King?" (44), Eleanor says:

Look round at the unreality of the light
 And the unreality of the faces in the light.

 A death-world here, where every move
 Is magnified on to the fog's blind face
 And becomes the gesture of a giant (44).

The fog becomes a symbol for both the confused state of affairs and for the states of mind of the protagonists. Marshal's introduction to Act III comments on "the shadow of Becket" (77), and Henry's opening lines correlate his physical condition and mental state:

I can say the night has been crossed. Though you never
 know,
 Crouching in prayers in this holy cellar,
 Whether the light has broken
 Or the night's as dark as ever (77).

The night before Henry's defeat, the "thick mist" that obscures the French army recalls the earlier fog and defeat, and Henry's

subsequent entry, "dazed and half-blinded" (87) by the smoke from the fire he ordered, foreshadows the darkness of his imminent death. Fire and the sun link the metaphors of light and warmth and seeing. After Becket's exile, Marshal recalls that his name "was breathed out like fire all over Christendom" (59), constituting a threat to Henry, and immediately after this passage Eleanor implies Henry's lack of warmth and joy when she invites Young Henry to come to Poitou "when [he] need[s] the sun to set [his] blood/Flowing more freely than ever it can here" (61). Addressing Henry, she declares:

But at last
I mean to wrench myself awake
And open my eyes to my own reality (61),

and Henry's reply, "Then please God you find that dawn less false/Than it is to me" (61), presages that fatal dawn when John deserts his father "To be on the side where the sun was rising" (93). After his defeat, broken in mind and body, Henry confuses present and past, cold and hot, and water and sweat. He imagines himself back with his father, washing off the "filthy summer's sweat... [and] the grime of the journey... [but] the water's been lying in the dark too long. It's icy cold. The caked sweat and dirt goes in so deep you have to wash to the bone" (95). To make him believe he has bathed, "ROGER guides the King's hand across the sweat on his body." Henry's words and Roger's action ironically echo Henry's lines spoken a moment before when in his delirium he recalls the potential of his marriage to Eleanor: "We can start

creating the world. My sweat could lie with hers and breed rivers" (94), and the scene enacts a mock baptism which incorporates a series of images associating rain, water, ice, sea, and the journey, in a manner similar to that of Dark. Henry's life as a journey is established in the Prologue, in which Anesty pre-figures the King in his quest for truth, law and order, and the action exemplifies the restless, desperate quality of Henry's search. Fry's compact structure gives a vivid sense of movement as the journeys and errands of a lifetime are compressed into a single action. Henry has an almost compulsive belief in the efficacy of movement and pursuit: "providence," he declares, "is a great maker of journeys/And whoever refuses to go forward is dropped by the road" (68). When Henry sends Becket back to England from France, he declares:

Becket,
The sea is running as smooth as a hound for you;
I'm sending you back with a pliant wind
All in your favour (69).

This statement proves ironic: soon after, Henry intuitively hears "the ice creaking on the river...the horses on the frozen roads" (73) which presage the news of Becket's murder. The sea imagery is associated on the one hand with the journey metaphors, and on the other with images of water in many forms. Roger's conception occurred on a night when "the rain came down...Like a high sea slapping over a cockle boat" (27), but rain is ominous rather than benevolent when the day of Henry's Lear-like division of the

kingdom "emerged after a night of bucketing rain" (55). At Le Mans, when the fire turns against Henry, he renounces God:

no such hands
As yours will have my soul. I'll burn it
Away like the city, I'll hurt you
In the centre of your love, as you do me.
Your eyes can sting like mine, and weep
With the same helpless water.
There's nothing left for either of us to save.--
We move out, Marshal (87).

His tears are not those of repentance, but of anger and remorse: a mixture of Promethean defiance and tragic recognition.

Characteristically, Henry calls for another move, but when the horses are ready, he "cannot ride" (89). Images of riding form another progressive pattern. Henry is first pictured in Marshal's report to Eleanor as riding in triumph through the city with Becket, who came to Henry "first on a limping mule" (71), and Eleanor, recalling her first meeting with Henry, says:

I'm not at all certain he didn't ride in
Through the doorway on a horse (15).

Marshal, recounting the early movement of events, declares, "There was the morning full of life, like an unbroken colt; but the moment the King, with a good will and strong knees, got astride it, God only knows what whistle it was answering; but it made history, whatever that is" (25). Becket, when leaving his trial "can hardly get away or control his horse" (51), which echoes Marshal's earlier comment. The attempt to ride away from the doomed city of Le Mans becomes a metaphor for Henry's inability to escape the consuming fire of his own purpose and the pressure of events.

"This ride," he declares, "will find/The weak seams in all of them, men and horses" (88), and his own inability even to mount his horse indicates the disintegration of his own ride of life.

Appropriately, Henry's attempts to establish the law are phrased in building images: he aims "to give England/An incorruptible scaffolding of law" (23), and later declares he will give the people "the city of the law/Even if [he has] to make it by fearful means" (62), a threat which reaches ironic fulfillment at Le Mans. It can be seen from the examples selected that both the images used and the language in which they are expressed are direct and forceful. The rhythms of the verse are almost colloquial, but at points of high emotion or when the occasion demands a ritualistic incantation, Fry's blank verse achieves a noble eloquence.

Becket's affirmation of anti-Sartrean existentialism is an example:

What a man knows he has by experience,
But what a man is precedes experience.
His experience merely reveals him, or destroys him;
Either drives him to his own negation,
Or persuades him to his affirmation, as he chooses (40).

Prose is utilized in the Shakespearian manner mainly for the speech of "low" characters, but also where Fry intuitively feels that the action demands it--as in the addresses by Marshal to the audience, where natural prose sets him apart as their link with the action,⁶ and in the final scene where the departure from the controlled

⁶ This is similar to Eliot's strategy in Murder in the Cathedral, where, after the murder, colloquial, modern prose is used by the Knights to address--and involve--the audience.

rhythms of verse is a correlative for the disintegration of Henry's life and work.

Commenting on Henry's appointment of Becket to Canterbury, Marshal recalls the hope of stability, prosperity and unity at that time, but "the whole significance of unity was not debated, nor what fires can forge a diverse multitude into one mind" (25). Fry's plays, and Curtmantle in particular, constantly explore these questions, and he finds the significance in the diversity which encompasses him in life. In the Preface he declares, "pattern and balance are pervading facts of the universe" (vii-viii), and this perceived unity is an expression of the inner mystery which contains the significance--or meaning--of creation. Ritual can "give shape to the mystery revealed/Yet as a mystery" (33): art and drama have a similar role, and in Curtmantle, because Fry succeeds in subordinating time, place and specific issues to the tragic pattern and to the timeless quest for identity, law, order, truth and meaning, and because the elements of language, action and character are so integrally structured, he succeeds in eloquently expressing his own sense of this mystery through the medium of his form.

Chapter Eleven

Conclusion

As suggested in Chapter Six (p. 137), part of Fry's success in the decade following the 1939-45 war can be attributed to his capturing of a popular mood--much as John Osborne was to do in 1956 with Look Back in Anger. Fry's war-weary audience sought a fresh, optimistic vision of life, and grasped at the reassuring assertions of his plays. Fry did not deal directly with the post-war situation and mode of feeling until 1970 in A Yard of Sun. I have not dealt with this play in full because it appeared when this dissertation was almost complete, and, more important, because an analysis of it would add little of significance to my exegesis of Fry's methods.* The play, originally called "Heat of the Day," is sub-titled A Summer Comedy, and completes the quartet of plays in which a season establishes the dominant mood. In form it is again Romantic Comedy, and the content again subsumes spiritual patterns within a secular plot. The source is an eighteenth-century Italian short story about a father who is settling his three sons in life (the three "feet" of a "yard" of sons). Its background is the Palio contest in Siena in which competitors representing ten of the city's wards race bareback around the piazza to climax a day of general festivity. Although the action takes place specifically in July 1946, the renewal of life that both the festival and the play celebrate is timeless. The setting

*For fuller explanation see note on page 231a.

is the "yard" of the Palazzo del Traguado (which Fry informs us means "goal"), and the play opens on the morning after a severe storm--"a sly dig said with love" to T.S. Eliot's¹ *Wasteland*. Europe is recovering from the storm of war, and the conflicts spill over into peace because of the differing allegiances and experiences of the characters. As well as renewal and resurrection, the play is concerned with themes of guilt, the quest for goals and the search for identity. The language and patterns of action, particularly the rebirth of the prisoner-of-war Cesare Scapare and the return of the prodigal son Edmondo, incorporate Christian myths into the secular action. The language, like the form, goes back to the style of the middle plays, and although not as exuberant as that in *The Lady's Not for Burning*, it possesses much of the same vitality, which is appropriate to the main theme. The vitality and fullness of life that the play affirms culminates in the excitement of the horse-race, which becomes a life-symbol, but Fry gives a typically ironic twist to the result in which the local ward wins with a riderless horse, and the rider Luigi, the ex-fascist-son, is applauded as champion. The play ends in a manner very similar to *Lady* with Roberto, the doctor-son, reluctantly but inevitably destined to marry Grazia, and the rest returning to their normal business. *Yard* also echoes the earlier comedies in several of its characters: Roberto is obviously related to those disillusioned romantic soldiers Thomas and Tegeus; Ana-Clara,

¹ Fry, in conversation, June 1969.

Edmondo's wife, is a resurrected Perpetua with the life-force dynamic of Dynamene, Jennet and Rosmarin; Luigi and Edmondo bear a strong resemblance to Humphrey and Nicholas Devize; and the innocent Grazia combines the qualities of Alizon and Gelda, while her mother Giosetta is a mature Doto. There is one new character, Scapare's son Alfio, the jockey, whose energy is symbolized by his motor-scooter. He represents the new generation bursting on the scene. The play is light, warm and entertaining, but it disappoints because it is a reversion in form and style after the new direction of A Sleep of Prisoners and Curtmantle.

In Fry's retrospective view of the post-war scene, he identifies in the desires of his characters those very yearnings that made his earlier plays popular. Because the quarter-century since the end of the war has been one of growing disillusionment, Fry's plays now appear to be somewhat euphoristic in their assertions, and in terms of reality (in the sense of truth to a situation), they appear artificial in comparison with the representations of life and society in the social or philosophical playwrights of the era--Osborne, Miller, Beckett, Pinter, and others. It is not surprising, therefore, that Yard received a negative reception because current critical opinion condemns Fry's plays for their superficiality, unwarranted optimism and lack of social relevance.² What Fry did achieve, and what may well prove the source of revival

² The scathing review of A Yard of Sun, TLS (Aug. 21, 1970), 918, accuses Fry of "vague Christian benevolence," "Christmas tree versification," and failure to face issues squarely.

for his plays, is the expression of qualities that Beckerman finds lacking in contemporary (1970) drama: a resolution of "the familiar with the unfamiliar," which includes "the marvellous, the wondrous, the unusual and exotic."³ This surge towards "something wondrous," to use Beckerman's phrase, constitutes the driving force behind Fry's plays, and informs his whole comic and religious outlook. Even in Sleep, The Dark is Light Enough and Curtmantle, which all possess a dark tone indicating that Fry participated in the shift of attitudes of his times, the sense of the marvellous is only subdued, not lost. Fry's mode of perception, which embraces comic vitality, a sense of wonder and an optimistic faith, expresses something inherent in human nature, and when the cycle of attitudes has passed through the phase of disillusionment his plays should again enjoy sympathetic performances and responsive audiences-- and, perhaps, kinder critics.

In the course of my discussions I have tried to show that, although the plays are products of a specific era, they are not limited by their period. Fry deliberately avoids contemporary settings and, without turning to "period" drama, prefers settings distanced by historical time, or as in Venus Observed quite independent of it. He makes his plays a-historic so that he can concentrate on universal human concerns: love, death, faith, freedom, and individual fulfilment. Asked why he chose to express himself through the form of poetic drama rather than through that of poetry

³ Bernard Beckerman, The Dynamics of Drama (New York, 1970), p. 142.

alone, Fry replied that he did so because his prime concern was with human relationships: "I don't think a person exists," he declared, "except in his relationships to other people."⁴ By its very nature, drama is the form best suited to such a concern. Fry does not stop at a concern with human relationships, but extends the temporal human experience by placing it within the context of an eternal, divine order. As discussed in Chapter One (pp. 8-11) and in subsequent chapters, one means of achieving this dimension is through the strategy of the sacramental aesthetic whereby successive events are related to one another and to the eternal. The patterns of religious myth and the resonance of the poetry reinforce this aspect. The drama that results from the interaction of the two planes, the temporal and the eternal, possesses both an immediate appeal and an inner resonance--characteristics that mark the greatest drama. However, the accusations of superficiality cannot be entirely set aside: there is something missing even in the best of Fry's plays that make them fall short of greatness.

This dissertation has focused on the analysis of thematic structure and has not been concerned with an evaluation of the plays as dramatic performances because this would have over-extended the scope and prevented concentration on the topic. Thematic analysis is an important step in understanding the total structure, and while it tends to stress verbal communication it is inseparable

⁴ Fry, in conversation, June 1969.

from consideration of such dramatic aspects as plot, character, conflict, setting, and movement, because thematic statements are made in a variety of ways. Therefore, before concluding, it is not inappropriate to extend the thematic examination briefly and offer a broad evaluation of the plays. As suggested in the previous paragraph, there are certain deficiencies that lessen the dramatic impact. Perhaps the most important of these is suggested by Thomas when he cries to Margaret: "Be disturbed/Be disturbed, Madam" (Lady, p. 13). She is not, and nor are we. In the comedies, despite thunderclouds on the horizon and ironic reminders that life has its dark side, we are not disturbed or touched deeply. Even in the plays that verge on the tragic, such as The Firstborn and Thor, with Angels, we are not deeply disturbed because evil is presented in terms of misguided action rather than as a malignant growth or condition of existence, and despite the pattern of sacrifice its correction appears to be a relatively simple matter. The ironic mode into which most of Fry's plays fall invites a fatalistic acceptance of life as it is, with all its paradoxes and contradictions, rather than any noble defiance or shudder of comprehension. In his essay "Comedy" Fry claims that he is ever conscious of the tragic alternative, but only in Curtmantle does he come close to communicating a true sense of tragedy. The inability to disturb and the lack of a tragic sense lead to a weakness in the conflicts of his plays, both within and between characters. Therefore, despite his concern with human relationships and his suggestions of

the wider context of human action, most of his characters lack that dimension of inner life that marks the creations of a master dramatist. Of the nine plays discussed, A Phoenix Too Frequent and Lady are undoubtedly the best in this respect: the characters are vital and memorable, and their action appears "significant." Though Fry's most fully developed characters--Dynamene, Thomas, Jennet, The Duke, and Rosmarin--appear in his Romantic Comedies, the form is essentially lightweight; when he turns to something more substantial, as in Sleep and Curtmantle, and demonstrates a flexible imagination, he creates a theatre in which the audience can undergo a deep emotional experience. This would suggest that his choice of Romantic Comedy was self-limiting, and it is to be regretted that he did not extend the experiments of Sleep and Curtmantle.

Fry occupies a unique position in the drama of his time because he is the only verse dramatist in English who has attracted a wide audience without resorting to the spectacular or diluting his poetry to the point of neutralization. Critics like Charles Williams, Denis Donoghue and David Pryce-Jones may fulminate against Fry's poetry as mere "embellishment" of drawing-room comedy, but as I have tried to show, the language is both part of the entertainment offered by the plays and an essential aspect of the total dramatic structure. In the early and middle plays Fry's exuberant language expresses the inner dynamic of a vision that perceives the universe as "fantastic to the point of nightmare," and even when

his exuberant mount is reined after Venus, the sense of vitality persists. Fry believes that poetry in the theatre can help to provide a "lightning spasm of discovery," and his own success in achieving this is implicit in the criticism of those who dismiss him as a "phrasemaker," for it is the pointed phrase or image that encapsulates such discoveries. The implication, or direct argument, of such critics is that Fry's language is neither metaphorically developed during his plays nor fully integrated with their action. In my analyses I have endeavoured to show in detail the development and integration of language within the context of each play. The patterns of imagery consistently reinforce the patterns of action and add a dimension that reaches out towards the mystery that enfolds existence. Because the plays are successful in making us vividly aware of this mystery, Fry fulfills one of his own criteria for poetry in the theatre--that it should give us a new perspective and "help us to see ourselves and the world freshly."

The key concept in Fry's perspective is that of inter-relationship. It is developed in three aspects: between men, between man and nature, and between man, nature and God. The relationship between men, whether in the form of eros as in Phoenix or agapé as in Dark, is continually expressed in terms of "exchange" whereby we must be more than inter-dependent in a merely functional manner as a condition of society, and must sacrifice something of ourselves in recognition of our responsibility for others. The principle is evident in Moses' readiness to sacrifice his personal

success for the Hebrews, in the exchange of strengths between Dynamene and Tegeus and between Thomas and Jennet, in the sacrifice of Hoel, in the grace of Countess Rosmarin, and even in the dedication of Henry to his concept of justice for his people. The relationship between man and nature, in the sense of his total physical environment, is a model for his relationship with the divine in a "root and sky" interaction, and nature functions as an ever present reminder of the astonishing mystery of creation of which man is a part. From the complexity of "Generations of roses in [a] wrinkled berry" (Lady, 56), to the cosmic display of the sun "annulled and renewed" (Venus, 13), nature is seen in terms that both parallel man's life and assert his involvement in the larger process. This process extends to God. Through the "sacramental aesthetic" all things in time transcend time, as the action in Sleep for example, and thereby become, in Spanos' words, "perpetually relevant symbolic actions." The patterns of action, specifically in the religious plays and by analogy in the secular, partake of the sacramental, and, when combined with Fry's resonant language, become an eloquent expression of the "co-inherence" of man, nature and the divine.

Parallels between man and nature and analogies that relate man's life to a divine pattern are two methods by which Fry expresses his sense of the unity of creation. Other characteristics of his plays that reinforce this concept of unity are antithesis, paradox and repetition. Antithesis is a basis of conflict and

inevitably the action of drama is based on it. What characterizes Fry's use of antithesis is the tension that pervades all his plays between a surging life-force, the comic assertion of vitality, and the forces of repression that would oppose it. This is particularly evident in Lady where the conflict is dramatized through the grouping of characters into "insiders" and "outsiders," and in Phoenix where the comic life-force asserts itself against both repression and death. As suggested above, the resolution of Fry's plays in a somewhat negative acceptance of evil and paradox does lack dramatic force. An alternative view is that even when verging on the tragic, as in Firstborn, Thor, Dark, and Curtmantle, his resolutions positively affirm a condition of unity because the representatives of evil, being only misguided, can be corrected. The comic-ironic nature of his conclusions, by suggesting that mankind can learn to live with its differences, also affirms unity, and as Robert Sharpe suggests, "a high irony of compassion" results from this type of synthesizing of life's discords because such resolutions tend to be consolatory.⁵ Paradoxes, particularly those concerning death and rebirth, inform the action of all the plays, and an attitude similar to that towards antithesis is established which maintains that we can only understand paradox by accepting it as a unifying rather than divisive aspect of existence. Repetitions, whether of action or relationship, affirm the cyclical nature of life and posit a unity between sequential and coextensive

⁵ Sharpe, pp. xi, xii and 77-80.

action or experience. As part of the rhetoric of the plays, antithesis, paradox and repetition function to provide a great deal of the wit, to forward the movement of words-in-action, and to complement the structure. The frequency with which they occur in the language of the plays suggests that existence is compounded of tensions between polarities--light and dark, heat and cold, life and death--and of enigmas. Fry's action and language combine to assert that antithesis and paradox are inevitable conditions of life and that rather than reject them as meaningless or be baffled by them, we should grasp them as keys to apprehending the meaning of existence.

Fry's plays, which so often take the shape of quests, together constitute an exploration of meaning that in itself is a quest for God. The Boy with a Cart presents a simple, orthodox faith, in a simple manner, but Firstborn confronts the perplexities of an ambiguous God of Wrath and finally indicates a rejection of orthodoxy in favour of a movement towards a concept of divinity as a potential of the individual. Thor, Phoenix, Lady, and Venus explore the New Testament concepts of love, sacrifice and redemption, and by illustrating the degree to which all individuals and relationships partake of the divine pattern of Christ, confirm the direction of Firstborn. Sleep reaffirms the resurrection in its recapitulation of the patterns of the earlier plays. It raises existential questions concerning man's meaning and purpose, and suggests answers in terms that go beyond existential fulfillment

of the individual towards a vision of harmony between man, nature and the divine. This harmony is predicated on a harmony of relationship between men that arises out of their interdependence. In Dark the fulfillment of the individual is seen as a step towards a sacramental relationship with others, and the tragedy of Curtmantle lies in Henry's inability to achieve such a relationship.

For the artist, concepts of harmony, pattern and unity are expressed through his form. In my analyses I have endeavoured to show how successful Fry is in expressing his meaning through a highly integrated total structure or form. Meaning becomes more than "theme" because it incorporates the intuitive vision of the artist. Theme is what the play is about; structure is how the separate parts are assembled and related; meaning is the result of the fusion of theme and structure in an expressive form. My analyses have tried to show how each play makes its own statement: Boy expresses a simple faith in a simple form; Firstborn, with its structure of oscillation and antithesis, expresses a tension between the tragic and comic, as does Thor in its concern with the paradox of sacrifice; the "concertina" movement of Phoenix and focus on death, resurrection and redemption, pulsate with the comic rhythm; a "climate" of comedy is also created in Lady and Venus which assert the same celebration of life; the form of Sleep is comic in its affirmative vision of release from the imprisoning forces of time and flesh; Dark asserts that the individual obtains self-fulfilment and approaches his divine potential through sacramental

relationships with others; and in Curtmantle the form distils significance from history to discover a meaning that combines a sense of mystery with a perception of unity. Repeatedly, the form of Fry's plays takes the shape of quests in search of meaning and although they reveal that he is disturbed by paradoxes, enigmas and existential doubts, their final assertion remains one of affirmation in which humanity is seen to "trace the outline of the mystery" of creation and thereby to explore the course of its own redemption.

A close examination of Fry's plays leads to the discovery of a fine craftsman at work, and to an encounter with an author possessing integrity, humour, compassion, and humanistic faith. Despite Fry's relatively small output, much of it--particularly Phoenix, Lady, Sleep, and Curtmantle--seems assured of a lasting place in the annals of the theatre because it achieves the prime aim of a dramatist, which is to entertain. At the same time, the plays communicate a vivid perception of a dynamic, harmonious universe: no mean feat in an age characterized by nihilism and despair.

Note

Except for minor revisions, the manuscript of this dissertation was complete in June, 1970: formal completion was delayed by external factors. Yard was first performed in July, 1970, and published subsequently. As indicated (p. 219), the play does not represent any development in technique, thematic statement or vision, and although it completes the quartet it does not appear to do more than reaffirm the celebration of the vitality of life that characterizes Fry's comedies and is particularly appropriate to the "climate" of summer. An extensive examination of Yard would have delayed completion further as it would have required an additional chapter, interpolations and cross-references. Since this examination would not have added any depth to the study of Fry's thematic structure, it was agreed that under the circumstances, a brief treatment would suffice.

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