

QUAKER ELEMENTS IN CHRISTOPHER FRY'S DRAMAS

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the interplay of the forces of life, death and love in Fry's plays. The relevance of Quakerism to the issue is established in Chapter I. This chapter takes the mystery of existence as the basic point common to Fry's plays and Quakerism and explores it as it develops in each.

Christopher Fry includes within his plays abundant evidence of the tragedy inherent in the human condition. He transcends this awareness, however, in his consistent intimation of the triumph of the vital force and in a concept of redemption through joy as the proper expression of the human spirit. This attitude parallels the basic frame of mind underlying the Quakerism in which Fry has his roots. The Quaker chooses to be amazed at the mystery of existence rather than lament his inability to fathom it. Indeed, he finds this the natural course. Intuitions of a greater reality prevent him from indulging in an unnatural suicidal concern with his human limitations.

Chapter II deals more specifically with the mystery of existence within each of Fry's plays. Each play is considered separately. However, since similar themes appear in all his plays, this chapter in fact explores the body of

Fry's plays as a whole. It perceives each play as a particular dimension of what is in all his plays.

The Appendix establishes the literary relevance of Fry's plays to the theatre as both religious drama and verse drama, and it concludes by describing the relevance of religion and poetry to a type of romance drama. Fry's work as a whole reflects the conviction that romance and comedy are universal, and that they can only be found after the tragic experience. There is something beyond tragedy and Fry calls it comedy. In reaching out to it, he says, one has to pass through tragedy first.

## PREFACE

The proximity to death and the interplay of the forces of life, death, and love which express the clash of freedom and authority make an inextricable tangle of plot in each of Christopher Fry's plays. The development of action, which amounts to little more than the progress of these forces, is a symphonic poem of motifs, of themes "which appear, reappear and combine" as an inner dialectic of "the conflict between the life-and-death-wish, faith and scepticism, religion and materialism."<sup>1</sup> The resolution of these conflicts and the conclusion of these plays lie in the nature of comedy and the presence of the comic spirit which do not differ from tragedy, but are born out of it.

I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as tragedy. The characters press on to the theme with all their divisions and perplexities heavy about them; they are already entered for the race to doom, and good and evil are an infernal tangle skinning the fingers that try to unravel them. If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy, and to some extent I<sub>2</sub> have to cross the one before I can light on the other.<sup>2</sup>

For Fry, tragedy and comedy differ from one another as experience does from intuition--they are not different, only complementary approaches to the same issues and integral

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<sup>1</sup>Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), p. 213.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review, IV, iii (March, 1960), p. 78.

parts of the wholeness and integrity of spirit in Fry's art.

Tragedy's experience hammers against the mystery to make a breach which would admit the whole triumphant answer. Intuition has no such potential. . . . Laughter may seem to be only like an exhalation of air, but out of that air we came; in the beginning we inhaled it; it is truth, not a fantasy, a truth voluble of good which comedy stoutly maintains.<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis I would like to consider in all Fry's plays the interplay of the forces of life, death, and love, and the intuitive vision with which they are resolved within the context of Quaker faith and practice. The path Quakers follow is a similar one of progress from the conflict and division in life to resolution and unity, as intuition is born out of experience, and as it grows above experience to truth.

The test for membership should not be doctrinal agreement, nor adherence to certain testimonies, but evidence of sincere seeking and striving for the Truth, together with an understanding of the lines along which Friends are seeking that Truth.<sup>4</sup>

It is not necessary that we should know all mysteries before we begin. . . . [Christ's disciples] did not understand at first the mystic union with their Master to which they were called, but they followed Him, and as they followed, there was gradually unfolded to them the fulness of His love and life. If we begin where they began, and follow as they followed, we shall end where they ended.<sup>5</sup>

As far as distinguishing characteristics go these ideals do no more than place Quakerism within the Christian tradition.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>4</sup>Christian Faith And Practice In The Experience Of The Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (London: Headley Brothers, 1963), Sec. 368.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Sec. 399.

However, the Quaker position can be defined clearly within this tradition. It lies within the Protestant movement by a demonstration of the reality of individual religion, worship, and insight, which was behind the break with Catholicism. But it demonstrates this reality more truly by holding to non-sectarian, non-doctrinal ways. In the pursuit of the inner life it is distinguished from Catholic mystical intuition through the individual's visionary potential outside the body of the Church (by means of his religious approaches towards creation and the sanctity of all forms of life), instead of through the spiritual myth and dogmatic belief of the Catholic Church. As opposed to these spiritual qualities Quakers are also distinctive as an actively Christian people because the whole principle of their lives and beliefs is to show the reality of Christian love and deeds in an everyday world--"they have taken the lead in showing that the love of Christ can overcome the spirit of hate and the desire for revenge."<sup>6</sup> The inner growth of the individual follows a way of life that attempts to perceive the Christian mystery in the daily world of his own experience.

In Quakerism there are two complementary movements, withdrawal to an inward Source of Truth and return to action in the world. The first is Greek in its religious emphasis, the second, Hebrew. Quakerism is both contemplative and active, both metaphysical and ethical, not because it has combined the two in a consistent system of

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<sup>6</sup>W. R. Inge, Mysticism in Religion (London: Hutchinson's University Library), pp. 128-129.

thought but because it has combined them through experience.<sup>7</sup>

Quakerism is a spirit of endeavour only and nothing else.

The main reason for considering the parallels between the Quaker position and Fry's plays is that in both the philosophical and metaphysical approaches to the mystery of creation and their expressions of a cosmic vision are alike. Even in his comedies Fry pursues the secular and pagan expressions of these same themes with a consistency and intensity no less than his religious seriousness in the "religious" plays. He says, "if any are religious they are all religious, and if any are pagan they are all pagan. They reflect the world I know, as far as my understanding has taken me."<sup>8</sup> In Quakerism these preoccupations are justified by the simultaneously sacred and secular nature of Quaker ways--the combination of inner spiritual life and the outward return to action in the world.

Quakerism has never accepted a distinction between the sacred and the secular. . . . The unity of the sacred and the secular involves this implication: that the sacramental quality . . . depends upon the spirit and intention of the persons concerned, not upon any atmosphere or circumstance provided from outside.<sup>9</sup>

Some explanation for these similar concerns with the mystery lies in the biographical evidence of a strongly

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<sup>7</sup>Howard H. Brinton, Friends for 300 Years (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Christopher Fry, Three Plays (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. vii.

<sup>9</sup>Towards a Quaker View of Sex (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1964), pp. 11-12.



religious family background. Fry's father, Charles John Harris Hammond, was an architect until he gave himself up to work for the poor in the Bristol slums as an Anglican lay-preacher. Fry was born in 1907 and he was only three when his father died. However, Derek Stanford, a friend and critic of Fry's, remarks that Fry

retained deep and powerful impressions of his father. The faith and personality of his parent had always meant much to him, and constituted a kind of sub-conscious ideal.<sup>10</sup>

His mother, Emma Marguerite, "also a religious-minded woman," was a Fry (a family of long Quaker standing). At the age of eighteen Fry adopted his mother's family name (for euphony, he said) and the family's religious attachments to the Society of Friends (Quakers). Stanford comments on a certain Quakerliness in Fry's temperament in later years, when he states, that

Fry, who sent his son to a Quaker public school, has something of the Quaker about him to this day. Indeed, it is probably the unusual combination of an early theatrical background with inherited Quaker tendencies that constitute the distinctiveness of his temperament; a nature both grave and gay, contemplative and sociable; and, above all, enamoured of quiet and peace.<sup>11</sup>

There were two aunts important in Fry's upbringing too, "both religious women; one of whom early inspired him with a love of English literature by reading the prose of Bunyan to him."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry (London: Longmans, Green, 1954), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

Later on, when the Second World War was declared, Fry, a conscientious objector, served in the Pioneer Corps, a non-combatant arm of the Forces. Stanford, whose acquaintance with Fry stems from these years in the Forces, comments again on Fry's temperament as "Quaker-like" when he describes two aspects of it, namely, the preserved "faculty for something akin to religious meditation," and, opposed to it, another quality in him which made "no attempt to avoid participation in communal matters."<sup>13</sup>

When, with this thesis in mind, I wrote to Fry about Quaker elements in his dramas, he replied, "I think you may be right in finding some parallels between the plays and Quaker mysticism: though this is for you to decide."<sup>14</sup> This thesis is, therefore, an attempt to examine the closeness of these parallels and determine the validity of the comparison beyond the bounds of superficial similarities and incidental parallels.

It is my belief that the basis for this comparison is fundamental in both Fry and Quakerism. Fundamental to both is the religious concern with life and universals. It is not a concern that makes the formal religious distinction between sacred and secular, but a concern with the basic

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<sup>13</sup>Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher Fry, see his letter to Iain Kirkaldy-Willis dated August 14, 1964. The letter is xeroxed and presented as Appendix B.

principles or spirit that lie behind both the sacred and secular alike. Chapter one will consider these preoccupations with the "mystery of existence," and also the formal directions they both take in expressing themselves.

The way of life Quakers observe is one of continual enlightenment. The responsibility of every individual is education (in the broadest sense) and self-improvement, and it is this concern that provokes their basic approach to life--to promote understanding and unity where before there was ignorance and division. Fry's plays also follow this basic pattern. Chapter two, therefore, examines each play separately in terms of its conflicts and division, and it takes the play's resolution in unity, drawing on those principles that arise from the fundamental position of Fry and Quakerism.

The third element both have in common is the place of experience and the progress of intuition from it. In both, experience is personal and individual, the centre of tragedy in Fry and the centre of life for Quakers. From it comes intuition, the harmony and unity that comes from conflict, and the vision of the mystery. Either way it is a principle present in both chapters.

My intention in this thesis is to speak of Quakerliness side by side with Fry's thought and his plays solely for the increased understanding it may give of his work. I believe that by examining the parallels between Quakerism and Fry it

is possible to assist an appreciation of his work and to understand its significance within a frame of reference far larger than that of his plays. I do not wish to establish any impression that Quakerism has been an influence on Fry, for that would immediately presume on the literary quality of Fry's dramas. Further, it would contradict the spirit of Quakerism, implying that it is credal and authoritarian, seeking its health and growth in conversion and evangelism. The concept "Quaker" is deceptive, only a label--the name derisively given to a group of people believing in a spiritual way of life to which George Fox's words gave expression. Unfortunately as a label it tends to obscure the process by confining this concept to these people and their approach to the circumstances of life. In truer perspective we find Quakers freely acknowledging other forms of mysticism and other agents of concern for life and the condition of man, but they do not call them Quakerism. There always have been certain groups that have in common a concept of the value of life, a concept of religion as a non-doctrinal spirit of endeavour, and a desire to perceive greater realities and the meaning behind the forms we accept as commonplaces in the world around us. Quakers are one of the families who thrive on these concepts. Fry became a member of this family, but that is not to say that it has influenced him. It is rather as though he has influenced it, for it is not for the family to tell its members how to behave. It is

rather for us to know that family from the way its individual members act. Whether they have anything in common with others is a commentary on life and does not tell us of influences. The problem of this thesis is therefore, a question of perspective. Just as the way an individual behaves and acts expresses the truer living nature behind his philosophies (or comments on the essence of the group if he acknowledges certain common pursuits) so Fry's plays are a commentary on Quakerism. But this is only if we speak of influences.

I can only wish that the reader be continually aware of my own perspective in this thesis. I am concerned only with Fry's perspective of life, and believe that the essential spirit of his poetry lies therein. Further, to my mind, the Quaker position speaks of this same perspective and calls on the same inner fires of experience. Though this would seem to equate the poetic and religious experiences indiscriminately, the connotations of these two words identify the two aspects of this experience very distinctly. "Poeticity" identifies the literary and aesthetic qualities of the experience in an artist such as Fry, whereas, "religiosity" bespeaks the philosophical and theological qualities of a similar experience in someone like a Quaker.

Poetry and religion are identical in essence though they relate themselves differently to practical life: poetry by a dramatic presentation of values and religion by precepts and a code.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>A.N. Wilder, Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952), p. 13.

Finally, my justification for presuming on the parallels between Fry and Quakerism is that at the age of eighteen Fry wished to acknowledge what his life had in common with them by joining them.

The major argument of this thesis is a literary one, since its concern is with themes and patterns of ideas, or basic truths, and with the way these things colour the general mood of each play. Though it does not bear direct relevance to these literary concerns Appendix A is presented as an attempt to return to the perspective I wish the reader to be aware of. It is an attempt to give Fry's plays some perspective as religious drama and verse drama, as well as to establish the relationship between a form of romance drama used by Fry, and the affirmation of the mystery of existence (both in Fry's plays and in Quakerism).

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## CHAPTER I

### THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE IN FRY AND QUAKERISM

Central to Christopher Fry's plays is their concern with the mystery of existence and the moments of sudden intuitive cosmic vision that transcend the commonplace as they rise out of conflict, contradiction and paradox. His non-dramatic works offer an explanation and an elaboration, for they are preoccupied with the philosophy of this theme, and they theorise on the way poetry can incorporate it into a form of drama that at once expresses his vision and conveys his message to the theatre. Quakerism also presents an approach to the concerns it has with an intuition of creation. Its ideals call on man to seek an understanding of the spirit manifest behind any form of experience. In this chapter I will consider the nature of these views and any further issues that arise out of them, such as Fry's specific views on comedy, tragedy and poetry in the theatre, or the combination of the inner life of the Quaker meeting and its active expressions of humanitarian concern.

"How lost, how amazed, how miraculous we are," says Fry.<sup>1</sup> Over and over again he insists on the complete mystery of creation, the newness of each experience and the

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts, XXXVI (August, 1952), 27.



singular distinctiveness of man's perceptions. The awareness of these sensations is capable of precipitating man's awakening out of the world of custom, habit, and order (that he has quite naturally created of the commonplaces around him) if only he will perceive their singularity. Man suddenly faces creation within the small world of his experience and is lost.

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 rationalise, 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. [But] we get used to it. We get broken into it so gradually we scarcely notice it. . . .<sup>2</sup>

But it is in the moment of loss that man is closest to the mystery, for he sees it and is overwhelmed by it; he is lost in it without identity; he is part of a nameless creation simultaneously possessing and not possessing order and reason.

And now I come into existence, and I see my hand lying on the table in front of me, and that one thing alone, the first impact of a hand, is more dramatic than Hamlet. What on earth happens, then, when the rest of the world comes to me, when the full phantasmagoria of the commonplace breaks over my head? . . . we have only to start on a catalogue to know how hopeless our grasp is. Thank God we are no more than partly aware of a little at a time. Reality is incredible, reality is a whirlwind. What we call reality is a false god, the dull eye of custom.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

"There is always something new under the sun, because a mystery never ages," says Fry a little further on in the same article.<sup>4</sup> "Our difficulty is to be alive to the newness . . . to be able to be old and new at one and the same time."<sup>5</sup> The experience of creation's mystery is not the result of a search, but a realisation, since man lives in it and since it and anything it achieves are the same.

Though Fry exults more in the mystery, the Quaker is talking about the same way of life that expresses this joy, when he considers the personal experience of an intuition of the truth.

All truth is a shadow except the last, except the utmost; yet every Truth is true in its kind. It is substance in its own place, though it be but a shadow in another place (for it is but a reflection from an intenser substance); and the shadow is true shadow, as the substance is true substance.<sup>6</sup>

Quakerly living is the personal expression of the individual's spiritual enlightenment and the increased understanding of life in both his own life and in the institutions of social concern and welfare.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Christian Faith And Practice In The Experience Of The Society Of Friends, London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (London: Headley Brothers, 1963), a quote from Isaac Penington (1653) given in some preliminary remarks "To The Reader." Further references to this source will be to Christian Faith followed by the paragraph location since the book has no page numbering.

Examples drawn from the records of this particular religious movement show how religion as such possesses an important social function in creating social organisms. It is also evident that the divine Spirit performs the function of producing unity within the individual as well as within the group. If not resisted, the same Spirit is able to overcome all disunity everywhere among and within men, and between man and God.<sup>7</sup>

The benefit to spiritual life and community activity is mutual since Quaker's spiritual life reciprocates by drawing on experience for its appreciations of the "divine mysteries." A constant exchange is made between body and soul, mind and spirit, experience, reason and intuition.

Man finds himself in the twilight zone of reason, poised between two worlds, an upper world of Light, and a lower world of Darkness, a Spiritual world which is superhuman and a material world which is subhuman. He is free to center his life on one of the three; he can live by the Light, he can live by human reason, or he can live at the mercy of his sensual cravings. His body is animal, his mind rational, and the Light Within him is divine. He is never without all three though the three are so intimately related that it is impossible to distinguish between them sharply. Much depends on their relationship. The Light of Truth should be a guide to reason and reason should help instinct in a properly ordered life.<sup>8</sup>

Insight into the divine essence moving in creation and manifest within every aspect of existence is the same as the understanding of spirit or principle that lies behind form or any perception of the mysterious. The central fact of Quakerism as a group mysticism is the uniting power of the divine spirit integrating the group as an organic whole, and the heart of Quaker theology has grown out of actual ex-

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<sup>7</sup>Howard H. Brinton, Friends For 300 Years (New York: Harper, 1952), p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

perience. Furthermore, this direct contact with a principle that was before all sects carries the same significance today as it did to George Fox and the first Friends.

The Society of Friends arose from a personal experience of direct encounter with God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The conviction that Christ can speak to the condition of every man spread rapidly among the seekers of the seventeenth century and has remained at the centre of the Society's faith and practice.<sup>9</sup>

Since this first experience of Fox, Friends have considered man the child of creation, in him lies life and the spirit of the universe. To understand and live and grow in the appreciation of this mystery and the perception of this phenomenon is the duty of man, as Quakers see it. William Penn expressed this understanding within the Christian experience when he declared

It is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true . . . though never so soundly worded, that . . . makes a man a true believer or a true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind and practice to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation, according to the dictates of this Divine principle of Light and Life in the soul which denotes a person truly a child of God.<sup>10</sup>

Though Fry rejoices in creation and the intuition of the mystery (not just from the point of view of life, but of death and destruction too), he pursues the issue into religious fervour and social consciousness, for death, destruction, disease and squalor are all of the law of life--"the creative

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<sup>9</sup>Christian Faith, Introduction, para. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., "To The Reader," para. 3, from William Penn (1692).

order contained in the apparent anarchy of life."<sup>11</sup> Yet it is only the mystery arising from these individual issues that will lead us to the perspective of the vision.

It is the imagination which makes the world seem new to us everyday. . . . It is the imagination which awakens the dry bones of any subject to sing about the mystery of creation. . . . You will find in the story of man's life on earth great wonders perceived by the spirit, and unless you live by these wonders you live, it seems to me, in an ultimately aimless world. . . . But the things of the mind can be learned only by the mind, and the things of the spirit can be learned only by the attentive spirit. Without that attention you are less than half yourself. With it, you will find your knowledge, your imagination, your relationships with other people, everything you do, taking on new importance and a greater value.<sup>12</sup>

Here Fry is saying what Quakerism has to say about the natural growth and education of the individual to an understanding of his position, a process that relies heavily on the conscience (that of God in everyman) and the assistance given to sensibility by experience. This path of truth and enlightenment leads ever outward into creation from that small spark within. Community, equality, freedom, and harmony become conditions that allow men to see themselves, not just goals that bring happiness and they become the starting point for the individual's search for communication and unity within and without. These conditions do not materialise out of the impositions of external law and order but grow from the inner spirit.

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<sup>11</sup>Christopher Fry, "Talking to Henry," The Twentieth Century, CLXIX (February, 1961), 187.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Fry, "On Keeping The Sense of Wonder," Vogue, CXXVII (January, 1956), 158.

The empathy comes from a deep reverence for life and an acknowledgement of its sanctity. Education--the intensifying of the light of conscience--is, therefore, the key to experience and any intuition it may foster.

The attitude of the Society of Friends towards education has been determined by their belief in the Inner Light. Holding as they do that there is something of the divine in everyman, they have regarded education (in the broadest sense) as the developing of that Divine Seed, or the fanning into a flame of that Divine Spark. . . . To Friends, therefore, education is an intensely religious thing; it means the training and development of the spiritual life, the liberating of the Divine that is within us.<sup>13</sup>

In his letter "The Play of Ideas," Fry reiterates all that has been stated so far, when he tells us that "the microbe is no less miraculous than the whole solar system," and that "we can't comprehend either of them."<sup>14</sup> But though "the ultimate answer to most of our problems . . . [may be] in the growth towards maturity of each individual," he poses the Quaker means (above) of approaching the mystery, perceiving the vision, and understanding creation as the answer to the problems of today in particular, and suggests that man--

may be so immersed in the immediate struggle that he becomes lost to the larger struggle of which this is a moment. At such a time he needs all his senses and perceptions to keep him aware of what his existence represents. He needs every property of mind he possesses, all those attributes which most curiously distinguish

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<sup>13</sup>Christian Faith, section 442.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher Fry, "The Play of Ideas," New Statesman and Nation, XXXIX (April 22, 1950), 458.

him from his fellow animals--compassion, laughter, concern beyond his own immediate neighbourhood, a sense of mystery, of his own incompleteness, and much more. He needs to think and feel in detail as deeply as he thinks and feels in general, as befits an inhabitant of a universe which deals in millions of light-years and millions of microbes equally.<sup>15</sup>

Though the views of Fry and the Quakers on the paradox of haphazard life which yet contains a pattern of anatomy seem to be the same, Fry relegates his views to the drama, using it as the medium for his message to the theatre's audience.

The workings of the spirit in the material universe are a clarification, not a mystification of human life. How far the playwright can succeed in expressing this is a lifetime job for him.<sup>16</sup>

His essays and articles seem to focus the discussion on three issues in particular, namely, the relevance of the dramatic principles of tragedy and comedy to experience and intuition, the role of the theatre, and the appropriateness of poetic drama.

In one respect a play is a concentration of life into a brief moment of time and action, complete in itself. It tries to say something above and beyond itself, so that it will not be just a reflection of reality, voiceless in its imitation. The traditions around comedy and tragedy are, in their own way, an attempt to phrase the dramatist's

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Fry, "Author's Struggle," The New York Times (February 6, 1955), Sec. II, iii, 1.

opinions and impressions in the frame of a convention. They are really one of the fundamental means by which the outlook of a playwright, the atmosphere of the time, and the comments of one on the other can best be expressed. Fry expresses his own views on the nature of tragedy and comedy as he sees them with considerable conviction in a good number of his non-dramatic writings. Towards the end of his article "Comedy," he says, "I have come, you may think, to the verge of saying that comedy is greater than tragedy. On the verge I stand and go no further."<sup>17</sup> Standing lost in wonder at creation, he interpolates tragedy and comedy together--their difference being "the difference between experience and intuition." He goes on to explain the connection.<sup>18</sup>

In the experience we strive against every condition of our animal life: against death, against the frustration of ambition, against the instability of human love. In the intuition we trust the arduous eccentricities we're born to, and see the oddness of a creature who has never got acclimatised to being created. Laughter inclines me to know that man is essential spirit; his body, with its functions and accidents and frustrations is endlessly quaint and remarkable to him; and though comedy accepts our position in time, it barely accepts our posture in space.<sup>19</sup>

"Tragedy's experience hammers against the mystery," but "comedy is an escape not from truth, but from despair into faith."<sup>20</sup> Fry may be talking about drama but his views on

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<sup>17</sup>Christopher Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review, IV, iii (March, 1960), 78.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 77.



the connection between art and life have the unmistakable ring of what he and the Quakers had to say about man's sense of direction in existence, and it continues to do so. Comedy's intuition is a relief, and elevation away from tragedy's pain, where "every moment is eternity" to the level where "pain is a fool suffered gladly."<sup>21</sup>

In The Dark Is Light Enough Fry takes a passage from J. H. Fabre that seems to trace the paradoxical system of the order and the direction of life through chaos.

The weather was stormy; the sky heavily clouded; the darkness . . . profound. . . . It was across this maze of leafage, and in absolute darkness, that the butterflies had to find their way in order to attain the end of their pilgrimage.

Under such conditions the screech-owl would not dare to forsake its olive-tree. The butterfly . . . goes forward without hesitation. . . . So well it directs its tortuous flight that, in spite of all the obstacles to be evaded, it arrives in a state of perfect freshness, its great wings intact. . . . The darkness is light enough. . . .<sup>22</sup>

But this does more than speak for Richard Gettner in that play. It seems to touch on the impression all Fry's plays create. Here is a sense of their inexorable, undeviating movement through comic chaos and tragic fate to a vision, to a hope, or just to an end where chaos has order, where fate has purpose, where all movement stops. It is as though free and haphazard organs show the whole pattern of their anatomy.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Facing p. 1.

There is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light; either here or hereafter, in or out of time: 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.<sup>23</sup>

If we say that Fry's dramas frame his thought, it is also just as true to say that they are very much a part of the theatre. He inextricably links his approach and his concept of drama to the role he sees the theatre playing, for "if a theatre is alive it is because it belongs to the life outside its doors."<sup>24</sup>

If the theatre can help us to see ourselves and the world freshly, as though we had just rounded the corner into life, it will be what entertainment should be, a holiday which sets us up to continue living at the top of our bent, and worth, I think, any amount of admonition and prophecy or the photographic likeness of how we appear by custom.<sup>25</sup>

Fry feels there is no obstacle to the fact that he is Christian and that much of his audience are non-believers for he seldom writes specifically in Christian terms. However, "what matters is whether the audience has an interest in life, in the fullest imaginative sense."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review (March, 1960), 77.

<sup>24</sup>Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts (August, 1952), 73.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Fry, "Talking of Henry," The Twentieth Century (February, 1961), 189.

Then there is the appropriateness of poetic drama. It is, as it were, the medium with which he transfers his thought to fulfil the purposes of entertainment in the theatre. Poetic inspiration is akin to mystical experience in its attempts to grasp the mystery and beauty of natural order through the use of live image and fresh symbol, and "religion necessarily expresses itself in poetry."<sup>27</sup> In fact poetry is the attempt to achieve this mystical experience in art and aesthetics. In Fry's words,

The Christian faith is an expression of the human being, of what has happened to him and is still happening. 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.<sup>28</sup>

If we stop pretending for a moment that we were born fully dressed in a service flat, and remember that we were born stark naked into a pandemonium of most unnatural phenomena, then we know how out of place, how lost, how amazed, how miraculous we are. And this reality is the province of poetry.<sup>29</sup>

It is in such remarks that Fry clinches this relationship between religion and poetry as that quality of religious verse drama in all his plays, for "if any are religious they are all religious. . . ."<sup>30</sup> In fact he tells us that we should

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<sup>27</sup>Amos N. Wilder, Modern Poetry and The Christian Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952), p. 9.

<sup>28</sup>Fry, "Talking of Henry," The Twentieth Century (February, 1961), 189.

<sup>29</sup>Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts (August, 1952), 73.

<sup>30</sup>Christopher Fry, Three Plays (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), Foreword, vii.

assume all this when his plays are in view.

I only ask you to allow me to suppose an organic discipline, pattern or proportion in the universe, evident in all that we see, which is a government uniting the greatest with the least, form with behaviour, natural event with historic event, which stamps its mark through us and through our perceptions, as the name of Brighton is marked through a stick of rock candy . . . I ask you to allow me to suppose a shaping but undogmatical presence 'felt in the blood, and along the heart,' which is of a kind with the law of gravity, and the moral law, and the law which gives us two legs and not six.<sup>31</sup>

As for the relationship between poetry and the theatre, Fry declares that

the theatre we should always be trying to achieve is one where the persons and events have the recognisable ring of an old truth, and yet seem to occur in a lightning spasm of discovery. That, again, is the province of poetry.<sup>32</sup>

He takes both back into drama itself when he adds,

It is a province of large extent; I see it ranging from tragedy, through comedy of action and comedy of mood, even down to the playground of farce; and each of these has its own particular conflict, tension, and shape, which, if we look for them, will point the way to the play's purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Poetry belongs to the realm of discussion and yet it is not out of place in the theatre, for though "we go to the theatre to be interested by a story of lives living out their conflicts in a concentration of time," words give us a larger,

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<sup>31</sup>Christopher Fry, "Why Verse," Playwrights on Playwrighting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), pp. 126-127.

<sup>32</sup>Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts (August, 1952), 93.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

or deeper, experience of action.<sup>34</sup> What poetry says in the theatre "is what it is," and under the immediate sense lies an appreciation that carries the atmosphere of "a certain experience of being," whether the audience is aware of it or not.<sup>35</sup> This appreciation is in any case commensurate with the purpose of drama, which presents universal truths inherent in the concentration of time, place and person on the stage. Poetry also contributes to the theatre, Fry feels, because it is the action of listening; the elaboration of an otherwise flat action, by heightening the experience in terms of adding meaning and significance and deepening the understanding by drawing it nearer some more basic truth.<sup>36</sup> It is in those moments of silent comprehension that we perceive the world most intensely and the emotions stirred are as deep in being as they are wordless.

It is this comprehension which poetry tries to speak, this revelation of discipline that comes up out of the earth, or is felt along the heart; it is this which verse has to offer.<sup>37</sup>

So the general lines of the play, the shape of the story, the disposition of the characters, should point and implicate by their actions and their wider uses the texture

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<sup>34</sup>Fry, in Playwrights on Playwrighting (New York, 1962), p. 126.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 127-129.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.

of the poetry. The large pattern of the action should have a meaning in itself, above and beyond the story; the kind of meaning which gives everlasting truth to myths and legends, and makes the fairy story into a sober fact; 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.<sup>38</sup>

What all of this reveals is an extraordinary comprehensiveness, unity, and wholeness in every facet of Fry, whether it is in his art or his approach to life. The result is a clear sense of a certain spirit or atmosphere in Fry that suffers very little vagueness or diffusion. Perhaps Caroline Graveson's remarks contribute to an appreciation of this sense of contemplative gravity and religious seriousness which is consistently behind an exuberant, joyful and spontaneous life in Fry's work.

Unless matters of culture are more clearly shown to be vitally related to religion, an increasing element in life will stand outside of the religious sphere, and life become either more and more disintegrated or wholly secularised.<sup>39</sup>

While Fry pursues his appreciations of life and his vision of it into drama, poetry, and the theatre, the Quaker's views inhabit an expanding spirit that reaches out into a life of action more and more. The meeting for worship is the centre of Friends' spiritual life. In it Quakers find the source of their spiritual growth and wellbeing.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> Christian Faith, section 463.

The Society of Friends has always recognised that corporate worship is central to its life. Both in the past and in the present such worship lies behind the Quaker testimonies against the activities and conditions that hinder the spiritual union of mankind with God and with one another, and behind the positive concerns that favour that union. For Friends there is in united worship a sense of adventure in the consciousness that the Holy Spirit has new light and truth to reveal.<sup>40</sup>

The meeting for worship is a gathering in silence. In it Friends are drawn by the same fellowship that stirred Fox and the first Quakers, and their

search for God begins in removing obstructions, such as self will and worldly desires, greed, pride and lust, so that the inner room may be ready for the divine guest if he should enter. . . . The Seed in any man can be cultivated by careful attention water and nourishment. However, its growth can never be forced into maturing into the perfection of inner capacities which is ever the Quakers goal, though it is never an end.<sup>41</sup>

The process by which a Quaker meeting comes into unity may be typical of the whole evolutionary process through which God creates. This evolution proceeds not by competition but by co-operation.<sup>42</sup>

Through the Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings Friends seek to order and conduct their affairs and business; to stimulate and preserve their fellowship and purpose; to acknowledge their responsibilities as human beings; relate their concerns and duties as rational loving creatures; and to exercise their resources, both as a world community and

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., Introduction, para. 6.

<sup>41</sup>Brinton, Friends For 300 Years (New York, 1952), pp. 66 and 205-206.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 219.

as individuals for the conditions of humanity.

Our congregations and our members individually need, above all things, to manifest a spiritual fellowship vitally in touch with the needs of men. . . . [We should] bear in mind that it will be the warmth of fellowship and brotherhood in our congregations that will attract and speak of the love of God.<sup>43</sup>

The religious service of our meetings and the social service of Friends . . . [are] complementary . . .<sup>44</sup> since they are rooted in the same life and spirit.

Friends' humanitarian concern is evidenced by the well-administered philanthropic and charitable work for which they are known today. The testimonies that characterise this humanitarianism are the result of the Quaker's spiritual life and are expressive of the revelations of the "Light Within" and of the understanding generated by it.

In its history the Society of Friends has produced many people whose lives of conspicuous service have profoundly influenced their times. . . . Their service sprang directly out of their religious faith, but this faith was itself stimulated and fostered by the religious atmosphere in which they lived.<sup>45</sup>

Historical demonstrations of particular concerns for life and truth have been seen in the applications of humanitarianism and a social testimony with the prison reforms of Elizabeth Fry, William Tuke's work for mental institutions, John Woolman's concern for negro slaves, the success of William Penn's state working on Quaker principles, and the schemes of Penn

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<sup>43</sup>Christian Faith, section 286.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., section 388.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., section 597.



and Bellars for European peace, which anticipated the League of Nations and the United Nations. However, the Quaker peace testimony is probably the best known and the most deeply rooted.

We are deeply convinced that the testimony for Peace, which we believe has been entrusted to us as a Society, is not an artificial appendage to our faith, which can be dropped without injuring the whole, but rather an organic out-growth of our belief as Christians and as Friends, which cannot be abandoned without mutilating our whole message for the world.<sup>46</sup>

Peace is a way of life and the fundamental experience out of which the first Quakers' Testimony arose. It springs from the experience of the "Light" and is the outcome of the whole character, whether of group or of individual, and takes every part of life to itself.

The Fruits of Peace must be manifested in every department of our life. Whenever we act unjustly or connive at injustice we are potential war mongers: every selfish act is a bomb dropped on our fellows.<sup>47</sup>

Every unselfish act is a recognition of life, a respect for individuality, and a reverence for that of God in everyone.

Our peace testimony . . . expresses our vision of the whole Christian way of life; it is our way of living in this world, of looking at this world and of changing this world.<sup>48</sup>

But it is not enough for the Quaker to declare himself a pacifist, for pacifist demonstration is in a sense a self-

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., section 623, para. 1.

<sup>47</sup>Gerald K. Hibbert, Quaker Fundamentals (London: Friends Home Service Committee), p. 9.

<sup>48</sup>Christian Faith, section 624, para. 1.

contradiction and not necessarily indicative of understanding or humanitarian concern. Instead

it requires that men and nations should recognise their common brotherhood, using the weapons of integrity, reason, patience and love, never acquiescing in the ways of the oppressor, always ready to suffer with the oppressed.<sup>49</sup>

And alongside these attempts to mediate over conflict go all Friends' other testimonies, which seek to reconcile humanity to its circumstances by aiding and assisting those suffering the consequences, not only of conflict but poverty, misery, disease, and ignorance.

We may never desert the victims of oppression, but we must endeavour to realise the conditions and needs both of the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>50</sup>

The artistic, dramatical and theatrical forms taken by Fry's appreciation of the mystery and by the necessity of incorporating the mystery into the life of modern man are totally unrelated to the humanitarian gospel conveyed by the Quakers' appreciation of mysticism. However, it is the spirit behind Quakerism and Fry's dramas that maintains the parallel initially drawn between their similar comprehension of this mystery that surrounds man and that is the essence of his existence. The purpose of the next chapter is to clarify this parallel and to examine it in the light of the

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., section 621, para. 3.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., section 537, para. 3.

conflicts and scepticism in each play, from which comes a knowledge of the reality of life's paradoxes, better still, a vision of their contradictory nature, and best of all, the intuition of the mysterious system that sees them all belonging to one law in spirit and form.

## CHAPTER II

### THE RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT IN CHRISTOPHER FRY'S PLAYS AND THE QUAKER PARALLELS

Each of Christopher Fry's plays is "a link in the chain, one section of which substantiates the rest," or, taken together, they "assume the form of a single organic body."<sup>1</sup> "They overlap and are full of mutual echoes: conceptual echoes, because Fry never repeats an image or jest."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the unity of Fry's plays as a whole is in the way they are arranged about a common centre. In relation to this centre each play is, by comparison to the seasonal comedies, another aspect of the same themes and concepts, or the expression of a different mood. Thus the importance of each is not for its difference, but its similarity, and Fry's greatest concern is to talk about "the theme within this mood, and the pattern or plot within the theme."<sup>3</sup>

Anne Greene considers the pattern of ideas that traces the mystery in Fry's plays to include (1) the wonder of the commonplace--of creation itself, (2) man's sense of estrangement in his own world, together with his need for clarity,

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<sup>1</sup>Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>O. Mandel, "Theme in the Drama of Christopher Fry," Etudes Anglaises, X (1957), 336.

<sup>3</sup>D. Stanford, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

(3) the bewildering mesh of God, (4) the mystery of love, and (5) faith in life's purposes.<sup>4</sup> In this pattern many Quaker principles are substantiated both by their relevance to the same concept of the mystery and through insistences such as, life as the central idea in these plays, the individual as the centre of existence, intuition of meaning behind experience, life behind form, the break through of a truer spirit, and conflict ending in reconciliation through death or love, but either way to the life behind it all. Broad and mysterious though the implications of all this may be, Fry renders them as the all encompassing reality or middle ground that places Quakerliness as the ideal in humanity's pursuit of the good in itself on one side, and his own plays as specific exemplifications of these insistences on the other.

One thing I was trying to do (in the comedies) was to give an appearance of improvisation, of free and almost haphazard life, while keeping within it a taut pattern or anatomy--an effort to reproduce the prolixity of natural things which yet contain within them law and form and direction.<sup>5</sup>

Whether it is Quakerliness or not is completely irrelevant, but the parallel lies there as though it were the intuition and the intuitive mind that pervades his plays as a spirit,

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<sup>4</sup>Priestley, Bridie and Fry: "The Mystery of Existence in Their Dramatic Works," Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin (1957), p. 359.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Fry, from a letter to Tain Kirkaldy-Willis (see Appendix B).

demonstrating itself as either a cosmic vision or a way of life in pursuit of the mystery of creation revealed by the vision. Quakerism encompasses this vision, if only because it exemplifies certain realities through which some of the Quaker beliefs manifest themselves.

The conflicts in all Fry's plays concern the pull and attraction of an empiric scientific formula on the one hand and "the spell of irrational wonder--the magnetism of the mystery of things" on the other."<sup>6</sup> All the characters experience "an inner-tug-of-war between credulity and scepticism," which, objectified, becomes belief and doubt.<sup>7</sup> In examining this sense of conflict in Fry's plays, references to Quakerism will be made in order to illuminate this issue, and at the same time to justify the parallels already drawn between itself and Fry.

#### THE BOY WITH A CART

Though The Boy With A Cart was Fry's first play it is perhaps the clearest and most straightforward expression of his "cosmic vision," since it is a simple statement of saintliness and Christian faith. Though the other "religious plays" convey the same quality of spirit and the certain

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<sup>6</sup>D. Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London, 1952), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

explicitness of Christian principles and beliefs that are only implicit in the comedies or Curtmantle, they also demonstrate the complications of indirect symbols and allusions as well as plots that are more specific and less directly relevant to the Christian spiritual setting. The spiritual climate of The Boy With A Cart is of medieval peasants, hagiography, mystery and simple innocence and the conflict is one of faith and scepticism, religion and materialism in the most direct sense.

Out of his father's death Cuthman becomes a man;

I have stayed too long with the children, a boy sliding  
On the easy ice, skating the foolish silver  
Over the entangling weed and the eddying water.

Grant this, O God, that I may grow to my father . . .  
As he grew to Thy Son, and his son  
Now and for always.<sup>8</sup>

Cuthman is a Christian and a saint. However, it is his saintliness that distinguishes him more than his Christian faith, for the play is about Cuthman and the working together of root and sky; God and man, as he grows to the will of God. Cuthman the saint makes his own life through direct contact with the mystery, while a hero like Moses in The Firstborn sets himself apart, on top of a wave of nationalism. When the wave breaks Moses sees and feels the rest of the ocean pounding him on the sands of life. It is even so

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Fry, The Boy With A Cart (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), p. 8. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

with Henry in Curtmantle. The law he seeks to bring about comes from the lawlessness of his own life, for when there is no law any attempt to impose order is anarchic. Life antagonised, responds to anarchy as the desire of freedom to replace authority. While experience leaves Moses washed up looking at a timeless ocean, and feeling the clash of good and evil, seas and sands, where before he felt he travelled the crest of a wave, it leaves Henry dead. Henry fought the waves and was destroyed by them before he even got to the firmer sands of life. Henry's confused perspective replaced the cause of national life with the cause of a king through the idea of the Plantagenet cause and the divine right of kings. But intuition leads Cuthman beyond experience, "There under the bare walls of our labour," and it lives where he feels "death and life were knotted in one strength/Indivisible as root and sky." (p. 39) The move to resolution through the petty squabbles and conflicts of all who would dare to even ridicule the divine purpose, like the reapers, let alone contradict it, like Alfred, Demiwulf and Mrs. Fipps, is sublime. The spring root and sky of young Cuthman's vision of God in the natural world grows into God's will. Man and God work together like root and sky and where they meet is the Church, incomplete and deserted until Christ the carpenter redeems it and places the king-post to complete the faith in the undaunted purpose driving Cuthman. And the



people of South England account for Moses and Henry and us--

And what of us who upon Cuthman's world  
Have grafted progress without lock or ratchet?  
What of us who have to catch up, always  
To catch up with the high-powered car, or with  
The unbalanced budget, to cope with competition,  
To weather the sudden thunder of the uneasy  
Frontier? (p. 39)

They tell us that the purpose is still there even though our  
lives may not even find it.

. . . . We also loom upon the earth  
Over the waterways of space. Between  
Our birth and death we may touch understanding  
As a moth brushes a window with its wings. (p. 40)

So this purpose and understanding are in all Fry's plays, for  
this is the theme about which we shall see lives make and  
break themselves in a continual interplay of the forces of  
life, death and love striving for the resolution of conflict.

As the insistence of the theme becomes more apparent  
from one play to another we will find that the setting is  
merely there as the form behind which the theme moves. It is  
also so for the Quaker, who neither understands nor acknow-  
ledges authority and law, but who looks to the spirit behind  
it for understanding. For example, Quakers revere the Bible,  
but do not consider it a declaration of faith or a handbook  
of religious practice and doctrine. Instead they feel it  
gives evidence of the personal experience of others, evidence  
in other times of that personal appearance and revelation of  
God so essential to the meaning of true faith.

And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their place, and prizing that above them which is above them.<sup>9</sup>

What Cuthman's life says in The Boy With A Cart is that this world is God's world and we know him through it. Life here is cooperation with God and we cannot live without his power, though we may not always acknowledge it. This play says of the mystery of existence what all Fry's plays state. The only difference is that Cuthman's vision sees God everywhere in creation, while the other plays, on the whole, are concerned with the same vision, without attributing it directly to the Christian concept of God. In all the plays "even those [characters] with no insight into the mystery are true children of life, differing from the heroes only in their lack of perception."<sup>10</sup>

#### A PHOENIX TOO FREQUENT

The essential feature of any Quaker testimony has always been a profound belief in the individual as the authentic pivot of existence, and in his sensitivity to the awesome, mysterious, and wondrous. The closeness of this concern for life and harmony to the concerns of life in this play find

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<sup>9</sup>Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends (London: Headley Brothers, 1963), section 204. All further references to this book will be to Christian Faith and to the paragraph number.

<sup>10</sup>Emil Roy, "The Becket Plays," Modern Drama, VIII, iii (December, 1965), 270.

their origin in the initial circumstances. The play is, as it were, a statement of the progression of disjointed, anemic sentiments towards a vision of creation and full-blooded life lived to the uttermost. "Freedom is an essential part of the philosophy of Friends, freedom to choose; persuasion, not compulsion."<sup>11</sup> The dilemma of both Chromis and Dynamene is their confrontation of one another. In this confrontation they are faced with choice and freedom, and compelled to choose between life and death, only to find that when they choose the conflicts are reconciled in the presence of Virilius moving again in the world. Shendi in The Firstborn is faced with a similar situation. His freedom comes with a challenge in the confrontation of a choice of fate, and not with the promotion that Rameses secures, for that is just another bondage. Only in the choice does he become himself freely, Shendi the Jew. Only in the choice does he realise that his rejection of Egypt is the fear of being sent to the grave and that his choice of Israel leaves him "only free to die." Tegeus corroborates his "This wasn't a world. It was death from the beginning" with--

At the best we live our lives on loan,  
At the worst in chains. And I was never born  
To have life. Then for what? To be had by it,  
And so are we all.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The Quaker Reader, Jessamyn West, ed. (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 506.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Fry, A Phoenix Too Frequent (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 39. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

But earlier Tegeus suggested a possible answer. "Then that may be life's reason," says he, when Dynamene ruefully declares that she sees life leading "one way or another, to death." (p. 25)

The play is a comedy about a Roman soldier who, though not very enthusiastic about life, falls in love with a widow who is trying to starve to death in her husband's tomb so she can join him. Tegeus Chromis, the soldier, faces the prospect of a court-martial for losing one of the bodies he is supposed to be guarding. But with Dynamene's assistance he evades replacing the body himself by substituting the body of her dead husband, Virilius. The gravity of the hanging bodies and the presence of death and lives set on a course for immediate death are inextricably the agents of potential life, death and love very much at conflict in the circumstances. Here is no sense of harmony, but one of life at odds with itself. There is Doto, the maid, "dying to be dead," because "death's a new interest in life," Dynamene, who is "making arrangements to join her husband . . . in the Underworld," and Tegeus, whose answer to a lady dying for love is "Not curious;/I've had thoughts like it. Death is a kind of love." (p. 8) But his boredom and dejection are so kindled by Dynamene's "human fidelity" that he sees it as "the clear fashion/For all souls." (p. 12)

And the world is a good creature again.  
 I'd begun to see it as mildew, verdigris,  
 Rust, woodrot, or as though the sky had uttered  
 An oval twirling blasphemy with occasional vistas  
 In country districts. I was within an ace  
 Of volunteering for overseas service. . . . (p. 12)

The play works towards harmony and the reconciliation of the individual to life through the mediation of love.

Call me  
 Death instead of Chromis. I'll answer to anything.  
 It's desire all the same, of death in me, or me  
 In death, but Chromis either way. . . . (p. 30)

Also in the respect for life, that cannot see the justification for any law that contradicts it.

Your life is yours, Chromis.

It's all unreasonable . . .

How can they hang you for simply not being somewhere?  
 How can they hang you for losing a dead man?  
 They must have wanted to lose him, or they wouldn't  
 Have hanged him. . . . (pp. 39 and 40)

This is a respect that includes their love.

Who are they who think they can discipline souls  
 Right off the earth? What discipline is that?  
 Chromis, love is the only discipline  
 And we're the disciples of love. I hold you to that:  
 (pp. 41-42)

The physical action is limited, confined to pacing round the tomb with the entrances and exits of Tegeus and Doto being triggers to the dialogue of conflicting forces and desires. For example, Chromis' re-entry turns the prospects of new found love and life for himself and Dynamene back to death as a reality.

I shall take the place of the missing man.  
 To be hanged Dynamene! Hanged Dynamene! (p. 39)

The corpses signify death as

they hang  
About at the corner of the night . . . present  
And absent, horribly obsequious to every  
Move in the air, . . . (p. 11)

Their loss means death to Tegeus' new life in love.

It's section six, paragraph  
Three in the Regulations. That's my doom. (p. 40)

But this new love demands that he live. He has walked into the tomb and been confronted with a state of affairs, "a vision, a hope, a promise" of "loyalty, enduring passion, / Unrecking bravery and beauty all in one." (p. 12) He has even savoured the fullness of that new state of being.

I feel as the gods feel:  
This is their sensation of life, not a man's:  
Their suspension of immortality, to enrich  
Themselves with time. . . . (p. 32)

Dynamene seeks death for love. But she is gradually pulled by the love of life and living love for Tegeus away from this wish.

Stop, stop, I shall be dragged apart!  
 . . . . .  
 . . . . . its terrible  
To be susceptible to two conflicting norths. (p. 31)

until

O all  
In myself; it so covets all in you,  
My care, my Chromis. Then I shall be  
Creation. (p. 32)

The sacrifice of her husband's body, physical symbol of what is left of dead love, is made so that the living love may continue and fulfil the demands of life for them both.

I loved  
 His life not his death. And now we can give his death  
 The power of life. Not horrible: wonderful!  
 Isn't it so? That I should be able to feel  
 He moves again in the world, accomplishing  
 Our welfare? It's more than my grief could do. (p. 43)

"In the experience (the characters) . . . strive against every condition of (the) . . . animal: against death, against the frustration of ambition, against the instability of human love."<sup>13</sup> This is the intuition of Fry's comedy, and the spirit of Virilius moves again in the act of reconciling Tegeus' life to the military law. The insistence of life in this play is so vigorous that it sways individual will on Dynamene's behalf and brings the triumph of life romantically to an individual, Tegeus, at odds with himself, and with his life held in a balance by a military regulation. Only life and the mystery could find the redemption of an individual and such a joyous union so romantically. The gruesome switch of bodies is both devised and justified by sentimental love, spontaneous desire, a naively direct and moving respect for life and an almost fantasy-like appreciation and visionary perception of existence bursting with life. This is all part of the spiritual climate of pagan joy in life in the play.

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review, IV, iii (March, 1960), 78.

THE LADY'S NOT FOR BURNING

The conflicts and estrangements of life to itself that were present in A Phoenix Too Frequent are also present in this play. The initial circumstances of the far from healthy Thomas Mendip and his jaundiced views on humanity prompted by the evils of war, set the stage for a similar story of life out of key with creation. Life in Thomas needs to correct itself and it proceeds to do so in a way that is amongst other things Quakerly. Jennet Jourdemayne and he come together despite themselves, and because of their very contrarieness. Through his attempts to defend his views against the contradictions of Jennet, they are actually searching together and enlarging the kernel of their own experience of both death and life in their familiarity with one another, and in the reconciliation of themselves, not as contradictions of life or death, but as complementary to one another and part of creation just by virtue of life within them.

However, there is something else that contributes to the paradoxical existence of these two creatures. In a Quaker way of life the central issues seem to arise from the inspirations and understanding of the meaning behind any concrete law, form, or order of things; from that spirit and life within any creature, that causes it to be what it is, to do what it does, and be no different from any other nameless thing than the difference its own form expresses.



Experience is the process whereby the spirit, life and meaning behind concrete things, is appreciated. Intuition is the method of perception. And conscience is the remembrance of the elements of itself that life acknowledges, such as the respect for itself in the claims of the individual for his own rights and the claims of the right to live, the reconciliation of life to itself in the peaceful coexistence of lives together, the harmony of life and the living, the equality of all life in the search for harmony, and the place of individual life in creation. Life is the central idea in Fry's plays and Mandel comments further on this in "Theme in the Drama of Christopher Fry" when he remarks that, "life justifies itself and it is what it is and its being is its assertion;" "it seeks its own perseverance, and, almost like a god takes possession of us even as we deny it--in the very fact of denying it."<sup>14</sup> The relevance of these points was certainly valid in A Phoenix Too Frequent. But here in The Lady's Not For Burning it is of peculiar significance since the play revolves around the contradiction of Thomas' vigorous denials of life.

Jennet escapes burning over night in the company of a war-sickened captain, who so despairs of life that he desires to be hanged.

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<sup>14</sup>Etudes Anglaises, X (1957), 336.

I've been unidentifiably  
 Floundering in Flanders for the past seven years,  
 Prising open ribs to let men go  
 On the indefinite leave which needs no pass.  
 And now all roads are uncommonly flat, and all hair  
 Stands on end.<sup>15</sup>

But Thomas sees life hold love as a threat to this wish in spite of his appreciations and familiarities with death--

"For God's sake hang me, before I love that woman!" (p. 35)

Jennet is to be burned "Before she disturbs our reason,"

says Hebble Tyson, the mayor. (p. 72) Thomas is found

guilty  
 Of jaundice, misanthropy, suicidal tendencies  
 And spreading gloom and despondency . . . , (p. 61)

for which he "will spend/The evening joyously, sociably, taking part/ In the pleasures of" his fellow men. (p. 61)

These circumstances carry far less weight than the conflict of wills and the antagonism of the forces of life and death and love. "Why should you want to be hanged?" says Jennet, and she adds to the contradictions already at play when she declares

I'm an unhappy fact  
 Fearing death. This is a strange moment  
 To feel my life increasing, when this moment  
 And a little more may be for both of us  
 The end of time. You've cast your fishing net  
 Of eccentricity, your seine of insanity  
 Caught me when I was already lost  
 And landed me with despairing gills on your own  
 Strange beach. . . . (p. 56)

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<sup>15</sup>Christopher Fry, The Lady's Not For Burning (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 20. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

Thomas', only retaliation is further rant about his crimes and associations with the devil

And Richard  
Make this woman understand that I  
Am a figure of vice and crime-- (p. 58)

Thomas, the "black and frosted rosebud whom the good God/ Has preserved since last October" no longer nods in at the window, but becomes more involved in defensive denials than in doing anything about his longing for death. Jennet longs for life. The reconciliation of the situation and these wishes is achieved in the end. Thomas' pessimism is stirred by life straining in Jennet, so that love and new vigour colour the winter world of his disenchantment.

Girl, you haven't changed the world.  
Glimmer as you will, the world's not changed.  
I love you, but the world's not changed. . . . (p. 96)

I know my limitations.  
When the landscape goes to seed, the wind is obsessed  
By to-morrow. (p. 97)

Fry said of this play,

I could see no reason why I should not treat the world as I see it, a world in which we are all poised on the edge of eternity, a world which has deeps and shadows of mystery, in which God is anything but a sleeping partner.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas acknowledges such a world and reconciles himself to it "for the sake of five-foot six of wavering light." (p. 89) The world does not become a good creature again, but Jennet shows that it is not all bad either, only mysterious. Thomas

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<sup>16</sup>Derek Stanford, "Comedy and Tragedy in Christopher Fry," Modern Drama, II, i (May, 1959), 4.

does not understand the depths and shadows, but he realises that his gesture of death is not going to change it, and accepts the fact that he cannot deny seeing life home "though neither of us/Knows where on earth it is." (p. 97)

The play revolves around Thomas Mendip and acts itself out within the turbulent springtime setting of the Renaissance, with its witch-hunt and an extraordinary proliferation of medieval knowledge and allusions. But the depths and shadows that play across Thomas and Jenet at the end leave them hanging on the verge of a vision of that mystery that the chaplain lives in throughout the play.

I know I am not  
A practical person; legal matters and so forth  
Are Greek to me, except, of course,  
That I understand Greek.  
And what may seem nonsensical  
To men of affairs like yourselves might not seem so  
To me, since everything astonishes me,  
Myself most of all. When I think of myself  
I can scarcely believe my senses. But there it is,  
All my friends tell me I actually exist  
And by an act of faith I have come to believe them. (p. 41)

It is a faculty that seems to leave him perpetually face to face with paradox in life, which

has such  
Diversity, I sometimes remarkably lose  
Eternity in the passing moment. . . . (p. 31)

It shows him Thomas who "on the contrary, is so convinced/He is that he wishes he was NOT." (p. 41) The chaplain's remark about a dream he has, that "Nothing/Is altogether what we suppose it to be" is perhaps a mute reflection on Thomas' condition.

VENUS OBSERVED

The Quakers are one of those few religious sects within the Christian tradition that came into being through a direct experience of the spirit that lies behind all formal beliefs and religious doctrines. The whole point of the Quaker way of life today still rests on this principle of individual revelation and direct contact with that of life in everyone through the means of personal experience enlightened by intuition. The idea of a revival of spirit, of life behind form and order, whether in the historic manifestation and origination of a religious practice, or the personal enlightenment of the individual mystic and visionary, is one of life within life, or an infinite vista of life behind external form, opening out into creation.

Fry's plays demonstrate a similar spiritual triumph, namely, the appearance of life and being behind the conflicts and forces of human law, an ordered world, and formal existence. For instance in A Phoenix Too Frequent life's purposes triumph and new life and love burst forth from the conflicts of the situation. There are wider forms of life, and greater mysteries to be perceived behind the particular turns of experience that involve Dynamene and Chromis in the fight against life to die, than in the fight against death to live, or the overall struggle of individual will against forces outside itself. Life is trying to break through in new

freedom and it does, because Fry's comic spirit, intuition, rises above the situation to reflect on it and all that follows. The night is passed, they come away from the pit Chromis nearly dropped them in, and the toast is to the new morning and both the masters--the dead who now moves again in the living.

The same thing happens in The Lady's Not For Burning in a different and perhaps more immediate way through Thomas' very denial of any other idea of life. His hate of the evils of war that encompassed him shut his eyes to any light that could filter in when he deserted the scene. But they gradually open on love and a life that is not on the battlefield. Love brings intuition which raises him above himself to see many other aspects of life, especially Jennet, the one that contradicted war and death. Like Tegeus and Dynamene, Thomas and Jennet are left wishing a good morning to each other and the dawning of a new day in their lives. Intuition has shown Thomas that life is neither one experience or another, and the response that the mystery encourages is the promise of itself--to see life home though he knows not where.

In Venus Observed the appearance of life and a system behind conflict is also present, but it is strikingly different. The Duke is the complete opposite of Thomas Mendip. Where Thomas saw life's imperfections and was taught to love and live, Altair sees no imperfections. There is always something greater and more meaningful beyond the immediacy of

an experience, even if it is only the mind as the receptacle of many experiences over a period of time. Fry calls the perception of meaning behind form and life behind experience, intuition of the mystery and the essence of the comic spirit, while Quakers see the perception of this spirit as the true appreciation of life and the process of continuous education of the conscience or understanding. However, the Duke only sees love and life, rendering them immortal because he does not see beyond. The distorted perspective he has of his own age is of immortal love, not mortal man.

Am I, before  
 God, too old? Consider the rocks  
 Of Arizona, and then consider me.  
 How recently the world has had the pleasure  
 Of pleasing, the opportunity of knowing me.  
 Age, after all, is only the accumulation  
 Of extensive childhood: what we were,  
 Never what we are. . . .<sup>17</sup>

The desire to live and love is of life eternal, but man is mortal and that is nature's imperfection, and the revelation the Duke must perceive. As with Thomas intuition raises the Duke above experience and leaves him with the prospect of seeing life home to wherever it may lead. In other words the process is the same even though the form it takes is different from the previous two plays. That the Duke's intuition contradicts Thomas Mendip's serves merely to reiterate

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<sup>17</sup>Christopher Fry, Venus Observed (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 67. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

the fact that there is no answer, only other experiences and the hope of further intuition. It also intimates that though intuition and spirit may be of life and immortal, the form and the experience change and are mortal.

The old Duke and young Perpetua are almost roasted by one of his ex-mistresses. The Duke in love with life does not see its natural imperfections--age, death, mutability and the shortcomings of mortal love. Unwillingly resigning himself to a faded memory chosen by his son, he rebels at the sight of Perpetua, the vision of youth. The conflict becomes one of youth and age, son and father. "Am I never to move?" says the Duke, and Edgar's reply is, "Oh, yes, father, but the other, or any way/Except between me and where I aim." (p. 50) The contest is on between them for Perpetua, "or so my hackles tell me," Edgar declares. (p. 50) The burning of the observatory intensifies the emotions and clarifies the situation, for after it Perpetua sees that her feelings were of fear--

found that fear could seem  
Like love to a silly girl, who now knows  
It was fear and not love. . . . (p. 88)

All that remains of the observatory through which the Duke tried to reclaim the past with Perpetua is "the smell of smouldering memory." Rosabel had loved the Duke--

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. (p. 57)



I fired the wing,  
 To destroy the observatory, to make you human,  
 To bring you down to be among the rest of us  
 To make you understand the savage sorrows  
 That go on below you. . . . (p. 80)

But it was a love beyond her strength, or so it seemed.

Today, this awful day  
 The violence of a long unhappiness rocked  
 And fell, and buried me under itself at last. (p. 80)

Edgar finds his "memory is for nothing else" but Perpetua.

Over and over again  
 I see you for the first time. I round  
 Some corner of my senses, and there, as though  
 The air had formed you out of a sudden thought,  
 I discovered you. . . . (p. 95)

The Duke is left looking to the autumn of his age and the  
 ever closer winter of life.

In mortality's name  
 I'll be sorry for myself. Branches and boughs,  
 Brown hills, the valleys faint with brume,  
 A burnish on the lake; mile by mile  
 Its all a unison of ageing,  
 The landscape's all in tune, in a falling cadence,  
 All decaying. And nowhere does it have to hear  
 The grips of spring, or, when so nearing its end,  
 Have to bear the merry mirth of May. (p. 97)

This is the epitome of Fry's sense of seasonal drama, where  
 theme and pattern of ideas are all one mood and atmosphere.

The Duke has returned to the perspective of creation, but  
 he does not stop there, for the pattern of life is revealed  
 to him in a vision of old age.

In the name of existence I'll be happy for myself.  
 Why . . . how marvellous it is to moulder. (p. 98)

imagine; to have the sensation  
 Of nearness of sight, shortness of breath,  
 Palpitation, creaking in the joints,  
 A sudden illumination of lumbago.  
 What a rich world of sensation to achieve  
 What infinite variety of being. (pp. 98-99)

And the vision allows him to love again: a love that belongs  
 not to youth or the past, but to the present, though it comes  
 out of the past.

I can still remember  
 In my ebbing way, how pleasant it is to love;  
 An ancient love can blow again, like summer  
 Visiting St. Martin. . . .

. . . . .

I marry  
 Rosabel, when Rosabel  
 (After six months, I understand)  
 Is disengaged from custody. (p. 99)

She and I, sharing two solitudes  
 Will bear our spirits up to where not even  
 The nightingale can know,  
 Where the song is quiet, and quiet  
 Is the song. . . . (p. 99)

It is as though this is a window opening on the world. Rosa-  
 bel's attempt to make the Duke feel is accomplished. And the  
 vision is one Hilda has also seen, and her explanation of it  
 comes at the Duke's inquiry after the health of her injured  
 husband.

He is Roderic-phenomenon,  
 Roderic only, and at the present Roderic in pain.

. . . . . This afternoon

I made a cockshy of him, but this afternoon  
 I could no more see him than he, poor darling,  
 Can truly see half that there is to see. (p. 92)

Just as Thomas Mendip "tucked up for the night of eternity"  
 was prodded unbelievably into spring and new life after  
 bitter winter, so the Duke moves into autumn and mellow love,

at first reluctantly, but just as inexorably. Life moves on. The Duke was just as wrong as Thomas to deny this new life just because the form it took had changed season. But circumstances marched on, taking them both along through the experience of love to an intuition of some other presence lying behind the immediate, some principle of non-interference subject to the same laws.

### THE DARK IS LIGHT ENOUGH

The scene and time of the comedies dealt with so far is located quite specifically, yet with considerable appreciation for realism in the general patterns of commonplace living and human emotions too. However, also present is a very close unity of mood and season of life within the overall framework. The pervasiveness of this mood makes the setting irrelevant as far as any sense of dramatic time or place is concerned. In terms of the atmosphere they are inconsequential because similar conflicts and forces are present whether it is Ephesus in Roman times, Cool Clary "1400 either more or less or exactly"; or Stellmere Park, now. There is a sense of mysteriousness and of the depths and shadows of creation lying within the specific locale of each play as well as the play's sense of climatic relevance to the life cycle. This season of each play gives it a unity in which the scene, season, characters, and action are bound together in the one climate or mood. The pattern of ideas that is formed is of conflicts

between character, action, and the play's mood, with the final insistence of the mood on unity in a situation that resolves these conflicts--a situation that is often paradoxical.

In regard to the unity of Fry's plays as a whole, this consistency in the mood is evidence of a more specific centre in the comedies. The season and mood at the centre of each play also establishes their relationship as seasons of one year, as phases of the same thought. The Dark is Light Enough is the winter play. However, though the nature of the ideas apparent follows the same pattern and though the intuition or moment of vision is similar, the circumstances and events assume a degree of serious and grave immediacy not in the previous plays. War is significant as a reality in which action, character, and state of mind revolve around the conflicts that a state of war induces. Though the winter present is further deepened by the death of the Countess on stage, it is a play in which the idea of comedy--a look through the eyes at the alternately tragic and comic pages of life--is most acutely perceived. The Countess' quietest task of restoring confidence to the fluttering Richard Gettner (accomplished by her death) gives him the sudden insight and determination to face the coming army and the probability of his own death. Again the mystery in creation and behind life, becomes a momentary reality on which the play ends. Like the Duke, Thomas and Tegeus, Gettner is

left in the moment of comic triumph--intuition. But if, as with the other plays, we look at the day-to-day reality or perspective of life, this intuition presents merely another vision. It is a sign of the everyday commonplaces that have in them the mysteries of creation, if only intuition will lift us above the ordinariness of experience, so that we can perceive them.

The real contest for the soul of man is between the world of temporal values and that world whose values are intrinsic and eternal: whether man shall be the puppet of an hour, or whether he shall manifest in his life those qualities which time does not corrupt. Will the world of time become so materialistic as to stifle the faint flickerings of the human spirit, or will it become infused with those qualities of beauty, truth, and goodness which alone can make life worthwhile?<sup>18</sup>

Whereas in the previous plays characters move in and out of their conflicts and troublesome circumstances, those in this play lift themselves through the conflict, never escaping it, to perceive something else. But, nevertheless, something else is achieved. Throughout the play the Countess has risked herself and her friends and family not to help Gettner, but to preserve him, merely because "life has a hope of him/Or he would never have lived."<sup>19</sup> Whether she is testifying to Quaker belief or not, the play continues in a

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<sup>18</sup>Christian Faith, section 456.

<sup>19</sup>Christopher Fry, The Dark-Is Light Enough (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 54. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page numbers in the text.

vein which Friends would endorse. How appropriate the idea of the pilgrimage of the butterfly through the storm (taken from J.H. Fabre by Fry) is to the neurotic activities of Gettner as he completes his pilgrimage to death along a path of reconciliation to the life he leads.

But the mystery is more than this. The force of something else in life transcends it so that the will to die and the will to live are irrelevant. Gettner reaches this point, his way shown by the Countess who has gone before him, and "the dark is light enough" for his sudden vision of the deeps and shadows of the mystery. This really is winter, but our experience tells us that it is summer elsewhere and that spring will soon come. It is as though the forces of creation that man and other life act out were superseded and the man himself in acting them out becomes creation itself.

Peter Zichy is, in a sense, a corollary relevant to the meaning of life in the play's circumstances of war. Peter's experience is the realisation of new meaning in life that was no deeper than attempts to mediate for peace. He finds a challenge to his appreciations for peace that he has never faced before, and he fights.

I became the very passion I opposed, and was glad to be.  
I borrowed a sword out of someone's useless hand,  
And as long as the fighting lasted  
I was, heart and soul, the revolution. (p. 59)

After it he understands peace in a fuller sense

I'm no less convinced  
 Than I always was, they're doing themselves wrong (p. 60)  
 . . . . .

But I know it now  
 In a different sense. I can taste it  
 Like a fault of my own, which is not the same  
 Flavour as the fault of another man.  
 Besides I know already from today's showing  
 That when they fail,  
 If they do fail and head for defeat,  
 Being in the heart of their disaster  
 Makes it more difficult to leave them. (p. 60)

He rushes back to Vienna, not for the sake of his mediations,  
 but to prevent the executions, for the sake of life that war  
 and persecution always threaten to destroy.

I was afraid  
 They'd lose the liberties they were beginning to gain  
 Lately; not that we should lose the humanity  
 We took of God two thousand years ago. (p. 79)

One of the selections chosen by J. West in The Quaker  
Reader utters a principle in Friends that seems to speak for  
 a belief that Peter has instinctively followed, though he  
 has not pursued it as a conscious religious practice.

Friends, therefore, believe that we must overcome poverty,  
 disease, fear, injustice and prejudice, and that to work  
 for these ends is part of true religion. Friends believe,  
 in short, that religion is something that has to be put  
 into practice. It does not mean the repetition of certain  
 acts or forms of words, but rather a sense that once we  
 are sure that we know at least a part of God's purpose,  
 then we must do something about it. . . . We can know what  
 to do because there is something of God in everyone that  
 inspires them to aim at the highest, and urges them to  
 respond to the highest.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Gettner, whose position is like that attributed  
 to Tegeus and Shendi in the section on A Phoenix Too Frequent,  
 is on the receiving end of this philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup>(New York, 1962), pp. 506-507.

Throughout the ages men have recognized certain qualities as the highest--truth, integrity, beauty, love, unselfishness and generosity. We believe that these are the qualities of God, that they have absolute validity and that they are bound in the long run to overcome error, hatred, suspicion, ugliness, greed, selfishness and the lust for power.<sup>21</sup>

Richard Gettner "the man of frustration, the man . . . in search of God," says,

Reality itself, with wonder and power,  
Calls forth the sound of great spirits.  
And mocks us with a wretched human capacity. (p. 45)

He answers Stefan's query about the secret value that makes him claim so much in order to keep his life, with--"Unless I live, how do you think I can know?" (p. 40) He will "not die to oblige anybody" and will "foot-kiss," "dust-lick" and "belly-crawl" rather than . . . "have no life at all." (p. 22) When Gettner acknowledges the Countess by turning back to her at the end, it is evidence of the truthfulness and validity of a philosophy which declares that

Everyone has the power to refuse; free will is an essential part of creation; but in his heart a man knows that good is right and evil is wrong in such a positive and certain way that no contradiction is possible.<sup>22</sup>

This Quaker principle is the love without evidence that motivates Peter's concern for Hungary in the Austrian Council. It is a comprehending love of unlimited reserve in life and it gives him the possibility of preventing the slaughter of the Hungarian rebels, just as it gave him the resources with

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



which to see "Hungary's best future in Austria's friendship" and to work for it. It is the love through which the Countess respects the sanctity of Gettner's life and responds to its desperate bids to continue. It is the love Gelda has for Gettner, her first husband.

I am Peter's wife. . . . .

. . . . .  
But I was Richard's wife and those vows,  
Though they're cancelled and nowhere now,  
Were abounding in purpose then, looking ahead  
With eyes narrowed against the weather  
To make a way where there was no way.

. . . . .  
Peter, if you rest in our love as I do,  
Don't wish me to ask Richard to die. (p. 36)

It is this love with which Peter reassures them both in their doubts about his own safety, a safety which this reverence for life sacrifices.

no one need ever die  
For us; you know I understand.  
My God, I should be sorry to see  
A dead man cross our love. (p. 36)

And it is the love in Richard Gettner at the end that responds resignedly.

Gettner, an "unhappy fact fearing death" scrambles for life, but the life he so desperately seeks seems to respond to a magnanimity in others that comprehends a larger meaning behind his life/death struggle. He is drawn slowly and surely from insecurity and instability by this love, so that the Countess' death is part of the life in him that he is prepared to respond to with his own sacrifice. This love is

the vision that mysteriously relegates the contradiction of life and death to one another.

However, tragedy and comedy, religion and paganism seem to be far from the point Fry is trying to make in these plays. There is something behind them all, some intuition or understanding that renders them all flat forms that need the perspective of spirit to establish their significance. Instead of returning further into a repetition of what Fry has said in his articles about these matters, Christian Faith reiterates much of what Fry talks of in new perspective, by a quotation from A. Barratt Brown and John W. Harvey.

The conventional distinction between 'sacred' and 'secular' art is indeed misleading and harmful to both art and religion. Men have come to speak of sacred music, sacred pictures, or sacred verse merely because the subject matter is connected with a world of religion which they have previously separated from the world of ordinary life. But the more fruitful distinction is between inspired art and uninspired art. The former may be, whatever its ostensible occasion or subject, essentially religious; the latter cannot be made so by any selection of a (so-called) 'religious' subject. . . . It is men and women in the first instance who are inspired and who are thus able to produce inspired speech and writing, music and painting; and because the springs of inspiration are never dry, the book of revelation is not closed. . . . It may be suggested that the test of the quality of such deliverances--whether in art or in religious speech or writing--will be found in their capacity in turn to inspire, to find an answering echo in the minds and lives of others, and to become a perpetual fount of inspiration. This is the immortality of the great inspirations of the prophets and artists--they continue to inspire because they have in them eternal life. 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.' These are the undying words--inspired and inspiring still.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Christian Faith, section 465.

## THE FIRSTBORN

In the comedies, Fry took highly individual characters and the personal experience particular to them within the consistent atmosphere of a season. They arrive at the same perception and momentary intuition that is reflected in the other plays, but the difference is that in the religious plays the path to this revelation, though it is the same in nature, is represented by the circumstances and conditions of a more universal and solid figure or cause moving along it. The more widespread comprehension of a saint like Cuthman, a national and religious leader like Moses, or of Christianity and biblical heroes, gives far more directness and immediate depth to the theme.

Talking about characters in The Firstborn Stanford remarks that:

Each character manifests itself to us in a kind of reflective process. We gaze as it were down a corridor at them, or, rather their words and their gestures lead us down a corridor into their own past. All of them at times, turn back in this manner, seeking in themselves a life they once knew; for a life which though outside the temporal boundaries of the play is still within them, affecting their present. It is this trait which gives them their human pathos--the sense we have of their having lived before the rise of the curtain on the play; of their having rejoiced and suffered in the past and of bearing that past as a memory with them, and as something more too than memory.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London, 1952), pp. 115-116.

This combination of character placed against the backdrop of racial memory and a sensitivity to some inherent link with another life--a wider creation--heightens this individualisation, so strong in its parallels to the Quaker position. But we must remember that Fry saw comedy coming from tragedy in the same way that experience gives rise to intuition. Even the characters in comedy must be "qualified for tragedy" and,

somehow have to unmortify themselves: to affirm life and assimilate death and persevere in joy. Their hearts must be as determined as the phoenix; what burns must also light and renew; not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hardwon maturity of delight, by the intuition of comedy, an active patience declaring the solvency of good.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the comedies, Fry's other plays, with the exception of Curtmantle, were written to be performed "either in, or not far away from, a church." This is their only real difference from the comedies. The category religious as distinct from the comedies does not really apply, for "if any are religious, they are all religious and if any are pagan, they are all pagan," says Fry.<sup>26</sup>

In The Firstborn the rescuing of the Israelites from bondage to Egypt by Moses supplies the circumstances and action of the play, but Fry interprets. It

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<sup>25</sup>Christopher Fry, "Comedy," Tulane Drama Review (March, 1960), 78.

<sup>26</sup>Christopher Fry, Three Plays (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), vii.

reflects the debate between authority and freedom in Pharaoh and Moses . . . a passionate plea for self determination in the language of current politics-- an assertion of the rights of the Jewish race to evolve their own ethos under a providential contract.<sup>27</sup>

What seems to be significant is the consequence of events and not characters as it was in the comedies.

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. . . .<sup>28</sup>

Seti is not a bad man, but is dedicated to the preservation of that power and assurance that the Egyptians had created for themselves. His is the cause of a nation, where all is part of the whole and is destroyed if it is useless and inefficient. But this imposition of racial law and order on that order and form of life that speaks for freedom of life calls up revolt. Likewise, Moses is not a good man, but he is dedicated to the cause of life and the individual or minority concern, and is its driving power, its mouthpiece and its will.

I am here to appease the unconsummated  
Resourceless dead, to join life to the living.  
Is that not underwritten by nature? Is that  
Not a law? Do not ask me why I do it!  
I live. I do this thing. I was born this action  
Despite you, through you, upon you,  
I am compelled. (p. 50)

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<sup>27</sup>D. Stanford, "Comedy and Tragedy in Christopher Fry," Modern Drama (May, 1959), 6.

<sup>28</sup>Christopher Fry, The Firstborn (in Three Plays), p.72. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

Without him this force is no more than a feeling amongst individuals that is unconscious and unoriented. With him it is the same as the struggles of individual will and the respect for life in the comedies. These two men stand for the collective organisation and conflict of human order and authority unnaturally suppressing individual freedom. They represent the conflict of everyday commonplaces and the miraculous (the instrument of God). Moses is fighting for a human cause and not a national one and this is the difference that is illuminated by the contestants. It is apparent in the peace and calm of the relationships of Moses and Rameses in a world of strife, or the childlike compassion of Tamsret in the palace of hard-headed politics. But nature takes her course amongst the good and bad on either side.

We're not enemies so much  
As creatures of division. You and I,  
Rameses, like money in a purse,  
Ring together only to be spent  
For different reasons. (p. 34)

So Rameses is going to die, and brutality fights brutality at any level and with any resources in anarchy, as Moses realises, when he is inextricably involved in the unhalting march of these forces, and when death strikes across the land. At first Moses is disillusioned.

The shadows are too many.  
All was right, except this, all, the reason,  
The purpose, the justice, except this the culmination.  
Good has turned against itself and become  
Its own enemy. (p. 92)

Then he moves from distraction to acceptance.

I do not know why the necessity of God  
Should feed on grief; but it seems so. And to know it  
Is not to grieve less, but to see grief grow big  
With what has died, and in some spirit differently  
Bear it back to life. (p. 94)

The characters Moses and Seti have started the conflict of freedom and authority and events have rolled them both up in the consequences. As Anath says, "It isn't we who make the bargains/ In this life, but chance and time." (p. 66) But the morning which still "comes/To Egypt as to Israel," sees the forces spent and Israel free. However, they are both left to pursue their separate destinies within the world in which they were so recently in conflict.

We must each find our separate meaning  
In the persuasion of our days  
Until we meet in the meaning of the world. (p. 95)

In a foreword to the second edition of the play Fry says that he hopes that Rameses as the figure of life will take the central place. He continues with Moses.

Moses is a movement towards maturity, towards a balancing of life within the mystery, where conflicts and dilemmas are the trembling of the balance . . . he suffers a momentary spiritual death at the moment when the firstborn's physical death creates the Hebrew's freedom; and his resurrection from that, . . . carries with it something of the life of Rameses.<sup>29</sup>

Moses shows the inexorable march of progress, where life paradoxically triumphs in breaking bondage at the expense of individual life carelessly tossed by these larger forces at

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<sup>29</sup>Christopher Fry, Three Plays (London, 1960), p. 5.

play. Moses' resurrection, with his realisation of "the morning that still comes" to them both is as it were the awareness of life beyond the struggle, behind the cause of nations. This intuition arises from what was a few moments before the disillusionment of his concepts that individual lives within this struggle can alter the justice or necessity of his own cause. For Moses, in that moment "a deep and urgent question mark" had hung over the ways of men and the ways of God.<sup>30</sup> He had seen God as representing their cause and their cause as being right, but Rameses had died even though he was an innocent life involved. Here the cause of nations has the same vitality in it as did individual's achieving their own vision as part of their destiny in the comedies, and each side, God's and the enemy's, is part of creation, left to find "their separate meaning" until they can "meet in the meaning of the world." (p. 95)

The tragedy of this play lies in the conflict of experience, just where Fry tells us to look for it. Moses warns Seti that

Egypt is only  
One golden eruption of time, one flying spark  
Attempting the ultimate fire. But who can say  
What secrets my race has, what unworked seams  
Of consciousness in mind and soul? 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. (p. 49)

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.



But neither is free to consider the other in any peaceful or intermediary way. Neither can perceive the vision or accept any insight until events are over and experience has taught them its lesson. The ending is not tragic because that is where the insight lies. The tragedy lies in the fact that experience has to work itself out. The experience shows conflict whereas life, as we have viewed it so far in the comedies, rises above this to a vision of joy, peace, and love, whether it is through Christian ideals or a romantic exuberance in the happy triumphs of life. Quaker principles are absent, but the experience of Moses is the kind on which their principles are derived.

#### THOR WITH ANGELS

In this play Fry's concerns with the mystery are Christian, and the subject of the play is Christianity. The contradictions of Christianity and paganism are the theme of the play and they present themselves in the spiritual unrest of Cymen. But there is also a theme of wider concern transcending the Christian teachings that provided satisfaction to the inadequacies Cymen finds in his pagan religion. So far the plays considered have carried Christian views and Christian symbols it is true, but problems arise. For example, S.M. Wiersma suggests that in A Phoenix Too Frequent

the symbols and themes are all Christian.<sup>31</sup> There is the theme of burial and resurrection in Dynamene's and Doto's seclusion until the early hours of the third day. There is the holly tree as the Christian symbol of the cross with the berries representing the drops of Christ's blood. However, there are also allusions to Greek and Roman religion such as the Pleiades, a miscellany of gods and spirits, and the story on the wine bowls. Further the phoenix is, according to the times and the title, a far more acceptable symbol within the play. In the light of these confusions of Christian and pagan symbols and ideas, and in the light of Fry's remarks about his comedies and religious plays being religious and pagan alike, it seems far more reasonable to stick to the idea of a Christ/Phoenix symbol of love in this play. Though the Christ and the Phoenix symbols can be interpreted separately at various levels, the significance of the idea they present seems to far outweigh the importance of an elaborate symbolic form, even if the likelihood of its presence is justified. The diverse allusions convey the meaning (love rising anew from its own dead body) equally effectively through both a Christ image and the Phoenix symbol. Similarly, it seems best to take the wine toasts and other images as a celebration of life that combines both Christian and Pagan sources to celebrate the living in the dead as well as new

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<sup>31</sup>"A Phoenix Too Frequent: A Study in Source and Symbol," Modern Drama, VIII, iii (December, 1965).

life. Both are affirmed in terms of love and a joy in life that is against death.

The spiritual climate of Thor With Angels reflects the nativity and the crucifixion. The tree is again present, and it seems worthwhile to keep in mind the fact that

so many of the hero-gods and avatars are associated with the Tree that the central symbol of Christianity is of a truly universal nature and by no means an historical abnormality.<sup>32</sup>

As for the theme, this play is "actively concerned with specific Christian virtues: with mercy and the value of sacrifice understood in the light of Christ's example."<sup>33</sup> This is one of the spiritual values of the Christian mystic.

A. Watts says that mysticism's entire concern

is to transcend subjectivity, so that man may 'wake up' to the world which is concrete and actual, as distinct from that which is purely abstract and conceptual.<sup>34</sup>

And W.R. Inge considers mysticism as one of the causes "why the type of religion of which the Quakers are the most consistent representations is gaining ground," and defines their type of mysticism as one

which rests on the apprehension of spiritual values, not on the acceptance of supernatural phenomena or the dismissal of the imponderables into the limbo of the epiphenomena.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Alan W. Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity (London: Thames & Hudson, 1954), p. 158.

<sup>33</sup> D. Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London: 1952), p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> A. Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Mysticism in Religion (London: Hutchinson's), p. 128.

Pure mysticism does not belong to any particular religion and is too subjective to provide a bond of union between individuals. Quakerism, however, is a group form grounded in Christian concepts, and it incorporates the subjective and contemplative, attributing them to the mystical in experience. It has nothing to fear from discovery and research, for though its evidence is internal its knowledge is based on facts and experience. Divine love, union with creation and an understanding of God's purpose are synonymous in the experience of the Christian mystic, and are not distinctively Quakerly. But it is the comprehensiveness of love in their own spiritual lives and in the outward expressions of their humanitarianism that distinguishes them.

In Fry's plays love is a cosmic mystery. Like rings in a pool of water, the ripples extend from the individual's selfish, grasping love of life in someone like Gettner, to lap on life itself. In Venus Observed the Duke and Perpetua's embrace in the fire is that of human solidarity in misery. But, whatever it is, a greater love moves these characters into life and towards the mystery. It is the same with Tegeus' worshipping love of beauty faithful to the grave, and Moses' sentimental reflections on his once promising youth as it seems to be reflected in the hero-worshipping Rameses. The end result lies in an understanding like Merlin's intuition of creation and the Countess Rosmarin's perspective that places a respect for life above the luxury.

of family feeling. Love does not seem to be a passion but an affection for life and the living. To live and love is to trust in the harmony of life's order, which includes the resignation of time, mutability and the phenomenon of death. This is the law of life. Fry is concerned with life's order, and the Christian doctrine that is apparent in his work is not from the written laws of God, but the living laws of life and the demands of love to live.

In Thor With Angels the instinctive assertions of life are part of the play. In Hoel, it is a straightforward will to live ("I want to live having a life within me that seems to demand it") comparable to what the Countess said of Gettner to Janik

Life has a hope of him  
Or he would never have lived. . . .  
. . . . .  
Richard lives  
In his own right, Colonel, not in yours  
Or mine. (The Dark Is Light Enough, p. 54)

For Cymen's family this wish is behind the pagan terror that drives them to sacrifice and appease their gods, and it is in direct conflict with the Christian teachings of love that eventually give the satisfaction Cymen seeks. To a direct recognition of need Martina adds a love of life that is compassionate. Despite the discriminations her family and people expect of her, it instinctively calls her to help old men and prisoners, because they are lives in need of it. Cymen, however, lacks the directness and naivete that lets

his daughter keep such conflicting forces apart.

It's a pity  
You had to be born a Briton. I'm forced to hate you.<sup>36</sup>

You look too tired to be hated  
And that won't do at all. (p. 144)

The insistence of life that Cyren feels generated in himself, regardless of Hoel's faith and race, poses a lot of dissatisfaction, doubt, frustration, and concern. Furthermore, it is beyond the simple answers of his pagan belief, so he throws down its altar in despair, and cries to his gods

By what stroke was the human flesh  
Hacked so separate from the body of life  
Beyond us? You make us to be the eternal alien  
In our own world. . . . (p. 138)

The appearance of Merlin is as though a more thorough way of life and a truer vision of existence has crept into the play, one that is closer to a still point in time and creation. With his presence it seems as though the problems and fears of the pagan and the response of a Christian love and faith play as forces across the face of a creation that holds them despite their contradictory nature.

Death is what conquers the killer, not the killed.  
You, and moreover your conquerors, will bear  
Kindly and as though by nature our name, the British  
Name, and all the paraphernalia, legend  
And history, as though you were our widow  
Not our conqueror. . . . (p. 127)

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<sup>36</sup>Christopher Fry, Thor With Angels (in Three Plays), p. 120. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

Merlin sees through time and watches life's rough and tumble of body and spirit, "quest and conquest and quest again," and comments on what he sees pass like moments across the face of Britain. To the pagan, life remains indifferent to man

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  
Nothing, it seems, cares for your defeat. (p. 127)

While Christianity conjures up the image of a time before the Pagan conquest

A Christian land. There  
It was, and old Joseph's faithful staff  
Breaking into scarlet bud in the falling snow.  
But as I said at the time, the miracle  
Was commonplace: staves of chestnut wood  
And maywood and the like perform it every year. (p. 128)

Ostensibly this play celebrates the arrival of Christianity to Britain, and the teachings of Christian love are the means by which Cymen's eyes are opened to a vision that is like that of the working together of root and sky, man and God that lies so deeply ingrained in The Boy With A Cart.

But I have heard  
Word of his 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. (pp. 151-152)

But Merlin submerges religion in the mystery, the spirit behind it--the spirit that was behind the one-sidedness of Moses' concept of his God and that included him and it as another part of the mystery seeking its own separate meaning.

The Christian sees spirit and being in creation through the concept and doctrine of Christian love, but Merlin's vision is of the natural world, and it speaks for the most fundamental and most true spirit of being that life responds to in all Fry's plays.

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 will  
 . . . . .  
 Where the stream of the dream wakes in the open eyes  
 Of the sea of love of the morning of the God.  
 . . . . .  
 Still I observe the very obdurate pressure  
 Edging men towards a shape beyond  
 The shape they know. Now and then, by a spirit  
 Of light, they manage the clumsy approximation,  
 Overturn it, turn again, refashion  
 Nearer the advising of their need.  
 Always the shape lying over life.  
 . . . . .  
 The shape shone  
 Like a faint circle round a moon  
 Of hazy gods, and age by age  
 The gods reformed according to the shape,  
 According to the shape that was a word,  
 According to Thy Word. . . . . (pp. 145-146)

"A secret direction passing the gods," it goes straight through Christianity to the key in which creation was composed.

The unity of things, and the idea of what we may perhaps term an evolutionary universe is annunciated. The passage in which the images that represent these ideas occurs is spoken, significantly, by Merlin . . . and not by one of the Christian characters. At the same time . . . the pagan sage, prophesies the coming of the Christians . . . whose arrival . . . will in some way fulfil the end towards which creation has been moving.



Looked at in this light, it is possible to reconcile Merlin's 'pantheism' with the gospel. . . . Christianity, Fry perhaps suggests, was the next stage in 'emergent evolution'--the flower implicit in an earlier seed.<sup>37</sup>

### A SLEEP OF PRISONERS

Mandel calls this play an allegorical masque that "asserts Fry's ideas rather than testing them," and Fry himself indicates this assertion when he suggests that

It has always seemed to me that the differences and conflicts between men spring often--perhaps more often than not--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, and then let them sleep and dream, each Man dreaming of the other three and of himself, so that each character could be seen four times over.<sup>38</sup>

As a result this play is one of Fry's most direct statements about the nature of love and conflict in a Christian context.

These four prisoners of war confined in a church move from division to unity through their dreams. It is the "growth of the vision and an increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death."<sup>39</sup> From David's frustration and total incomprehension of Peter's temperament, the squabble penetrates David's sleeping state. His dream projects the situation in his mind to the parallel of the

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<sup>37</sup>D. Stanford, Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London, 1952), pp. 99-100.

<sup>38</sup>O. Mandel, Etudes Anglaises (1957), 345; and Christopher Fry, "Drama in a House of Worship," The New York Times (October 14, 1951), sec. 11,2.

<sup>39</sup>D. Stanford, "Comedy and Tragedy in Christopher Fry," Modern Drama (May, 1959), 4.

Cain and Abel story of outright murder, seen through Cain's angry eyes.

I loved life  
 With a good rage you gave me. And how much better  
 Did Abel do? He set up his heart  
 Against your government of flesh.  
 How was I expected to guess  
 That what I am you didn't want.<sup>40</sup>

Then in Peter's dream, his--Absalom's--death becomes a political murder by David. Absalom will attribute no importance to evil in others since he has no enemies and cannot see the evil.

Hell is in my father's head  
 Streaming with imagined hordes  
 And conjures them to come. But you and I  
 Know that we can turn away  
 And everything will turn  
 Into itself again. What is  
 A little evil here and there between friends? (p. 182)

In Adam's dream, the sacrifice of love for the sake of progress--the story of Abraham and Isaac--sees Peter saved by a new incitement to love.

There's no loosening, since men with men  
 Are like the knotted sea. Lift him down  
 From the stone to the grass again, and, even so free,  
 Yet he will find the angry cities hold him.  
 But let him come back to the strange matter of living  
 As best he can: . . . (p. 192)

In the last dream, Meadows' dream, they are all together. David, Peter, and Adams appear as Shadrac, Meshac, and Abednego and live in undivided triumph through the fire of their own inhumanity to one another.

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Fry, A Sleep of Prisoners (in Three Plays) p. 179. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

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. This  
 Surely is unquenchable? It can only transform.  
 There's no way out. We can only stay and alter. (p. 208)

They are joined by Meadows whose quiet love and strength seem  
 the whole cause of the unity in retrospect. It is he who  
 seems to understand and interpret what the others feel.

Good has no fear;  
 Good is itself, whatever comes.  
 It grows, and makes, and bravely  
 Persuades, beyond all tilt of wrong:  
 If we believe it with a long courage of truth. (p. 208)

The play finds in these four men the reconciliation and love  
 of understanding in the union of love, one nature with another  
 for the sake of life.

The human heart can go to the lengths of God.  
 Dark and cold we may be, but this  
 Is no winter now. The frozen misery  
 Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;  
 The thunder is the thunder of the floes,  
 The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.  
 Thank God our time is now when wrong  
 Comes up to face us everywhere,  
 Never to leave us till we take  
 The longest stride of soul men ever took.  
 Affairs are now soul size  
 The enterprise  
 Is exploration into God. (p. 209)

The whole concept of the play is based on four biblical  
 stories which are Christian myths holding their fundamental  
 truth in the dream state of these soldiers. Here is a  
 dramatisation of the Jungian dream state embodying the collec-  
 tive unconscious of a race's history together with specific  
 religious turns that throw back to the beginnings of Christian

myth. In their dreams these four men follow the path of their cultural history, living the spiritual memory of their race as it leads them into the meaning of the world and brings them up to their own times of war outside the church in which they are imprisoned, and of war among themselves. They have met the differences and conflicts in their own facades in terms of common memories and reach a common unity of spirit within those memories, a new respect for humanity and life that supersedes the Judeo-Christian context of their times and their dreams.

In The Firstborn Fry was using not only the same technique, but similar material. It is not historical evidence, biblical story, or happy romance, retold as drama, that count with Fry. It is the meaning or truth behind the facts and the form that carry the import, and it is the symbols and allusions, events, characters and story that together create the climate. In the comedies this effect was achieved by a unity in the season of the play, while in the religious plays the Christian and Pagan are tied into this mood. But when Fry deals with biblical events as he does in A Sleep of Prisoners and The Firstborn, Christian history as he does in The Boy With A Cart and Thor With Angels--to a lesser extent, and history as in Curtmantle, this effect suddenly achieves the stature of myth-making. This technique that Fry specialises in is the essence of myth itself. In Fry's words it carries the "ring of an old truth."

The transforming power of the myth depends upon a full and effective realisation of its meaning, which is something very much more than a devout fascination for the numinous quality of its symbols.<sup>41</sup>

In Christianity even Moses is a Christ figure who provides the connection of the paschal lamb sacrifice to Christ's sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> Moses was saviour of Israel and fought the forces of evil in the same way (Christ's grace is retro-active in enlightening all the seers of old). Furthermore, the historical figure of Christ, alive and dead, shows men "the indestructible power of love" that is "central to any statement which sets out the beliefs of the Society of Friends."<sup>43</sup> In fact Friends' views on the Bible and other such testimonies give evidence of a similar attitude. This was also considered in the discussion on The Boy With A Cart.

[Quakers deal with Biblical events in a way that] makes possible a return to belief with an understanding of the deeper meanings inherent in the words of the Bible. At this stage we are not so much concerned with historical validity or rational consistency with our scientific or philosophical outlook as we are with the inner significance of history, myth and symbol. Symbol is a language of religion, but it must never be a substitute for religion. All living theology grows out of personal experience. Accordingly each biblical text, to be of real value, must have spiritual relevance to the inner religious experience of the reader or hearer. This . . . may be understood as interpretation of the Bible through the Light Within.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>A.W. Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity (London, 1954), p. 135.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>43</sup>H.B. Pointing, The Society of Friends (London: Friends House, 1953), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup>Howard H. Brinton, Friends for 300 Years (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 34.

A Sleep of Prisoners deals with the spiritual implications of various points of view. Their relevance to both the unity of the play and the unity the characters again achieve, lies in the figure of Christ himself. Each one of these biblical stories contains the same myth of good and evil, of conflict and sacrifice--a myth that reaches its climax in the relevance of actual fact to mythical truth that the story of Christ achieved.

In this play, perhaps more than in the others, there is the idea of evil as a consequence of man's consciousness. Fry emphasises vices and shortcomings rather than active evil in his characters.<sup>45</sup> David seems the most clear example in this play, and Henry carries the idea in Curtmantle. While in the other plays, though it is present, romance of both comedy and Christian virtue tend to minimise it. However, in all the plays the supreme good opposing this evil is that man must die and love for life.<sup>46</sup>

The Christian archetypes seem to arise from a particular point of importance in other myths, or, at least, they contain the properties of several older myths that go back to a story of creation. In a very specific way the myth of creation belongs to everyman, for Adam is the new creature, the individual in his ability to see all he encounters as if for the

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<sup>45</sup>Emil Roy, "The Becket Plays," Modern Drama, VIII, iii (December, 1965), 270.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

first time. He needs no names and sees the world with a sense of wonder grasped by no other, until experience teaches him the habit of commonplaces. What Fry and Quakers hold in common is the value of being able to perceive in wonder, as if for the first time, while yet understanding in the fullness of the experience of living--a combination of vision and the mystery of existence. For Cuthman, in The Boy With A Cart, this sensation is the working together of God and man, indivisible as root and sky. It probes the depths of the Christian mystery when, in the fullest moment of life he sees Christ the carpenter and hears his voice hovering "on memory with open wings." (p. 39) For Tegeus Chromis in A Phoenix Too Frequent the sensation is of feeling "as the gods feel."

I was born entirely  
For this reason. I was born to fill a gap  
In the world's experience, which had never known  
Chromis loving Dynamene. (p. 28)

Can we be made of dust as they tell us?  
What! dust with dust releasing such a light  
And such an apparition of the world  
Within one body. . . . (p. 32)

Thomas Mendip's vision is of a commonplace woman, Jennet-- "five-foot six of wavering light." (p. 89) She is a vision "As inevitable as original sin," and one that "I shall be loath to forgo. . . /Even for the sake of my ultimate friendly death." (p. 97) To the Duke of Altair, the sensation is of the autumn of his age, but just as dazzling.

In the name of existence I'll be happy for myself.  
Why, . . . how marvellous it is to moulder (p. 98)

What a rich world of sensation to achieve,  
What infinite variety of being. (p. 99)

Richard Gettner sees reality calling "for the sound of great spirits" and telling him that the value he placed on his own life is "simply what any life may mean." And so the moments go. For Moses, a vision of life and destiny is exemplified by the struggles of Egypt and Israel in The Firstborn. Cymen sees Christianity offer him and his people a welcome to creation in Thor With Angels. In A Sleep Of Prisoners each soldier lives through the dream of unity, while Curtmantle imparts a perspective of Henry's tragic history to the audience.

#### CURTMANTLE

In Curtmantle, Fry's most recent play, certain elements that have appeared in previous plays are localised by a far more specific series of historical facts. Henry has a character far more complex than that of Moses or Seti in The Firstborn--the only other play in which Fry's sense of comedy does not take over from the tragic experience of man. Likewise the events and facts of Henry's life incorporated in the play are far more numerous. Yet the play goes through to the tragic concepts that are as elusive but as definite as those in The Dark Is Light Enough. There are two themes, one towards a portrait of Henry that searches for his reality,



and the other of 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.<sup>47</sup> Through them comes a familiar "angle of experience." The play, in searching for the reality of Henry's character, is resolved in tragedy with the close "He was dead when they came to him." Henry is not granted insight into his own condition. But the force and life in him belongs to a wider kind of being, rather like the absorption of Seti's and Moses' characters into the larger conflict beyond them and their understanding--that of warring nationalisms. It is Henry's tragic fate to move through life creating law and order out of darkness and yet he goes to his end watching it all crumble round him. Eleanor and his family forsake him, antagonised, taking lands and rule. Politically they lower his achievements further by alliance against him with France. He alienates himself from the Church by the murder of Becket. His ending is in the same darkness he came from and his kingship is nothing. In the face of death the forces of life and character in him disappear leaving a body, like any other, that is stripped by the need and poverty of his own people--the demands and elements of life that he fought to curb and restrain by enforcing law and order. His life was the fight,

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<sup>47</sup>Christopher Fry, *Curtmantle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), viii-ix. All further quotes from this play will be identified by page number in the text.

clash, and tension of a personality moving within the environs of title and responsibility. Throughout the play William Marshall, whose reminiscence this is, seems to question this life in pinning the character and accomplishments of Henry against the backdrop of the times, which were as lawless as creation, but which were the tableau of Henry's attempts at law and his own lawlessness. This play is far clearer about the phenomenon of man than is The Firstborn, because Henry's character is placed in far greater detail and relief within the perspective of the permanent condition of man. Fry's sense of man's tragedy is in this play the overemphasis of material and authoritarian concerns. Henry is too much of a hero and this is his flaw. He is not content to be one man and not the human race. He contradicts man's responsibility to accept life seeking to impose his own moral standards on it. All that remains of Henry is the meaning of his life in William Marshall's mind, while the facts belong to time, and his life belongs to the universe. But Henry spent his whole life working against this very formlessness and loss of the sense of being.

Fry's sense of tragedy and the tragic experience echoes throughout the memory of Henry's life. His tragedy is brought about by his complete misinterpretation of life. His sense of perspective is wrong. Richard Gettner took his perspective of life from himself, instead of getting a look at him-

self through life. Moses did the same in representing Israel, only to learn through bitter experience what Gettner had perceived in enlightenment. Henry does not even learn what experience has to show him, for he fights it every inch of the way. He is a great man in spite of the circumstances, whereas Moses was a great man because of the circumstances. He equates himself and the young princes with the Plantagenet cause, without realising that what is best for the country is not what he sees as best for it in the Plantagenets. He puts kingship and royalty before the country's cause.

Nothing but good,  
Because the voice of Plantagenet is one voice,  
Calling and answering along the same road.  
The power I give them is trust and affection. How  
Can this be ill spent? (pp. 55-56)

As a result of this lack of perspective Henry's struggles for order reduce his achievements and frustrate his aims in their own anarchy so that everybody that stands against him stands representing the same anarchy in life, an anarchy whose conflicts become personal squabbles in the way that the struggle of freedom against authority that plagued Egypt in The First-born also became a battle of personalities. The divine right of kings established the life of a nation as that of the king and Henry further distorts his own perspective by calling the life of that king that of the Plantagenet cause. Eleanor challenges the future of the state in Henry's world with a reminder of the world they are all part of (where no life has more value than any other) when she says to Becket

Ask yourself where it is you stand, saying  
 Where is the King?  
 Look round at the unreality of the light  
 And the unreality of the faces in the light.  
 You and he, you told him would reach a place  
 Where you might not know what was being made of you,  
 Or understand the conclusion when it came. (pp. 43-44)

The conflict of the King and the Archbishop becomes a conflict that splits the friendship of Henry and Becket, and reflects a deeper conflict, that of the State and the Church. This particular squabble reaches its pitch when Henry feels that Britain is too small to contain them both, while Eleanor wonders "who will grow large enough to contain the island?" (p. 47) She tries to warn Henry, but he ignores her.

Let me say this to the man who makes the world--  
 And also to the man who makes himself the Church.  
 Consider complexity, delight in difference.  
 Fear for God's sake, your exact words.  
 Do you think you can draw lines on the living water?  
 Together we might have made a world of progress.  
 Between us, by our three variants of human nature,  
 You and Becket and me, we could have been  
 The complete reaching forward. . . . (p. 47)

He cannot understand. Eleanor's final remarks when Henry makes a prisoner of her in her own court describes the significance of Henry's actions and predicts the outcome of such a rule. But they do not lessen the tragedy of Henry's fatal misunderstanding.

You take me back to yourself in the only way  
 You know, by forcible possession,  
 As you took your own vision of the world  
 With a burly rape in the ditch. Your hopes, therefore,  
 Are born bastards, outside the laws I recognise.  
 The true law hides like the marrow of the bone,  
 Feeding us in secret. This 'lex non scripta' may prove to be  
 Not unity but diversity,  
 And then who will be the outlaw? (p. 81)

You, within yourself,  
Are the one raped, waiting for punishment.  
The shadows will only deepen for you. They will never  
lift

Again. (p. 83)

In this play Eleanor alone maintains a sense of perspective. She recognises "the true law . . . feeding us in secret." She does not fight Henry like Becket, but submits to the system of law and form and order in life, of which all hazardness is a part. The paradox of Henry's life lies in the lawlessness of Henry's attempts to bring law and order to the anarchy of his times. And this anarchy lies in the state of the kingdom for it is "not nature but human nature [that] is chaotic, splitting the reason away from the emotions."<sup>48</sup> Herein lies the tragedy of Henry's life and the tragedy that humanity faces. It is a question of realities and truths, all of them being shadows of the one true reality. Human nature is chaotic, a shadow of nature distorted as it falls on the broken ground of reason divorced from emotion. Experience is the agent that changes these forms. It is the circumstances that reflect or distort the image and essence of life.

Richard Gettner see reality calling forth the sound of great spirits and mocking us with a wretched human capacity. (p. 45) In The Dark Is Light Enough he is a tragic figure, an unhappy figure of wretched human capacity until the sudden

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<sup>48</sup> Emil Roy, "The Becket Plays," Modern Drama (December, 1965), 270/

and romantic reversal. After it the great spirit of the hero and the insight of the saint respond to reality making death a revelation that to Fry is comedy. But Henry is full of a wretched human capacity that mocks the reality of its struggles for law and order with the distorted reflections of its own lawlessness.

The original spirit that spoke to early Quakers, though it transcends the limitations of any set of religious principles or beliefs, sees the tragedy of the human condition in man's blindness to experience. Where circumstances observe the light it is the duty of the enlightened to educate ignorance and teach the path of truth.

Historically the form of this particular spiritual endeavour came in the context of a civilisation and culture centred on the teachings of Christianity. But Quakers acknowledge that this spirit appears in many other ways.

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. This world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.<sup>49</sup>

Fry's plays look at the same phenomenon, whether it is through the eyes of a saint who sees the spirit of his God in the world he inhabits, through the eyes of a Roman soldier

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<sup>49</sup>Christian Faith, section 227.

and an Ephesian widow (or an English captain and a supposed witch) as love suddenly leads them into a new life, through the eyes of a deserter that are opened to a realisation of himself through the faith, trust, and selfless concern of an old woman, or through the eyes of a hero that are opened to the realisation that the reality of his God includes all life, both good and evil, and that it is not confined by human narrowmindedness to one absolute or another. To Quakers and to Fry, in his plays, religion is significant not for any particular creed, but because its nature is a specific concern with some more basic inner reality. In the understanding of this reality people cease to be individuals of unique passions and life. Instead they become expressions of patterns in life and forces resistant to it. Fry's characters are not people as we know them, but are vehicles of the life that they carry within them. Whenever they move and speak it is this life within them that speaks and acts.

Fry's vision is of the cosmos, and the theme of his plays is the struggle of humanity and its visions. His plays rejoice in these visions as moments of truth that resolve the contradiction of things in the perspective of their relevance to life's anatomy. Fry expresses his feelings and sensibility and believes in the worth of such a way of life. His plays express the principles that are involved and Quakers show them to us in the patterns of their lives. Fry is a contemplative man and his plays have to be accepted as

expressions of cosmic humanity, not realistic interpretations of a self-centred human condition.



## APPENDIX A

### THE POETIC-RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF ROMANCE DRAMA IN FRY'S PLAYS

So far any thoughts on the verse in Fry's dramas have been obscured by the considerations of the literary content. The poetry is one of the most important contributions to the relationship Fry establishes between the general romance nature of his drama and the affirmation of the mystery of existence. The purpose of this appendix is to examine the way this relationship is established, and to give some sense of perspective to the literary considerations of the Quaker-like genius in Fry's plays.

Fry belongs to the revival of poetic drama which first started stirring in Britain with W.B. Yeats at the turn of the nineteenth century. As a genre it did not show much life, outside of what appeared on stage at the Abbey Theatre, until the 1930's and the verse plays of Auden and Isherwood. Following T.S. Eliot's first play in 1935, Murder in the Cathedral, verse drama was a thriving form until the fifties. But, though poets and playwrights like Stephen Spender, Norman Nicholson, Ronald Duncan, Anne Ridler, Patric Dickin-son and Donagh MacDonagh gave evidence of the increasing interest in poetic drama, only Eliot and Fry have achieved any stature in this field. These two and Charles Williams differed considerably from verse dramatists as a whole,

because their drama was also religious.

Eliot and Williams were both converts to the Church of England, and became poets of a religious experience that verges on the mystical.<sup>1</sup> They formulated this experience in terms of orthodox Christian faith as interpreted by the Catholic tradition of the Church of England. Eliot went to his conversion and High Church Anglicanism through the Puritan tradition of New England, Sanskrit, and Indian religious thought--the Way of Rejection and the Medieval Monastic ideal of the cloistered contemplative. Williams went on a different route, by way of the Rosicrucians and studies of ceremonial magic, cabalism, alchemy and the occult in the manner of Yeats. With A.E. Waite's books as his source, and E. Underhill and mysticism as a contact, he went from the vague and trivial fantasies of the occult to a living tradition of Christian orthodoxy--the Way of Affirmation and the implied belief in the relevance and dignity of the material creation and the possibility of ultimate redemption.

Fry, however, was born and brought up religious, becoming a Quaker in his youth--completely out of the line of orthodox doctrine. These three dramatists started their playwrighting careers in a similar way as regards form (church festival drama staged within a ritualistic, or

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<sup>1</sup>John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams (London: Longmans and Green, 1955), p. 11. All the biographical information in this paragraph comes from this publication, pp. 11-15.

formal framework), but soon went their ways to discover "those images of human experience in which the desired religious design can be so achieved poetically, that what is palpable is poetic and not religious in purpose."<sup>2</sup> But even at the beginning the character of Fry's festival pageant, The Boy With A Cart, was very different from this same form in T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral and the beginning of Charles Williams more mature work--Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, and it precluded the rest of his drama. An unsophisticated pastoral with a genuine religious motivation, it lacks the sentimentality and pageantry so often apparent in Eliot and Williams.<sup>3</sup> The directness of the vision appears in the directness of the diction, while the poetry is felt through the evocation of the moods of nature. Instead of the subtle, sophisticated, and complex religious pageantry of the other two, it speaks of the country and its loveliness from the depths of a life at one with nature and the countryside, and its life gives something of that direct vision of God with which Cuthman is characterised.<sup>4</sup>

Fry uses poetry in his dramas as the vehicle for his poetic passages, for his wit, puns, bathos, and humorous

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>John Ferguson, "The Boy With A Cart," Modern Drama, VIII (December, 1965), 288.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 288 and 291.

but impersonal vituperation, rhapsodic love, and familiarity with death and violence. The value he finds in verse is rhythm and a tension that realism cannot achieve. We live with our feet in two different worlds at the same time, he says.

It is this tension between two meanings which verse conveys, favoring sometimes one, sometimes the other. The prosaic or colloquial can be rhythmically just sufficiently charged to resolve into the implication of verse at a moment's notice, even halfway through a sentence, and back again, without disturbing the unity of the speech, in the way that the spirit and flesh work in ourselves without noticeably sawing us in half.<sup>5</sup>

Stephen Spender feels that Fry dazzles himself with a strong sense of what can be done with words, but without a sense of the words themselves, so that death and love, crime and virtue are all juxtaposed in joking language--so that any attempt at achieving a poeticality of purpose that replaces the specifically religious is lost.<sup>6</sup> But this juxtaposition is part of Fry's purpose. He uses poetry to make us more aware of life, and in An Experience of Critics he shows that behind the image of "a man reeling intoxicated with words" is his long and painful labouring.<sup>7</sup> He sees words as an ornament on the meaning and not the meaning itself and says

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<sup>5</sup>Christopher Fry, "Why Verse," Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), pp. 129-130.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Spender, "Christopher Fry," The Spectator, CLXXXIV (March 24, 1950), 364.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Fry, An Experience of Critics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 23-24.

that just as comedy is a world of its own, "so a verse play is not a prose play which happens to be written in verse."<sup>8</sup>

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. It is the language in which he speaks of himself and his predicament as though for the first time. It has the virtue of being able to say twice as much as prose in half the time, and . . . if you do not happen to give it your full attention, of seeming to say half as much in twice the time. 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.<sup>9</sup>

Poetry and the total structure of character, description, stage setting and action are inseparable and to understand one is to understand all, for "the poetry is the action, and the action is the figure of the poetry."<sup>10</sup>

Fry's drama belongs to the romantic comedy genre, a form that has been non-existent since the times of Shakespeare and Fletcher as far as the English theatre is concerned. J.H. Adler (in "Shakespeare and Christopher Fry") feels that it is the unfamiliarity with this genre that lies behind the adverse criticism and bewilderment Fry has caused in some circles.<sup>11</sup> M.K. Spears' article "Christopher Fry

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts (August, 1952), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Fry, An Experience of Critics (New York, 1953), p.27.

<sup>11</sup> Education Theatre Journal, II (May, 1959), 85 and 87. Further references to romantic comedy and Fry are also considerations derived from the nature of romantic comedy and definitions of tragicomedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. Sources for this were F.H. Ristine,

and the Redemption of Joy" is a most pertinent example of this since it speaks specifically of fantasy and romance in Fry's plays.<sup>12</sup> Spears feels that Fry's central weakness is

a romanticism manifested in a kind of ingenuous immaturity, in a refusal to accept limitations and restraint and the unwillingness to subordinate himself to the dramatic medium. (p. 43)

His other objection is to Fry's reversal of comedy from the traditional ridicule of follies and vices upholding the civilised norm against the individual's wilful departure from it, to a ridicule of virtue and idealism as cynical realism and worldly materialism. (p. 29) He makes custom, convention, common sense and worldly wisdom ridiculous, redeeming joy from them and associating it with the spiritual and idealistic. (p. 30) However, this is in fact all very compatible and relevant to Fry's intentions. Adler considers it as another point in his argument, when he says that "romantic comedy is very appropriate for a vision of the world that is one of joy accepting a vision tinged with mystery and an awareness of evil." (p. 93) The problems Spears sees confronting this type of comedy are actually

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English Tragicomedy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) and Madeleine Doran, Endeavours of Art (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 186-208.

<sup>12</sup>Poetry, LXXVIII (April, 1951), 28-43. The argument in this paragraph comes from this article and Adler's article (already cited). Adler's comparisons of Fry and Shakespeare are a comparison to Shakespeare's romantic comedies exclusively. Both belong to the same genre. (Page references bracketed in text.)

aids that contribute to Fry's plays, therefore. It is no problem if the theme has to go beyond comedy and tragedy to attain a cosmic or mystical perspective, or if the theme of our annual life is not taken seriously, for the fantasy adds to the romantic comedy. Nor is comedy in danger of being too free in having to go beyond tragedy and comedy and human life if cosmic joy is the norm. There is nothing perilous about a romantic admiration for strangeness and wonder and a denial of evil's existence, for Fry's most direct way of stimulating a feeling of "how lost, how amazed, how miraculous we are" is by dealing with literal miracles, wonder, romantic endings, and plots where conflict is not external (and if it is the audience knows that it will melt away to give a happier ending on the whole). When Spears concludes with a remark that Fry's plays are "thematically superficial in that the triumph is asserted and not earned," and that they do not redeem joy but affirm it, he does not seem to realise that this is not valid criticism at all. (p. 43) With a better sense of perspective, Adler comments that Fry's romantic comedy, like Shakespeare's, has a pervasive intellectual content that is difficult to reduce to a formula, and which affirms without sentimentality, existing for the delight to be derived from the affirmation. (p.87)

In their revival of poetic drama Eliot and Fry were "trying to establish verse not for its own sake," but

because it could "deal with the fundamentals."<sup>13</sup> It is a scheme in which the public mind can be slowly reconditioned to the mystery. Both Eliot and Fry stress the idea that form is essential to the presentation of a permanent truth and the form of Fry's drama is romantic comedy. Fry's intentions find no problems in belonging to this genre for both are characterised by a certain atmosphere of joyous life and an escape into a delightful imaginary world in which problems are illogical, physical dangers unreal, language highly poetic and the people solid, true and genuine.<sup>14</sup> It is very theatrical, as any tendency to fantasy is, and, as a result, as entertaining as romantic comedy's excitement, spectacle and surprise were to Shakespeare's and Fletcher's audiences, for

if the theatre can help us to see ourselves and the world freshly, as though we had just rounded the corner into life, it will be what entertainment should be, a holiday which sets us up to continue living at the top of our bent.<sup>15</sup>

I believe the need for poetry is an essential part of the human condition. . . . Surely the business of the theatre is the exploration of that nature, so that the listener can perhaps be aware of more about himself?<sup>16</sup>

And as for the other world, other time, other place settings of romantic comedy,

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<sup>13</sup>Adler, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>15</sup>Fry, "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts (August, 1952), 73.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Fry, "Talking of Henry," The Twentieth Century, CLXIX (February, 1961), 190.



there's something to be gained by being sometimes at one remove from today--you can get a clearer look at what you might call the permanent condition of man--and I can never really see more than minor distinctions between the past and the present, differences in kind rather than being. The immediate threat to life was the same, basically, in the time of the Black Death. The H-bomb presents the same moral dilemma with which man is always being confronted.<sup>17</sup>

In this thesis we have seen how all Fry's plays are parts of a whole, and that as a combination of the religious and pagan they have in common the religious spirit of their author's preoccupations with the mystery of existence. Through the conflicts of life, death, and love comes the inner struggle of belief and doubt where life is the theme and where unity resolves the contradictions to it in each play's mood. Life is a spirit everywhere, exuberant through love and joy and insistent in freedom and belief, and all Fry's plays affirm this life. In this, we have also seen how they parallel Quakerism, where the spirit speaks from behind the form, where every deed finds its perspective in the spiritual life, and where the sanctity of life reverberates in the insistence on respect for life, humanitarianism and the nourishment of inner life on revelation. With a mystical belief in the goodness of all life that is most Quakerly, Fry's plays study the metaphysics of the human condition and, though he is not a mystic, his plays trace the form of the mystery as the theme within the plot and in the pattern of ideas in the mood. And now, finally,

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

we see that the ideas in Fry's plays are enhanced by their dramatic form, as entertaining romance drama, and a tragicomic development of comedy from tragedy (both as the formal seventeenth century comic ending from tragic events, and as Fry's cosmic intuition from experience). This affirms the poetic-religious concern with the mystery of creation in Fry's plays. The parallel to the Quaker position is present here at just as fundamental a level as it is in a literary context. Carried to a natural conclusion, the Quakerly way of life presumes a similar happy ending--the joy of insight and of divine revelation through the development of intuition from experience and a direct religious concern with the mystery of creation.

In the light of a lack of discrimination between the sacred and secular in life, this final equation of the poetic and religious experience in Fry is an identification that Quakerism would seem to make and depend on. From the initial separateness of theology and aesthetics the discussion of Quakerism and Fry has brought us to an examination of life and art and the common source of the religious and poetic experience. That they have in this last chapter apparently resolved themselves in their common derivation is not an attempt to deny the difference between the religious and poetic. It is instead a shift in perspective. Throughout the thesis my intention has been to lay the Quaker position alongside Fry's, as in Chapter I, and to talk of Quakerli-

ness side by side with Fry's plays, as in Chapter II. In Chapter I I established their similar nature and concerns from an intellectual and literary point of view. Here, I have attempted to return to these similarities at the most fundamental point, their origin, with the idea of art in the image of life and the fact that the poetic and religious experiences are alike.

Poetry is allied to mysticism (in the sense of the true contemplative) and stands to it in the relation of the sketch to the final work of art. . . . In the natural order of things . . . it is an analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar.<sup>18</sup>

Poetry and religion are equated like artifice and experience by Wilder, who declares that "the poet sees himself solely as a craftsman," though as a man he may know the religious experience.<sup>19</sup> "The religious life involves our total response to the unconditioned," whilst "the aesthetic life moves toward the shaping of the work of art."<sup>20</sup> As an art poetry takes its own direction though it "takes its birth at the mysterious sources of being and after its own fashion reveals them by its own creative movement."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in the ultimate experience that animates poetry the poet finds himself on religious ground.

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<sup>18</sup>Amos N. Wilder, Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952), pp. 12 and 13.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

At the end of the section on The Dark Is Light Enough (Chapter II) in a quotation from Christian Faith on the conventional distinction between sacred and secular art, a more fruitful distinction between inspired art and uninspired art is suggested. Inspiration opens the doors of revelation, and, in terms of the poetic and religious experiences, inspiration is the common, highly personal source. The terms sacred and secular refer merely to subject matter. I believe that Fry touches on such religious poetry by his Quakerlike concerns with a way of life that revolves around visions of the mystery of existence. Furthermore, he firmly believes in poetic experience and inspiration as well as poetic language and effects as the true means of grasping and expressing the truth of reality and the spirit of the mystery, and he uses the ideal mechanics of romance drama to affirm both the joyous and the miraculous in a world of dramatic mystery, exuberant life and exciting visions.

APPENDIX B

LETTER FROM CHRISTOPHER FRY TO IAIN KIRKALDY-WILLIS  
CONCERNING THIS THESIS

37 BLOMFIELD ROAD LONDON W9

August 14. 1964

Dear Mr. Kirkaldy Willis:

Thank you for your letter.

I think you may be right in finding some parallels between the plays and Quaker mysticism: though this is for you to decide. One thing I was trying to do (in the comedies) was to give an appearance of improvisation, of free and almost haphazard life, while keeping within it a tacit pattern or anatomy — an effort to reproduce the prolixity of natural things which yet contain within them law and form and direction. Perhaps, in trying to do this, I made too much use of symbol and myth. For instance, thinking of Venus Observed, here are some notes:

\* The Mithraic symbol for fire was a lion.

There is a strange link between horses and the fire cult. In the Arthurian legend of the Perilous Bed — in contact with the bed the knight was assailed by arrows and bolts shot from he knew not where. He nevertheless gained mastery of the bed.

A book that you might find interesting, if you haven't read it already, is Alan Watts' "Myth and Ritual in Christianity" (Thames and Hudson).

with best wishes.

yours sincerely:  
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