Chapter - V

Conclusion

I can only call it a vision, a hope, a promise

- A Phoenix Too Frequent

The life embracing and life-enhancing nature of comedy has been witnessed through the ages. Comedy demonstrates man’s ability to endure. The classical formula of ridicule and subsequent amendment of folly leading to a happy ending is complemented in the development of English comedy by the specifically Christian view of man as doomed and blessed.

This study of Fry’s play shows that they fall into the category of life-embracing and life-enhancing comedy. They also emphasise the Christian view of man as doomed and blessed, the accent being on the state of blessendess, due to the dramatist’s belief in Providential will. Fry believes that life is a miracle, and only if man is aware of being born into a pandemonium of most unnatural phenomena, can be aware of how miraculous he is. In Fry’s opinion, tragedy and comedy are closely linked. He observes:

The bridge by which we cross from tragedy to comedy and back again is precarious and narrow. We find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought; a turn such as we make when we turn from speaking to listening. I known that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as a tragedy. (Can You Find Me 12)

In keeping with this view it is observed through the study that in all the plays there is the experience of the tragic, or potential for tragedy. In applying Fry’s belief that “If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy,” it I s found
that in general most of the characters undergo an experience of the tragic, to emerge to assert life.

The hypothesis mentioned in the first chapter has three parts. The first part states that there is progress from alienation to de-alienation in the lives of the characters portrayed and Fry is aware of the duality of human nature. This part of the hypothesis is examined through a study of the plays, in the second chapter. Brian Baxter’s theory of the three forms of ontological life, which regards God as the other and Kenneth Keniston’s categories of focus, mode, agent and replacement for alienation are used to test the experience of alienation of the characters. The plays are studied in the order of the extent of alienation undergone by the men and women characters. It is observed that Richard Gettner of *The Dark is Light Enough*. Thomas Mendip of *The Lady’s Not For Burning*, Roberto Bruno of *A Yard of Sun*, Cymen of *Thor, with Angels*, Moses of *The Firstborn*, David king of *A Sleep of Prisoners* and Tegeus of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* suffer alienation but emerge from it to affirm life. Gettner suffers alienation from God, from existence, society and himself. This stems from his frustration at having failed as a writer as well as his inability to determine his sense of direction. For him, all is failure, before he finally succumbs to the example of the Countess. War and the horrors that men perpetrate create a gulf between Thomas Mendip and the world of men. In him is found a touch of self-alienation as well. Roberto experiences a sense of estrangement from his kin due to the effects of war and the walls built by fear of betrayal, doubt and suspicion. Cymen’s alienation is from his gods and from existence. Moses is momentarily isolated from God while David king faces the danger of total isolation from even his friends because of war and the tensions of being a prisoner of war. The Duke in *Venus Observed*
experiences isolation because free, with self-realization. Edgar, his son, with his lack of self-confidence and shyness, is the least alienated among the men characters and comes out of it easily through love and self-acceptance. This does not hold good for Seti, the tyrant and power seeker faces existential alienation with the death of Rameses. Henry strives for secular law and at the end often play meets death, isolated from family and subjects save for his illegitimate son Roger, and Marshal. Fry does not present a resolution to shendi’s state which remains at a point of uncertainty, in his inability to face the life of an Israelite or pursue the lifestyle of an Egyptian. In contrast it is found that Chuthman of *The Boy with Cart* is confronted with the possibility of alienation but does not succumb to it due to faith in Providence. Here the potential for alienation from God is presented but the experience of alienation is not undergone.

Among the women characters it is observed that alienation, though intense in some instances, is overcome father than in the men largely due to their receptivity to love. Rosabel Fleming of *Venus Observed* labours under the greatest extent of alienation but recovers due to self-realization and acceptance of love. Dynamene of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and Jennet Jourdemayne of *The Lady’s Not for Burning* brave fragmentation and overcome it. In *Curtmantle* it is found that Eleanor remains alienated from Henry at the end of the play. In Miriam of *The First Born*, alienation form Moses is sense of isolation caused by guilt is dismissed through love and support from the family. Fry’s statement that somehow the characters have to unmortify themselves to affirm life and assimilate death and persevere in joy is proved true in the chief characters and some of the minor characters. Fry is seen as a committed writer in his persuasion that alienation can be overcome through the act of faith.
The second part of the hypothesis states that Fry believes in love as a rejuvenating force that displaces alienation, and that he portrays women as instruments of de-alienation due to their instinct for love. This part of the hypothesis is examined in the third chapter. It is found that Fry subscribes to the Biblical dictum of dying to oneself and awakening in Christ. Through this study is established the dramatist’s view that loving means making commitments. It also brings to light various categories of love. These categories show a tendency to overlap in certain instances. The first of these is gift love or agape as seen in Countess Rosmarin and Gelda of *The Lady’s Not for Burning* and Perpetua of *Venus Observed*. Life giving love where eros is capable of ascending to agape is shown by Dynamene of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and Jennet Jourdemayne of *The Lady’s Not for Burning*. Creative love where philia displays the capacity to rise to agape is manifest in Ana-Clara of *A Yard of Sun* and Jessie Dill and Hilda Taylor-Snell of *Venus Observed*. Their characteristic quality of the capacity to give an all-embracing love as well as participation and objectivity leads to the coining of the term ‘involved spectator’ where the character exhibits involvement in the action and an ability to regard the same in a detached manner. It is also found that Anath, belonging to the first category, possesses these qualities which make her fit the description of the ‘involved spectator’. The fourth group categorized under motherly love consists of Giosetta Scapare of *A Yard of Sun*, Clodesuida to *Thor, with Angels* and Margaret Devize of *The Lady’s Not for Burning*. By the end of the plays, it is observed that Giosetta’s feelings move towards agape, Clodesuida’s towards eusebia and Margaret’s towards philia. The healing effect of love is found in the rehabilitation of Grazia of *A Yard of Sun* and Martina of *Thor, with Angels*. De-alienating love at work is seen in the character of
Rosabel Fleming. The study makes clear that Fry makes manifest that love grows with Divine approval, faith, acceptance, sympathy and awareness of the mystery of life. Also evident is the fact that the plays depict the women characters suffering a lesser degree of alienation than the men and offering support to the men. *A Sleep of Prisoners* is also studied and in this play with no women characters it is found that *philia* moving towards *agape* is vital for the reintegration of mankind after experiences as traumatic as war and imprisonment. It also suggests that love of this kind can prevent wars. The exploration results in establishing Fry’s belief in the Christian idea of living in “deputyship” where loving means giving, willingness to suffer, fearlessness and being creative, as is also enjoined by other persuasions.

The final part of the hypothesis states that Fry is greatly influenced by the Bible and also exposes through the structure, language and imagery in the plays, the theme of progress from alienation to de-alienation. In the fourth chapter a study is made of the influence of the Bible on Fry. It is found that Fry’s is essentially a moral approach. There is the belief in Providential will and that divine support is necessary for progress from fragmentation to reintegration. Fry also emphasizes that one has to face life and not turn one’s back on it. Fry makes use of Biblical themes rendering them relevant to modern life. The plays are studied in order of indebtedness to the Bible in the use of themes, passages, phrases, cadences and echoes. In the *Firstborn* the Exodus emerges as an archetypal image symbolising the pursuit of freedom by all races. The New Testament theme of Christ’s life spent in deputyship recurs in the portrayal of Countess Rosmarin’s life in *The Dark is Light Enough*. Conversion from belief in gods of anger to belief in the God of Love of the New Testament is depicted in *Thor*, with Angels. In this
play too is found the underlying theme of “be lost and then be found” (TWA 80) which encapsulates the experience of existential alienation and the journey to reintegration. They study also proves that Fry lays stress on the value of life. Regarding life as a gift, he shows that the modern tendency to suicide, the death wish and self-destructive apathy can be countered by love and commitment. This is made manifest in A Phoenix Too Frequent where Dynamene’s death wish and Tegeus’ planned suicide are both converted into a resurrection of life. The study of the Boy with a Cart shows its resemblance to the miracle plays as well as the morality play Everyman, as it traces Cuthman’s journey through faith and final communion with God. A Sleep of Prisoners dealing with the theme of war is found to have four Biblical episodes woven into the framework of the dramas of four prisoners imprisoned in a church, the last dream becoming the shared experience of the men. This play shows that faith is not out of place in the modern world. The study of the plays proves that Fry stresses on the gift of life, man’s need to change the changeable but put up with the unchangeable and of the harnessing of the values of the past to plot out the future.

The plays are studied according to the order of seasonal plays, consisting of The Lady’s Not for Burning, A Yard of Sun, Venus Observed and The Dark is Light Enough, the secular yet religious play A Phoenix Too Frequent, the religious plays, The Boy with a Cart, Thor, with Angels, A Sleep of Prisoners and the First born, and the historical play Curtmantle. Though it is found that the general structure of the plays is linear there are slight variations in A Sleep of Prisoners, A Phoenix Too Frequent, The Firstborn and Curtmantle. It is observed that the four seasonal plays have a linear structure. They also share the common feature of the entry of an outsider or outsiders which precipitates the
situation towards the tragic thus causing a downward plunge in the movement towards de-alienation. The upward movement towards reintegration occurs with the growth of realization in *The Lady’s Not for Burning*, *A Yard of Sun* and *Venus Observed* whereas in *The Dark is Light Enough*, the turning point and the upward movement is envisaged at the very end of the play when Gettner resolves to face the army. In the seasonal comedies the moods of spring, summer, autumn and winter are conveyed largely through language. In *A Phoenix Too Frequent* a modification in the linear structure is noticed. The linear movement along a slope consists of two downward movements in Tegeus’ case and one in Dynamene’s both meeting at the deepest point to move upwards together to assert life. In *The Boy with a Cart* the movement is a definite linear— one with no downward movement though it remains static at the point where Cuthman experiences uncertainty at the failure of the king-post to stand, before moving upwards to the culmination, that is, union with the Supreme. The structure of *Thor, with Angels* is a clear downward-upwards movement, the turning point coming at the call of the messenger after Cymen breaks the altar-stones. *A Sleep of Prisoners* presents a complex structure in that the progress from darkness to light takes place in the minds of the four prisoners. This development takes place through the dream enactment of Biblical incidents. It marks a “growth of vision” which is in the mental make-up of the prisoners but the play starts and ends with the prisoners being in the same physical state of imprisonment. Action in the traditional sense of drama is absent. In *The Firstborn* is seen two curves cutting each other, one signifying the fate of Moses and Israel and the other that of Egypt. They meet at the point where Moses return to Egypt to lead the with the freed Israelites. In *Curtmantle* the structure is different as William Marshal’s mind becomes the stage on
which the life of Henry is presented. Marshal becomes a narrator-actor. The presentation of events takes place in quick succession and through telescoping. They are heightened by the use of the cinematographic techniques as well as light and dark to emphasise Henry’s state of grace and isolation and the conflict between Becket and Henry.

Diagrams representing the structure of each play can be found in Appendix 2. Fry uses Biblical incidents in *The Firstoborn* and *A Sleep of Prisoners*, Biblical symbolism in *The Dark is Light Enough*, Biblical symbolism and myth in *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, history and legend in *Thor with Angels* and *Churtmantle* and the life of in *The Boy with a Cart*.

But he does not stop with presenting them as they are. They become representational and relevant to the modern time, for, like Eliot, he “fills them with modern experience.” This is especially so in the play *The Boy with a Cart* where the chorus, the People of South England, are inhabitants of Cuthman’s time yet modern due to their use of modern idiom. They link the audience to the life of faith of Cuthman, which thus become pertinent for all time.

The opening scene of each play is found to be of importance. The opening scene indeed strikes the keynote of each play. There is a vital link between the first scene and the last. The last scene or end of the play is thus termed as being in ‘appositional correlation’ to the first scene or beginning of the play. Thus in *The Lady’s Not for Burning*, Mendip’s extreme sensitivity to man’s failure to enable himself and his subsequent desire to be hanged are resolved in the final scene when he shows a degree of willingness to live in the world of men is spite of tis sordidness. In *A Yard of Sun*, doubt, frustration and suspicion engendered by war and dramatized symbolically in the heat and lack of water in Siena, and simering tempers modulate into easing of tensions, realization,
acceptance and an awareness of the complexity of life, as well as of the possibility of a better future. The Duke of Altair’s initia search for fulfillment in love, in Venus Observed, leads to the consciousness of having to accept old age gracefully. In The Dark is Light Enough, the Countess’ ride in the snow to save Richard Gettner finds completion in the final scene when Gettner rides back through blinding snow to the Countess and resolves to confront the army. A Phoenix Too Frequent demonstrates the progress from Dynamene’s initial death wish and Tegeus’ estrangement from the world to the desire for life at the close of the play. In The Boy with a Cart the image of root and sky and of God and man working shoulder to shoulder are re-affirmed at the culmination of the play when Cuthman experiences the presences of the Divine Carpenter. The unknown force that holds Cymen a captive in Thor, with Angels reveals itself to Cymen as the sacrificial mystery of the Crucifixion. In A Sleep of Prisoners the frustration, fear, hatred for the enemy and hostility towards the Divine diffuse into the shared belief of the prisoners David king, Peter Able, Tim Meadows and Corporal Joe Adams that love and brotherhood are necessary for the ceasing of all hatred. Moses’ entry into Egypt in The firstborn occurs when he sees God as one “who will support the spirit” (TF 76). He leads the Israelites to freedom, out of Egypt, convinced that in spite of the griefs witnessed, eternity will lead to hope. In Curtmantle the relationship between the first scene and the last is ironic and symbolic of a poignant significance. The former begins with light hearted relationship between Becket and Henry and contains the information that Henry had persuaded Becket to give his cloak to a beggar as well as Marshal’s report of Henry’s words: “Christ./ He said, ‘we’ll have no naked men.”’ (C188). The later ends with Rogar covering the stripped king with his own cloak and Marshal’s recall of
the words “Christ’ he said, ‘we’ll have no naked men.’” (C 277). Curtmantle, unlike the other plays, has a Prologue which dramatizes through the retinue of the king and the breaking up of the camp, Henry’s obsession with the secular law. The vital link between the first scene and the last in all the plays establishes the organic unity of the individual plays.

The study of the plays in chronological order shows that Fry uses verse in the majority of his plays, and a combination of verse and prose in others. In the early play *The Boy with a Cart* (1937) Fry employs prose with verse and the passages of other minor characters speak in prose. Prose is also used for narrative purposes and in one or two instances by Cuthman himself. *The Firtborn* (1945) consists of verse alone, so too *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946) and *Thor, with Angels* (1948). In *The Lady’s Not for Burning* (1949) there is the inclusion of a few passages of prose used only by Skipps the drunken-rag-and-bone man, when he appears at the end of the play. *Venus Observed* (1950) and *A Sleep Prisoners* (1951) are in verse. The dialogues of the commoners like the Huckster, the Barber and others are in prose. William Marshal, the narrator-presenter and actor, uses prose for narrating past incidents which are not enacted, as well as for bridging the gap between the past and the action on stage. In *A Yard of Sun* (1970) verse is used throughout. A notable feature is the lengthy stage directions, the most significant being the description of the Neapolitan gesture of succumbing to fate, made by Alfio which conveys the essence of the play, that of resigned acceptance (AYOS 81). In general Fry uses prose to express the ordinary and mundane. Verse is the medium used most often and at certain points the verse soars to heights of epiphanic grandeur as in Cuthman’s recollection of his communion with the Divine Carpenter.
The use of verse by the different characters is apt. Among the alienated men, Richard Gettner who is alienated from God, from other men and from himself uses language that is redolent of sarcasm, cynicism, scorn, mockery of good in others as well as self-derision. His estrangement from the race of mankind is reflected in his conversation and his description of having written frustration syllable by syllable (TDLE 109) apt to a failed writer who is painfully conscious of his inadequacy. Thomas Mendip who is acutely aware of the extremes of the noble and the sordid in man soars to poetic heights in his description of the earth (TLNFB 169), but also uses images of decay and rot to convey the decadence of man. (TLNFB 173). Roberto Bruno’s nature is very similar to that of Jimmy Porter, the difference being that his anger and hostility find expression verbally and also in action. The images and metaphors he uses are active and sharp in keeping with his character of partisan, social revolutionary and doctor. Cymen’s verse characterizes the depths of alienation probed by him and of his total estrangement from the gods of anger (TWA 93-84). Tegeus’ philosophic, idealistic yet soldierly nature is seen in his verse which is idealistic or practical in turn. Seti, who faces a bleak prospect of the future with the death of his son and heir Rameses, is seen as a tyrant whose language is suggestive of egoism and his belief in the power of Egypt. Henry’s language is as coarse and earthy as he is, yet far sighted and poetic as when he is aghast and disturbed that his words said in anger might have evoked danger and death for Becket. (C251) Shendi’s language carries hostility against Moses as well as his own despair. The Duke of Altair talks in the strains of a person quite removed from common man, in keeping with his ivory tower image. Edgar voices his doubts and uncertainties in a sometimes boyish tone, the words echoing his lack of self-confidence.
Rosabel Fleming’s confession first to Dominic Reedbeck and then to the Duke (Vo 229) helps her to gain self-realization and her mellow resignation is in contrast to her earlier charged feelings of alienation from the Duke. Dynamene’s outpourings agant fate stem form her alienation from the world brought on by Virilius’ death. Jennet Jourdémayne’s rationalisings undergo a hcase when confronted with the absurdity of existence when the townspeople want to burn her. Eleanor’s alienation from Henry is marked by her expressions of distaste at his rash acts. Miriam’s lethargy and unwillingness to free herself from the suppressed state of subjectivity is clear in her love of the apathetic life that has become a habit. Grazia tries to cover her isolation brought about by a false sense of guilt, by her conscious efforts at light-hearted conversation with the members of her family and friends.

It would be relevant at this point to make a comparison between Fry’s presentation of alienated characters with the Absurdists’ presentation of the same in their plays. The writes of the Absurd Theatre believe that alienation is basically an incomuicable experience and hence the use of very little dialogue or conversation. The characters give up the struggle against isolation, accept the alienated state passively or retreat further into it. Fry’s characters, with the exception of those for whose states Fry does not present a resolution or replacement are expressive about the experience they undergo. Thus language becomes the medium of communication between the alienated from society, talks, albeit cynically, to members of society, openly derisive about them and himself. But he responds to one individual from society, namely, the Countess. In doing so he breaks free from isolation and sows the seeds for the recovery of his self-esteem. This heralds a change in his life and attitude. Thomas Mendip’s aversion
towards man’s evil, dishonesty, lust, avarice and indifference, does not close the channels of communication between him and society. Instead he carries on an endless harangue, as it were, before what he believes will be his hanging. His ability to communicate with Jennet Jourdembayne and her consequent actions pull him towards life. Robertoi Bruno’s discontent, suspicion and hostility prove too much for his volatile nature and he rids himself of his agony through a rush of words aimed at Edmondo, -Ana-Clara, Luigi and others. He is able to express himself to the solicitous Giosetta Scapare. Cymen rages in an outburst of anguish directed against the pagan gods who he thinks have brought him to a helpless state. Moses’ spiritual anguish finds voice in his questioning of God’s ways. David king’s simmering fury at being imprisoned and the subsequent frustration and hostility towards all things is communicated through vituperative language aimed especially at the passive Peter Able. Tegeus’ despair at the triumph of fate and law over love is witnessed in his anguished exclamation against fate.

In a like manner Rosabel gives vent to her feelings against the Duke in an accusation of his aloofness. Dynamene, mourning, laments Virilius’ death and expresses her anguished state to Doto her maid, even as she grieves. Jeneet’s mood of optimism crumbles into a dull bewilderment when confronted with irrationality only to reassert her need for life in her conversation with Thomas Mendip. Eleanor is incapable of rebelling physically against Henry’s dictum but in her rebuke (C 259) of his ways she expresses her inability to agree with him. Miriam’s words convey her sense of isolation from Moses as well as her antagonism towards Anath who had cared for him. Grazia’s betrayal, though her evasions on the subject initially strike the hearer as an inability to visualize Cesare’s sufferings.
Language in the plays cannot be dismissed as a mere “wanton prancing of words.” It is functional as it is self-revelatory, exposing the state of mind of the characters. This helps in the understanding of the characters by the audience. Characteristically the verse is pliant and charged, as it expresses in full measure the tension undergone by the characters, in short, life experienced at full pressure. Fry also demonstrates that language and hence communication is a necessary and effective means to nullify in degrees the phenomenon of alienation. Unlike the plays of the Absurd Theatre, where the alienated characters undergo the inability, Fry’s characters resort to communication which becomes a help in freeing themselves from the state of isolation. Fry’s comic vision being what it is, language and verse of this order is vita, else it would fail to communicate the sense of wonder of life.

Though Raymond Williams charges Fry’s plays of being “an embellished kind of minor comedy… often verbally exasperating” and Donoghue charges the dramatist of “verbal flippancy”, Fry’s own belief that writers can trust their voices with blank verse, according to themselves helps to counter these charges as also his comment on the need for poetry in the theatre which states that the flight of poetry from the theatre between the Jacobean and the Restoration eras was due to the accent of life shifting from the adventuring soul to the body and God a magnet attracting the steel of the spirit declined in the minds of men to the absentee boas of a welfare states. Fry’s use of verse in thus irrevocably linked with his awareness and appreciation of the miracle of life.

The study of Fry’s plays proves that Fry is aware of the phenomenon of alienation and its effects on man. With Fry’s background of Christian faith and belief in the will of Providence, the plays expose his persuasion that existential alienation can be overcome
by an act of faith, love and commitment. This is traced in his plays as a movement from
darkness to light. Fry cannot be condemned as a facile optimist for as he himself says
“good and evil are an infernal optimist for as he himself says try to unravel them.” The
way out of alienation is not easy for it enjoins the individual to accept the responsibility
of making a commitment. Fry’s comic vision is made clear in the plays through the
theme of movement from near tragedy to comedy, through the structure and the use of
appropriate verse and metaphors buoyant and often startling, rousing the audience to a
state of awareness so necessary to learn of the splendour of life.

It must be accepted that there was a fading of the intitial enthusiasm that Fry’s
plays with their sparkling wit and humour evoked. The modern audience could identify
more easily with the plays of the Absurd theatre which presented the aloneness and
isolation of individuals in more terrifying detail and in the language of an ominous
silence. But it cannot be denied that Fry who witnessed both World Wars, is very
conscious of the dangers that fragmentation can cause to the soul of man. However he
believes in man’s essential goodness and ability to mock back at despair. That is why the
rhetoric and humour in the plays, which contribute to comedy, simultaneously suggest
deeper levels of meaning. Fry is thus a “writerly writer” assigning the receiver not the
role of an inert consumer but one of going beyond the writing. Fry’s sense of
commitment is best explained in the words of Charles Gordon Clark: “The poet and
dramatist who many years ago made a character say that life was ‘all shapes of shapes
and shades of shades’ is a better guide through the wilderness than many who would lead
the Church from traditional positions of authority” (452).
At a time when it may be the fashion or the inclination to support the theory of the fully autonomous and forget the Divine, the chances are that a writer of Fry’s belief and purpose is dismissed as a facile optimist whose works are mere experimentations with words, as has been done. But it must be borne in mind that the belief in an act of faith or commitment is not Fry’s belief alone, as has been proved in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis. If Absurd drama can bear witness to the nothingness of man and the void he faces, and survive, the plays of Fry which assert than man can yet be everything, deserve a revaluation, and can stand the test of time. With gentle insistence Fry gives the assurance of light at the end of the tunnel. Fry’s plays are indeed a witness to the mystery of life.