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Christopher Fry's Contribution to Modern Drama

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CHRISTOPHER FRY'S CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN DRAMA

by

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I
Introduction: The genre and the poetry

In a modern theatre increasingly preoccupied with the mundane, the sordid, the perverse, and the hopeless, Christopher Fry's plays loom like beacons. For Mr. Fry finds the world, however chaotic, magnificent; and he chooses to explore its more civilized areas in a language undauntedly poetic, through characters cultivated enough to speak that poetry. When the curtain rises on a Fry production, we are likely to discover not a drab flat in the "red brick" tenements of modern Britain, neither a prison yard nor a subway, not a sultry town in the Southern United States, or the boys' restroom in a slum-side city high school, but an historical or semi-mythical kingdom, a gracious time-mellowed estate, or simply an "April-drenched" English countryside. His characters usually find life baffling, but they are never so constrained by their environments or their psyches that they cannot voice that bafflement in trenchant and perceptive comment. Thomas Mendip, in *The Lady's not for Burning*, is a young man fully as angry as Jimmy Porter, but he has a poise and intellectual sophistication which give balance and direction to his passion. The lustily primitive Jutes of *Thor, With Angels* have full command of virtuoso vocabularies; and, as Walter Kerr says, "even when, in *The Lady's not for Burning*, he introduces two brothers who seem on the bumpkin side, they turn out to have the intellectual facility and emotional disillusionment of a
coulpe of Shavian Caesars.\textsuperscript{1} Fry's people do not speak a studied prosaic cadence like that found in T. S. Eliot's poetic dramas, nor the half-contrived vernacular of the American "scenery-chewing" school. Instead, they fairly explode in a sweeping, imagistic, and witty verse.

Fry as a serious playwright is clearly a deviation from the modern norm, and, as such, has alienated some critics. With some justice, they deplore his "verbal pyrotechnics," and follow Eliot in chiding that "...if the young man wants to be a poet, he must first learn to be less poetical."\textsuperscript{2} Certainly Fry's plays do violate Eliot's dictum that "what we have to do is bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike their own, an unusual world in which poetry can be spoken."\textsuperscript{3} Yet, in an article defending his type of poetry for the theatre, Fry in effect answered that challenge. This prosaic approach would all be very well, he argues,

...if there were not moments when action suddenly seems like a flame burning on the surface of a dark sea; when human behavior dies upon itself for lack of nourishment outside its common experience; when the extreme diversity of life threatens to disintegrate altogether unless it can be unified in some place of the mind.\textsuperscript{4}


\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4}Christopher Fry, "Why Verse?", Vogue (March, 1955), p. 137.
Although Fry may allow his audience to escape from their twentieth-century urban world, he never allows them to ignore the important questions. If he does not choose as characters the more ravaged specimens of contemporary life in perpetual psychic or sociologic discontent, he does give us colorful individuals just abnormally articulate enough to flash "a lightning spasm of discovery"¹ into our hearts. The best of his nine plays contradict the charge by one critic that his work is merely "...an embellished kind of minor comedy, incidentally brilliant, often verbally exasperating."² Fry may not concern himself with current issues; he does not significantly experiment with form, but the development of his technique and the profundity of his themes prove that he is not a lightweight. Within his own genre he determinedly depicts the complexity of human joy and agony, and in doing so he manages to entertain as well as exalt his audiences.

Fry's poetry is above all vital. He achieves his effects through highly figurative language and liberal use of internal rhyme. One example of his skill in manipulating sounds might be the description in The First-Born of Egypt's seventh plague which is filled with subtle consonance and alliteration. Anath, the "Pharaoh's daughter," looks out her window to where "the terrace crackles with dying locusts," and recalls

> When, after the sixth time, the hail had come down,  
> I laughed. The hail was hard, metallic, cold

---

² Raymond Williams, Drama From Ibsen to Eliot (New York, 1953), p. 268.
And clear, beating on us with the ferocity
Of brainbright anger. As cut diamonds, clean
Clean, and fit to be beaten down by. 1

In another mood, there is the passage from *Venus Observed* when
the aging Duke, reprimanded by his jealous mistress for a
"mocking perpetuation" of love, retorts,

> So Rosabel believes when the cold spell comes
> And we're compelled to enter this draughty time
> And shuffle about in the slipshod leaves,
> Leaves disbanded, leaves at a loose end,
> And we know we're in for the drifting of the
> fall...
> We should merely shiver and be silent,
> never speak
> Of the climate of Eden, or the really magnificent
> Foliage of the tree of knowledge,
> Or the unforgettable hushed emerald
> Of the coiling and fettering serpent;
> Pretend we never knew it, because love
> Quite naturally condescended
> To the passing of time. 2

Another obvious quality of Fry's verse is wit. His poetry
is at once sensuous and intellectual. He likes to send simile
after metaphor in successions of paradox, antithesis and com-
parison, playing variations upon one idea. He delights in the
whimsical or deflating incongruity which adds a racy quality to
the almost Keatsian luxuriance of his verse, and he has an ec-
clectic and sometimes bizarre store of factual information that
makes the effect all the more striking. Fry's humor can run
the gamut from the brittle, sophisticated interplay of the
seasonal comedies to the lighthearted whimsey of *The Boy with
a Cart*; from the down-to-earth commentaries and asides of his

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1Christopher Fry, *The First-Born* (New York, 1946), Act I, ii,
p. 56. All subsequent references will be from this edition.

2Christopher Fry, *Venus Observed* (New York, 1950), Act I,
p. 9. All subsequent references will be from this edition.
"working class" characters to the often astringent soul-searchings of Moses in The First-Born or the self-mocking irony of Henry II in Curtmantle. Yet Fry's wit is seldom mordant, only indirectly satiric. He has an underlying cheerfulness that is apparent beneath even the bitterest utterances of his most cynical characters, and it is a cheerfulness that is demonstrated by his diction.

Nouns abound in Fry's poetry—nouns of all shapes, flavors, and aromas, nouns that are melodic or consonant; often names of flora and fauna, natural or cosmic phenomena. For Fry has a fresh-air imagination. It is said that he always composes outdoors or beside a study window, and certainly his observation of nature is first hand and detailed. He makes amused note of the way a donkey brays, how dandelions are "puffed into uncertain places"; he sees the "scare of birds in the air," herons that "haunt the dregs of the mist like ghosts." In his grouping together of the four "seasonal comedies," he now indicates a deeper interest than formerly in the symbolic possibilities of nature. His view is at once cosmic and microscopic; he likes to juxtapose the small against the vast:

...we have seen
The blackthorn hung where the Milky Way has been
Flower and star spattering the sky.1

Again in The Boy with a Cart—where we probably find his most spontaneous poetry—he uses the opening chorus to conjure up a mood of springtime, bounty, and pastoral peace:

1Christopher Fry, The Boy with a Cart (New York, 1950) p. 2. All subsequent references will be from this edition.
In our fields, fallow and burdened in grass
or furrow
In barn and stable, with scythe, flail or harrow,
Sheepshearing, milking or mowing, or labor
that's older
Than knowledge, with God we work shoulder to
shoulder.

(p. 1)

A few lines later Cuthman, the boy-saint, has a speech that is
pure lyric:

This is the morning to take the air,
flute-clear
And, like a lutanist, with a hand of wind
Playing the responsive hills, till a long
vibration
Spills across the fields, and the chancelled
larches
Sing like Lenten choirboys, a green treble.

(p. 3)

On occasion Fry's imagery can be downright earthy, but when it
is, it is earthiness with a gusto and verve. In the tradition
of Rabelais and Shakespeare, his minor characters often have at
their command a wealth of pithy invective as does the barbarian
Quichelm in Thor, With Angels:

Runt of an old sow's litter, you slop-headed
Pot-scourer...you buckle-backed
Gutsack...

...

Woden welt you for a sheeptick...
...you whitebellied weasel,

or Doto, the maid servant in A Phoenix Too Frequent:

You sex of wicked beards!

...

...you acorn-chewing infantryman...


1Christopher Fry, Thor, With Angels (New York, 1949, Act I, pp. 1, 20. All subsequent references will be from
this edition.
You square-bashing barbarian!\(^1\)
or Nicholas in *The Lady's not for Burning*:

You crapulous puddering pipsqueak!\(^2\)

This Shakespearian gusto in Fry's verse is often pointed out. Perhaps the main resemblance is an energy of imagination and a virtuoso's joy in the language, a joy which often leads Fry to gleeful acrobatics. In the only two plays in which he gets seriously carried away, *The Lady's not for Burning* and *Venus Observed*, one of the characters in the former cannot help crying, "O what a fine thing is metaphor!" (Act I, p. 14) and later at a crucial moment the hero says to the heroine,

```
Madam, if I were Herod in the middle
Of the massacre of the innocents, I'd pause
Just to consider the confusion of your imagery.
```

Of *Venus Observed*, Walter Kerr remembered that just when we expect a dramatic confrontation between the would-be lovers, the heroine suddenly stands and recites an "apostrophe to the glories of syntax,"\(^3\) lasting forty-four lines and rendering her breathless. As a result the play was more or less damned by the reviewers. In *An Experience of Critics* a slightly singed Fry nevertheless relishes the image he emerged with at that time:

```
I see a man reeling, intoxicated with words; they
flow in a golden—or perhaps pinchbeck—stream from
his mouth; they start out at the ears; they burst like
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\(^1\)Christopher Fry, *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (New York, 1946), p. 9. All subsequent references will be from this edition.

\(^2\)Christopher Fry, *The Lady's not for Burning* (New York, 1946), Act II, p. 16. All subsequent references will be from this edition.

\(^3\)Kerr, p. 296.
rockets and jumping crackers and Catherine wheels round his head...his typewriter continues to chatter long after it has been put back in the case. Words will grow out of him like fingernails, for some time after his death.¹

But in the plays written since then, The Dark is Light Enough and Curtmantle, Fry has pared down his exuberance, has given his verse more restraint and a greater dramatic utility. Of course, some earlier plays, especially A Sleep of Prisoners and The First-Born, are fine examples of integrated poetry and action; and indeed much of his exuberance, especially in The Lady's not for Burning, is undeniably entertaining and unrestrained.

As Fry puts to use a Shakespearian gift for words, it is to be expected that he follows a Shakespearian tradition and the recent one of the Irish Renaissance Theatre of emphasizing that vivid, highly descriptive language in order to add dimension to stage action. This is a theatre which stands diametrically opposite the cinema, and his adherence to it makes Fry go against the current of much contemporary drama. In the Abbey Theatre this emphasis on language was so pronounced that the actors were forbidden to make any but the most necessary gestures, and during important speeches the silent actors stood stone still or answered to Yeats. Yet perhaps the Irish writers enjoyed a certain advantage over the later twentieth-century English playwright. Synge had said in his famous preface to The Playboy of the Western World:

In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has turned into bricks.¹

This was, of course, Eliot's dilemma and perhaps his opportunity. He strove to make of the bricks a workable poetic expression for drama and by and large succeeded. Fry, on the other hand, has a determined faith in a "fully flavored" poetry for the stage and refuses to admit that a modern audience cannot make a "leap of faith" into a poetic perception. For an explanation of why he continues to write as he does for the theatre, we have only to look to his own words:

I ask you to allow me to suppose a shaping but undogmatical presence 'felt in the blood, and felt 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 instead of six.

... This has been an age of signposts, of ideologies, of patent cures, of battle cries; we must take up our positions, draw clear lines between this or that, label, analyse, dissect; we must live the letter, for the letter is the law. But we have been looking at the possibility that poetry has another, deeper law. The truth of poetry deepens under your eye. It is never absolute. There is no moment when we can trumpet it abroad as finally understood.²

Fry's themes are non-polemical. His poetry is the intuitive language that expresses truth which can only be perceived

²Fry, "Why Verse"? p. 166.
intuitively. We have in him a man who believes in "the logic of music," a universal discipline that is able to awaken the "harmony, modulation and the resolving of discord" in us, a manifestation of an even higher "shaping but undogmatic Presence"¹ in the Universe. We have, in short, a romantic. Fry's vocabulary is modern English gorgeously patterned, frankly literary. His plays are not "signposts," or messages which can be thoroughly digested in a sitting. There are levels of meaning in his phrases and in his witticisms that reverberate long after the curtain has been rung down. He believes in the order and efficacy of poetry, and if he has no wealth of "popular imagination" to draw upon, he does have an ample supply of imagination himself. His concern is to offer his audience something lovely to see and hear and something transcendent to think about, and in an age of rather austere innovators in the theatre, that concern has been appreciated.

Kierkegaard once said that "between man's purpose in time and God's purpose in eternity, there is an infinite qualitative difference." It is that space Fry has chosen to explore in his plays. For Fry God exists, and the universe has a definite raison d'être, albeit incomprehensible to man. Yet man has a certain spiritual instinct, an intimation of "the very obdurate pressure" edging him "towards a shape beyond the shape he knows," and he is finally able to move towards maturity, "towards a balancing of life within the mystery."² In all Fry's

¹Ibid., passim.
plays the characters are attempting to find that maturity; this is their struggle. For Cuthman, the peasant saint of Fry's earliest play, that conflict is relatively simple; his intuitive receptivity to God's will is unhampered by groping intellect. For Moses in *The First-Born* the development is agonizing because it involves the death of Rameses. For Richard Gettner, the deserter in *The Dark is Light Enough*, it would seem almost an impossibility. Henry II, the intractable hero of *Curtmantle*, tries to impose a human order upon "the shape lying over the life." In short, Fry moves in his plays from the simple to the complex, from the saint for whom this intuition comes easily to the great humanist for whom it is a grim and all-consuming struggle; and as his characters have evolved in complexity, Fry's mastery of technique and profundity of thought have also evolved. Fry's poetry is non-experimental, his philosophy is a Christian mysticism that is ultimately orthodox. He has, however, done brilliantly and significantly what he set out to do, to employ his music and his drama as vehicles for a definition of man's truth. The body of this paper will be a tracing of this search for that definition as it develops in three groups of Fry's plays: the religious festival dramas, the "dark" comedies, and the historical play, *Curtmantle*. 
II

The Religious Festival Plays

All Fry’s plays are implicitly religious, but four must be classified as direct “explorations into God.” The Boy with a Cart, Thor, With Angels, and A Sleep of Prisoners were all written to be performed within the church itself rather than for the commercial theatre, while The First-Born was originally intended as an outdoor church pageant. All four concern men involved in a religious experience, reacting to it with varying degrees of perception.

The Boy with a Cart, Fry’s first published work, is a modern miracle play. Short, simple, unilateral in theme, it has an admixture of slapstick humor and reverence that may be an approximation of the spirit of the first guild-produced plays. Cuthman, the young shepherd boy—not yet a saint—is simple, luminously good, and cheerfully single-minded. His mother is everyman’s mother. She frets about her social position, quotes her grandmother’s adages, attempts alternately to manage and to rely upon Cuthman, and finds her cross-country ride in the cart a source of helpless indignation. But she is a good sort really, and, as “the voice of convention,” fairly docile. She hastens to add, “but he is a good boy and his singing voice has improved wonderfully on the journey” (p. 27); and neither she nor the equally amiable villagers of Steyning interfere with Cuthman’s mission. His only opposition, several loutish yeomen, and the shrewish mother of two of them, are rapidly
discouraged by two whimsical miracles reminiscent of Shaw's miracles in *Saint Joan*. Yet in spite of the whimsy, Fry like Shaw has a serious point to make. When Cuthman's work on the church is frustrated at the eleventh hour by his inability to insert the king-post, his desperate prayers are answered by a miraculous visitation. As Cuthman describes it to the villagers, we sense Fry's own very real piety:

...But gradually I was aware of some one in
The doorway and turned my eyes that way and saw
Carved out of the sunlight a man who stood
Watching me, so still that there was not
Other such stillness anywhere on the earth,
So still that the air seemed to leap
At his side. He came towards me, and the sun
Flooded its banks and flowed across the shadow.
He asked me why I stood alone. His voice
Hovered on memory with open wings
And drew itself up from a chine of silence
As though it had longtime lain in a vein of gold.
I told him: It is the king-post.
He stretched his hand upon it. At his touch
It lifted to its place. There was no sound.
I cried out, and I cried at last "Who are you?"
I heard him say "I was a carpenter"...

(p. 39)

At the end the final chorus draws the message to our doorsteps:

...We also loom with the earth
Over the waterways of space. Between
Our birth and death we may touch understanding
As a moth brushes a window with its wing.

Who shall question then
Why we lean our bicycle against a hedge
And go into the house of God?
Who shall question
That coming out from our doorways
Who have discerned a little, we have known
More than the gossip that comes to us over
our gates.

(p. 40)

The fact that this is hardly fresh material has not discouraged Fry. He brings to it a fresh enthusiasm and talent.
In *The Boy with a Cart* we have Fry beginning to experiment with poetry in the drama. He has taken the most conventional of stories, and has kept plot, characterization and conflict to a minimum, relying on the chorus and Cuthman's major speeches for looms on which to weave his verse. But already we can observe his piquant lyricism and his wit, and his interest in man's relationship to God. His mysticism is emerging. *Thor, With Angels*, written ten years later, begins to define that mysticism more intricately.

This time Fry chose as his theme the spiritual reactions of a pagan Jutish family to the coming of Christianity in ancient Britain at the time of Saint Augustine's mission. Instead of the receptivity of a Cuthman, we have in Cymen, the father, a reluctant faith evolving out of a primitive polytheism. There is also a counterpoint of reactions from the other members of the clan to their Christian British captives. This added complexity of motive gives the play a richness of plot and characterization that *The Boy with a Cart* lacked. It all begins when Cymen's sword is stayed miraculously before he can kill a British boy in battle. Astonished by his completely unprecedented temerity, he decides to take the prisoner, Hoel, back home and determine what sort of magic is at work on him. His brothers and his sons have experienced nothing. Their spiritual senses are blunted and they live like the savages they are, aware of only the reality of their blood-lust and the necessity for appeasing the capricious Nordic gods they have learned to dread in childhood. Tadfrid's remedy for their presumable anger at Cymen's cowardice in battle would be for him to
...stand in the winter sea
Till his clothes freeze to his flesh. It's the only way
To be sure of a store of magic against such an evil.

(Act I, p. 9)

He and the others have just barely evolved from magic to primitive religion. The women, though, represent another attitude. Clodesuida holds to the letter of her religion. She is the last bastion of a dying superstition, and she anxiously observes the rituals, attempts a single-handed maintenance of the status-quo. As she complains,

I wear myself out securing us to the gods
With every device that's orthodox, sacrificing
To the hour, to the split minute of the risen sun.
But how can I keep them kind if always
They're being displeased by the rest of you?
It isn't easy to keep on the windy side of Woden
As anyone knows.

(p. 21)

Martina, daughter of Cymen and Clodesuida, finds it more pleasant to ignore the whole issue. She tells Hoel,

...I'll not worry about my father,
Nor my mother, nor my uncles nor, between ourselves,
The gods. The universe is too ill-fitting
And large. I am very careful about small things, such as wearing green in the third month
Or bringing blackthorn under the roof;
But the big things, such as the gods, must look after themselves.

(Act II, p. 44)

But Cymen must renounce the old gods, the "goaders, grappling gods,/ whose iron feet pace on thunder's floor" (Act II). A power beyond himself makes him question the mindless aggression of his race, changes his tribute to Woden into "we must love
one another," gives him, when at last he understands his transformation, the vision to prescribe man's duty. For he discovers he is responsible for "the sorrow of this world":

All make all;
For while I leave one muscle of my strength
Undisturbed, or hug one coin of ease
Or private peace while the huge debt of pain
Mounts over all the earth,
Or, fearing for myself, take half a stride
Where I could leap; while any hour remains
Indifferent, I have no right or reason
To raise a cry against this blundering cruelty
Of man.

(Act III, p. 53)

The most interesting figure in the play is the pivotal character, Merlin, incredibly surviving long after the upheaval of the Celtic civilization, "a very old man: old enough to be his own grandfather." Martina has discovered him, as she tells us,

in the quarry where it caved in.
His beard was twisted like mist in the roots
of an oak-tree,
Beaded and bright with a slight rain, and he
was crying
Like an old wet leaf. His hands were as
brown as a nest
Of lizards, and his eyes were two pale stones
Dropping in a dark well.

(Act II, p. 33)

Merlin serves as the link between the past and the present; for he remembers a "Christian land:...Arthur's land," and he can foresee the future arriving "in a ship full of primroses from Rome." But Merlin serves a purpose in this play not only as the poetically appropriate Celtic seer, but as a transition between the old superstitions and the new religion. For Merlin is incorrigibly pagan, an old
Eternal suckling, who cannot drag his lips
Away from the breast of the earth, even to grow
Into the maturity of heaven. (p. 45)

Yet in his attachment to earth, he senses the unity of existence, the infinite shaping presence, "the shape lying over the life." For him not only man but all nature is undergoing a slow metamorphosis:

...I'm too near-sighted now
To be able to distinguish one thing from another
The storm-swollen river from the tear-swollen eyes,
Or the bare cracked earth from the burnt-out face,
Or the forest soughing from the sighing heart.
What is in one is in the other. (Act III, p. 50)

As Fry tells us in the foreword, Merlin presents "the theme of the evolutionary adventure which man is engaged on; life—mineral, vegetable, animal—is one." So Merlin is the raisonneur of the play and must be considered the interpreter, if not the embodiment, of Fry's point of view. His prophetic vision tells him roughly this: that there is in the universe a fixed guiding principle which is gradually molding all life, all the world, into a now uncomprehended but ultimately coherent order; that life is explicable and faith possible to man only as he perceives and responds to this principle. But man as well as nature has an inborn receptivity which, if he allows it to function, can prescribe for him a code and ease his mortal uncertainties. If Merlin is the raisonneur, the converted Cymen is the hero who illustrates how man can respond to his spiritual

1p. iii.
intimations. He tells us that we must turn away from violence, from the "cruel blunderings of man" that betray him. He prays:

God give us courage to exist in God
And lonely flesh be welcome to creation.
(p. 54)

As Derek Stanford observes, Fry is not a systematic thinker—indeed what poet is? What seems to be in this play a theory of "emergent evolution" is not perforce a finished philosophy. It is, however, an interesting idea applicable to our own era of receding faith, and an idea that Fry never drops. In all his plays there is an affirmative notion that God exists and is gradually but implacably improving upon His creation, that man will be spiritually pummeled until he can willingly respond to God's design.

A Sleep of Prisoners was written later than The First-Born although its conception may have been at approximately the same time, for Fry worked on it throughout the war and did not see it produced until 1951. It is, however, more experimental than the tragedy, more mature in structure perhaps, but less effective as drama. For this reason, and because A Sleep of Prisoners, like The Boy with a Cart and Thor, With Angels, was written for presentation in a church, it seems logical to discuss it first. In this play for the first time Fry experiments with expressionism and concerns himself with the psychological natures of his characters. These characters are four English soldiers, prisoners of war, whom the enemy "Towzers" have locked in a church before their removal to a camp. For these men the

dilemma of existence in a chaotic world is immediate and agonizing, and their instinct for faith is subliminal. Saturated with the atmosphere of their prison, they sleep, and each has a dream in which he relives a Biblical incident symbolic of and serving to illuminate his own situation and that of his fellows.

The first dream is that of Private Tim Meadows who had just broken up a fight between the two younger men of the group: David King and Peter Able. In Meadows' dream Peter, the daydreaming unenthusiastic soldier, becomes Abel; while David, the fiercely committed fighter, is Cain. In their dream struggle the ancient dichotomy between the thinker and the doer is again dramatized. For Peter (Abel) is the son who in the aftermath of Eden "frets for what never came his way" (p. 16), who puzzles at men who

...question the need to stay
But do, in an obstinate anticipation of love.

(p. 14)

But David (Cain) is the real inheritor of the earth:

Amply the animal is Cain, thank God,
As he was meant to be: a huskular strapling
With all his passions about him.

(p. 14)

Adam's first son knows that man is to be "content and full," that he must be true to nature's law of aggression. Yet the swift retribution which follows his fratricide belies that belief, for he and his progeny are doomed, hunted, eternally routed, and he can emit only one agonized protest before the chase is on:

...The punishment
Is more than I can bear. 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?

For it is Abel's progeny that must rightfully inherit the world. We have blundered along with Cain for centuries, Fry seems to be saying; the only workable solution must come from a rejection of violence and aggression, a humility to "know I do not know." It must be the way of Peter who cannot feel a strong antipathy for even the "Towzers." It must be an assumption of love.

In the next dream sequence, however, we have the other side of the coin. This is David's dream, and it is a recreation of the King David-Absalom story. Here the dichotomy is drawn between the wholly committed king and his vain and shallow son. Absalom (Peter) knows no cause; for him

Hell is in my father's head
Making straight towards him...
Know that we can turn away
And everything will turn
Into itself again. What is
A little evil here and there between friends?

As Joab (Adams) says,

A foiling heart: the sharp world glances off
And so he's dangerous.

Fry's Christian pacifism is never sotheaded. Absalom's destruction is necessary. Through David's eyes we see Peter's reluctance to hate as simply apathy, a failure to commit himself to God's cause. It is not enough to be sacrificed, Fry seems to be saying, but the sacrifice must be offered in the name of
love, as a way of furthering the evolutionary process.

Peter's own dream, which follows, again involves his sacrifice, this time as Isaac, the son of Abraham—and this time in the best interests of the world, "for our better freedom." As David (now Abraham) tells him,

> God dips his hand in death to wash the wound,  
> Takes evil to inoculate our lives  
> Against infectious evil.  
> (p. 24)

But Isaac, the innocent, is saved by the appearance of the white ram in the bushes, and this good fortune illustrates the theme of redemption in the play. This is reinforced by the appearance of Meadow, "the donkey man," who offers to take Isaac back down from the sacrificial hill site, on his "mangy mule Edwina," "old Millie-edwinium."

> Gee-up, you old millennium. She's slow  
> But it's kind of onwards,  
> (p. 34)

he says; and here, as in the preceding dreams, Meadows takes the role of God. Anne Greene, in an article written for *Modern Drama*, calls our attention to the fact that, as God, Meadows has a policy of "non-interference":

> These dream fragments suggest that from the beginning God has refrained from interfering while man determined his own course of action and by that action created his own heaven or hell. Yet God is not without concern. Meadows lies on his bunk thinking while the others sleep, making an encouraging remark when anyone wakes. He thinks of the enemy, of the 'choppy crossing,' and of how long it will be before they reach daylight—implying God's concern for the fumbling efforts of man to solve his problems and the distance man must go before he finds understanding.... At times, God's failure to interfere seems to leave the world to chance, as when Cain and Abel play at dice to determine his attitude on the question of sacrifice.... But God gives an ambiguous answer, for although Abel wins the dice game, he is sacrificed....
In the dream of Abraham and Isaac, however, God's intention becomes clear, for a purpose is discovered at the very heart of chance.  

God then utilizes chance itself to keep the evolutionary process moving.  

Of the last dream Fry said in his preface: "...the dream changes to a state of thought entered into by all the sleeping men, as though, sharing their prison life, they shared, for a few moments of the night, their sleeping life also." The theme of this dream dramatizes the most explicit message of the play. As Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego, Peter, David, and Adams discover that the fire of the furnace is not fire but men, "all human. There's no fire!" and that even within the furnace it is possible to survive, to go forward. In this dream Meadows is not God but man sharing the "fire," the misery and wrong propagated by humanity. But it is he who voices the final message of love:

...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.  

(p. 47)  

This last dream, which is shared by all four of the men, serves as a sort of group therapy, an exercise in brotherhood and common revelation. When they awake, they find themselves refreshed, imbued with a new hope.  

In A Sleep of Prisoners we find men frustrated and

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1Anne Green, "Fry's Cosmic Vision," Modern Drama (February, 1962), p. 361.  

spiritually exiled, lost "at sea,"

Wondering for land, but there's no homeward
I can see...your land and mine, is nowhere
yet.

(p. 47)

Still the message of the play is deeply optimistic and consistent with Fry's conviction of God's purpose stated in Thor, With Angels. The dream device serves to show that man's instinct for order lies even beyond the level of consciousness, and that by following this intuitive compass within himself, by learning to love, he can be the instrument of God that he was intended to be and find a salvation. As Peter asks, "What gives us a sense of direction in a dream?" (p. 49).

The First-Born is Fry's first tragedy and probably one of his most important works; it is certainly his most powerful drama. The hero, Moses, is the scourge and the prophet of God, the transcendental figure who is tuned to an Eternal purpose. But Moses as a man must collide with the ambiguity of good and evil, and his triumph must involve tragedy. As Fry says in the foreword to the second edition of the play:

The character of Moses is a movement towards maturity, towards a balancing of life within the mystery, where the conflicts and dilemmas are the trembling of the balance.¹

Moses is the first highly sophisticated and inspired hero Fry had depicted at the time of this play. Perhaps the artistic success of The First-Born is due to the more concentrated

dramatization of a single conflict as well as this fuller characterization. For Moses and Seti are epic figures, and their collision results in the crumbling of an empire. Seti, totally immersed in his dedication to the state, is a worthy opponent for the great prophet. The minor characters too are more fully drawn, and as they are divided into two hostile groups—Egyptians and Jews—their varying reactions to the conflict provide a harmony of characterization not found in the earlier plays. Most important, we find Fry's wealth of natural imagery less ornamental, more focused on a symbolic enhancement of the theme; it is appropriately somber, suggestive of the desert landscape, and again and again foreshadows or symbolizes the action. There is the dying fowl at the marshes, that suffers like the Jewish people, for "a wildfowl quality of blood, / ...a temptation for sportsmen"; the hawk described by Moses and the worm hidden in Rameses' bouquet are symbols of the admixture of good and evil; the dying locusts, "glutted jackals," and "vulture-bearing boughs" symbolize the plague-stricken land.

The First-Born is essentially a study in good and evil. Moses, the righteous, the liberator of his people, who believes

It is the individual man
In his individual freedom who can mature
With his warm spirit the unripe world
(Act I, i, p. 15)

must nevertheless destroy the best of his enemies—Rameses. As the cynical Anath asks,

...what is this divinity
Which with no more dexterity than a man
Rips up good things to make a different kind
Of good?
(Act II, iii, p. 66)
Only Moses can justify his god, "the God of the Hebrews, a vigour moving/in a great shadow"; only he has the vision, is the chosen instrument of the "shaping presence." None of the others has this vision. Of the Egyptians only Anath in her affection for Moses has a real grasp of the implications of the conflict. Anath, in her great common sense, is impatient with the grandiose ambitions of Seti. But she also has no faith and no illusions. She can only see the helplessness of the individual human being:

No power against misery! That's what our lives add up to. 
Our spacious affability, our subtle intelligence
Our delicate consciousness of worlds beyond the world,
Our persuasive dignity when sacrificing to the gods,
Our bodies and our brains can all become Slutted with lice between afternoon and evening.

(Act II, ii, p. 55)

Miriam, Anath's Jewish counterpart, has an equal bitterness learned from a lifetime of suffering. She resents the danger of Moses' presence to her and her son Shendi, resents it all the more because she cannot help believing his efforts will be futile. She knows what her life is; she says:

Before I could talk it talked to me
In most difficult words....
Pogrom, for one. And the curses of Egyptian children
The shout of command kicking at the ribs,
All human words torn to a scream.

(Act I, ii, p. 22)

She is as impatient with the fervor of Moses and Aaron as Anath is with Seti. Moses, she says, will
... take evil by the tail  
And you find you are holding good  
head-downwards.  

(Act II, ii, p. 48)

Yet her son Shendi's betrayal of his people is finally more  
than she can endure. Aaron's point of view is that of the  
practical general. He would have Moses wait prudently, serve  
time for Egypt, and use the good nature and hero worship of  
Rameses to further their cause. It is not until after the  
divine intervention of the plagues that he can admit that  
Moses' "madness seems to be a kind of extended sanity" (Act  
III, i, p. 70). Next to Moses Rameses is the superior human.  
He has a natural compassion and intelligence, the potential  
for great good. But he is caught between the two great forces  
of Moses and Seti. The latter must blight his life and his  
future; Moses must unknowingly destroy him. So Moses' struggle  
must be a lonely one, and his duty saddening. "Anath—Egypt,"  
he cries,

Why was it I that had to be disaster to you?  
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.  

(Act III, ii, p. 88)

He gives us the only answer that is possible:

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

(Act III, ii, p. 90)

We have in the character of Moses a spiritually mature hero,  
"trembling in the balance" perhaps, but serving and comprehending  
as much as man can the evolutionary process of God. We have
in The First-Born, too, an artistically mature Fry giving us the most straightforward dramatization of his vision of life. In the comedies the message is naturally diffused—not perhaps so much because the imagery is distracting—but because of the nature of comedy. The First-Born proves that Fry is one of the few modern writers who will attempt an authentic tragedy with a hero of epic proportions. Undoubtedly the reason lies in his conception of a purposeful universe. The First-Born takes for its subject the apparently unnecessary grief of life. But his people are superior, and their grief is ultimately exalting. Fry said in his foreword to A Sleep of Prisoners:

...progress is the growth of vision: the increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death. I have tried, as you know, not altogether successfully, to find a way for comedy to say something of this, since comedy is an essential part of men's understanding. In A Sleep of Prisoners I have tried to make a more simple statement.... (p. vii)

In The First-Born he has made that statement even more simply and more successfully.
When we turn from the religious plays to the comedies, we find a more expansive Fry who can give fuller play to a sparkling and cerebral wit and a delight in fantasy. Yet this expansiveness is not an end in itself. Fry is still probing into the nature of man, of God, and of existence. On the surface these comedies seem gossamer light; they display magic-lantern worlds of beauty and brilliant nonsense. But beneath the glitter there is always a serious, sometimes agonized quest for spiritual truth. Ultimately they are celebrations of the inexplicable. Like the religious plays, they are based upon a concept of the mystery as well as the unity of all life, and their seasonal grouping is a reflection of this concept. But it would be misleading to say that they are four facets of a single "exploration into God," into love, or into man. They are rather separate excursions, and though they ask much the same questions as the religious plays, the conclusions are more fluid; they are appropriate to and change according to the special "season." The Dark is Light Enough is in one sense a study of spiritual love; A Phoenix Too Frequent, profane. The Lady's not for Burning depicts the poignancy of young love; Venus Observed traces the loneliness of the man who lacks love. But even within the plays love is only one manifestation of the mystery of creation.

None of the four is straightforward comedy. Each touches
upon a theme traditionally more appropriate to tragedy, goes beyond manners to the deepest intimations of the soul, and frames the tangible reminders of death squarely about the picture of life it depicts. Each confuses the unwary audience or reader with a dialogue that fluctuates between the most brittle epigrams and the most lyrical expressions of feeling. In one speech from The Lady's not for Burning we glimpse the point of view that can produce such plays. "For God's sake shall we laugh?" cries the hero Thomas:

...For the reason of laughter, since laughter is surely
The surest touch of genius in creation.
Would you ever have thought of it, I ask you,
If you had been making man, stuffing him full
Of such hopping greeds and passions that he has
To blow himself to pieces as often as he
Conveniently can manage it—would it also
Have occurred to you to make him burst himself
With such a phenomenon as cachinnation?
That same laughter, madam, is an irrelevancy
Which almost amounts to revelation.

(Act II, i, p. 49)

Fry believes that we are doomed to suffer in our mortal ignorance, but that we "must suffer as wittily as we can" (Act II, p. 61). It may be that the alleged difficulty of Fry's "dark" comedies lies in our own habitual approach to theatre. We are too used to going to a play and emerging with a clearly marked prepackaged truth. Fry offers us a bright rococco comedy, verbally fluent and inventive, and his meaning usually resides in his melody. Unlike Chekhov, he makes no effort to avoid stylized characterization, contrived situation, or theatrical climax. Although in the quality of his wit and sophistication he most resembles Giraudoux and Anouilh, unlike these French writers, he employs little or no impressionistic stage effects.
He attempts to portray the fluidity of life through the fluidity of language. His is a dialectical comedy which is thematically profound.

The "summer drama," *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, was Fry's first produced comedy, and like *The Boy with a Cart*, it is slight, experimental, principally a vehicle for the poetry. Fry tells us that he got the story from Robert Burton who derived it from Plotinus. It was a cynical little anecdote of a young widow resolved to die beside the crypt of her husband, but changing her mind abruptly when a young officer guarding the hanged bodies of criminals wanders into her place of vigil. When one of the bodies he has left unguarded is stolen and his mortal punishment seems inevitable, she obligingly offers him the body of her late husband as a replacement, and they continue their dalliance unthreatened. Fry has striven to give this story charm and a respectable motive, and he uses the device of enclosing it in macabre surroundings to emphasize the warm vitality of his living lovers. For his thesis is "ripe-ness is all." *Doto*, the nonchalant maid, who has accompanied her mistress because "death's a new interest in life," provides a worldly commentary; and her contention that "life and death/is cat and dog in this double-bed of a world," comes closer to truth than Dynamene's sentimental pose of grief. But Fry's conclusion is not cynical. We feel the dead Virilius was something of a prig; Dynamene is terribly feminine, a little flighty; and Tegeus has a touch of Tom Jones. But the love between them is sincere and eminently preferable to death. When he first sees her, Tegeus admires her devotion. Deeply
satisfied, he exclaims: "...to have found life after all unambiguous!" But life is, if anything, ambiguous, and as Dynamene notes later,

What appears
Is so unlike what is. And what is madness
To those who only observe, is often wisdom
To those to whom it happens.  

A Phoenix Too Frequent celebrates the summer of life—all the pleasures, sights, sounds, smells, and emotions evocative of that golden time. Alongside this evocation, Fry sets up death, barren romanticism, and those man-made regulations that can "snuff the great/candles of creation." He would have us know that in the life-and-death struggle, life is ultimately "the master." This play cannot be taken too seriously. Although it is written without "verbal pyrotechnics," is entertaining and very playable, perhaps it is most important because it shows Fry learning to imbue his plots with poetry.

With The Lady's not for Burning he hit his stride, for this play is a much more complex and skillfully managed statement of his point of view. This is the spring drama, which takes place on an April evening in a medieval English village where a young man's bitter disillusionment with life creates an unexpected disturbance. Thomas Mendip, a soldier turned itinerant, is newly back from fighting in Flanders where he has been so shaken by his view of man's brutality and corruption that he decides the only heroism is to die. To this end, he walks into the mayor's office, briskly announces that he

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1Christopher Fry, A Phoenix Too Frequent (London, 1955), p. 31. All subsequent references will be from this edition.
has murdered two men, and demands to be hanged. He arrives, however, in the midst of a witch hunt. Almost at once the lovely young accused, Jennet Jourdemayne, appears and also appeals to the mayor for his protection from the hysterical mob of villagers. Her appeal, she says, is in the name of laughter, for the charges against her are so absurd that she cannot take them seriously. Unlike Thomas, Jennet loves life; ironically it is she who is condemned to die. Neither of their appeals is granted. This "injustice" enrages Thomas. He is very young. With a young man's arrogance, he disapproves of humanity with a fervor only the young can muster. So he pursues his determination to be hanged with a flamboyance and flippancy that leaves the local "Establishment" sadly confused.

Mayor Tyson Hebble is, of course, his perfect foil. Caught completely off guard, this pompous, sputtering dignitary, "afflicted with office," prays in vain:

...Almighty
God more precise than a clockmaker,
Grant us a steady pendulum.

(Act I, p. 18)

"I will not be a toy of irresponsible events" he cries unavailingly. "The standard soul must mercilessly be maintained!" (Act I, p. 21) he decrees in desperation. But the night's events and his insouciant prisoners are more than he can handle.

Equally unable to cope with life is the vague, amiable Chaplain, a frustrated musician whose viol, Fry would have us know, is indeed his "better self." The Chaplain apologizes to Hebble: "I wish I were a thinking man, very much/of course I feel a good deal, but that's no help to you" (Act II, p. 42).
The Chaplain has been intimidated into assuming a reluctant and ineffectual authority, but his instincts are right. He has a childlike sense of wonder and feels a natural sympathy for Thomas and Jennet and therefore is unable to sit in judgment. "I should like to see them dance" (Act II, p. 48), he says wistfully. But he flounders in the mystery; he has found no balance.

Margaret, Hebble's sister and housekeeper, represents another ineffectual approach. Margaret is busy, and her attempt to tidy up life is continually frustrated by the magnitude of its chaos. "Sin is so inconvenient," she sighs; and for youth she has only a wearied commiseration.

But it is Thomas and Jennet who dominate the action, and their opposed points of view carry the theme of the play. In the beginning their outlooks are entirely opposed. Jennet, the alchemist's daughter "whose father broke on the wheel of a dream," is the determined rationalist who admits of only the actual. Her scientific studies have not given her an awe of nature's mysteries, but only a belief in the "Essential Fact." Paradoxically she loves life while Thomas, the bitter idealist, expresses only contempt for the absurdly muddled world and the inadequate race of man. Like Anath in The First-Born, he sees man as a filthy creature, a decaying vegetable stuffed full of hate and selfishness. But the growing love between Thomas and Jennet begins to transform them both. Thomas soon finds himself admiring the universe which "something condones incorrigibly" and defending its mystery; and it is he, not Jennet, who explains that mystery:
Nothing can be seen
In the thistle-down, but the rough-head thistle comes.
Rest in that riddle. I can pass to you
Generations of roses in this wrinkled berry.
There: now you hold in your hand a race
Of summer gardens, it lies under centuries
Of petals. What is not, you have in your palm.
Rest in the riddle, rest; why not? This evening
Is a ridiculous wisp of down
Blowing in the air as disconsolately as dust.
And you have your own damnable mystery too,
Which at this moment I could well do without.
(Act II, p. 55)

Jennet's blossoming love also begins to communicate to her an awe of the inexplicable. To Thomas's description of men as corruption, she counters with the mysterious fact that, even so, women love them. She finally acknowledges, "There's no escaping into truth." When Humphrey, Hebble's roistering nephew, tries to seduce her in return for her life, she cannot sustain her pragmatism, decides it might be better to die. So it is love that forces life upon Thomas and the humility to die upon Jennet. "We are lost, irretrievably lost," cries Thomas, and, as surely as Adam and Eve, they are. For love hasn't changed the world, and even as it lies before them their only consolation is that

the best thing we can do is to make
Whatever we're lost in look as much like Home as possible.  
(Act III, p. 94)

The Lady's not for Burning is about love and spring, yet it is anything but trite. Fry has rephrased the eternal question: Why in a dark world do these two make all the difference? And that in itself shows why he is at home in comedy. For all that he explores the most pessimistic contingencies, his answers
always leave us something to hope for. Thomas and Jennet, like the rest of us, find that love cannot change the world, but can only sensitize the lover, by making him vulnerable to the riddle of existence, by forcing him to become a part of it.

One critic has said,

In Fry's attempts to recondition the public mind to mystery, he has at times let the first draft remain more mysterious than is necessary. His word choice is more felicitous than his order.¹

This criticism is most true of Venus Observed, for this play is the most expansive of all. It is the quintessence of Fry—all the basic ingredients are here and condensed: the montage of eloquent comic characters, the hero unreconciled to the paradox and disorder of the universe, and the universe itself crowded onto the stage in a crazy-quilt profusion of imagery, dwarfing the characters and sometimes obscuring their meaning. Yet for all the confusion and hectic color, Venus Observed has a definite charm. It is theatrical, ostentatious, and brilliant; the dialogue is Noel Coward out of Shaw, and it scans. It could be viewed as a fantastic spoof of all the bedroom comedies of the modern stage; and beneath the charm runs a persistently serious theme. Venus Observed is a study in loneliness. From the beginning the urbane Duke is presented as a man who holds himself aloof from humanity. A scientist, he can lose himself in the stars as a release from human demands; a handsome and wealthy nobleman, he can descend from his observatory tower to find his pleasures and needs eagerly requited.

He demonstrates his nonchalance almost immediately in the play by asking his son to choose a mother from among his three mistresses, all casually assembled at his estate for the event. That one of them is married hasn't occurred to him to be a drawback. Having handed Edgar an apple and assigned him the delicate task of Paris, he gives little thought to any repercussions. He deserves Rosabel's admonition that

nothing beats against you
heavier
Than a fall of rain. And out you whip
Your impervious umbrella of satisfaction!
How you prink across every puddle, and
laugh
To think that other men can drown.

(Act I, p. 11)

It is a mistake to believe that the Duke is entirely immune to self-knowledge. It is autumn for him as well as the earth, and he begins to feel his vulnerability. But he attributes it to the human condition. He tells us that his dilemma is loneliness, "estrangement in a world/where everything else conforms." As he voices his bewilderment we hear the same plea as that of Cymen in Thor, With Angels, that "lonely flesh be welcome to creation." With the appearance of Perpetua, the lovely young daughter of his agent, the Duke's dilemma comes to a crisis. In spite of the fact that Edgar has fallen in love with her, the Duke pursues her, attracted by her youth and beauty and possibly by a freedom of spirit that he lacks. For Perpetua has a moral stamina that makes an existentialist choice simple: she has simply destroyed everything bad. Unlike the Duke, she is totally engagé. But in Perpetua's encounter with the Duke, she discovers that action is not so simple, that by giving him
pain she has lost a degree of liberty. She tells him:

No one is separate from another; how difficult
That is, I move, and the movement goes from life
To life all round me. And yet I have to be myself
And what if my freedom becomes another person's compulsion. What are we to make of this dilemma?

(Act III, p. 82)

But it is not Perpetua, but Rosabel, the most involved of the three mistresses, who awakens the Duke's humanity. Jealous of the tryst between the Duke and Perpetua, she sets fire to the observatory, trapping them on the fifth story. After a hairsbreadth escape, the Duke finally concludes that the antidote for his isolation must be to marry the woman who loves him; he and Rosabel must share their "two solitudes." Fry's conclusion is that man is alone, the only creature in nature entirely individual, able to question that individuality. But man is not doomed to utter loneliness. By giving himself in love, he can come to a partial compromise with the riddle.

The Dark is Light Enough takes us into winter and a more somber mood. The greater austerity and control of this last of Fry's comedies reminds us of The First-Born. This play is based on a story of the Austro-Hungarian war. It is suspenseful, highly but not distractingly symbolic, and its theme is concentrated in and emerges out of the action rather than the dialogue more successfully than in any of Fry's other work. Fry prefaces the play with a passage from J. H. Fabre, the nineteenth-century naturalist:
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....

His concern, then, is still the pilgrimage of man in a dark world, and this is his final comic statement of it. The story revolves around the Countess Rosmarin, whose estate lies on the border between Hungary and Austria and whose sympathies are divided between the two warring countries. Answering a plea for help from her ne'er-do-well ex-son-in-law, Richard Gettner, who has deserted from the rebel Hungarian army, she harbors him under the greatest duress, finally dies from the exertion, and does it all through no motive but charity. Like Meadows in A Sleep of Prisoners, the Countess Rosmarin is considered by most critics to be a symbol of God. Like him, she follows a doctrine of "divine non interference"; she is an unwilling authority:

...she would rather be dead
Than be responsible for any change
In any soul in the world.

(Act I, p. p. 42)

But as another character notes,

She can't escape it....
She has a touching way
Of backing a man up against eternity

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Until he hardly has the nerve to remain mortal.

(Act I, p. 39)

Richard Gettner is a thoroughly lost sheep when she first salvages him. Like Thomas Mendip, he sees that "we're made in no fit proportion/to the universal occasion," and he is lost in his own futility. Here again is Fry's intransigent hero, but this time at his lowest ebb. Gettner's disillusionment is so complete as to be moral cowardice. For he has no morals, no loyalties, no anchor at all, except the remaining will to survive. He lacks the necessary
talent to go from a place to a place,
But divination to go so deviously
That north, south, east, and west
Are lost in admiration, and yet to arrive
After a short experience of eternity,
At the place and people one set out to reach.

(Act I, p. 17)

Lacking this spiritual instinct, he is frozen in absolute inactivity; he is, as the Countess says, like a man stripped to bathe in a winter sea who stands shivering, unable to take the plunge or to dress again. Thus suspended, he allows the Countess to jeopardize her life by rescuing him from the army he has deserted; he further allows her to give as hostage her beloved son-in-law and finally to be forced out of her home. He lets Stefan, her son, challenge him to a duel, and shoots him in panic. He demands, in effect, the final sacrifice of her life. Fry has been called agnostic, but this play is profoundly Christian. It seems almost a parable of the Crucifixion as well as "the ninety and nine," and nowhere has his belief in a divine presence been stated more concretely or more hopefully. Richard may say in his bitterness:
Never come up to expectations,
They'll expect again, and quite differently.
They'll tell you to be a man of decision,
To take the cold sea in a courageous plunge,
And when you do they squint at you for a fool.
It's the ontological feminine principle.
God's a woman. That surprises you,
But it's perfectly evident in every aspect
Of the arrangement. Create you to think
You're the beloved of God, the blest
Pair of you in a confederation of longing,
With the whispers hot in your ear: Immortal man,
Immortal man achieve me.--And then
You're made another generation of:
The frank daylight's turned full on you,
And her finger withers you with scorn.
(Act II, p. 65)

But the fact is that God or "Goddess" is just and dispassionate.
Countess Rosmarin admits to Gettner, who is perplexed by her
goodness, that she is unable to love him as he is. "We're
elected into love." Her protection of him stems from no ul-
terior motives. But she promises him that

We need
Neither of us despair. I'll not
Leave you until I can love you, Richard.
(Act III, p. 101)

So the pilgrimage to immortality is finally compulsory. Every-
one must take as long as necessary to achieve his "election
into love." Richard finally has no choice but to complete his
course in salvation by sacrificing his own life in imitation
of her.

Like all good dramas, this play has several levels of
meaning. Along with the religious implications runs a comment-
tary on the futility of war. This was also true of A Sleep of
Prisoners and most of the other plays, but here it is more ex-
plicitly stated in the dialogue between Janik, the Hungarian
rebel commander, and the Countess. Earlier in the play Richard
had taken a thrust at nationalism:

There are fearful excitements on any side. Any side can accuse the other And feel virtuous without the hardships of virtue. When pride of race has been pent up In a tyrannous disregard, and valued liberties Have been lost for long enough, what comes in the way Of dignity's free and natural flowing Is nothing but rocks to be blasted. I envy them Their certainty. Each private man Has a public cause to elucidate him, And a reasonable sense of having been wronged. If you like you can call this man your enemy; It's what he expects. (Act I, p. 15)

In a sense this is the Countess's point of view, also. In the face of Colonel Janik's patriotic fervor, she remains a perfectly poised neutral. When Janik asks her, "Then you have no thought for the downtrodden men, the overlong justice, madam?" she answers,

Not
As they are downtrodden, but as they are men I think of them, as they should think of those Who oppress them. We gain so little by the change When the downtrodden in their turn tread down. But then, deserters all, we should all change sides, I dare say; and that would be proper behavior For a changeable world, and no more tiring Than to go to the extraordinary lengths Which men will go to, to be identical Each day. (Act II, p. 51)

Fry's themes are universal rather than timely. His "objective correlatives" are never drawn from the contemporary arena. But occasionally he incorporates an indirect comment on our more immediate concerns. This is true of The First-Born where the dialogue between Moses and Seti takes on a deeper meaning in light of the Nazi era; it is true of Venus
Observed and the Duke's complaint of estrangement; it is certainly true of *The Dark is Light Enough* and its view of the futility of man's controversies. The Fry that appears in these comedies is one of the few vocal optimists of our time. The reason, it would appear, is his faith in man's ultimate destiny and in a deity interested in advancing that destiny. But along with that optimism goes a faith in man's intuitive instinct for virtue—an instinct which can be stimulated by poetry and by laughter. This is why Fry writes poetic comedies. He has admitted that writing for him is much like the pilgrimage of the butterfly or the soul:

> In some such way a poem, or a line of poetry, will feel its way towards a predestined end. Occasionally it finds it, and then we have the inevitability which we call great poetry, a discovery of the underlying discipline of revelation in which we are made. But when that miracle doesn't happen, the minor poetry or verse can at least prepare us for the discovery, and lead us into that way of experience.¹

In the four seasonal comedies Fry sometimes does lose his way in sheer verbiage; but most important, sometimes he achieves the "predestined end," and the revelation.

¹Fry, "Why Verse?", p. 165.
Curtmantle, Fry's most recent play, cannot be considered within the preceding genres. Like The First-Born, it is a tragedy based on historical materials; like The Dark is Light Enough, it is serious drama shot through with comedy. But more than any other Fry work this play is an epic study of character. Curtmantle is a dramatic biography of Henry II of England—a modern chronicle play. Henry is, of course, a colorful and familiar figure in literature. But it has been his clash with Thomas à Becket and the authority of the church which has inspired most writers. Among the moderns, notably Eliot and Anouilh have explored that conflict. But Fry is less interested in the church-versus-state theme than he is fascinated by the personality of his perverse and vital king. His is the historian's Henry, the sovereign who laid the first foundations for the English Common Law. In this play Becket, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Louis of France (in absentia) all appear as antagonists, but none of them is drawn proportionate to Henry. For Henry commands the spotlight and our empathy; and Fry has given him—beneath his bluster—almost Promethean stature. He seems to represent all the arrogance, shortsightedness, and splendor of human aspiration. Fry says in his preface:

Just as the thirty-five years of his reign contain a concentration of the human condition, so his character covers a vast field of human nature. He was simple and royal (his nickname of 'Curtmantle' de-
rived from the plain short cloak he wore), direct and paradoxical, compassionate and hard, a man of intellect, a man of action, God-fearing, superstitious, blasphemous, far-seeing, shortsighted, overriding. It is difficult to think of any facet of man which at some time he didn't demonstrate, except chastity and sloth.1

Fry motivates Henry so that we see him as a great but fatally foolish man. In his idealistic determination to impose an order and a workable system of laws upon his kingdom, Henry leaves that kingdom a shambles. Only his obstinacy brings about his break with Becket, with France, and with his own wife and progeny; it finally brings about his own downfall. This Henry is as majestic, as tragically flawed, and as memorable as any of his classic predecessors.

In depicting this full-scale heroic character, Fry seems to have rejected the passivity of his earlier characters who were for the most part manipulated by the shaping deity. Thomas Mendip, the Duke of Altair, and Richard Genner may bewail their mortal limitations, but they learn to conform, to find a humility in order that "lonely flesh be welcome to creation." But Henry remains a renegade even in defeat. If Moses was the instrument of God, the Countess Rosmarin a personification of God's justice, Henry is the advocate of man against the whole universal system. In The Dark is Light Enough one character says, "There's no balance without the possibility of overbalancing." Henry is radically unbalanced. But fanatic that he is, he makes for better drama than Moses or Rosmarin. Fry's

1Christopher Fry, Curtmantle (New York, 1961), p. iii. All subsequent references will be from this edition.
bullnecked Plantagenet is the most convincing character he has drawn to date.

In Curtmantle Fry has covered a span of thirty-one years in a series of scenes which dramatize the high points of Henry II's life. Naturally he has had to employ some device for unifying this action. William Marshal is that device. Marshal was the friend and servant of Henry, and it is through his loyal and sober eyes that we envision the king. We see the events as they are remembered by this affectionate but objective by-stander. The expressionistic device is never so deliberately contrived and theatrical as it sometimes is in Anouilh. Marshal serves as participant in most of the events, and his soliloquies arise naturally from the action. Curtmantle, like The Boy with a Cart, is in both prose and poetry; and the poetry here is more sublimated than ever. The energy, the gusto, the facility remain, but the metaphorical trimmings have vanished. This play has no need for them.

Fry states in his preface that this play has two themes:

...one a progression towards a portrait of Henry, a search for his reality, moving through versions of 'Where is the king?' to the unresolved close of 'He was dead when they came to him.' The other theme is Law, or rather the interplay of different laws: civil, canon, moral, aesthetic, and the laws of God: and how they belong and do not belong to each other.  

The prologue, a masterpiece of effective exposition, at once introduces them both. It opens on an encampment. The characters are the more lowly members of the royal retinue: a barber, a juggler, a huckster, and a prostitute—in short, a group of

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. ix.}\]
the common people English law will someday protect. They are making shift in a rain storm, inconvenienced and disgruntled by the king's habit of traveling through the countryside, surprising local magistrates at work, overseeing as much as possible of the legal business of the realm. A stranger in search of royal redress appears, breaks into their group crying, "Where is the King?" and we have the first of these refrains that echo throughout the play. Where indeed is the king? From their conversation we begin to visualize Henry, his restlessness, his energy, his headlong and rather unruly pursuit of order. We see too that in his very drive for justice he often misses the chance to confer it. The stranger gets no audience, for at this point the camp breaks up again. The king, we are told, is in the saddle, and his court—wet, cold, exhausted—must follow. This scene also gives us a view of these common people, who receive and suffer the king's bounty. Their cynicism adds a twist of irony and foreshadows the greater irony of the ending. The disgusted huckster speaks for them all when he declares, "If a man can't have his lawful sleep, to hell with the laws!" (Prologue, p. 8).

In Act I the king comes closer. William Marshal appears to announce his arrival to the queen and describes the scene in the courtyard below. Henry and Becket, his chancellor, have just indulged in a bit of wonted horseplay as the king cheerfully clothed a beggar at Becket's expense. Marshal's account of this brings Henry into closer focus for us; we begin to visualize his love of mischief, his sentimentality, his robust vulgarity, and his generosity. "'Christ,' he said, 'we'll have
After this verbal preparation, the king's appearance is no anticlimax. He bursts into the room with Becket in tow and proceeds to dominate the action. We find him at the peak of his power before disappointments begin to take their toll. In high spirits, pleased at the success of Becket's diplomatic mission to France, Henry displays a happy and totally unselfconscious hybris. He is contemptuous of Louis' failure to father an heir. He boasts of his "four strong Plantagenet males born/to a kingdom worthy of God's admiration." He is proud of his accomplishments:

   God's light, there's no anarchy to come worse
   Than I've already transformed into good government,
   Unless they drive me to a harrowing of hell.

   (Act I, p. 12)

It is the anniversary of his first meeting with Eleanor, and she adds to our information about him as she recalls the youthful Henry who had stormed into her presence, stolen her from the pious Louis with a minimum of diplomacy, and taken her home to bear his heirs. But perhaps the quality of Henry that emerges most clearly in these early scenes is his imperceptiveness about people. His dynamism allows him no backward glance at other's reactions. Both the subtle creative Eleanor and the intellectual perfectionist Becket are formidable figures in their own rights. But rather than utilizing Eleanor's genius for his dream, he relegates her to the childbed and then largely ignores her. Unlike Anouilh's Henry, his adultery is no reflection of bitterness; it is simply a failure to consider her. For Becket he has the greatest admiration; he delights in his ef-
ficiency, but he does not know his man. He cannot see that Becket's genius for service may be bent to another master. He simply doesn't listen to Becket's warning about the impending crisis between church and state. He has no more respect for the princes of the church than he has for his rival Louis, and it is his pride that causes him to err in judging these opponents.

As each subsequent scene unfolds, we find Henry pursuing his course, little by little alienating all those whom he depends upon. And in his pride and determination to unify the law, he not only forces Becket into opposition but abandons his own principles of justice by depriving him of his estates without trial. Yet his greatest error results from his injured vanity. He decides to crown his son prematurely in defiance of Becket's right as Archbishop of Canterbury to perform the coronation, and in defiance of the threat of the new French heir. This is the fatal decision, for his "young eagles" are an unruly and jealous lot, too immature for sudden power. Gradually the tide begins to turn against Henry. Becket's martyrdom gives the church a solidity and following that the king cannot hope to shake. Eleanor, estranged, retreats to her beloved Provence and an informal collusion with the enemy, dividing the loyalty of his sons. Only one casual act of generosity proves valuable to Henry in these years. The illegitimate son he had rescued from poverty proves to be a stay in his need. Only the death of Becket brings any measure of humility to him. Faced with the impossibility of recalling his words, he begins to feel his helplessness: "This life
is infamous, if it uses us/against our knowledge or will" (Act II, p. 74). But to this new awareness of fate, Henry rallies with a desperate defiance. There is no final humility for him. His self-imposed penance and public flagellation are gestures; his surrender to his victorious son and his ally, the son of Louis, is only a practical necessity. Dying, he calls for extreme unction as a formality, for "I believe in the law." To the end Henry remains arrogant, totally secular, a law unto himself, but he does retain his dignity and his pride. Perhaps this is what Fry meant when he called this play unresolved. For Henry experiences no final humbling illumination; and it seems truer to our conception of life and of tragedy because he does not.

The secondary theme of law in this play runs parallel to the theme of Henry's failure. As the proponent of man's laws he lacked the ability to unify them or to order his own life. For man's laws include the aesthetic and moral strictures that must reinforce all custom. Eleanor in her artistic objectivity, with her insistence upon the "exact word," embodies the aesthetic order—the formal laws of art. She could have been an intermediary between the temporal and the spiritual—even, as she might have effected a compromise between Henry and Becket had she been allowed a voice. But her protestation is in vain:

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. Neither of you will dare to understand it. Have I spoken too late?

(Act II, p. 47)

Of course she has. Inevitably the truth of art is ignored until too late, and its benefit to the external world is retroactive. Eleanor's laws of art, deprived of life, must become effete, merely decorative, must retreat from the real world as Eleanor herself must retire to Provence and dispense her rules of triviality, while Becket moves implacably towards the ritual of martyrdom which the world and Henry unconsciously demand. As Eleanor tells Becket,

And you have lost
Your genius for life, that ready sense of the world
Which used to give your gravity a charm
And your laughter a solemnity
As though you sang the complex heart of reality
And by singing, mastered it.

(Act II, p. 37)

So Henry's failure becomes the world's failure, his inability to comprehend and build on diversity, our own inability. This is the plea for unity we have heard before in A Sleep of Prisoners: a plea for tolerance that in fact underlies all of Fry's philosophy. For Henry is Seti, indisputably Cain. With the imagination to "know I do not know" he might have achieved his dream of progress. As it is, his dream, like all our dreams, was too narrow, and though he was capable of changing his world, he was blind to the method. But Fry has not lost his optimism or his faith in an evolving destiny for man. If he had, he could not have written this play. If any one preoccupation emerges from Fry's work it is this impatience
with any uncompromising view of life.

His celebrations of diversity are implicit in every line he has written and in the way it is written—bristling with paradox. In Curtmantle he has dramatized this diversity in terms of law. Each character seeks order; each has his own conception of law. None finds his way through chaos because he is limited to that single conception. The only way toward progress is unity, Fry tells us, and an all-embracing respect for life. Persistently, employing a variety of "objective correlatives" and tones, Fry has stated and restated this message, his conviction that "truth cannot be trumpeted forth as finally understood." He believes that art must assume the role of intermediary, must mitigate the power of the modern slogan shouters, "word-facters," propagandists, and proponents of unilateral truths. In Curtmantle he has demonstrated this graphically. He has dared to use materials already made classic by other writers and has elicited from them a new set of ideas.

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1Fry, "Why Verse"?, p. 166.
V

Conclusion

His theme of the order and the unity of the universe, the interdependence of its laws, and the purposefulness of its Creator, is one of Fry's peculiar contributions to us. From Thor, With Angels to Curtmantle he has insisted upon the tragedy but never upon the futility of life. Although man may not be adequate to the "universal occasion," though his pettiness is ridiculous, he is finally capable of maturity and communion with all nature through tolerance, charity and love. But Fry is never blind to the fact that man rarely finds his balance. His protagonists are often the very embodiments of human imperfections and foolishness. Fry urbanely forgives them and celebrates their imperfections with delight, but he never lets us lose sight of the fact that they diverge from the ideal, just as he never allows them to forget. Thus aware, even his minor comic characters have a pathos, and his great tragic figures of Moses and Henry shoulder all our burdens of loneliness, doubt and fear. Fry is never a sentimentalist nor an easy optimist. Death, cruelty, horror lurk in all his plays, threatening to take their toll. Yet he has a faith in individual human nature that can even extend to his "Towzers." As a sensitive modern man, he notes the chaos and battles the sense of estrangement. For he believes that both are surmountable. All of his characters are searching for an order. Cymen gropes his way from barbarism to a law of love. The soldiers of A Sleep of Prisoners, thrown willy nilly back into barbarism,
find a renewal of faith in their religious heritage. Moses, seeking to mold a new order, discovers that he must destroy a civilization in the process, but that that destruction is ultimately fruitful. Tegeus and Dynamene, Thomas Mendip and Jennet Jourdemayne, the Duke of Altair and Rosabel all learn that personal love can transform chaos into mystery and make it tolerable. Richard Gettner receives the most profound lesson of all; for he finally sees that only man's willingness to undergo suffering can effect his "election into love." Henry, like most of humanity, never fully understands the rules of salvation. He attempts--desperately--to achieve an order on his own terms. But he fails to realize the truth of diversity. He cannot understand the interrelationship of all disciplines. Fry himself has chosen to pursue his course within the aesthetic discipline. He has said that for him, poetry best expresses his vision of truth because it is by nature fluid and entirely mutable, achieving "flashes of truth," but no answers. But in offering us these "flashes," Fry has done more than the playwright who holds humanity up before us as an apparently pointless horror show. A reader or a viewer of art must be a great eclectic, choosing whatever beauty and meaning he will, forgetting the rest. There is an equality in greatness; we may believe both Cervantes and Coleridge in the same evening, and Debussy does not contradict Bach. Fry's vision of truth does not, of course, negate any current philosophy of despair, but it holds out a ready antidote.

Poetic drama is a peculiarly unmarketable commodity in today's theatre. Like the novel, this genre demands a leisureed
concentration and an acquired perceptiveness that are not readily compatible with the pace of our lives. Also, the revolution in cinema has provided such an exciting new medium of "total theatre" that it continues to overshadow legitimate drama. (Fry has almost restricted himself to scriptwriting in recent years, either by choice or necessity.) The sociologists insist that television and movies are transforming us into a visually-oriented society. Yet even under these conditions, the post-war comedies of Fry have thrived. He has been produced by Sir Laurence Olivier and Tyrone Guthrie, in Mayfair and on Broadway; off-Broadway theatres continue to re-stage him with success. Perhaps the greatest appeal of his comedies is their authentic wit. Since the wane of the last farces of the twenties and thirties, good comic dialogue has become increasingly rare. In fact, in some quarters, it is held to be almost passé, while Chaplinesque pantomime is de rigueur. But fashions change, and whether he is "in" or "out," Fry must be considered one of the comic geniuses of our time. He is not an innovator either in form or ideas. He follows the English tradition of Shakespeare, Sheridan, Synge, and Shaw. Like Shakespeare and Synge, his view of life is entirely poetic, and his language depicts the beauty and pathos of life as well as its surface frivolity. Like Sheridan and Shaw, he is the master of a repartee that can cut away prejudice, though he is less concerned with social problems than spiritual ones. But this is not to say that his targets are obsolete. He directs his irony and his whimsey at very current foibles. Thomas Mendip with his Weltschmerz is a rather silly—if sympathetic—
angry young man. The Duke of Altair in all his existential solitude suffers mainly from selfishness. Fry's minor characters often mirror contemporary types and attitudes and reveal these in their timelessness. In one sense only Fry might be termed an innovator. The seasonal comedies attempt to treat serious themes in a comic tone; for all their gaiety they are deeply if not always conventionally religious. In *The Dark is Light Enough* where he brushes so close to tragedy, he achieves a very special mode of statement. If the popularity of Fry depends upon his wit, it is this seriousness of intention which lifts him above the mere pricker of folly. In offering us an affirmation of life, he fulfills the fundamental and greatest role of the comedian.

Unlike his comedies, most of Fry's other works have not received their due acclaim. *The First-Born* and *Curtmantle* present much the same ideas as the comedies, but, with the single exception of *The Dark is Light Enough*, they voice these ideas more succinctly and more dramatically. *Curtmantle* has been largely overlooked in the flurry over Anouilh's *Becket*. *The First-Born* has not been produced in the United States. But both of these plays are first-rate dramas and contain visions of truth that should not be ignored. Both take for their subject the theme of fate in human endeavor and find new ways of exploring this most ancient of problems. *Thor, With Angels*, in spite of the fact that now it is mostly used as a vehicle for amateur church groups, is one of the most imaginative and delightful historical comedies in contemporary theatre. *A Sleep of Prisoners*, though it has suffered the same fate, is
an anti-war plea of great effectiveness. Altogether Fry's repertoire, if comparatively slight, is impressive, both as poetry and drama. His plays all have beauty, style and depth. Taken as a whole they offer to our despairing age an obstinately affirmative faith in man's dignity and his ability to find a spiritual unity within and above all ideological and ethnic differences. No message could be more universal or more timely. In A Sleep of Prisoners Meadows rejoices:

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.
(Act III, p. 48)

This is the spirit Fry brings to modern drama; and it is a spirit of health and optimism we badly need. If the space age does not end in annihilation, the next age should find Fry prophetic. We can only hope that there will be more of his plays for it to rediscover.
Bibliography

I
Primary Works


II
Secondary Works

