Christopher Fry's Dramatic Work - The Background.

(a). The purpose and pattern of the present inquiry.

(b). Modern Drama and Christopher Fry.

(c). Influences on Christopher Fry and his art.
   (1). Biographical.
   (2). Literary.
   (3). Philosophical.
The purpose and pattern of the present inquiry.

The purpose of the present inquiry is to evaluate Christopher Fry's contribution to British Drama. As his dramatic work has not so far been discussed in sufficient depth and detail, this study is a modest attempt in this direction. It also seeks to offer a reevaluation of Fry as a dramatist, since it is necessary to dispel certain commonly held misconceptions about Fry, such as that he is merely a juggler with words or that he is only a minor religious dramatist. Fry's published plays are ten in number—the religious festival plays: The Boy With a Cart (1939); Thax, with Angels (1948), and A Sleep of Prisoners (1951); five comedies: A Phoenix Too Frequent (1946), The Lady's Not for Burning (1949), Venus Observed (1950), The Dark Is Light Enough (1954), and A Yard of Sun (1970); a tragedy: The Firstborn (1946); and a history play: Courtseal (1961).

Though these plays have received considerable critical attention, Christopher Fry has been rather unlucky in his critics. He has been usually dismissed as a 'word-smith' and his plays have mostly been relegated to the genre of religious drama. But a closer scrutiny of his work reveals that Fry is a thinker and a dramatist with a serious and coherent world-view. He is mainly interested in man and life—so much so that he can be considered primarily as a secular dramatist and his plays mainly secular in outlook, even when he handles ostensibly religious themes. He celebrates life and its potentialities in all his plays. Particularly after the war when man appeared to lose interest in life and was almost carried away by a death-wish, Fry emphasized time and again the need to accept and affirm life. One of his characters says,
"I want to live,
even
If it's like a louse on the back of a sheep, skewering
Into the wool away from the beaks of crows,
Even like a limpet on a sour rock
I want to live."

Another character of his says,

"I'll not die to oblige anybody
Nor for the sake of keeping up
decent appearances. Before I do
I'll get down on all fours, foot-kissing
dust-licking, belly-crawling
And any worm can have me for an equal
Rather than I should have no life at all."

Through these characters Fry seems to pour out his own unshakable faith in life. One can even say that it is an apotheosis of life.

These lines remind one of Walt Whitman's poem Song of Myself in which he states,

"In me the carresser of life wherever moving, backward as well as forward sluing,
To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or object missing.

Absorbing all to myself and for this song.3

This is an equally joyous celebration of life. Fry, as a lover of life is committed to living. He feels that whatever may be the ugliness connected with life, it must be lived. He knows that in this world, "There sleep hypocrisy, porosity, greed, lust, vulgarity, cruelty, trickery, sham and all possible nitwittedry."4

But he still feels that 'something condones the world, incorrigibly'.5 He tries to define the creative pattern of life, endeavours to explain the reality behind the appearances and demonstrates a compassionate acceptance of life. What one finds in his plays is nothing short of a lyrical affirmation of life almost similar to that of Dylan Thomas's pantheistic view of life in his poem Fern Hill, where he says, "Time held me green and dying Though I sang in my chains like a sea."6

Fry has usually been pigeon-holed as a religious dramatist.

5. Ibid., p.190.
An attempt has been made in the following chapters to show that he is basically a secular dramatist and that all his plays are essentially secular in outlook. Even his religious-festival plays, viz., The Firstborn, Thor, with Angels and A Sleep of Prisoners aim at showing the glory of life and the efficacy of good in the world. Though they ostensibly deal with Biblical themes, in them also Fry offers, a positive and joyous affirmation and assertion of life based on the belief that life is good and meaningful and that with all the hardships besetting it, it is worth living.

Fry's affirmation of life and its celebration in his plays assumes various forms: viz., his zest for life and the sheer joy of being alive; his presentation of love (love of various types—love between man and woman, parents and children, love of animals, etc.); his rejoicing at faith as a means of asserting life; his enjoyment of nature; his interest in human nature and its oddities, and finally, the pleasure he takes in handling the language. All these have been dealt with elaborately in the next chapter.

The plays of Fry present a vision of hope, rejecting cynicism, a vision of love eschewing hatred and a vision of life triumphing over death and destruction. He celebrates man's capacity to endure, to overcome obstacles and to perpetuate life under all circumstances. Comedy celebrates man's capacity to live and tragedy man's capacity to suffer. Comedy and tragedy are complementary and hence inseparable.
That is perhaps why when Fry thinks of comedy it first appears to him as tragedy, as he himself says, "I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as a tragedy." His comedy is an escape into faith, stressing the importance of life. His drama explores Man and life and affirms the power of good. An endeavour is made in these pages to focus attention on this neglected aspect of Fry and study his drama from this point of view. A thoroughly intensive study of Fry's themes and techniques is made in the forthcoming chapters with a view to determining the point of view of the playwright and establishing him as a secular dramatist with a serious and coherent world-view, with a deep faith in Man and life.

In the forthcoming sections of the chapter it is proposed to discuss Modern drama in general and Christopher Fry in particular and the various influences that have shaped his drama.

*******

(b). Modern Drama and Christopher Fry.

Before embarking upon a study of Christopher Fry's plays it is necessary to examine what he thought of modern drama, since this would provide a useful basis for assessing his own work.

Modern drama is a mixture of several forms. There is no one form that dominates it. One can see several experiments in naturalism, expressionism and realism and in poetic drama. There is a perplexing variety of influences, styles and forms. Commenting on this, Allardyce Nicoll in his essay 'Somewhat in a New Dimension', points out that "a prime feature of the present-day theatre is the lack of any prevailing characteristic form. 'Any dramatist', Christopher Fry points out, 'is sitting down to write a play two hundred or three hundred years ago would not have had to give very much thought to how he would approach the stage. The form and the manner were already there to be taken up and used. His whole attention could be given to letting his talent use them. But now he may set off in a dozen or more directions. The plays of Shaw, Brecht, Tennessee Williams, Eliot, Rattigan, Giraudoux are unlike each other in a way that the plays of Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh and Arquhar were not.' (From Introduction to John Hall- The Lizard on the Rock.) In his comparison between the position of the young playwright to-day and his predecessor several hundred years ago Fry is entirely correct."

So a modern dramatist has to struggle against heavy odds, since there is no set and commonly accepted form readily available to him for use. Many dramatists of our age have made experiments with form and medium and Christopher Fry is no exception to it. As Allardyce Nicoll says, "Eliot, Fry, Yeats, Synge and Auden and Isherwood were important figures who attempted to revive poetic drama. Each succeeded in his own way." The most interesting development in the drama of the 1930s was poetic drama, and many dramatists tried their hand at it. Referring to these dramatists, G.S. Fraser observes, "The attempts of T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, G.S. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood and a number of other writers to revive the verse drama, to give it a topical and popular impact deserve great respect, however limited we may now judge their ultimate success to have been." 

Poetic drama of the present century projects the modern dilemma and its numerous implications. Whether it is Eliot or Yeats or Auden and Isherwood, or Fry—all of them aimed at giving expression to the ethos of the modern age. In his plays Eliot brings out the spiritual hollowness of the modern world and the loss of moral


standards and suggests his own solution by making his protoganists
aware of the danger of a totally motorialistic view of life. Yeats
tries, through poetic drama, to remind the people of Ireland of
their past heroic age, and hence his escape into the Irish legends
and the Cuchulain myth. Auden with his two imaginary countries
Ostania and Westland— one representing a decaying democracy and
the other a Fascist state— lashes at the condition of the modern
world in general and Europe in particular, a solution being sought
in socialism. But in his world-view Fry differs from all these
major modern verse dramatists. Fry expresses his powerful vision
of existence which is 'broad and diffused'. In his plays Fry too
brings out the contemporary atmosphere of restlessness and
boredom, disillusionment and uncertainty. Thus he holds a mirror
to the modern age and the modern man with his dilemmas but he
always unequivocally suggests that life is for living and expresses
his strong faith in Man and human life.
Influences on Christopher Fry and his art

The various influences that have probably shaped Fry's mind and art can be broadly divided into three categories, namely biographical, literary and philosophical.

1. Biographical influences:

Christopher Fry was born in Bristol on 18 December, 1897 and at a very early age was unlucky to lose his father, who was an Anglican lay-preacher. Commenting on this, Derek Stanford says, "Fry, who was only three at his death, retained deep and powerful impressions of his father. The faith and personality of his parent had always meant much to him and constituted a kind of subconscious ideal; it is possible that those filial emotions are reflected in his early work The Boy with a Cart."

For, the father of the future St. Cuthman (the hero of the play) dies when the boy is still young and his son's words upon him paint a vivid tender portrait. Possible too, is the relationship between the missionary urgency of certain Fry's compositions (The Firstborn, Thor, With Angels and A Sleep of Prisoners) and his father's example. While Stanford seems to be overstating the case when he talks about the 'missionary urgency' of some of Fry's plays, it is true that filial emotion has been effectively portrayed in The Boy with a Cart. Cuthman after hearing the news of the death of his father, bursts out with sorrow.

How can I keep
Face with a pain that comes in my head so fast
How did I make the day brittle to break?
What sin brought in the strain, the ominous knock,
The gaping seam? was it a boast on the rock.
The garrulous? what have I done to him
Father, if you are standing by to help me
Help me to cry"12

Perhaps while writing these lines, Fry might have been prompted by a filial feeling, though of course, one must remember that literature is always something more than mere autobiography.

Derek Stanford seems to be arguing for a totally religious upbringing for Fry when he says that "Also important in Fry's upbringing were two of his aunts both religious women, one of whom early inspired him with a love of English literature by reading the prose of Bunyan to him."13 The critic here assumes that his religious sentiments in minded aunts had influenced Fry and had inculcated certain religious sentiments in him. Perhaps this remark of Stanford has made Gerald Vassos say that "Fry was raised by his mother and an aunt both religious women- Church of England as is Fry—This background is probably in part responsible for Fry's refusal to treat the search for God as a painful and harrowing quest, but as a simple act of opening the eyes."14 But Fry himself denies his

being raised by his two religious-minded aunts. In a letter to the writer of this thesis he replies, referring to his 'A Family History'.

"It will put right for you any mistakes in the Stanford book, (I wasn't for instance, brought up by two aunts)." The theory that Fry was influenced by his religious-minded aunts has thus no basis in fact.

Referring to Fry's Quaker heritage, Stanford says, "Fry's mother was also a religious-minded woman. Although Church of England herself, she came of Quaker stocks and Fry who sent his son to a Quaker public school, has something of the Quaker about him to this day. Indeed it is probably the unusual combination of an early theatrical background within hereditary tendencies that constitutes the distinctness of his temperament." Quakerism was a new revivalism started by George Fox in Cromwell's days. C.M. Trevelyan describes it as a "tradition and a set of spiritual rules of extraordinary potency handed on from father to son, and mother to daughter in the families of friends." It is possible that Fry came, to a large extent, under the influence of his mother in the absence of his father, who died when Fry was young—because this is

a sect in which home instruction by the elders is important. In fact, the strength of the influence of the distaff side on Fry is indicated by his very surname. It is curious to note that Christopher Fry should have been called Christopher Harris, for his father's name was Charles John Harris (Charley Harris). The name 'Fry' which Christopher Fry took is from his mother's side. His grandmother belongs to a 'Fry' family. Referring to his own name, Fry says, "It was the Frys, my mother's maternal forebears rather than her father's family the Hammers, who were always talked of in my boyhood as the stock from which I had sprung, perhaps because being so faithfully to a few miles of Somerset they seemed more homogeneous; and so I came in time to take the name as my own by a kind of right." 18

The name 'Fry' comes from the word 'free'. Concerning its origin Fry says, "This proliferation of life, which in the distaff way I belong to, was first called Fry in 1262. There was a man called Roger de Barton whose son William was a serf or villain owned by Wells Cathedral. In 1262, according to the Liber Albus, the Dean and Chapter of Wells noted:

'William son of Roger de Barton,' a native of our Manor of Wyscomb has been brought into liberty from us by Thomas Corby, vicar of Wyscombe. He and his are free'. There must, I imagine, have been

something promising about William to encourage the vicar so to spend his money. From that time forward he and his descendents were known as le Fraye, the free men. His sons, all tenants of the parish of Winscombe, were called Adas le Fraye, Martin le Fraye, and William le Fraye. Since there is a succession of Williams in every generation of the family from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century I take the last of these three to be the true begetter of the line which led to my grandmother Emma. 19

And in connection with his Quaker heritage, Fry himself says, "I was brought up believing the Frays were Quakers, and certainly if there is anything I have always 'felt in the blood and felt along the heart', it is this. Perhaps at some time they were, I'm reluctant to deny it after living with the belief so long and so compatibly, but the evidence is slight." 20 Commenting on this sect, Trevelyan further says, "The finer essence of George Fox's Quaker teaching common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples and the 'quiet' Friends of later times, was surely this— that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas. So church or sect had ever made that its living rule before... To maintain the Christian quality in the world of business and of domestic life..."


20. Ibid., p. 17.
and to maintain it without pretension or hypocrisy was the
great achievement of these extraordinary people. The Quakers
attach much importance to practising the Christian qualities in
real life rather than to dogmas. This is precisely the idea in the
concluding lines of Fry's _Thor, with Angels._

"We are afraid
To live by rule of God, which is forgiveness
Mercy and compassion, fearing that by these
We shall be ended—and yet if we could bear
These three through dread and terror and terror's doubt
Daring to return good for evil without thought
Of what will come, I cannot think
We shall be the losers."

Thus Fry's Quaker upbringing also explains his emphasis on the
importance of living a good life in the light of Christian princi-
pies and regarding religion not as a life-denying but a life-giving
force. The influence of his religious-minded parents is seen in
his plays with religious motifs and background like _Thor, with A-
Angels, The Boy with a Cart, The Firstborn_ and _A Sleeper of Prisoners._
In _Thor, with Angels_ the coming of St. Augustine to Briton and
the christianising of Briton in the fifth century form part of the
theme. The story of Moses and the four Biblical parables, namely

---

the killing of Abel by Cain, the stories of David and Absalom and Isaac and Abraham and the experience of Abednego, Shadrach and Meshach in the furnace—form the core of The Firstborn and A SLEEP OF PRISONERS respectively. The stories taken from The Exodus, the Genesis, Samuel and Daniel reflect Fry's interest in theological and Biblical motifs. God, the Holy Trinity, Original Sin, the Doomsday, the Dove representing peace—all these appear in his plays. In A SLEEP OF PRISONERS, Adams asks Meadows,

"You cockeyed son

Of heaven, how did you get here?"22 almost meaning and reflecting the idea of the Son of God coming down to earth to save men. But the point one has to note here is that though these plays have ostensibly religious themes, they are not 'religious drama' in the narrow sense of the term, since they have no sectarian axe to grind, no didacticism to offer and no life-renunciation to preach. They are essentially plays which stress the importance of living, of which faith is seen to be a significant aspect.

Fry's experience as an actor and director helped him to a large extent in shaping his plays. In 1934 he joined the Repertory players at Tunbridge Wells where he both acted and directed and he is to have played the male lead in the PREMIERE of Bernard Shaw's

A Village Roofer. In 1940 he became the director of the Oxford Playhouse. He got his training more from the stage than from the library or the study room, a characteristic which he shares with a greater dramatist like Shakespeare. This first-hand experience of the dramatic medium helped him to achieve a spontaneity and immediacy of expression, making his plays dramatically more alive than those of some of his contemporaries.

In the last days of his father, his family moved house twice, first to the top of Ashley Hill, and then down the hill again to save his ailing father. After his father's death, Fry lived for some time with his grandparents in Homedale and later, after a short interval at Gillingham, settled in Bedford with his mother and aunt Ada. It is quite likely that the landscape and the village in which he lived have enriched his sensibility and his imagination. Commenting on this Stanford observes, "There were .... certain items in the landscape for which Fry felt affinity and which seemed as I thought to nourish his mind with a kind of mythological pabulum . . . . All I wish to suggest, just here is that from his association with barrow, Fry has perhaps gained a deeper awareness of the long mysterious lineage of man. In a similar way, there are other features belonging to the village in which the poet lives that very possibly feed and strengthen indigenous aspects of his imagination."23

Stanford adds, "As we sat talking on that high sunny hillside, I thought how naturally the poet and the landscape merged to produce one single impression, which I shall endeavour to describe. The features of both were generally serene and rich in possibility. The lines of thought about the poet's face were answered by the forms of the landscape which seemed to promise a variety of moods returning always to its own 'still centre'."  

One of Fry's boyhood experiences with his aunt Ada also throws light on his view of religion and life and their inter-connections. Once he showed her the first scene of a play he was writing then called Amenadon. To quote him: "I had made one of the characters in my play say, 'By God,' or perhaps 'Good God,' and Ada anxiously reproved me for using the Name in vain. When she herself used the word it was said on a breathy with a slight tremble as though her vocal cords were genuflecting. Bodily genuflection was too High Church to be contemplated, except an almost imperceptible lowering of the head during the Creed. I was impatient of the airless, text-ridden nature of her beliefs, which it seemed so far from the invocation of 'God is spirit and we must worship him in the spirit and in truth'; and yet I had an uneasy respect for, a feeling unworded at the time, that even though so narrowly interpreted it was a deeper

valuation of life than belief in a progression of accidents, a phenomenal opportunism beginning nowhere or than the evasive obtuseness of Isn't-Nature-Wonderful?25 This deeper valuation of life, this apparently cheerful acceptance of what life offers and even this view of religion as a life-giving force instead of a life-deny ing one— those ideas and feelings perhaps grew stronger as Pry's career progressed.

2. Literary Influences.

It is also possible to trace certain prominent literary influences in Fry's dramatic work. But though he was influenced by many writers, the stamp of individuality is perceptible in every line that he wrote and his plays do not show evidence of the profound impact of any single writer.

T.S. Eliot, Charles Williams, the Elizabethan dramatists in general and Shakespeare in particular, the Romantics and Bernard Shaw—these are the few writers that seem to have influenced Fry's work.

Modern Drama particularly after the Second World War, is to a large extent influenced by Eliot. To put it in the words of Akhiloshwar Jha: "To say that Fry began writing plays under Eliot's influence is to state the commonplace. The unexpectedly tremendous success of Murder in the Cathedral in 1935 had its impact as a liberating force on many budding post-dramatists of the thirties and Fry was no exception."26 The early plays of Christopher Fry clearly show the influence of Eliot. Fry himself called his The Boy with a Cart an exercise in Eliot's style. For example, in the chorus 'The people of South England', one can trace the influence of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral.

---

"Out of this, out of the first incision
Of mortality on mortality, there comes
The genuflexion, and the partition of pain
Between man and God; there grows the mutual action
The perspective to the vision."27 The sharp imagery and the thought here clearly reflect Eliot. Even in the final chorus one can see traces of Eliot again.

Between
Our birth and death we may touch understanding
As moth brushes window with its wing
Who shall question then
Why we lean our bicycle against a hedge
And go into the house of God?"28

Eliot's influence could provide Fry with a poetic idiom for expressing religious themes as noted by Achileswar Jha. Rudolf Steen further traces Eliot's influence in A Sleep of Prisoners. He says "In his post-war plays Fry has freed himself from the direct influence of Eliot but in A Sleep of Prisoners, it is stronger again. Its language is unusually severe and subdued for Fry and some of its rhythms are clearly Eliotian... A passage from the end of the play will illustrate this:

28. Ibid., p.46.
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 floods,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart spring,
Thank God our time is now then wrong
Comes up to face us every where,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul man ever took;
Affairs are now soul size
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.  

The obvious influence of Eliot in the moulding of his verse can be seen here. Though the influence of Eliot is clear in his early plays, in the later plays Fry differs from him both in form and language and he asserts his individuality. Eliot advocates an almost spartan sparseness in the language and use of words, and follows an ascetic rule of keeping the language on a 'thin diet' where as Fry differs from Eliot. Commenting on this Rudolf Steamm points out that, "Eliot has stated himself that so far his work

as a dramatist has consisted in preparing the field for a new type of play. It seems that Christopher Fry began his dramatic career very much in the way Eliot had begun his; as a writer of plays for special occasions. . . . . . While the master laboured to disguise the difference between his plays and the average West End production the pupil decided to be different with a vengeance. . . . . . In choosing his own tactics he asserted his individuality and revealed a dramatic talent quite different from Eliot's."30 Thus, though he came under the influence of Eliot early in his career, Fry absorbed that influence and soon asserted his individuality, particularly in his presentation of life, in his view of religion as a life-giving force, in his glorification of life, and in his joy in handling the language.

As Derek Stanford rightly points out, one can trace the influence of Charles Williams on Fry also, particularly in his use of internal rhyme and controlled alliteration. This can be seen in his chorus in The Roy with a Cart.

F. R. Fitzgerald, in his essay, The Verse Plays of Christopher Fry31 tries to fit the plays of Christopher Fry into the pattern of Georgian verse drama. Among features of Georgian verse drama that he notes are that it contains a semi-mythical subject and no dramatic interaction and is marked by the appearance of a queen mother or a queen mother and further points out that Fry has introduced

31. World Review, April, 1952.
such a figure into *The Lady's not for Burning* and *The Firstborn*. But these characters in the plays are only minor figures. So Fitzgerald's attempt to trace a Georgian parallel for them is not fully convincing.

It is possible to trace the Elizabethan influence, particularly that of Shakespeare and Marlowe in Fry's plays. Commenting on this Stanford points out, "I recognize of course, the Elizabethan note, the full-blown verbal abundance of those plays, but equally well, I saw that Fry was in no wise attempting to reanimate the spiritual world of the Elizabethans. Although his language might seem to reproduce the colours of Marlowe and Beaumont and Fletcher, his interests, motives were other than theirs." [32]

The influence of Elizabethan verse drama is very much perceptible in Fry's plays; its gusto, its vigour and abundant magniloquence, its full-blown verbal abundance, its language full of conceits, its self-conscious metaphors, its unrestrained flow of poetic images, its splendour of phrase and the dialogue—all these are very much in evidence in the plays of Fry.

It is this Elizabethan abundance that was partly responsible for the success of Fry, particularly after World War-II. As Frederick namely says, "Indeed it is for such a bacchanalia of words and thesaurus of fine phrases have not been heard in our language-starved theatre for many a long century. No wonder at the

---

enthusiasm of the rejoicing, the sincerity that made many compare
his plays with the tradition of the Elizabethan masters. It
proved that there was a large public ready to support any worth
while attempt to find a way towards poetry and imagination."33
Almost expressing a similar idea, Ifor Evans comments that "It is
important to remember that these years immediately after the war
were notable for a number of most distinguished Shakespearean
revivals, the glamour of the settings and the magnificence of the
verse seemed in complete contrast with the dreariness that had been
imposed on civilian life by war conditions... Fry's success was
largely due to the fact that he seemed the living and contemporary
counterpart to all this obscurity."34 It is possible to trace
certain similarities between Fry and Shakespeare, though not to a
large extent but in a limited manner. Fry's plays bear similarities
with the plays of Shakespeare in verse, in language and themes.
As Alder Jacob points out, "the romantic verse comedies of
Shakespeare and Christopher Fry are in the same tradition.......
Frequently similarities are quite specific. The plot of The Lady's
not for Burning, is a case of Much Ado About Nothing and that of
Venus Observed, a case of Love's Labour's Lost. Fry's borrowings

33. Frederick Lumley, Trends in 20th Century Drama (London, 1946),
p. 214.
34. Ifor Evans, A Short History of English Drama (London, 1950),
p. 193.
from Shakespeare are ominously appropriate because of the genre in which the two worked and because 'Shakespeare's (romantic comedies)' have the sort of vision which probably most nearly approximates Fry's. 35

Like many plays of Shakespeare, Fry's plays too attain a universal significance. Fry uses the Shakespearean device of placing the microcosm of human life in relation to macrocosmic events. This can be seen in Venus Observed where the action takes place on two levels. Shakespeare's early comedies like Love's Labour's Lost and Two Gentlemen of Verona are full of conceits and verbal parodies. This playful and fantastic wealth of language can be seen in Fry's early comedies, namely A Phoenix Too Frequent and The Lady's not for Burning. J.C. Trewin notes that "In The Lady's not for Burning he has an Elizabethan splendour of phrase and the dialogue is so closely-textured that in performance it is next to impossible to appreciate it all at a single hearing." 36 Referring to The Lady's not for Burning Fry himself says, "I set out to write a play which would be first cousin to an artificial comedy." 37 and

he definitely shows his individuality by expressing in them
a world view which is characteristic of him.

Talking about Fry, R.A. Scott-James almost sums up in a few
sentences the influence of Shakespeare. "This impassioned reflection
mingled with puckish humour, this flow of poetic images which
starts from the direct impact of life, this seriousness and these
concepts, this tenderness for the foibles of human nature, where do
they spring from if not from the fountain head in Shakespeare?
Prospero waves his wand; the Duke of Altair his telescope." 39
All this suggests how Fry tried to reanimate the English drama
with Elizabethan splendour of phrase, with exploratory and
suggestive use of language.

Marius Bovlot in his essay, "The Verse of Christopher Fry" 39
raises a single voice of dissent. He compares the verse of
Christopher Fry with that of Marlowe just to show that Fry has
failed in imitating Marlowe. He deplores the very word 'Elizabethan'
being used in connection with Fry. He feels that Thomas Nendip in
The Lady's not for Burning is only Jaques lifted out of the Forest
of Arden and if the critics feel that this is Elizabethan then it
is an unhappy use of the word word. One cannot possibly accept this

38. R.A. Scott-James, Fifty Years of English Literature (1900-1950)
view for after a close scrutiny one finds a sea of difference between the philosophy of Jaques and that of Thomas Mendip. While referring to Fry's verse Bewley says, "To sum up the characteristics of these plays, they are written in verse thoroughly lacking in style, whether one interprets 'style' in a tightly critical or in a loosely fashionable way. Under the surface smartness the verse is thoroughly conventional and academic. It has, it is true, an appearance of originality but this is partly because this kind of verse fell into such absolute neglect after the first War that most theatre-goers have forgotten that verse dramas with high-pressure poetry were once highly esteemed, if not widely produced in this country. Both Venus Observed and The Lady's not for Burning are pretenders to a distinction which neither possess." Bewley is certainly less than fair to Fry here. A close scrutiny of the verse of Fry reveals, as will be shown later, that Fry 'kept his words to the purpose' in the sense that he used words with all seriousness and tried to give expression to his world-view and to his conception of life. Bewley seems to have judged the plays of Fry with a preconceived notion that his verse is ornamental. When one compares the verse of Fry with that of Marlowe, one should not be blind to the fact that the dramatist, while reviving the Elizabethan splendour

of phrase, is also trying to keep it nearer to the contemporary rhythms too. Bewley further says, "The surface of his poetry is exasperatingly unyielding to any inner movement. The ingredients of almost any passage from his later plays boil down to the same things: a cynicism too youthful and exhibitionistic to be disturbingly bitter; the ability to flatter the rather sappy contemporary audience, whose real taste is for whimsicality, with the suggestion that in his poetry they have graduated into an appreciation of something really sophisticated or highbrow; an extreme narrowness of emotional range which monotonously repeats its tones and tricks with the good effect that every one can settle back in, the comfortable knowledge of what will be expected from them in the way of response." A closer look at the verse of Fry definitely disproves what Bewley says, because for Fry verse is not simply a colourful medium of expression but an instrument to articulate a coherent world view. Apart from this, if the youthful cynicism is disturbingly bitter, it is nothing but a reflection of the then prevailing mood of Europe after the war. Bewley's condemnation of Fry is thus undeserved.

It has been pointed out that the drama of Bernard Shaw has also had a perceptible impact on the plays of Christopher Fry. R.C. Churchill remarks that, "Fry himself has described Eliot as

41. Marius Bewley, pp.31-32.
his master, but in reality he has two masters and this perhaps is the most encouraging thing about him... Eliot is the main influence behind *The Boy with a Cart* (1939), *The Firstborn* (1946), *The Lady's not for Burning* (1949), and *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951).

Show's influence predominated in that entertaining one-act play *A Phoenix too Frequent* (1949) and perhaps also in *Venus Observed* (1950) and *The Dark Is Light Enough* (1954)... Fry is a minor poet who has nevertheless learnt from Shaw and from his own stage experience how to write plays which are more dramatically alive than Eliot's.**42** What he points out is that Fry learnt from Shaw to write plays that are dramatically alive on the stage. Then Churchill says that Show's influence is seen in the plays *A Phoenix too Frequent, Venus Observed and The Dark Is Light Enough* he might be meaning that like Shaw Fry too gives us something similar to the Shawian drama of ideas.

It is possible to see certain similarities between Shaw's theory of the Life-Force and Fry's view of life. Both dramatists are great 'careers of life'. But Shaw's Life-Force is a kind of spiritual reality pushing the human race upwards—a kind of a dynamic impulse which employs women as its agent. One sees Shaw struggling hard to reconcile the two contradictory strains in his temperament— one, a highly practical and utilitarian strain, and

---

the other, an imaginative and artistic one. Shaw seems sees the Life-Force as something that connects both. But Shaw’s interest in ideas and his passion for discussion result in his characters becoming merely puppets in the hands of the dramatist. Like Shaw, Fry too believes in Life’s inescapable hold on man, but he differs from him in that he is not interested in intellectual discussion for its own sake. Showing a far more imaginative and poetic awareness of life, he makes his characters live life fully, instead of merely making them his mouth-pieces. Fry believes in every individual’s intensive participation in life, whereas in Shaw, the Life-Force operates in human affairs in order to improve it, and one gets an impression that individual men and women are only being used as its instruments.

Furthermore, the wit of Shaw is mainly dry, ironic and satirical, whereas that of Fry is exuberant and rich with imaginative flights. For example, in Man and Superman, Tammie speaking of marriage says: "Marriage is to me apostasy, profanation of the sanctuary of my soul; violation of my manhood, sale of my birthright, shameful surrender, ignominious capitulation, acceptance of defeat. I shall decay like a thing that has served its purpose and is done with; I shall change from a man with a future to a man with a past; I shall see in the greasy eyes of all the
other husbands their relief at the arrival of a new prisoner to
share their ignominy. The young men will scorn me as one who has
sold out to the women I, who have always been an enigma and a
possibility, shall be merely somebody else’s property— and damaged
goods at that; a secondhand man at best.43 The whole passage is
no doubt witty but dry at the same time.

In The Lady’s not for Burning, Thomas Mendip talking of love,
leading ultimately to marriage, says to Jennet,

"All right, you’ve done your worst. You force me to tell you
the disastrous truth. I love you. A misadventure
so intolerable, hell could not do more.
Nothing in the world could touch me
And you have to come and be the damnable
Exception. I was nicely tucked up for the night
of eternity, and like a restless dream
Of a fool’s paradise, you, with a rainbow where
Your face is and an ignis fatuus
Worn like a rose in your girdle, come pursued
By fire, and presto; the bedclothes are on the floor
And I, the tomfool, love you. Don’t say again
That this doesn’t concern me, or I shall say
That you needn’t concern yourself with to-morrow’s burning."44

In both the plays, the protagonists act contrary to what they say. Turner in Man and Superman marries in the end though he speaks of marriage disapprovingly. So also Thomas Mendip in The Lady's not for Burning loves Jennet though he that loving is an intolerable misadventure. Both the dramatists are witty but Fry is far more imaginative and poetic though his wit is equally sharp.

One can also observe the influence of Myth, legend and medieval practices in Fry's plays—a fact which demonstrates his affinities with the Romantics. Myth, as Tillyard puts it, is not just a legend but a story or event that has become a communal possession, the agreed and classic embodiment of a way of feeling or thinking, "the universal instinct of any human group, large or small, to invent almost always, unconsciously certain stories or events or places or persons real or fictional with an uncommon significance to turn them into instinctive centre of reference."45 This is what one finds in many of the plays of Fry. A myth like that of the phoenix, a legend like the Becket story, a medieval practice like that of witchcraft or stories of the distant past like that of St. Augustine spreading Christianity—these elements establish the connection hereo with the tradition of Romanticism. When one reads

lines like,

"What is rustling in the grass?
What shakes in the tree? What is hiding in
The shadow? And Cuthman said God is there
God is waiting with us."46 one is reminded of Wordsworth's pantheism.

Thus, one can trace the influences of Eliot, the Elizabethan
dramatists, Charles Williams, Bernard Shaw and the Romantics in Fry's
drama. But it is a measure of his stature as a dramatist that Fry
has absorbed all these influences and evolved a dramatic idiom
all his own.

3. Philosophical Influences.

It is also possible to trace the influence of existentialism in Fry's plays. The different ideas generally emphasized by the modern existentialists are knowledge, sense of good and evil, insecurity, fear, anxiety and search for a way out. Man in the 20th Century particularly after the wars has become intensely aware of these issues. As Frederick Mayer points out, "The philosophy of existentialism has become extremely popular since World War II. It is representative of the disillusionment and the wasteland feeling which the war created. More than ever the individual must find renewed meaning with in himself and he cannot appeal to special utopias for a magic solution to his problems." This feeling is reflected very much in literature particularly after World War II, and one can observe the impact of this on the dramatic work of Fry. To the question, "Would you accept the view that there are traces of existential thought in your plays?" he replied that "There are many kinds of existentialism, but in so far as I believe in individual search ("It is the individual man/ in his individual freedom who can mature/ with his warm spirit the unripe world.") and not in generalisations and labels. Yes. But the Sartrean philosophy that man only exists when he has made himself exist is nonsense. (Soket: what a man knows he has by experience. But what a man is proceeds experience.) 48 This clearly brings out his idea of


48. Christopher Fry, "Personal Correspondence", April 10, 1975, *vide, Appendix I.*
existentialism. In Sartre's existential thought which is atheistic, freedom occupies a central place. Man is condemned to be free, and Man alone exists. But Christian existentialism differs here. Fry, who strongly believes in the existence of God, can never reconcile himself to Sartrean philosophy. He observes in Curtmatle that

"What a man knows he has by experience/ But what a man is proceeds experience" (319). Fry strongly believes in the individual's search to free himself from sorrow and suffering. This search has distinct philosophical overtones. As Radhakrishnan in another context says, "This feeling of distress is universal. A sense of blankness over-takes the seeking spirit which makes the world as a waste and life as a vain show. Man is not the final resting place. He has to be transcended. Man can free himself from sorrow and suffering by becoming aware of the eternal. This awareness, this enlightenment in what is called Jana or bodhi." 49 Man must be aware of the eternal. This distress and the blankness that he experiences in the world make him feel that the world is a waste but still one has to try to free oneself from sorrow and suffering. This, to some extent influences the characters of Fry. In many of the plays of Fry, one sees the protagonists making an endeavour to become aware of the

eternal. Cyran in Thor, with Angles, when struck with some strange power unknown to him, says,

"I'll ask the louse

In the filthy shirt of a corpse in the bottom of a ditch
If I can learn what it is I've learnt to dread
I lay on my bed and felt it stand with its feet
Planted on either side of my heart, and I looked
Up the tower of its body to find the face
To know if it meant to help or hinder
But it was blotted out by a shield of thunder,
Am I to sacrifice without end and then
Be given no peace? The skirts of the gods
Drug in our mud. We feel the touch
And take it to be a kiss. But they see we soil them
And twitch themselves away. Name to me
What mocked me with a mood of mercy and therefore
Defeat. Who desired that?\(^\text{50}\) Perhaps the violence which

his gods, Thor and Valhalla, preach may represent the modern violence of the war. He learns at last to get the 'courage to exist in God.' So also the Duke in Venus Observed, after his observatory getting burnt in flames, cleanses himself as though in purgatorial

\(^{50}\) Thor, with Angles, Plays (London, 1977), p.82.
flames and arrives at a sort of understanding of the eternal, where
the song is quiet and quiet/is the song. So too do the characters
in A Sleep of Prisoners and The Dark Is Light Enough. Dynamos in
A Phoenix too Frequent and Thomas Mandip in The Lady's not Far
Burning with their death-wish and existential dilemmas somehow come
to terms with themselves and arrive at an understanding of life, a
basic necessity to understand the eternal. Many of the characters
of Fry can be interpreted in this light. Fry strongly believes that
man cannot find himself without faith in life and that man's exist-
ence demands a definite understanding of life with a faith which may
later lead to an awareness of the eternal. One of his basic themes
is man's enigmatic existence and his attempts to adjust himself
to this world; the existential influence is to a large extent
responsible for ideas like these. Fry's depiction of the horror,
the despair of life is closely related to existentialism and many
of his themes are considerably coloured by existential thought.
Thus, though one can trace the influences of the Elisabethans, Alist
Shaw, Existentialism, Christian theological and Biblical motifs
and Quakerism in Fry's writings, his plays are the expression of an
authentic personal vision and reflect his ideas and approach to
the world and life, man and existence, mystery and revelation. His
individuality is perceptible in every line that he wrote and this
is the mark of an original talent.