THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

FORMAL EXPERIMENTS IN MODERN VERSE DRAMA

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

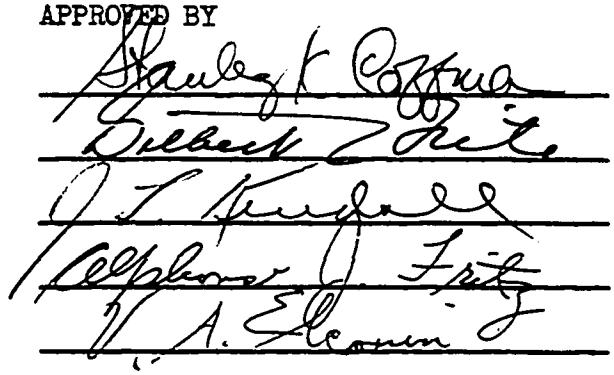
DONNA L. GERSTENBERGER

Norman, Oklahoma

1958

FORMAL EXPERIMENTS IN MODERN VERSE DRAMA

APPROVED BY



DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my debt to Dr. Stanley K. Coffman, Jr., the director of this dissertation, for his many comments, suggestions, and helpful criticisms. Dr. J. P. Pritchard, Dr. S. C. Wilcox, and Dr. Kester Svendsen of the Department of English of the University of Oklahoma have also been kind enough to read and comment on this study while it was being written. I wish to thank all members of my committee for the time and energy they have expended in my behalf.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FORMAL EXPERIMENTS IN MODERN VERSE DRAMA

CHAPTER I

PERSPECTIVES OF MODERN VERSE DRAMA

Interest in drama has been perennial among poets in every century, although since the beginning of the eighteenth century, there has been an increasing separation between the interests of the stage and the interests of a living poetic art. The results of this separation have been particularly evident in the verse theater, whereas the theater for prose has maintained an element of sensitivity to current life and art which has long been lost to the poetic drama. The development of drama in English verse after the achievements of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries reveals an ever-widening gap between the areas of concern on the stage and areas of action related to contemporary experience or to contemporary modes of apprehension, and the increasing popularity of the closet drama as a literary form argues the weakness of the tradition of the verse play in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is not until the twentieth century that a group of verse playwrights have attempted to revitalize verse drama for the stage by bringing to it the same standards of artistic coherence insisted upon in other fields of creative endeavor. In modern art this artistic coherence has ex-

pressed itself in a search for a living form: for a meaningful relationship between content, structure, and language. The conception of verse drama as a formal experience was what had been lost as a result of the increasingly rigid separation on the stage of the domain of poetry and the world of real and vital concerns.

Evidence of this separation can be found as early as the stage of the Restoration in the heroic plays of Dryden and his fellow playwrights. The tendency to relegate the use of verse to a highly specialized world had already begun, and the world of verse was increasingly becoming identified with the distant, the vague, the exotic, and the heroic. There is little need to pursue the point that the prevailing pattern for the verse play—or, to take the more inclusive term, for the poetic play—remained much the same throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even into the revival of verse drama in the early twentieth century by such diverse figures as Cale Young Rice, Gordon Bottomley, Stephen Phillips, and John Drinkwater.

In his discussion of the decline of poetic drama and of the critical confusions attendant upon the changing uses of the term, Moody Prior asserts that "poetic drama" may be used as a historical distinction "in which case it embraces the tragedies of ancient Greece, of Elizabethan England, and of seventeenth-century France, and sets these against the prevailing traditions of recent times."[1] The great dramatic periods noted by Prior were periods of formal integration for verse drama; and,

---

[1]Moody Prior, "Poetic Drama: An Analysis and a Suggestion," English Institute Essays, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 3.

having fallen far from the status it once held, such drama has become highly specialized in the popular mind: "Where the term 'poetic drama' today implies the use of verse, it usually, as a further limitation, carries the suggestion that verse calls for a particular style and language in conjunction with a particular kind of play."[1] The particular style called for is the elevated and elevating--often, as in the verse plays of Stephen Phillips, lyric or epic, not dramatic. The particular language associated with the debased verse drama is vague, heroic, often archaic in diction. The particular kind of play is one in which the outlines are generally fuzzy, the scene is remote, the characters unreal.[2] This stereotype for verse drama was underwritten by the conviction that drama in verse must be passional drama. To draw on Moody Prior's summary again:

> The discussions of the drama during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries laid the groundwork for another present-day notion, one common current form of which may be illustrated by Maxwell Anderson's statement in his essay, "Poetry in the Theatre," that "prose is the language of information and poetry the language of emotion." The association of the poet with the passions in the drama took a number of forms before it reached the simple distinction based on the differences in the use of language, between the prose dramatist and poetic dramatist which it generally assumes today.[3]

The development of poetic drama in this direction led to the use of violent actions and complicated stage effects which could be used to under-

---

[1] Ibid., p. 10.

[2] W. B. Yeats's awareness of this typical shortcoming in conventional poetic drama is reflected in his remark about the characters in George Russell's Deirdre: "All its male characters resemble Tennyson's King Arthur." ("Dramatis Personae," Autobiographies [London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1955], p. 449.)

[3] Prior, loc. cit., p. 15.

score the assumption that, as language failed, other elements could be inflated to create the conditions proper to the poetic experience.

The term "poetic drama" had come by the end of the nineteenth century to mean any anti-realistic drama, whether in verse or poetic prose, and its romanticism usually took one of two roads to escape from reality: the pseudo-historical, involving heroic figures in heroic situations; or the fantastic, involving a never-never land or symbolic searches for symbolic blue birds. Two of the best known poetic dramas of the nineties are Maeterlinck's Pelleas and Melisande and Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac. Yet both of these plays are as weak in structural significance as they are abounding in sentiment.[1] And although "poetic" prose has taken the place of verse, the same exoticism, the same distancing from contemporary meaning, the same weaknesses are present that have been increasingly identified with poetic drama since the eighteenth century. This is the tradition which accounts for the early plays of Yeats: romantic in subject matter and conventional in form and verse—always, however, innately superior in technical mastery of language.

This conventional romantic tradition continues unbroken into the mid-twentieth century in the work of playwrights like Maxwell Anderson, who, in spite of his contemporary efforts, is very little closer to be-

---

[1]T. S. Eliot's judgment that Rostand is a poetic playwright superior to Maeterlinck is based on Rostand's ability to attain occasionally artistic form for his emotional situations: "In the particular case of Cyrano on Noses, the character, the situation, the occasion were perfectly suited and combined. The tirade generated by this combination is not only genuinely and highly dramatic: it is possibly poetic also." Maeterlinck's concern is with "the emotion which cannot be expressed"; hence, his sentimentality. ("'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," Selected Essays [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950], p. 29.)

ing a modern verse dramatist than is Rostand. Although he is one of the most persistent and popular verse dramatists of the last thirty years, Anderson's work, by and large, belongs in spirit, aim, and construction to the turn-of-the-century tradition. His theory has led him to the conventional position that verse is to be used as a means of elevation and of ennobling; that the proper subject matter for verse drama, as one would expect, is remote and historic. The weaknesses and restrictions of such a view are obvious in Anderson's own comments:

> When I wrote my first play, White Desert, I wrote it in verse because I was weary of plays in prose that never lifted from the ground. It failed, and I did not come back to verse until I had discovered that poetic tragedy had never been successfully written about its own place and time. . . . With this admonition in mind I wrote Elizabeth the Queen and a succession of historical plays in verse. . . . Winterset is largely verse, and treats a contemporary tragic theme, which makes it more of an experiment than I could wish, for the great masters themselves never tried to make tragic poetry out of the stuff of their own times.[1]

In his popular versifying of Tudor-Stuart history, Maxwell Anderson's metrical theory seems to be that when writing about Elizabethans, one should write like them; at any rate, the over-all pattern of his lines is Elizabethan blank verse, although as one critic has pointed out, "a good deal of the writing is more Tennysonian than Elizabethan in quality."[2] Gassner further characterizes Anderson's verse with the comment that "the general effect of the writing is one of passionateness and elevated expression."[3] Precisely the same description

---

[1]Maxwell Anderson, Off Broadway (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1947), p. 54.

[2]John Gassner, ed., A Treasury of the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 865.

[3]Ibid.

could be given for the verse of any number of Anderson's predecessors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and he differs from them in no significant way. "Passionateness and elevated expression" are traditionally both the cause of and the use for verse in drama. In this scheme of things, verse itself becomes a convention for heightening the unrealities the audience is asked to accept in a drama whose purpose is escape from a disturbed, real world through a stock response on the level of the merely sentimental--a response involving far less than the total artistic experience drama is capable of offering. As Eric Bentley has observed, "even 'high-brow' American playwrights like Maxwell Anderson write at an appreciably lower level than the best American poets, novelists, and critics."[1]

To discover the earliest poetic play in our century which suggests the possibilities of a meaningful coherence of form, language, and content, one must turn--not to a play in verse--but to a play in prose, by Synge out of the Irish Renaissance. Riders to the Sea, not excepting Synge's inherent romanticism, is realistic in content and portrayal; yet within the starkness of its theme and characters, this play could profit (on a smaller scale) from the kind of reading Heilman has given to Lear, for here as in Lear, imagery is used as it might be used in a poem--to intensify and to extend the experience of meaning and action.[2]

Both Yeats and Eliot, among others, have explained that the

---

[1]Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 192.

[2]Robert B. Heilman, This Great Stage (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948).

poetic quality of this play in prose arises from the native rhythms in the speech of the island people its characters are modeled upon; and to these rhythms, Synge has matched the poetic rhythms of life, death, and resignation, which can be sustained on their most simplified and dignified terms for the length of this brief, one-act play. The key to Synge's successful poetic drama is his language, and fortunately Yeats recognized Synge's proper direction in time to urge him to the Aran Islands. "He had learned Irish years ago, but had begun to forget it, for the only language that interested him was the conventional language of modern poetry which has begun to make us all weary."[1] Yeats, however, rescued young Synge from the Paris of his forgetting and sent him back to relearn his native heritage.

The success of Riders to the Sea as poetic drama points up the importance of a rhythmic coherence of language, meaning, and structure as parts of an organic whole not seen in conventional, post-Shakespearian drama in either verse or poetic prose. And it is on this ground, it seems to me, that the question of defining poetic drama must rest: not on individuated technical matters such as subject treatment through fantasy or the presence or absence of the verse line. Thus the insistence by critics that drama in verse is not necessarily poetic, is not only a caution well taken, but one which indicates where the heart of the matter must lie. If poetic drama is to be reinstated as a living genre, it must be as an experience in which language is one of the formal elements

---

[1]W. B. Yeats, "Preface to the First Edition of The Well of the Saints, 1905," The Cutting of an Agate (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1919), p. 112. The date of this essay qualifies the term "modern poetry."

working with all its resources in conjunction with other structural elements.

Lacking the natural resources of a poetic prose language like that available to Synge, modern poetic dramatists have turned to verse to reclaim for word, image, and rhythm a place in dramatic art, and with the exuberance typical of a B. B. C. lecturer on the arts, J. Isaacs in his section on "T. S. Eliot and Poetic Drama" summarizes the modern situation:

> The excitment of English poetic drama for us is that it is in verse, and that it is English verse. Verse can do things which are beyond the capacity of prose. The vehicle of poetic drama is verse, its mechanism is imagery, its substance is myth and its binding structure is the musical pattern which gives an over-all unity to every tiny fragment of what is in the end a musical symphony.[1]

This emphasis by Isaacs on elements in modern verse drama which ought, by rights, to be expected of all verse drama worthy the name, and his excitement over the unified pattern possible to verse drama, can only be accounted for by the fact that conventional verse drama has become so highly specialized in the artistic world that little is expected of it as a living entity.

> Prose has had the stage pretty much to itself for the past hundred years largely because poetry has refused to compete with it, preferring instead to retire to a private literary world of its own where, to all dramatic intents and purposes, it has palely perished. Plays have been written in verse for generations and no one has cared, not even the versifiers. If there is one body of printed matter to which the contemporary poet does not wish to return, it is to the body—carcass rather—of double-columned pages produced in the name of drama by the

---

[1]An Assessment of Twentieth Century Literature (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), p. 157.

poets of the nineteenth century.[1]

The theater's sensitivity to change, even before the turn of the century, was reflected in the realistic prose theater of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw, which became "modern" almost contemporaneously with the novel. The verse drama, however, remained an archaic dramatic type,[2] and it was not until the modern emphasis on the relationship between language and structure was brought to bear on the verse play that it began to reflect modern artistic awareness.

The idea of recreating verse drama as a significant art involves bringing and adapting to the stage the formal concerns which have become a means of defining significance in other areas of modern literature. An attempt is made to effect the recovery of the relationship between word and act, between rhythm of language and rhythm of action, between meaning and structure. Language, according to Blackmur, is gesture;[3] and drama is gesture, either mimetic or meaningfully non-mimetic. There is an obvious relationship to be recovered: one which has been lost for over three centuries, and one which naturalistic drama cannot hope to

---

[1]Archibald MacLeish, "The Poet as Playwright," Atlantic Monthly, CXCV (February, 1955), 50.

[2]The evidence of a few dates may make the situation clear. 1877: James, The American; Zola, L'Assommoir; Ibsen, Pillars of Society. 1880: Zola, Nana. 1881: Ibsen, Ghosts. 1885: Zola, Germinal. 1887: Strindberg, The Father. 1892: Hauptmann, The Weavers. 1893: Shaw, Mrs. Warren's Profession. 1896: Crane, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. Intersperse the following conventional poetic dramas, and the picture is complete. 1892: Yeats, The Countess Cathleen. 1893: Maeterlinck, Pelleas and Melisande. 1897: Rostand, Cyrano de Bergerac. 1900: Phillips, Paola and Francesca.

[3]R. P. Blackmur, "Language as Gesture," Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), pp. 3-24.

encompass. Thus the search for a dramatic form embodying language as part of structure and meaning is not only a central concern of modern verse drama, but is in itself a way of defining modern verse drama.

The same proposition is generally accepted as true of all modern literature and of all modern art.[1] In the novel, Joyce's Ulysses and in poetry, Eliot's The Waste Land have become classic examples of modern works in which language and structure are exploited to offer, with an emphasis peculiar to this age, the experience of form in conjunction with the experience of content.[2] A new concept of form makes itself felt in a self-conscious insistence that the shape of art is no longer merely a way of controlling and ordering content, but an active participant in the expression of content. It is this very formal emphasis that Yvor Winters has seen as irresponsible and mistaken, and against which he has registered his protest.

> Mr. Joyce endeavors to express disintegration by breaking down his form, by experiencing disintegration before our very eyes, but this destroys much of his power of expression. Of course he controls the extent to which he impairs his form, but this merely means that he is willing to sacrifice just so much power of expression—in an effort to express something—and no more. He is like Whitman trying to express a loose America by writing loose poetry. This fallacy, the fallacy of expressive, or imitative, form, recurs constantly in modern literature.[3]

---

[1]See, for example, José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1956), pp. 3-50.

[2]It is of interest to note that the work of Joyce himself has been performed at the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Mass., and at the Poetry Center in New York and that the text of the performance, Passages from Finnegans Wake: A Free Adaptation for the Theatre by Mary Manning, has been issued by the Harvard University Press in its Poets' Theatre Series.

[3]Yvor Winters, Primitivism and Decadence (New York: Arrow Editions, 1937), p. 49.

Whether or not one agrees with Winter's loaded critical terminology or with his analysis of the situation, subsequent critical examinations of Joyce's Ulysses and Eliot's Waste Land have established that it is precisely a formal emphasis--an attempt to establish form through word, image, rhythm--which has led to the abandonment of traditional modes in favor of a form no longer viewed as a container, but as one with, and inseparable from, that which is contained.

The important role of language in modern literature is a part, even a cause, of the general awareness of structural significance.

> When the literary history of the twentieth century is ultimately written, it is likely that the distinctive spirit of the literature of our day, both in theory and in practice, will be found to depend on two factors: the emphasis on literary structure . . . and an unusual awareness of the linguistic medium itself. The preoccupation with the medium is actually prior. Critical analysis of structure and creative experimentation with language are characteristic of our time because critics and writers tend to conceive of the literary work--the real poem or story or novel--as residing primarily in language and as consisting primarily of word arrangements.[1]

This particular formal emphasis in modern literature provided the playwright interested in giving modern relevance to poetic drama, the only living tradition he had to bring to the stage. The established tradition of poetic drama which remained from the nineteenth century, and still remains to some degree, offered nothing useful except in the way of a negative example, but modern poetry had successfully exploited the formal possibilities of language, and the "idea" of an inherently significant form had been explored in all of modern art (cubism and ex-

---

[1]Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 45.

pressionism are two aspects of this central concern).

It is not at all remarkable that, within the orientation of modern art, modern verse playwrights should seek the same organic relationship of part and whole which Ernst Cassirer describes for the poem:

> The context of a poem cannot be separated from its form—from the verse, the melody, the rhythm. These formal elements are not merely external or technical means to reproduce a given intuition; they are part and parcel of the artistic intuition itself.[1]

Nor should one be surprised to find that the writers first to explore the possibilities of a drama formally relevant in all its aspects, including language, should be a group of modern poets who had already repudiated what appeared to them to be inherent weaknesses in their own poetic predecessors in the nineteenth century.

Foremost among these poets and playwrights in terms of influence and awareness are Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Isherwood, Spender, and Fry[2]—and I hope to indicate in the following chapters the varying attempts made by each to discover formal possibilities which might offer a theater experience capable of calling into play a complex response from the audience, of providing a drama operating in a number of ways to create an artistic whole, of reclaiming for verse drama a place as a distinctive and meaningful genre, and of defining its ability to profit

---

[1] An Essay on Man (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1953), p. 198.

[2] There are other verse playwrights who might well be considered in a study of this kind such as Archibald MacLeish, Louis MacNeice, Charles Williams, Ronald Duncan, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, or Richard Eberhart—but the work of the group I have chosen is more widely known and in every case has had some influence through actual performances on the stage. Also, this group offers within its members a sufficient variety of approaches and results to indicate the major possibilities for a modern verse drama.

from the advances and experiments made in the other arts.

As a common factor in the concepts of form held by all of these writers, verse was to be viewed as one of the structural elements of verse drama rather than as an "elevating" adjunct. In their experiments it was to abandon many of its traditional aspects on the stage (the tyranny of the blank verse line or the heroic couplet, vague and dreamy diction, stock romantic images, descriptive lyrical passages, use of archaisms, artificially "poetic" line constructions, and forced rhyme and meter) and to become an integral part of the internal structure of the play. It was to seek rhythms relevant to both action and meaning; the rhythm of the language was to carry the rhythm of the action.[1] It was to seek fresh effects in imagery and diction as a way of accomplishing a total formal effect. In short, within the realm of the spoken (or sung or chanted) word, the program, consciously or unconsciously, was to be much the same as that of modern poetry.

Having solved the problem of a relevant language and having before him the "idea" of meaningful form provided by modern art, the verse

---

[1]In this respect, the attempt to recover the symbolic word-act relationship is shown by Lawrence Lipton in "Some Shop Talk on Poetry and Drama" (Trace, April, 1955, p. 3) to be an attempt to return the poet to his original role in the creation of drama: "The Greeks had a word for it. In fact they had two words for it. Poietes: maker. And Drama, fr. draien [sic]: to do, to act. . . . The origin of Greek drama in ritual is too well known to require documentation here. What is not so widely known is the fact that draien, to do, to act, had little if anything to do with what today we call action on the stage. It had nothing to do with a Jose Ferrer spouting verses during sword play in Cyrano de Bergerac, . . . It was meant to be something much more literal. The drama itself was expected to do something, to perform an act. . . . In a word, drama was functional in form and practical in effect."

playwright who sought the stage as his area of presentation still had a large part of his equation to solve.

> We should remind ourselves of the nature of poetic drama, that it is not a matter of transferring to the stage lyrical or narrative or even dramatic verse. We have learnt from Francis Fergusson's Idea of a Theater that poetic drama means a structure of action, plot, agents, scene, speech and gesture, whose internal relationships possess these qualities of mutual coherence and illumination which we ask of the words of a poem.[1]

This description of the ideal relationship of parts necessary to genuinely poetic drama makes it clear that significant use of language is not the whole answer. Language was to be only a single aspect of the vital structural relationship of a total effect: the verse playwright, in his role as maker, had to bring other factors, principally dramatic factors, into the proper relationships so that the nature of drama, which is action, might be fulfilled. The proper form for the proper action was as much the problem as it had been for the makers of Oedipus Rex or Lear, and the reward was to be the same: that whenever action, structure, language, and meaning are brought into a highly significant relationship, the result is a formal whole which is unique to the dramatic experience.

Within the dramatic heritage of the stage, Yeats found in the Noh plays a clue to more meaningful formal relationships than he had been able to achieve in his early conventional work. Eliot saw in the Greeks and the Elizabethans as well as in the ballet, the liturgy, and Ernie Lotinga, Marie Lloyd, and the English music hall the materials for

---

[1]Dennis Donoghue, "Yeats and the Clean Outline," Sewanee Review, LXV (Spring, 1957), 214.

experiment in ways of embodying action and meaning; and Isherwood, Auden, and Spender added to many of the same elements their awareness of Expressionism and of Bertolt Brecht's suprarealistic Epic theater. And Fry, the one member of this group who is not principally known as a poet of major stature, has, as the heir of the others, used their experiments to serve the purposes of his own particular problems and approach.

The tradition upon which these verse playwrights might draw for their specifically dramatic statements—for the expression of action with its concomitants: character, setting, plot—was a much richer one than that offered by the verbal tradition in the theater. Again, however, the tradition of poetic drama available from the nineteenth century could provide nothing of use in terms of the dramatic functions of the stage. For a vital stage heritage, modern verse playwrights went either to the past (Yeats's Noh forms, the uses of chorus or of ritual incantation by the writers of the thirties) or to the various experimental modes of the living prose theater such as Expressionism, Surrealism, Impressionism, and their endless modifications on the contemporary stage.

The theater of Ibsen had created a place for the symbol in modern dramas which were not primarily "symbolist" dramas like Maeterlinck's. The church steeple in The Master Builder, the polluted public baths in An Enemy of the People made available the functional dramatic symbol on the modern stage. After the establishment by Ibsen and his contemporaries of a vital place for real issues in the theater, the prose drama responded to the pressures of modern politics, psychology, and science;

and the response was felt in terms of form. The fourth wall convention of the realistic stage was attacked by Pirandello on several occasions, most notably in his Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921). This tortured, formally coherent drama about a disembodied play stressed the frank theatricality of the theater experience and the necessity for a meaningful form which the naturalistic or realistic stage cannot provide while it insists on a real street or drawing room whose fourth wall has been cut away to admit the audience to eavesdrop. In the same year, an American play to explore the relationship of expressive stage techniques to meaning was Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine, an expressionistic treatment of the mediocrity caused by routine life in the modern world. In this play, for example, to express the state of Zero's mind in a murder scene, Rice has the platform containing the office equipment revolve rapidly, and there is a cacophony of music and offstage effects, followed by a peal of thunder, a flash of red, and then blackness.

The experimental scenes in The Hairy Ape or in others of Eugene O'Neill's many dramas are too well known to need rehearsing here, and in stage expression, O'Neill is a vital part of the living tradition of the modern theater. Significantly, his failure to create great drama is a failure of language, and in this context it is interesting to note that in the finest scenes in a play like The Hairy Ape, the language suddenly coheres, suddenly takes on a brief structural relevance.[1]

---

[1]The opening scene in The Hairy Ape has an example of this in the long, soliloquy-like exchange between Paddy and Yank, in which each speaks in a language whose rhythms underlie and in part create its meanings. Paddy, in a "voice full of old sorrow," pours forth his melancholy reverie of the lost days of the sailing ship when man had not yet been swallowed up in the steel monster of the steamer. Yank's answer, an

O'Neill, however, does not sustain the possibilities of language, and valuable as such plays as Mourning Becomes Electra (a modern retelling of the Oresteia) or Strange Interlude (with its frankly extended asides as a convention for presenting the psychologically revealing interior monologues of each character) are for offering examples of dramatic possibilities, they both suffer the failure of language which is typical of modern prose drama.

The modern playwrights who undertook, by the use of verse, to gain for the drama a formal coherence of both language and structure did not create a school or issue manifestoes. For the most part, they are seen best as a coherent group in their similar orientations in modern poetry, and similar but individual responses to the problems facing the verse dramatist. Yeats had had the practical dramatic background which the other poets so painfully lacked, but it was partly in reaction to the theater movement which he had helped to found that he turned to the formal integration provided by the Noh. "In 1916 came Ezra Pound and Fenollosa's book on the Japanese Noh plays, which changed the whole course of W. B. Yeats' enquiries toward symbolism, with musicians and dancers as part of the pattern."[1] Eliot had both seen a private performance of At the Hawk's Well and reviewed Pound's book for The Egoist; therefore he could not have been unaware of the symbolic possibilities of the formal relationships between poetry and drama as Yeats had de-

---

apotheosis of brute strength, is in contrast to the more leisurely rhythmic reverie of Paddy: the monosyllabic stressed speech matches the beating of his fist on the steel bulkhead.

[1]Isaacs, op. cit., p. 138.

veloped them, although Eliot's own experiments were to lead him into quite different paths.

The relationships between the other members of this group are more obvious, if somewhat more confusing. Sweeney Agonistes was first printed in October of 1926 and January of 1927 in The Criterion, and it was responsible for suggesting a possible direction for much that was to follow. It was not published, however, in volume form until 1932 and, in the meantime, Auden's charade, Paid on Both Sides, had appeared in the 1930 edition of Poems. In November of 1933 Faber and Faber issued The Dance of Death, and in 1935 Murder in the Cathedral was given at Chapter House, Canterbury, followed by staging in London at the Mercury, with publication in May of 1935. In 1936, The Ascent of F.6; in 1938, On the Frontier and Trial of a Judge; and in 1939, The Family Reunion completed the picture in the thirties. Not only proximity, but also the community of stage experience offered by the Group Theatre under Rupert Doone makes the interlocking influences of these playwrights on each other as inevitable as was the later divergence between Eliot and the rest of the group. After the thirties, the line of development from the work of Eliot to the work of Christopher Fry is fairly clear, both in terms of borrowings and rejections, and although Fry is not as insistently contemporary as the writers of the Group Theatre, his work does not, as some of his detractors have claimed, represent a regression for modern verse drama, since he seeks in his plays the formal coherence which is the aim of the other writers under consideration in this study. Fry's verse plays are of value, if for no other reason than for indi-

cating another direction possible for modern verse drama, and the very range of variations available to a verse drama maintaining a common ideal, argues a vitality not evident in verse drama since the seventeenth century.

Describing the development of a modern poetic drama, J. Isaacs concludes, "there is, finally, the startling variety of elements derived from every conceivable theatrical activity past and present. In short, there is a wider theatrical equipment harnessed to a deeper poetical purpose."[1] The "deeper poetical purpose" is to make a significant dramatic experience both out of the wide and rich range of materials and techniques available to the maker for the stage, and out of the impoverished language of the stage to which could only be brought the concerns of modern poetry--concerns which redirect attention to the possibility of a totally related form for drama, of a structure "whose internal relationships possess those qualities of mutual coherence and illumination which we ask of the words of a poem."[2]

The fact that many of the attempts to recreate verse drama have failed is not important when the various causes for their failures are understood. The coherence made available by an idea like that of a totally and mutually relevant form for the stage is not only a way of stating possibilities, but also of measuring successes and defining failures. And in terms of such an idea, even failures or partial successes become

---

[1] Ibid., p. 143.

[2] Donoghue, loc. cit.

somewhat redeemable in view of their place in the growth of a tradition. The scholar who studies Hamlet cannot afford to dismiss Gorboduc or The Spanish Tragedy; and while there have been as yet no modern verse dramas of the stature of Hamlet, should one appear, I think there is little doubt that its possibilities will have been explored and charted, at least in part, by the poet-playwrights to be examined in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

W. B. YEATS

W. B. Yeats's career as a dramatist very nearly spans his career as a productive poet, and the same concerns, the same variety, the same remarkable development are evident in both phases of his work. As a poet and as a dramatist, Yeats began in the conventional mode of the late Romantic tradition influenced by Rossetti in poetry and Maeterlinck in drama, "in all things Pre-Raphaelite."[1] In the years of experience that followed his beginnings, Yeats so transformed his poetry and his drama that one need only compare an early poem such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" with a late one like "Sailing to Byzantium" or an early drama like The Shadowy Waters with a late play like Purgatory to discover the results of his development. This development represents Yeats's growth from the poetry and drama typical of the nineties to a poetry and drama, still largely romantic in subject matter, typifying much that we identify as 'modern' in poetry or in poetic drama.

In his role as a transitional figure, Yeats is of particular value both as an introduction to the accomplishments of modern verse drama and as an index to the difficulties facing the modern dramatist.

---

[1]Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 121.

Yeats had the special problem of having to liberate himself from the debilitating influences of an older tradition before he could create a verse drama which met the standards which by the second decade of the century he had learned to set for his poetry. Although Yeats's particular resolution of the problems of verse drama did not offer a formula which could be readily adapted or widely used by those who followed him (as, for instance, Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes did) he was instrumental in actually creating on the stage a totally coherent verse drama having the vital relationship between structure and language that modern poets sought in their poetry.

Like other modern poets and verse dramatists, Yeats found one of his fundamental problems to be that of language, and his progress in the direction of an integrated dramatic verse is a process of moving further and further away from all that conventional nineteenth century verse represented. An early comment from his autobiography indicates Yeats's awareness of the direction of his development, if not the final limits toward which it was to push, and reflects his growing concern with the necessity for strengthening and vitalizing his language:

> Years afterwards when I had finished The Wanderings of Oisin, dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds. I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythms.[1]

In a later quotation, from a letter dated September 10 [1905], to Arthur Symons, Yeats reveals a growing awareness that the problem of

---

[1]Ibid., p. 74.

language is related in drama to the problems of stage elements such as action. In reworking some of his early plays for publication, he has learned that the traditionally poetic is not sufficient in and of itself, and that poetic drama calls for a unity of action and poetry which must be inherent in the poet's conception.

> You will hardly recognize not only The Shadowy Waters but Baile's Strand and a good deal of The King's Threshold. They have all been rewritten after rehearsal or actual performance, . . . I have learned a great deal about poetry generally in the process, and one thing I am now quite sure of is that all the finest poetry comes logically out of the fundamental action, and that the error of late periods like this is to believe that some things are inherently poetical, and to try and pull them on to the scene at every moment. It is just these seemingly inherently poetical things that wear out.[1]

Throughout his career, Yeats himself documented his changing concepts of poetry and drama, and his development as a poet has been traced in some detail by almost every critic to deal with Yeats--notably by Louis MacNeice, J. P. O'Donnell, and Richard Ellmann among others. A renewed interest in Yeats's dramatic output has led critics in recent years to the same kind of examination of the whole range of Yeats's plays, and critics like Ellmann, Dennis Donoghue, or Thomas Parkinson have discovered a development in Yeats the dramatist analogous to that of Yeats the poet.[2] It becomes increasingly clear that a reader like MacNeice who finds the plays of value only because of their influence

---

[1]The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 460.

[2]See Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1949); Dennis Donoghue, "Yeats and the Clean Outline," loc. cit., 202-225; Thomas Parkinson, "W. B. Yeats: A Poet's Stagecraft, 1899-1911," ELH, XVII (June, 1950), 136-161.

upon the poetry[1] has failed to realize that Yeats arrived at a concept of language and of form as significant for modern poetic drama as his accomplishment in verse is for modern poetry.

The dramatic form at which Yeats finally arrived did not come to him with ease, however, and he constantly revised the group of early plays written for the Abbey Theatre. Typical are the endless revisions of The Shadowy Waters, which cover the whole period of his apprenticeship to the stage and show his insistent attempts to eliminate the causes of his dissatisfaction with the nineteenth-century mode of poetic drama. The play was begun in 1885, started over again in 1894 after Yeats had seen a performance of Axël in London, and then revised constantly until 1911.[2]

This play, which was variously printed as a dramatic poem and as a poetic drama, is typical of Yeats's early work and hence typical of poetic plays in the nineties. As is to be expected, the principal failure is one of language, a failure which is itself a symptom of the "fatigue which is in every corner of The Shadowy Waters. . . . We think again of Maeterlinck and of Villiers de l'Isle Adam: which is a roundabout way of saying that in The Shadowy Waters Yeats' conceptions were lyrical rather than dramatic."[3] If the final version of the play seems

---

[1]The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

[2]To Florence Farr after her performance of the play at a Theosophical Convention, Yeats had written in 1905: "I am at work on The Shadowy Waters changing it greatly, getting rid of needless symbols, making the people answer each other, and making the groundwork simple and intelligible. . . . I find I am enriching the poetry . . . greatly in the process." (Letters, p. 453.)

[3]Donoghue, loc. cit., pp. 210-211.

imperfect by modern standards, the 1900 version was even more marked by the melancholy, reverie, and monotonous lyricism which had filled "The Indian to His Love."

> His characters spoke the language of his early poetry; their dialogue drifted off into separate monologues and their addresses to one another deviated into rhapsody and ecstasy. More damaging still was the vocabulary of the verse, the pre-Raphaelite diction infused with occult and Irish symbols esoteric and personal in their bearings.[1]

In spite of all that Yeats did during the years he spent attempting to eliminate the weaknesses of language, structure, and mood, the acting version of 1911 reveals The Shadowy Waters to be a far from satisfactory play, one which Eliot characterizes as

> . . . one of the most perfect expressions of the vague enchanted beauty of the pre-Raphaelite school: yet it strikes me . . . as the western seas descried through the back window of a house in Kensington, an Irish myth for the Kelmscott Press; and when I try to visualize the speakers in the play, they have the great dim, dreamy eyes of the knights and ladies of Burne-Jones.[2]

The play is not only weak in characterization, it also lacks a conceptual unity, a center of coherence; it suffers from the absence of an unmistakable poetic core which controls all the various aspects of drama through what Langer identifies as a "commanding form."[3]

The Shadowy Waters is conventional in form, and the inconclusive and divided nature of its action underlies the structural insignificance

---

[1]Parkinson, loc. cit., p. 145.

[2]T. S. Eliot, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," The Permanence of Yeats, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 336.

[3]Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 314.

of the whole. The drama creates a dreamy atmosphere, but very little more, and the hero of the play, Forgael, is the typical romantic dreamer seeking an ideal love promised him by grey birds which hover about the mast of his ship and lead him across strange seas. Forgael, identified by his magic harp with the bard of the Orphic tradition, is able to charm the captive Queen Dectora to his dream of an ideal love; and at the end of the play, in spite of the warnings of the sailors that they are going to their deaths, the two of them sail off alone, following the birds. The magic harp, which is one of the principal symbols, "begins to burn as with fire," and while Forgael gathers Dectora's hair about him, in the final speech of the play, he also gathers together the symbols of the inevitability of his quest: the magic harp, the golden net of the Ever-living, and the guiding birds.

> Beloved, having dragged the net about us,
> And knitted mesh to mesh, we grow immortal;
> And that old harp awakens of itself
> To cry aloud to the grey birds, and dreams,
> That have had dreams for father, live in us.[1]

The symbols of the play cohere only superficially, however, in the closing lines, and there is no sense of inevitability or rightness about Dectora's decision to accompany Forgael. As a matter of fact, the reader or viewer is aware that Dectora may be the unwitting victim of a dream not her own—one which, should the meshes of the net fail or the harp cease to burn, might easily become a nightmare. This is not, of course, Yeats's intention, but he has created in Dectora a character at

---

[1] The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (New York: Macmillan Co., 1953), p. 109.

odds with her unearthly fate. The rich, sexual imagery of her final speech contrasts strongly with the vague dreaminess of Forgael's, and there is more than a faint suspicion that it is for divergent reasons the two lovers abandon the world.

The failure of the play to present a coherent and meaningful action is not only marked by the weakness of character, but also by a failure to make effective use of language. Yeats attempts a structural contrast through the conventional device of using prose speech for the common sailors and verse for the heroic characters, but he is unable to bring the two levels of language together in any meaningful sense because the materialistic sailors simply seem to be intruders in the world of the shadowy waters. The contrast which is established is between a real world of real lust and an ideal dream world dominated by harp and birds; it is a contrast mutually exclusive and excluding: an artificial juxtaposition of two worlds which have nothing to do with one another. Even an audience sympathetic to the poetry of the play would probably find justice in the sailor's question: "What is the use of knocking about and fighting as we do unless we get the chance to drink more wine and kiss more women than lasting peaceable men through their long lifetime?"[1]

The symbols, which are heavily stressed in the play, also fail to operate functionally in the structure of the drama, although they are no longer the private, esoteric symbols of the earlier versions. The ship-sea-beautiful woman combination is traditional to symbolize the

---

[1]Ibid., p. 97.

quest for ideality upon which the dreamer with his magical harp embarks; yet the feeling which results is that the symbols have been paraded before the audience for their traditional values and that they do not "work" in any way that is basic to an artistic experience. They are as static as the play as a whole, which is itself simply a conventional situation placed upon a three-dimensional stage as a vehicle for lyric verse. The failure of the play is neatly summarized by Padraic Colum's comment that Yeats "attempted to make theatrically effective a conception that might have been embodied in a Mallarmean dialogue. The result is that everything becomes muddled."[1]

Although The Shadowy Waters is not as coherent or successful a play as some of Yeats's other earlier dramas such as On Baile's Strand or the even more conventional The Countess Cathleen with its Tennysonian echoes, it has seemed of particular relevance here since its failure is probably dictated by the fact that its subject matter--an insistence upon the importance of the life of the spirit--fails to find any sort of meaningful formal coherence in and between language, symbol, structure, or action. Yet it is a very similar subject matter which dominates the plays of the middle and late period of Yeats's productivity, and on the whole these later plays succeed simply because they do attain a formal coherence and significance which set them off as modern poetic dramas as surely as the language and structure of the later poems establish them as influential in modern poetry.

---

[1]"Poet's Progress: W. B. Yeats in the Theatre," Theatre Arts, XIX (1935), 940.

The plays in which Yeats reaches some clear conception of the possibilities of a poetic drama built as a conceptual whole come after an extended period of non-productivity in the drama.[1] During this period Yeats lived with Ezra Pound for three successive winters in Ashdown Forest in Sussex, and Pound tried to convert him to the new and modern poetry, to doing away with all remnants of the nineties that remained in his verse. The extent of Pound's influence was acknowledged by Yeats in a 1924 postscript to his essay on "William Blake and His Illustrations to The Divine Comedy":

> Some seven or eight years ago I asked my friend Mr. Ezra Pound to point out everything in the language of my poems that he thought an abstraction, and I learned from him how much further the movement against abstraction had gone than my generation had thought possible.[2]

Yeats's attempt to purge his verse of abstractions and worn-out diction is quite clear in the Plays for Dancers, the first of which, At the Hawk's Well, he dictated to Pound in the winter of 1916, "and its terse, vivid diction stamped him as a modern poet even in the mind of such a fastidious critic as T. S. Eliot, who attended its performance in a drawing room."[3]

The second event which enabled Yeats to create a new drama after 1916 was again the result of Pound's influence, although perhaps in this

---

[1]"As for his writing of new plays, that stopped abruptly after 1910 except for The Player Queen (which he had begun in 1907), and did not recommence for six years. There was no more interest payable on the old capital." (Ellmann, op. cit., pp. 195-96.)

[2]Essays (New York: Macmillan Co., 1924), p. 178.

[3]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 217.

case merely a fortunate coincidence. Pound was, during this period, the literary executor for Ernest Fenollosa, and he was hard at work on the volume of Noh plays which he translated with the aid of Fenollosa's notes. In these Japanese Noh plays, Yeats found the formal stimulus he needed and an example of meaningful coherence not available through the European theatrical tradition. Commentators on Yeats agree that he would probably have arrived at a form similar to the Noh and that, indeed, he was already working toward it by the time Pound made available an already finished product complete with workable and definitely non-mimetic conventions.

> A 'pure' drama, without action, concentrating on ritual and language, and creating its whole atmosphere from these, was something he had long brooded on: 'All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world.' The whole Noh paraphernalia of masks, stylized gestures, musical commentary, elevated language, and exclusive audience was congenial, in addition to the 'spiritualist' interest of the plots.[1]

Yeats had grown dissatisfied with the conditions forced on a dramatist by the demands of a popular audience, even in a theater like the Abbey; yet he felt the need for dramatic creation, and the need of the theater experience. The Noh drama, an aristocratic form traditional in Japan from the fourteenth century, provided him with the necessary bridge to the "theatre's anti-self," the small intimate audience meeting in a drawing room to participate in a highly formalized symbolic presentation of poetic drama. Yeats has often been berated for taking his drama deliberately away from the common stage, and his disapproving

---

[1]Anthony Thwaite, "Yeats and the Noh," The Twentieth Century, CLXII (September, 1957), 239.

critics all work from the basic concept of drama as a communal art, one which must grow from and beckon to the people. The defensive note sounded by a critic of drama that "to the uninitiated philistine" the Four Plays for Dancers (1920) seem to have a form "incomprehensible to the ordinary man" and that "they are made not of real human stuff but of the unreal imaginings of a visionary"[1] is typical of many of the charges brought against modern poetry in general, and, in many respects, equally unfair. Yeats's experiences as the founder of a national theater had taught him that the community in which art thrives no longer existed and that the dramatist who sought to build or create such a community could expect only limited returns for his efforts. "Yet I need a theatre. I believe myself to be a dramatist. I desire to show events, not merely to tell of them. . . ."[2] In the absence of any other community of faith—the Irish could not even agree in their enthusiasm for Ireland—Yeats turned toward a perfected art form, limited in scope, but worthy of the small audience which it commanded and creating in the name of art a community of experience which had not been possible before.

Yeats's turning to the fourteenth century form for his plays is actually a recognition of a source of clarity, order, and symbolic structure which, in effect, cleared the stage of a great deal of rubbish accumulated there in the course of the development of poetic drama after

---

[1]A. E. Morgan, Tendencies of Modern English Drama (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 146.

[2]"A Note on 'At the Hawk's Well,'" The Wild Swans at Coole, Other Verses and a Play (Churchtown, Dundrum: The Cuala Press, 1917), p. 43.

the seventeenth century. And it was a form which allowed language and its resources to participate in the clarity, order, and structure. One has not far to look to find the reasons for the appeal of the Noh drama to Yeats. It incorporated with a formal precision music, dance, the use of masks, and language into a single, coherent effect in which the action of the play becomes symbolic of the whole conception. The Japanese plays themselves deal with the subject matter which was most interesting to Yeats: the legendary, the mystical, moments of human recognition of the impinging spirit world; and Yeats in adapting the model to his own use found a tradition already created in the same spirit which pervaded his own plays. The appeal of the Noh tradition to Yeats is clear in Fenollosa's own description of the type:

> The beauty and power of Noh lie in the concentration. All elements—costume, motion, verse, and music—unite to produce a single clarified impression . . . by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand. The emotion is always fixed upon idea, not upon personality. . . . After all, the most striking thing about these plays is their marvellously complete grasp of spiritual being.[1]

And one should include Pound's insistent reiteration that the Noh is a non-mimetic form in which all aspects of the drama join in search of a unified effect:

> It is a symbolic stage, a drama of masks . . . it is a theatre of which both Mr. Yeats and Mr. Craig may approve. It is not, like our theatre, a place where every fineness and subtlety must give way; where every fineness of word or of word-cadence is sacrificed to the "broad effect"; where the paint must be put on with a broom. It is a stage

---

[1]Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, 'Noh' or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1916), pp. 120-121.

> where every subsidiary art is bent precisely upon holding the faintest shade of a difference; where the poet may be silent while the gestures consecrated by four centuries of usage show meaning.[1]

In other words, the Noh provides a poetic drama in which M. Cocteau's distinction between poetry in the theater and poetry of the theater does not obtain; for in the Noh, poetry in the theater becomes a part of poetry of the theater, although there is little doubt that the Noh as a form of drama has specific limitations by means of which and within which it must seek to work—limitations from which Cocteau would instinctively seek freedom for his theater.

Yeats, in "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (originally the introduction to the Cuala Press edition of Pound's translations), has spoken at length of the attraction for him of the evidence in translated versions of the Noh that there is in each drama "a playing upon a single metaphor, as deliberate as the echoing rhythm of line in Chinese and Japanese painting."

> In the Nishikigi the ghost of the girl-lover carries the cloth she went on weaving out of grass when she should have opened the chamber door to her lover, and woven grass returns again and again in metaphor and incident. The lovers, now that in an aery body they must sorrow for unconsummated love, are "tangled up as the grass patterns are tangled." Again they are like an unfinished cloth: "these bodies, having no weft, even now are not come together, truly a shameful story, a tale to bring shame on the gods." Before they can bring the priest to the tomb they spend the day "pushing aside the grass from the overgrown ways in Kefu," and the countryman who directs them is "cutting grass on the hill"; and when at last the prayer of the priest unites them in marriage the bride says that she has made "a dream-bridge over wild grass, over the grass I dwell in"; and in the end bride and bridegroom show themselves for a moment "from under the shadow of the love-grass."[2]

---

[1] Ibid., p. 6.

[2] Essays, pp. 289-90.

This detailed interest by Yeats in the successful, single-minded use of a unifying metaphor which grows out of the action of the play ("the girl-lover carries the cloth she went on weaving out of grass when she should have opened the chamber door to her lover") is of particular interest when we recall that for over fifteen years he returned again and again to the problem of organic metaphorical coherence for The Shadowy Waters, and that one of his own metaphors is a similar one: the meshes of the net of the Ever-living, the fatal weaving of destinies which has caught up the two lovers, symbolized by Forgael's covering himself with Dectora's red-golden hair.

Yeats's interest in the single image or unifying metaphor is analogous to a similar emphasis in the Imagist movement in poetry, which had succeeded in making its influence felt by the time of Yeats's first contact with the Noh through Ezra Pound. Pound had noted the importance of the image to the individual Noh play in his explanations in the Fenollosa book, "It has . . . what we may call Unity of Image. At least, the better plays are all built into the intensification of a single image."[1] As an indication of his own interests, Pound added in a footnote:

> This intensification of the Image, this manner of construction, is very interesting to me personally, as an Imagiste, for we Imagistes knew nothing of these plays when we set out in our own manner. These plays are also an answer to a question that has several times been put to me: "could one do a long Imagiste poem, or even a long poem in vers libre?"[2]

---

[1]Fenollosa and Pound, op. cit., p. 45.

[2]Ibid.

As T. S. Eliot points out in his review of the Fenollosa book, this concentration on the image not only eliminates rhetoric, it also has a tendency to limit the length of the plays,[1] bringing them in this respect also into conformity with the practice of the Imagist poets. And although these extremely brief image-focused plays may have seemed long to the man who wrote "In a Station of the Metro," in comparison to the conventional expectations of the stage, they are short indeed, depending upon a concentration which Yeats succeeded in capturing and intensifying in his transformation of the Noh to his own purposes. Through the coincidence of the Noh, Yeats found a ready-made formula for bringing to the romantic tradition of sprawling, structureless verse drama a tension and concentration at one with the interests of modern poetry.

Pound cautions the reader of his translations to "remember that the words are only one part of this art. The words are fused with the music and with ceremonial dancing. . . . The plays are at their best, I think, an image; that is to say, their unity lies in the image. . . . "[2] And he insists that the reader remember that "When a text seems to 'go off into nothing' at the end . . . the vagueness or paleness of words is made good by the emotion of the final dance," for the Noh has its unity in emotion.[3]

Unity of Image, Unity of Emotion resolved in a final symbolic

---

[1]"Noh and the Image," The Egoist, IV (August, 1917), 103.

[2]Ibid., p. 64.

[3]Ibid., p. 45.

dance: Yeats found himself confronted with a form of drama, an image of action with a six-century-old sanction behind it, which was so compelling that it became transformed within a span of ten years into a particular structural relevance for one of his better-known poems, "Among School Children," in which a dramatic incident calls up an emotional reaction embodied in terms of images and resolved in the symbolic figure of the dancer and the dance. I do not wish to suggest that Yeats would not have written this particular poem in this particular way had he never come across Japanese Noh drama, but I do wish to suggest that the Noh provided him in every respect a dramatic form which fulfilled inherently the demands of Yeats's kind of poetry, and that the transference of the same pervading structural logic to the world of a poem should not surprise us.

The image of the dancer as the emblem of the perfect work of art for Yeats and other poets has been traced by Frank Kermode, and he concludes that, given Yeats's interests and development,

> . . . it will not surprise us that Yeats' discovery of the Japanese Nō plays was an important moment in his career. . . . Every aspect of the technique and presentation of Nō must have struck Yeats as certain proof of the soundness of his own theory of drama, which in itself stems from the Romantic Image. Above all, these were dance-plays, and so antithetical to the realism that was, in Yeats' view, draining the force of the theatre, so hostile indeed to the whole mimetic tradition of the West, that the players went masked. . . . And musical movement, the symbolic order of art, superseded the fragmentary passion of the speaking voice and the naturalism of modern stage movement. . . . Musicians would frame the action, and comment in song. All would be inexplicit, suggestive, but faultless in design; and often the climax of the play would be a dance like Salome's. There would be no separable meaning; the verses would be spoken as the dance was danced, and would dispense with that kind of expression that points 'meaning.'[1]

---

[1]Romantic Image (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 78-80.

According to Pound, the dance is an important part of the Noh performance, and places upon the playwright the necessity for making the dance rise out of the situation of the play and contribute to the whole action and thematic meaning. Yeats showed his ability to use the dance as a part of the total action or image of the play in his four early Plays for Dancers and in several later dance plays such as A Full Moon in March.

It is idle to speculate on the specific patterns of the dances which Yeats had in mind; the important consideration is that the dance must be appropriate to the demands of the text and that it must not violate the unity of the whole play. The same is true in the case of musical accompaniment. Yeats has given directions for the use of a simplified but rhythmic music in At the Hawk's Well, and the sounds of drum, gong, or zither are intended to accompany the specific rhythmic motions of the actors, but even Yeats did not insist on the use of the particular musical scores created for the plays by Dulac or Antheil. Even more than is the case with the dance, the particular music to be used with the plays cannot afford much real insight into their nature, and it is only the text which is the invariable element in each play and which must, in the successful play of this type, be the controlling factor bringing all other elements into being and proportion by the conception it embodies. As Susanne Langer has demonstrated, in drama, an art in which individual interpretations of subsidiary forms such as dance and music are inevitable, the need is particularly strong for a "commanding form," for "one essential conception, an unmistakable 'poetic core.'" Yeats realized the necessities of individual performances, and

although he had a prototype of dance (Michio Ito's interpretive dance) and of music (Dulac's or Antheil's simple, rhythmically effective background accompaniments), he would have been willing, I believe, to accept Langer's conclusion that "if the commanding form is organic and its realizations economical, the most abnormal materials will be assimilated, the most intense effects of abstracted space, time, or power will become part of the pure dramatic work."[1]

In the Noh, setting is an integral part of the text of the play. The stage itself is always bare by Western standards, and characters in the play announce where they are and what their surroundings look like, often even the meanings of their symbolic gestures. Thus language in its evocative role takes precedence over representational background. The bare stage and the convention of the audience's imaginative participation in the setting before "the mind's eye" make obsolete the standard criticism of poetic drama's redundancy in presenting verbal descriptions within the frame of the modern picture stage. This feature of the Noh also fulfills a need, recognized by Yeats, of redressing the balance between scene and functional word: "The theatre of Art when it comes must therefore discover . . . grave and decorative scenery, that will be forgotten the moment an actor has said, 'It is dawn,' or 'It is raining' or 'The wind is shaking the trees . . . . '"[2]

As is always the case, it is well to remember that it was not from the Noh that Yeats learned the need for a simplified background which would not detract from gesture and word. As early as the 1904

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 314. [2] "The Theatre," Essays, p. 209.

Samhain Yeats indicates clearly that his aesthetic preference in the matter of setting has crystallized:

> We must have a new kind of scenic art. I have been the advocate of the poetry as against the actor, but I am the advocate of the actor as against the scenery . . . a landscape painted in the ordinary way will always be meretricious and vulgar. . . . We should be content to suggest a scene upon a canvas, whose vertical flatness we accept and use, as the decorator of pottery accepts the roundness of a bowl or a jug. . . . This decoration will not only give us a scenic art that will be a true art because peculiar to the stage, but it will give the imagination liberty. . . . The poet cannot evoke a picture to the mind's eye if a second-rate painter has set his imagination of it before the bodily eye. . . . [1]

In this passage the appeal that the symbolic Noh setting would have for Yeats is obvious as well as is the fact that here again the conventional in the popular theater of the day militated against any sense of the coherence of parts necessary to a unified and meaningful dramatic whole.[2]

Yeats's desire to create for himself "an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society"[3] led him to the drawing-room, a fact which meant a modification of the Noh stage-effects. A bare wall, sometimes a patterned screen as in At the Hawk's Well, and the lighting of a large chandelier were sufficient for his plays for dancers, and he

---

[1] Plays and Controversies (New York: Macmillan Co., 1924), p. 135.

[2] In discussing the remarkable clarity of vision with which Yeats viewed the interrelationships of the various aspects of drama, Una Ellis-Fermor illustrates the fact that Yeats had, as usual, to clear the stage of the old to make way for new possibilities: "Half an hour spent with photographs of settings or designs made for settings during the nineties or the early years of the twentieth century will put the reader in a position to appreciate the tradition Yeats had to fight. In England, certainly and often even on the continent, the elaboration of detail in setting and background confused the impression of the play. . . ." (The Irish Dramatic Movement [London: Methuen and Co., 1939], p. 72.)

[3] Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 212.

even discovered that "these masked players seem stranger when there is no mechanical means of separating them from us."[1] In place of a curtain, three musicians carry in a black cloth which, at the beginning and ending of each play, they ceremoniously unfold and fold in a triangular pattern, singing alternately all the while a series of short lyric verses which usually set the scene both on a descriptive level,

> I call to the eye of the mind
> A well long choked up and dry
> And boughs long stripped by the wind,
> And I call to the mind's eye
> Pallor of an ivory face,
> Its lofty dissolute air,
> A man climbing up to a place
> The salt sea wind has swept bare.[2]

and on a thematic level,

> What were his life soon done!
> Would he lose by that or win?
> A mother that saw her son
> Doubled over a speckled shin,
> Cross-grained with ninety years,
> Would cry, 'How little worth
> Were all my hopes and fears
> And the hard pains of his birth!'[3]

---

[1]Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 136. The observations of James Schevill, a writer with practical experience in verse drama, bear out the soundness of Yeats's instincts: "When . . . a modern proscenium and drop curtain were put in, the change altered the relationship between the audience and the stage. There was a sense of looking into things instead of living with things. The difference is important. When you sit before a curtain you become curious about what you are going to see, and what you are going to hear becomes secondary. It is the difference between watching a magician, a man who can create dazzling and absorbing visual effects, and listening to and watching something that you can think about and enjoy. It is the difference between overwhelming the mind from without and permitting the imagination to function from within." (The Audience and Verse Drama," Trace [February, 1958], pp. 30-31.)

[2]"At the Hawk's Well," Collected Plays, p. 137.

[3]Ibid. In view of my earlier suggestion of the identification of the Noh and "Among School Children," it is interesting to note the appearance here of lines which were later to find their way, in a slightly altered form, into the poem.

The ceremony of the folding and unfolding of the cloth is not only a formal convention calling into play the imaginative participation of the audience in Yeats's intimate theater, but it also has the practical value of allowing the actors to enter or leave the stage area, so that it operates much as the curtain on a conventional stage which is opened to reveal the scene of the action—in this case, however, a scene built verbally and identified ritualistically with the stylized gestures of the unfolding or folding cloth.

In Calvary, the last of the Four Plays for Dancers and the only one not identified with Irish mythology or history, Yeats uses his musicians' songs for the ritual of the cloth as a means of setting up a thematic counterpoint to the symbolic action of the play. Although the First Musician identifies the scene as the road to Calvary and the action as Christ's dreaming back His passion, the wider setting of the play is the symbolic antithesis set up between the herons, eagles, swans, and gulls as symbols of the subjective life and Christ as the symbol of the objective. The pattern of the subjective, lonely, and withdrawn is introduced in the musicians' first songs with the thematic counterpoint established by the interpolation of the Second Musician.

First Musician.
Motionless under the moon-beam,
Up to his feathers in the stream;
Although fish leap, the white heron
Shivers in a dumbfounded dream.

Second Musician.
God has not died for the white heron.

Third Musician.
Although half famished he'll not dare
Dip or do anything but stare
Upon the glittering image of a heron,

That now is lost and now is there.

Second Musician.
God has not died for the white heron.[1]

The narcissistic image of the heron is quite clear in its import without specific reference to the popular idea that certain water birds will not feed at the full of the moon, so struck are they by their own reflection on the surface of the water. Nor does Yeats's system established in A Vision, which identifies the full moon as the phase of complete subjectivity and complete beauty, add anything not already implicit in the imagery itself. The thematic imagery is widened, as the play progresses, to include other solitary birds--"eagle, swan or gull" --as types of subjectivity, and the song for the final unfolding and folding of the cloth has gathered a particular relevance created by a well-controlled unity of language, symbol, and action in the play:

First Musician.
Lonely the sea-bird lies at her rest,
Blown like a dawn-blenched parcel of spray
Upon the wind, or follows her prey
Under a great wave's hollowing crest.

Second Musician.
God has not appeared to the birds.

. . . . . .

First Musician.
But where have last year's cygnets gone?
The lake is empty; why do they fling
White wing out beside white wing?
What can a swan need but a swan?

Second Musician.
God has not appeared to the birds.
(pp. 293-94)

---

[1]Collected Plays, p. 288. Further quotations from "Calvary" will be taken from this edition.

Yeats, in a humour[1] not unlike that of Eliot in his notes to The Waste Land, states explicitly in his "Note on Calvary" what he intended in the symbolic counterpoint of the play, and in best eighteenth century tradition he confuses the issue only slightly by claiming the source for his symbols to be a letter "written by Robartes to Aherne in the spring of 1917." Robartes writes that he has learned from the Judwalis that all men are divided into subjective and objective natures with their Daimons assuming characteristic shape.

> Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river, while the beasts that run upon the ground, especially those that run in packs, are the natural symbols of objective man. Objective men . . . always seek the welfare of some cause or institution, while subjective men are the more lonely the more they are true to type, seeking always that which is unique or personal.[2]

Having provided us with his source, Yeats goes on to specify the uses he has made of his symbols so that the reader of his note may not go unrewarded:

> I have used my bird-symbolism in these songs to increase the objective loneliness of Christ by contrasting it with a loneliness, opposite in kind . . . sufficient to itself. . . . I have surrounded Him with the images of those He

---

[1]"I have written the little songs of the chorus to please myself, confident that singer and composer, when the time came for performance, would certainly make it impossible for the audience to know what the words were. I used to think that singers should sing a recipe for a good dish, or list of local trains, or something else they want to get by heart, but I have changed my mind and now I prefer to give him [sic] some mystery or secret. A reader can always solve the mystery and learn the secret by turning to a note. . . . " (Plays and Controversies, p. 471.)

[2]Ibid., p. 472.

> cannot save, not only the birds, who have served neither God nor Caesar, and await for none or for a different saviour, but with Lazarus and Judas and the Roman soldiers for whom He has died in vain. . . . I have therefore represented in Lazarus and Judas types of that intellectual despair that lay beyond His sympathy, while in the Roman soldiers I suggest a form of objectivity that lay beyond His help.[1]

It is, perhaps, comforting to have Yeats's assurance as to what he was doing in the play, but I do not think it is necessary to seek any source or esoteric sanction for the meaning of the play, which is carried quite satisfactorily in symbolic action and in imagistic development. The thematic counterpoint between the act of the crucifixion and the symbols of the birds is heightened by the fact that the lyrics sung by the musicians are set in contrast to the blank verse lines which are either narrative passages spoken by the musicians or actual dialogue between Christ and the men He has failed to touch by His sacrifice. Whatever its use, the blank verse is colloquial and vigorous, and it contrasts with the highly symbolic, intricately rhymed three- and four-stressed lines of the lyrics which grow out of the specific action and carry their persistent thematic comment to a larger sphere. The two general strains of verse are counterpointed and yet unified in action and images within the play itself. An example of this can be seen in the beginning of the play. The First Musician sets the scene:

> The road to Calvary, and I beside it
> Upon an ancient stone. Good Friday's come,
> The day whereon Christ dreams His passion through.
> (p. 289)

A player enters wearing the mask of Christ and carrying a cross while

---

[1] Ibid., p. 473.

the musician continues:

> And now He stands amid a mocking crowd,
> Heavily breathing.
> Those that are behind
> Climb on the shoulders of the men in front
> To shout their mockery: 'Work a miracle',
> Cries one, 'and save yourself'; another cries,
> 'Call on your father now before your bones
> Have been picked bare by the great desert birds';
> (p. 289)

He then sings a short lyric which follows imagistically as well as thematically as a comment upon the transitional narrative verse:

> O, but the mockers' cry
> Makes my heart afraid,
> As though a flute of bone
> Taken from a heron's thigh,
> A heron crazed by the moon,
> Were cleverly, softly played.
> (p. 289)

The mocker's cry, "'and save yourself'" is a temptation directed toward the self which must yield completely in what is to be an act of utmost objectivity: the selfless crucifixion. Thus it is identified with the thigh bone of a heron crazed by the moon, the ultimate symbol of subjectivity set up in the first song of the play, and is "cleverly, softly played" because the temptation to self is disguised by mockery. The repetitive pattern of the imagery is also involved in the threatening juxtaposition of the bone of the heron, image of inmost subjectivity, and the bones of Christ, the objective man, which will be "picked bare by the great desert birds" if he does not save himself.

Lazarus's appearance and his claim on Christ's death is a specific rendering of a type of the solitary, subjective man.[1]

---

[1]Yeats's version of the Lazarus story has an obvious debt to Wilde's story in which Christ goes into a city and sees among others he

> Alive I never could escape your love,
> And when I sickened towards my death I thought,
> 'I'll to the desert, or chuckle in a corner,
> Mere ghost, a solitary thing.' I died
> And saw no more until I saw you stand
> In the opening of the tomb; 'Come out!' you called;
> You dragged me to the light as boys drag out
> A rabbit when they have dug its hole away;
> And now with all the shouting at your heels
> You travel towards the death I am denied.
> And that is why I have hurried to this road
> And claimed your death.
>
> (p. 290)

And Lazarus, doomed endlessly to search out a tomb, identifies himself with the solitary birds:

> . . . make way,
> Make way for Lazarus that must go search
> Among the desert places where there is nothing
> But howling wind and solitary birds.
>
> (p. 290)

Judas's mocking temptation is that, as he could not bear the thought of an all-powerful Christ, he had enacted the betrayal so that even Christ could not save him; thus he has made Christ, at least in this, less than all-powerful. His identification with the self-crazed heron is most explicit:

> When I planned it
> There was no live thing near me but a heron
> So full of itself that it seemed terrified.
>
> (p. 292)

He refuses to be identified with Martha and the three Marys who are not solitary because not outside the love of Christ.

> Take but His love away,

---

has known "an old man crouching, weeping upon the ground, and when He asked why he wept, the old man answered, 'Lord, I was dead, and you raised me into life, what else can I do but weep?'" Yeats recounts this story in Autobiographies, p. 286.

Their love becomes a feather
Of eagle, swan or gull,
Or a drowned heron's feather
Tossed hither and thither
Upon the bitter spray
And the moon at the full.
(p. 291)

Judas is chosen by the Roman soldiers to hold up the cross, and Christ "stands with His arms stretched out upon it" in what is by this point in the play a symbolic act even beyond traditional associations, for it is his inability to save the subjective men which in effect causes the suffering, the real crucifixion of the objective, selfless man. The three brutalized Roman soldiers ironically complete the picture:

One thing is plain
To know that he has nothing we need
Must be a comfort to him.
(p. 293)

They completely misunderstand His sacrifice in their world of total indifference, a world ruled by the God of chance, the God of dice. They are the dancers in this play, and the dance is described by the Second Roman Soldier:

In the dance
We quarrel for a while, but settle it
By throwing dice, and after that, being friends,
Join hand to hand and wheel about the cross.
(p. 293)

It is the dance with the encircling of Christ by the objectively indifferent that wrings out the final cry, "My Father, why hast Thou forsaken Me?", and the play ends with the song for the unfolding and folding of the cloth which is now charged with thematic meaning.

It should be obvious, I think, from this discussion of the play, that its images and symbols do not depend on a knowledge of Yeats's

private theories and that they grow out of and deepen the meaning and action of the play. It is hard to imagine a commentator on the play who views the coherence of the musicians' songs as dependent upon extraneous information; yet this is the charge that Phyllis Thouless in her Modern Poetic Drama brings against the play,[1] and one can only suspect that she failed to discern Yeats's intent when he spoke of the "mystery or secret" which the reader could solve by a note. The fact that she takes quite seriously Yeats's statement that he was at the time editing "Arabian mystical doctrines found in Robartes's papers"[2] suggests that she was looking for some occult doctrine as an extraneous source for the play, and for this reason failed to see that the language, action, and symbols all operate within the play itself to present a unified whole not dependent upon some recondite source for its coherence.

The only difficulty the reader may find in this play is in the notion of the dreaming back of the dead over intense or particularly painful experiences, a doctrine Yeats apparently accepted and one which appears several times in his plays. This idea can, I think, be accepted easily enough as a convention, by taking Yeats at his word for the purposes of the play. And although the play could have been created outside of this occult framework as a simple presentation of the Passion in a present moment, the idea of the dreaming back has for Yeats the advantage of distancing his subject matter, of suggesting the recurring or cyclical nature of all experience, and of enabling him to present a non-

---

[1] Oxford: Blackwell, 1934, p. 159.

[2] Ibid.

mimetic, non-traditional arrangement of his materials. In other words, within this frame, the dreaming back is Christ's, and the point of view, the emphasis is governed by what was most painful to Him. The idea of the dreaming back actually strengthens the structural logic of the play, and the reader gains by his willingness to accept the idea just as he gains by his willingness to accept the participation of the musicians as a modified chorus, as both commentators on the scene and bearers of explicit thematic statement.

Part of the problem of the modern verse playwright lies in the creation of acceptable and meaningful conventions for the stage, and in the Noh plays Yeats found such conventions readily adaptable to his own needs. The result is a form for the stage that is contrived and limited, but within its conventions and its limitations, providing a more rewarding opportunity for the union of poetry and drama than was possible to Yeats in the earlier and more expected forms. The advances in language and structure in the Plays for Dancers, however, over The Shadowy Waters, are remarkable ones which cannot be accounted for simply by the fact that the Noh drama provided Yeats a tradition with which to work. It can only be accounted for by his new vision of the nature of drama--a vision made possible by revolt against the demands of the Abbey Theatre. With the aid of the Noh, he has made an attempt to build a drama as spare, clean of line, and vigorous as the language of the poetry with which he wished to construct it. As Bentley points out, the Noh plays

> gave him a sort of dramatic equivalent for his new verse style: something terse, refined, solid, cryptic, beautiful. They also showed Yeats how to simplify his staging by radical conventions and how to combine music and dance with words

without letting the words get swamped.[1]

The Noh drama, which was Yeats's key to the stage, provided him only with an idea for drama and not with a fixed and rigid scheme. Yeats's adaptation of the Noh elements differs from play to play, and even the four early Plays for Dancers, written within the space of four years, show his willingness to experiment in response to the demands of each dramatic conception. The many correspondences between the Noh and ideas he had already evolved meant that he was not placed in the position of a mere imitator of a body of drama not his own, and Yeats was actually fortunate that he knew no Japanese and had never seen a Noh play. This very lack of knowledge, according to Thwaite, allowed him to adapt the conventions of the Noh and to create a new life for his own particular type of drama, in contrast to Pound whose partial knowledge proved so restrictive to him that his versions of the Noh are lifeless failures.[2] Yeats, who only grasped the import of some of the Noh elements and the idea behind a drama made possible by the Noh, was free to create a distinctive form dictated by his own needs. As Bentley illustrates with Brecht's Noh plays, Der Jasager and Der Neinsager,—plays very different in spirit and handling from Yeats's—the "Noh play can become anything you want to make it. Yeats's plays are as distinct from their Japanese prototypes as from Western drama." [3]

---

[1]Eric Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," The Permanence of Yeats, p. 244.

[2]"Yeats and the Noh," loc. cit., p. 237.

[3]Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," loc. cit., p. 244. It is interesting to note, however, that At the Hawk's Well, the dance play closest in construction and presentation to the Noh, has been made into

The Dreaming of the Bones, another of the original group of Plays for Dancers, makes use of the idea of dreaming back:

> The conception of the play is derived from the world-wide belief that the dead dream back, for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life. . . . The lovers in my play have lost themselves in a . . . self-created labyrinth of conscience.[1]

But the play differs from Calvary in its conception and presentation. It is one of the few Yeats plays to have its setting in the contemporary period: the time is 1916, the year of the Easter Rising of the Irish against the English, and the modern character is a young Irishman escaping after the Dublin Post Office fight. The young man's flight is under cover of the night; and within this situation of a night pursuit, the early thematic songs of the musicians set a mood of suspense and expectation by reference to the supernatural. The language of these songs is highly evocative but never vague.

> Why does my heart beat so?
> Did not a shadow pass?
> It passed but a moment ago.
> . . . . . .
> Have not old writers said
> That dizzy dreams can spring
> From the dry bones of the dead?
> And many a night it seems
> That all the valley fills
> With those fantastic dreams.
> They overflow the hills,
> So passionate is a shade,
> Like wine that fills to the top
> A grey-green cup of jade,
> Or maybe an agate cup.[2]

---

a Noh play proper which was presented on the professional Noh stage in Japan in 1949, 1950, and 1952. (Thwaite, loc. cit., p. 242.)

[1]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 467.

[2]Collected Plays, p. 276. Further quotations from "The Dreaming of the Bones" will be taken from this edition.

The young patriot, who is not masked, encounters "a Stranger and a Young Girl, in the costume of a past time . . . who wear heroic masks," and they lead him through the darkness to a ruined abbey, his place of temporary haven, from which he is to be rescued by an Aran coracle. The journey of the three is symbolized by formal circlings of the stage with each turn representing a different phase of their progress as it is announced by a particularized descriptive speech of the musician:

> They've passed the shallow well and the flat stone
> Fouled by the drinking cattle, the narrow lane
> Where mourners for five centuries have carried
> Noble or peasant to his burial;
> An owl is crying out above their heads.
>
> (p. 279)

The owl ("the cat-headed bird") becomes identified with the scenery of the night and the dead, and the "tomb-nested owl" sets the atmosphere for the conversation of the travellers, which turns to talk of the dead, particularly of those who have died in rebellion against their native land. The rebels Ireland has suffered fall into two categories: those who have participated in internecine warfare, the common sinners, and those who have called in a foreign invader to their aid, those so accursed that they are buried alone and condemned to suffer beyond life for their deed. Diarmuid and Devorgilla, two famous lovers, are of the second category: as tormented shades they are forced to dream back together, and "though eyes can meet, their lips can never meet," until they are forgiven by a member of their own race. The identification of Devorgilla with Helen of Troy arises naturally, as the lovers' sin has been the betrayal of their native land by bringing in the Norman

invader against Devorgilla's husband, the rightful king. For seven hundred years, just as Helen dreams back to her lover, they are forced to seek release in an embrace which is always prevented as the memory of their guilt rises to separate them.

Set against the owl as symbolic of the dead and of the night, the musicians' songs also pick up the image of the cock which adds thematically to the action, both as a traditional sexual symbol and also in its customary role as the bird of dawning whose crowing banishes all ghosts from the face of the earth.

> Why should the heart take fright?
> What sets it beating so?
> The bitter sweetness of the night
> Has made it but a lonely thing.
> Red bird of March, begin to crow!
> Up with the neck and clap the wing,
> Red cock, and crow!
>
> (p. 279)

There are several references to the coming of morning light, and as it becomes evident when the young couple begin to dance that they are the condemned pair seeking forgiveness from one of their countrymen, the audience realizes that the references to the bird of dawn and to light itself are functional parts of the suspense of the action. The lovers are fighting against time for a release which will also be a consummation symbolized by a kiss. Thus the cock functions as a doubly-charged symbol, and its presentation as the bird of March enforces the associations of life and birth which oppose it to the symbol of the owl. This is an opposition made explicit in the final song of the play:

> My heart ran wild when it heard
> The curlew cry before dawn
> And the eddying cat-headed bird;
> But now the night is gone.

I have heard from far below
The strong March birds a-crow.
Stretch neck and clap the wing,
Red cocks, and crow!
(p. 285)

The dance in this play is the central moment; as the words of the text demand, it should create a pattern of unending frustration which may be resolved by the act of the young Irish patriot, who asks, as he watches their dance,

Why do you dance?
Why do you gaze, and with so passionate eyes,
One on the other; and then turn away,
Covering your eyes, and weave it in a dance?
(p. 283)

The dance is also his moment of recognition and temptation:

I had almost yielded and forgiven it all—
Terrible the temptation and the place!
(p. 284)

With his refusal, the lovers can only change the dance (but not resolve it in completeness) and be swept away in a cloud as dawn comes on the mountain. The dance in this play is, of necessity, not the resolution although it provides the Young Man with the moment for his own resolution.

In spite of the fact that the Young Man controls the action, the play does not seem to have much unity or basic structural significance. The idea of the dreaming back does not function structurally as it does in Calvary or in other of the plays, and the dance, although a temptation like the dance in At the Hawk's Well, does not have the integral function in the pattern of the action that it achieves in the earlier play in which the Guardian of the Well dances to lure Cuchulain

away from the rising of the immortal waters. The Dreaming of the Bones seems to depend too heavily upon a supernatural situation which, for all its poignancy and its sanction in folk myth, finds no inherent unity with the basic situation of the play. The idea of the young traitors caught in the eternal unrest of conscience and undergoing endless torment might be more meaningful to the structure of the play if their appearance to the Young Man had some sense of necessity based within his psychological state or his situation. The supernatural lovers do provide another test, of course, and a test of a different kind, of the courage of the young patriot, but the two levels of action seem superimposed; and, in spite of all Yeats can do with his excellent use of the resources of language and symbol, they never cohere into the single, meaningful dramatic action which must inevitably be the aim of these short dance plays. Some readers may feel, however, as Ronald Peacock does, that the motive of patriotism is quite sufficient to give coherence to the play as a whole:

> This play is essentially dramatic in conception. Its emotion is the most fanatic Irish patriotism. But what gives definition to the emotion in all its intensity is an act; the refusal of the Young Man. . . . The figures in this play are one man and two ghosts; but the passions evoked are those of a whole nation of men and the life of centuries. The dramatic intensity of the climax lies in the perspective it unfolds.[1]

Whatever one's judgment of the success of the play, it is an interesting example of Yeats's ability to adapt to his own special purposes the use of such traditional elements of the Noh as the stylized journey

---

[1]Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1946), p. 125.

motive (the journey of the Young Man both symbolizing and contrasting with the endless wandering of the two spirit-lovers between dusk and dawn), the unexpected recognition of spirits, the symbolic dance, and the use of heroic masks for the suffering figures out-of-time set off against the unmasked hero of the contemporary scene.

The use of masks particularly fascinated Yeats. Masked actors aided him in achieving the distancing which he desired for drama as a necessary way of restoring to it its proper proportions. With masks he could be more certain that the rhythm of the whole work in its intricate patterns of action, dance, song, and speech would be stressed instead of the facial expressions of the virtuoso actor, who sought by means of a grimace to express a meaning which words no longer carried on the conventional stage. Further, masks had the effect of dehumanizing and of placing emphasis upon idea, of suggesting the timeless in patterns of action rather than the merely ephemeral.

> It is natural that I go to Asia for a stage convention, for more formal faces, for a chorus that has no part in the action, and perhaps for those movements of the body copied from the marionette shows of the fourteenth century. A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body.[1]

Yeats liked to think that the Noh itself had developed from the puppet theater in its beginnings, and this (unsupported) theory was probably

---

[1]Yeats, The Cutting of an Agate (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1919), pp. 8-9.

behind the stage direction to the Old Man in At the Hawk's Well: "His movements, like those of the other persons of the play, suggest a marionette."[1] Yeats's desire to escape the ephemeral and the imperfect which the merely human face represented can be explained in terms of his own ideal conceptions represented by the Byzantine phase of culture, where all is fixed in the artifice of eternity—where the very antithesis of dirty faces is achieved. In a more general context, Yeats's interest in masks can be explained as a part of the pervading dehumanization of art which José Ortega y Gasset has found as symptomatic of the modern artist. "Wherever we look we see the same thing: flight from the human person."[2]

It is impossible to trace in detail all of Yeats's adaptations of elements from the Noh tradition; the important thing is to recognize that in each case the materials of the play are controlled by the demands of the particular play. Often the direction of development was toward a simplicity and clarity which heightened the effect of the whole. Such was the case in the rewriting of The King of the Great Clock Tower as A Full Moon in March, in which Yeats by elimination of the character of the king strengthened the structural and symbolic conflict between the Queen and the Swineherd ("Crown of gold and dung of swine")—a strengthening reflected in a clarification of action and verse. This attempt to achieve "an increase of strength in the bony

---

[1]Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 138.

[2]Ortega y Gasset, op. cit., p. 30.

structure"[1] was a life-long dramatic endeavor on Yeats's part. In "First Principles" he clearly indicates that the idea of action and character which the late plays fulfill was an early one: "An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form. . . . The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of the action. . . . "[2] In this respect, Purgatory is of particular interest not only because in this play more than in any other he succeeds (without sacrificing complexity) in fulfilling his early description of first principles, but also because it is one of his last two plays and indicates the direction in which his dramatic development was moving at the time of his death.

Purgatory is another of the plays to make use of the idea of dreaming back, but here as in Yeats's other dramas based on this notion, it does not obtrude itself as doctrine: the idea of dreaming back functions both dramatically and poetically. Yeats demonstrates quite clearly in this play his ability to create an outward form, a public image, for an esoteric and inwardly cherished idea. "I have put nothing into the play because it seemed picturesque; I have put there my own conviction about this world and the next,"[3] and Yeats's "conviction" breeds good poetry and good drama if not further conviction. As Ure points out, this is one of the plays which can be regarded as an attempt to make dramatic capital out of the material A Vision provided for

---

[1]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 187.

[2]Ibid., p. 103.

[3]Yeats, Letters, p. 913.

Yeats,[1] and Virginia Moore has referred to the play as an embodiment of "The Return" concept of A Vision.[2] The play, however, like the best poems, stands complete without reference to the storehouse out of which its materials came; and perhaps even more than in the case of the poems, it is important to view the play without reference to private sources, for drama is by nature the most objectified, most public of utterances.[3]

Purgatory moves further in the direction of absolute economy of language, action, and presentation than any other of Yeats's plays. It shows the obvious influence of the Noh in its simplicity, its reiteration of image and unified emotion, and its symbolic actions. The Noh machinery of musicians, dance, and masks have, however, been eliminated. Yeats's other major influence in drama, that of Celtic mythology, has also been stripped away, leaving only the barest possible effects to create a starkness, an almost unbearably exposed terror, which is the aim of the extremely brief play: "a scene of tragic intensity."[4] It is,

---

[1]Peter Ure, Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London: University Press of Liverpool, 1946), p. 85.

[2]The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality (New York: Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 425.

[3]The objection which T. S. Eliot makes to the title of the play ("I wish he had not given it this title, because I cannot accept a purgatory in which there is no hint, or at least no emphasis upon Purgation") is perhaps more to the point than explaining the play as an extension of Yeats's private system, as Eliot at least has the weight of public tradition on his side. There is, however, a theological bias evident in Eliot's objection, particularly in view of the fact that Yeats presents quite clearly within the play the extent of the supernatural that he intends to evoke and use dramatically. See Eliot, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," loc. cit., p. 338.

[4]Yeats, Letters, p. 907.

I think, this quality of bareness which encourages the view that the play can be dealt with satisfactorily as an allegory of the decline of the Irish aristocratic tradition and of Yeats's hopes for a new and better Ireland. Bentley's definition of Purgatory as a domestic tragedy "which symbolizes the decline of Ireland and perhaps of the modern world generally"[1] is fair enough as far as it goes, but it does not go far toward accounting for the total effect of the play. Donald Pearce in his article, "Yeats' Last Plays: An Interpretation,"[2] provides a detailed allegorical examination of the play which agrees with Bentley's generalization, but I do not think that the reader of Pearce's detailed symbolic correspondences is any closer to an understanding of the play than that which is provided by Bentley's hint.

Yeats's nightmare in which Shaw appears as a sewing machine which "clicked and shone" reminds us of his hatred of a drama which had as its raison d'être the mechanical presentation of an idea or message, and it should not be necessary to document at length his lifelong preference for symbolic presentation as opposed to the merely allegorical, which he considered a lesser means of expression. He speaks of the difference between symbol and allegory in his essay on Blake:

> A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some visible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy, and not to imagination. . . .[3]

---

[1]"On Staging Yeats' Plays," New Republic, CXXVIII (June, 1953), 17.

[2]ELH, XVIII (March, 1951), 67-76.

[3]Essays, p. 142.

Yeats's pervading interest in magic and ritual as a part of art in its evocative role works against any suggestion that allegory might satisfy him as the mode of being for a verse drama.

> All Art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which mediaeval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy, for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence.[1]

Although Yeats, with maturity, modified a great deal the presentation such a theory of art suggests, his essential ideas about the creation of poetry remained the same, and his general theories place him in opposition to the aims of the allegorist.

All of this is not intended to suggest that an allegorical reading of the play is not possible and that it does not perhaps exist quite legitimately on one level. It should suggest, however, that such a reading is not a satisfactory way of dealing with the play and that the lengths to which a critic like Pearce pushes such a reading actually distort the drama as a whole. Pearce takes the last three plays (The Herne's Egg, Purgatory, and The Death of Cuchulain) as a trilogy, and finds that "they are closely similar in mood and attitude and have, at bottom, a common theme--a crying out against the desecration by vulgar hands of something to be held sacred, or at the least, supremely noble."[2]

---

[1] Ibid., p. 183.

[2] "Yeats' Last Plays: An Interpretation," loc. cit., p. 67. Under Pearce's guiding allegorical principle, the play rapidly becomes a series of equivalences. The marriage of the Old Man's mother and the groom equals the debasement of the Anglo-Irish aristocratic tradition by degenerate alliances which insure the fall of the house: "The offspring of this marriage (latter-day nationalism) slew the father (degenerate landlordism), took to the road as a peddler (of popular materialistic

This statement of theme might be taken as a statement of theme of much of Yeats's work; it is the other side of the coin from the search for an ideal which is immutable. The major difficulty with Pearce's program is that his approach places the emphasis on the elucidation of the thematic, allegorical counters as a means of giving worth to the plays. This is not necessary, particularly in the case of Purgatory which, without doubt, is a poetic drama and one which yields up a distinct and unique artistic experience without reference to a specific historical situation.

In Purgatory there are only two actors: a Boy and an Old Man, and the stage directions do not indicate masks. Perhaps the absence of masks in this play can be accounted for by the fact that the play itself, by its very nature, achieves the distancing that had been a major objective in the use of masks in the earlier plays. In addition, the elimination of masks is in keeping with the general atmosphere of the play, its starkness of tone; it uses the minimum essentials of language, action, and symbol to express a maximum horror so controlled through expression that it is the image of the play which remains with the reader and not the horror itself. By the creation of a poetic play in which all parts contribute to the total effect in proper proportion, Yeats has managed very skillfully a subject which might easily have degenerated into melodrama, in which case it would have been the horror of the action which remained to the reader instead of the sense of

---

nationalism throughout the country) and, in the old man's words, 'got upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch' (Proletarian Ireland) a bastard son (the modern Free State) who has neither memory of, nor belief in, the old man's tale."

inevitable totality which a work of art provides.

The action of the play is extremely simple, even if, as Eliot notes, not very pleasant.[1] An old man and his son return to the ruins of a great house which had formerly belonged to the man's mother, who betrayed her class by marriage to a groom, a worthless drunkard who burns down the house while drunk. In the fire, the Old Man, then a boy of sixteen, had stabbed his father, by this act making himself homeless and parentless since his mother had died in the course of his birth. The play takes place at night, as befits the action which the night encompasses, and this particular night is an anniversary of the wedding of the ill-matched pair. In keeping with the cyclical nature of the entire action, the boy is now the same age as the Old Man had been when he killed his father in the burning house; in turn, the boy is killed with the same knife: "My father and my son on the same jack-knife!"[2] The Old Man hopes that the ritual act will complete the cycle of evil influence of the house, and free the spirit of his mother, driven by remorse, from her dreaming-back: a re-enactment of her wedding night and his own begetting. He fails, however, and the play ends with his despair as the sound of hoof-beats announces the return of the drunken bridegroom from the public house to begin again the action with which his mother "must animate that dead night / Not once but many times!"

---

[1]"The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," loc. cit., p. 338.

[2]"Purgatory," Collected Plays, p. 435. Further quotations from "Purgatory" will be taken from this edition.

The Old Man is the focal point of the play and one of the major means of its coherence and unity. His is the attempt to redeem the past and the future by his action, and his is the failure. The action of the play, the setting, and the meaning are all controlled by the emotional reactions of the old peddler, who once had read Tertullian and who had lived with his mother's memory in a once-great house. For him the two major symbols of the play—the more general one of the house and the less public one of the tree—are identified with his mother and with a past which has been destroyed by his father, who represents a destructive force identified in the Old Man's mind with the sexual principle—a principle which by rights should be creative. In the perverted order of the world of the play, the creative act becomes the destruction of the family, through the birth of a child who is to be the murderer of his father and son.

The father's destructive influence extends to his attempt to destroy his son's birthright, to keep him on a groom's level, an attempt frustrated by those who half-loved the boy for his mother's part in him. The final destructive action of the father is the symbolic act of burning the house made great by the life which once inhabited it.

> Great people lived and died in this house;
> Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,
> Captains and Governors, and long ago
> Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.
> Some that had gone on Government work
> To London or to India came home to die,
> Or came from London every spring
> To look at the may-blossom in the park.
> They had loved the trees that he cut down
> To pay what he had lost at cards
> Or spent on horses, drink and women;
> Had loved the house, had loved all

> The intricate passages of the house,
> But he killed the house; to kill a house
> Where great men grew up, married, died,
> I here declare a capital offence.
> (pp. 431-432)

This passage, unlike any other in the play, is rich in public association, in its calling up of place names and rich tradition, and the expansive lines on the Old Man's tongue deepen a sense of what has been destroyed. Even here, however, the more private symbol of the tree appears, and it is an integral part of that which has been destroyed by the father, a man whose animal nature is identified throughout the play with the beasts he once had groomed. The old peddler sees his father in the window on the re-enacted wedding night as "some tired beast," and hoof-beats announce his perpetual arrivals in the night of the Old Man's mind.

The imagery and action of the play as well as the Old Man's emotional reactions carry an explicit statement of an Oedipal situation which is the link involving the man with the spirit world, the link which unites the two worlds of the play and gives them a fusion lacking in The Dreaming of the Bones. Whatever may be involved for the shade of his mother, the suffering and terror belong to the Old Man as he experiences a psychological reaction which can only be adequately explained by his identification with the dead woman. Within the framework of the play, his is the purgatorial experience even though it is created for him in terms of his mother's remorse, and it is a purgatorial cycle he is unable to break, an evil he cannot expiate by the murderof his son.

> I killed the lad because had he grown up
> He would have struck a woman's fancy,
> Begot, and passed pollution on.
> (p. 435)

The identification of the Old Man with his mother is suggested by the fact that, as the man and boy stand before the burned-out house, he alone can see the image of his mother as a young girl standing in the lighted window; while the boy, who is obviously no better than his grandfather the groom, can only see the image of the bridegroom as he stands in the lighted window pouring whiskey into a glass. (The relationship between the terms "groom" and "bridegroom" creates complex connotations in view of the basic situation of the play.) The hoof-beats also are heard only by the Old Man, and as he describes the timeless action about to take place, he hears the sound of the horse as his mother heard it on her wedding night:

> It's louder now because he rides
> Upon a gravelled avenue
> All grass today. The hoof-beat stops,
> He has gone to the other side of the house,
> Gone to the stable, put the horse up.
> (p. 433)

The identification of the mother with the house is an expected one in Freudian terms, and the Old Man early suggests the suffering that touches the image of the house:

> The shadow of a cloud upon the house,
> And that's symbolical. . . .
> (p. 430)

His command to the boy, "Study that tree," and his question, "What is it like?" introduce the second major symbol, which operates so organically with the drama that Pearce ignores it in his quest for an allegorical reading. Yeats, however, stresses the image of the tree in the

early lines and in the closing of the play; and one is surprised that Pearce did not suggest at least that the tree could be identified as the family-tree, riven by the same destructive force which had destroyed the tradition represented by the house. In answer to the question, "What is it like?", the boy says, "A silly old man." This answer, which begins the identification of the now-bare tree with the old man, is passed over by the peddler who turns to the image of the tree as it had been:

> I saw it fifty years ago
> Before the thunderbolt had riven it,
> Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,
> Fat, greasy life.
>
> (p. 430)

The imagistic identification of the father with the thunderbolt should be an easy one to make, particularly since he is linked with the destruction of the house by fire. The richly sensuous description of the tree in leaf suggests a fertility which has been lost and may suggest an archetype of the tree of life, a suggestion reinforced later by the line, "'Then the bride-sleep fell upon Adam.'" After the killing of the boy, the stage grows dark "except where the tree stands in white light," and the Old Man repeats his command—now to the world at large—"Study that tree." Believing yet in the efficacy of the ritual slaying of the son, he continues:

> It stands there like a purified soul,
> All cold, sweet, glistening light.
> Dear mother, the window is dark again,
> But you are in the light because
> I finished all that consequence.
>
> (p. 435)

The identification of the tree both with the Old Man and with his mother

is possible, and both identifications are surely suggested. The tree also functions as a phallic symbol, particularly in its juxtaposition to the other major symbol, the house.

The purgation cannot, of course, be accomplished either psychologically or actually by the killing of "A bastard . . . got / Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch" and the inaugural sound returns:

> Hoof-beats! Dear God,
> How quickly it returns—beat—beat—!
> (p. 436)

The ritual has failed, and the Old Man is left with the knowledge that "Mankind can do no more." The play ends with his half-cry, half-prayer, "O God . . . Appease / The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead."

In spite of the extraordinary basis of the play's action and conception, the language is concrete and often highly colloquial, showing a unity of development through the play by word and phrasal patterns of repetition. The verse, like the rest of Purgatory, has a deceptive simplicity, containing a power quite different from the rather dreamy, evocative power often found in Yeats's earlier dramatic work. Here for the first time throughout a drama, Yeats has abandoned the blank-verse line with which he had achieved such flexibility in the Plays for Dancers. The predominant line in Purgatory is a four-stressed line which, in combination with a colloquial diction, creates a texture of bareness in keeping with the structure and total effect of the play. An example of the way the verse underwrites the action can be seen in the first speech of the play; the boy, who is to be identified with the groom his grandfather, opens the play with lines which would, I think,

suggest the sound of the hoof-beats which later become a symbolic part of the action:

> Half-door, hall door,
> Hither and thither day and night,
> Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,
> Hearing you talk.
>
> (p. 430)

Yeats's experimentation with the verse of Purgatory did not represent a sudden interest in varying the dramatic line; he had already experimented with the possibilities of blank verse, and the lyrical choral interludes in the earlier dance plays had offered a chance for metrical variations from the pervading pattern of blank verse. The complete break with blank verse in Purgatory, however, represents a major advance in Yeats's attempt to create a verse for the dramatic necessities of his action, and to make of it a vehicle strong enough and flexible enough to carry forward the action and conflicts of the drama. The extent of Yeats's accomplishment in creating a dramatic verse is acknowledged by Eliot, who speaks with a practicing verse dramatist's awareness of the difficulties involved.

> [An] important cause of improvement is the gradual purging out of poetical ornament. This, perhaps, is the most painful part of the labor, so far as the versification goes, of the modern poet who tries to write a play in verse. The course of improvement is towards a greater and greater starkness. The beautiful line for its own sake is a luxury dangerous even for the poet who has made himself a virtuoso of the technique of the theater. What is necessary is a beauty which shall not be in the line or the isolable passage, but woven into the dramatic texture itself; so that you can hardly say whether the lines give grandeur to the drama or whether it is the drama which turns the words into poetry.[1]

---

[1]"The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," loc. cit., p. 340.

And in recognition of the fact that verse and structure are organically related in verse drama, Eliot concludes this passage:

> Yeats's purification of his verse becomes much more evident in the Four Plays for Dancers and in the two in the posthumous volume: those, in fact, in which he had found his right and final dramatic form.[1]

In Purgatory, within the brief span of six pages, one scene between two characters, Yeats has compressed a sense of action, depth, and strength that would not be possible in any drama except that existing in conjunction with the poetic mode of apprehending experience. The influence of the Noh, much more than a convenient set of conventions for Yeats, provided him with a working clue to the nature of poetic drama, in which the parts--the image, the emotion, the action, the verse, and the individual art-forms of music and dance--have to yield to a controlling sense of form to provide a completed experience from which none of the elements are separable, or, to use Eliot's word, isolable. In the sustained development of this idea of drama into actuality, Yeats attains the status of a pioneer in modern verse drama since he repudiated both the traditional direction of the poetic play and the direction of the naturalistic and realistic drama of his day. Yeats's reputation as a verse dramatist has been somewhat obscured by his reputation as a poet, but a renewed interest in the possibilities of verse drama is bringing with it an awareness of his contribution to the theory and practice of verse playwriting, as well as a recognition of the solid and substantial practical achievement which his forty years' work in the theater has provided his successors.

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 34-41.

CHAPTER III

T. S. ELIOT

Unlike Yeats, who began his dramatic work in the conventional poetic mode and moved ever toward a more experimental and finally unique form for verse drama, T. S. Eliot began with the unique and experimental and has moved toward an increasingly conventional presentation of verse drama. The direction of this dramatic development from the writing of Sweeney Agonistes to the production of The Confidential Clerk has been charted with interest and careful observation by Eliot himself and by many contemporary critics. Eliot's position, however, as the most influential poetic dramatist of his time gives a special relevance to further examining his development in spite of the fact that there are as yet few critical stones unturned.

As has often been pointed out, Eliot's dramatic impulse revealed itself in various guises some time before the completion of his first original play, Murder in the Cathedral, in 1935. In the realm of dramatic criticism, "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama," "Possibilities of a Poetic Drama," "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," and the influential "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" were all completed in the twenties, and they set forth the essential attitudes toward poetry and drama which Eliot has retained throughout his career with a surprisingly small amount of revision.

With the addition of his comments after 1935, Eliot has provided a working body of critical theory spanning nearly four decades, and according to William Arrowsmith, "there is hardly a verse dramatist of talent who does not, in some way or other, derive from Eliot's determination to have a verse drama." From Eliot's "famous bag of dramatic tricks, the Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," Arrowsmith concludes that

> His disciples scatter broadcast from the suggestions of the Dialogue: the notes connecting the form of the ballet and the drama were taken up by Auden and Isherwood; from the notes on dramatic liturgy derive, I think, Anne Ridler's nativity play, The Shadow Factory, Ronald Duncan's masque and anti-masque, This Way to the Tomb, as well as Fry's two festival plays, The Boy With a Cart and Thor With Angels.[1]

In Eliot's poetry, the dramatic element is strongly evident from the first, not only in the interior monologue presentation of Prufrock or in the actual snatches of dialogue in "Portrait of a Lady" or in The Waste Land, but also in the less evident method of procedure for these poems--a method which involves the assumption of a scene to be filled out for the reader as it takes on relevancy through character or action. The procedure usually results in a simultaneously perceived dramatic relationship between scene, action, and character which precludes any sense of the purely lyrical or descriptive for its own sake and which produces a strong sense of particularized apprehension for the reader of the whole area of the poem's existence. For instance, one never recalls Prufrock and his problems in an abstracted way but always in terms of concrete settings and actions: afternoon teas, the catlike

---

[1]"English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," Hudson Review, III (Summer, 1950), 205.

fog, women talking of Michelangelo, the snicker of the eternal footman, or white flannel trousers on the beach. The same is true of Gerontion, an old man in a rented house with the jew squatting on the window sill and the goat coughing in the field overhead. One has only to think of Tennyson's Ulysses to realize that Eliot's concrete sense of dramatic integration is not an automatic reward of the dramatic monologue form.

Eliot first attempted a purely dramatic form in Sweeney Agonistes —a fragment generally credited with pointing the way to new possibilities for verse drama through use of contemporary speech rhythms and of the jazz rhythms of the music hall. Perhaps as important to Eliot's own development as his accomplishments in rhythmic structure, was his demonstration in Sweeney of the possibility of a verse drama which makes several levels of meaning available at once. This, as he explained later in "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (1933), was the method of Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare has created several levels of significance, with plot for the simplest auditors, words and their expression for the more literary, rhythm and musical patterns for the musically sensitive, and "a meaning which reveals itself gradually" for those "auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding." Many of these levels presumably act upon an auditor at once, although with differing force, depending on the auditor's sensitivity, and those which do not interest a member of the audience simply will not intrude upon his consciousness: he will not be aware of their existence.[1]

---

[1]The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 146.

This idea for creating a workable verse drama became a structural principle in Sweeney Agonistes, and its influence remains in the later dramas in a modified form. Eliot describes the process as it works in Sweeney Agonistes:

> I once designed, and I drafted a couple of scenes, of a verse play. My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play —or rather, should be addressed to the latter who were material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play.[1]

This use of the interaction of sensitive characters (the "initiated" or "initiable") and the insensitive, unknowing characters (often clods) becomes a structural device in all of Eliot's plays—one which is quite clearly evident in Murder in the Cathedral and in The Family Reunion and less so in the two later plays, The Cocktail Party and The Confidential Clerk.

As Sweeney explains to Wauchope, Horsfall, Klipstein, Krumpacker, Swarts, Snow, Doris, and Dusty,

> I gotta use words when I talk to you
> But if you understand or if you dont
> That's nothing to me and nothing to you
> We all gotta do what we gotta do. . . .[2]

The others can only respond to Sweeney's tale of "a man once did a girl in" out of their limited personal experience and understanding (Doris

---

[1] Ibid., p. 147.

[2] "Sweeney Agonistes," Collected Poems 1909-1935 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936), p. 153. Further quotations from Sweeney will be taken from this edition.

has just drawn the coffin card in a modern debasement of a once-meaningful ritual, Snow is blindly insistent upon the fact that "They dont all get pinched in the end," and Swarts wants to know "What did he do" all that time with a dead woman in a bath with a gallon of lysol?).

Sweeney's impatience,

> What did he do! What did he do?
> That dont apply.
> Talk to live men about what they do.
> (pp. 151-152)

is the result of his inability to communicate his knowledge that "Death is life and life is death." The other members of the party are aware of Sweeney's meaning only as they experience the irrational fears of the uncertain modern world, and the final chorus of the play expresses on their level of comprehension the nightmare quality of an existence without potential meaning. The chorus's apprehension of life is on the same level as that of Doris (who has to read from printed instructions to learn the meaning of her fortune-telling cards), and the triple rhythms of the lines carry a potential hysteria expressive of the experience of modern man.

> When you're alone in the middle of the night
> and you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright
> When you're alone in the middle of the bed and
> you wake like someone hit you on the head
> You've had a cream of a nightmare dream and
> you've got the hoo-ha's coming to you
> . . . . . .
>
> And you wait for a knock and the turning of a
> lock for you know the hangman's waiting for
> you.
> (p. 154)

The play ends with the foreboding and impressive

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK

representing the ever-present fears of all of them, of which Pereira is a concrete embodiment. Sweeney, unlike the others, is aware of something more particular, some meaning he almost understands and encompasses as Orestes-Sweeney--a role suggested by the epigram from the Choephoroi. For Sweeney, "is the hangman also the Hanged Man?"[1] The horror of retribution is in the knocking, however, because Sweeney has not apprehended the meaning of the other epigram from St. John of the Cross, which, Grover Smith suggests, must ironically be applied to the Crippen of the piece.[2]

Eliot's inability to complete his fragments of an Aristophanic melodrama may be accounted for in several ways, all of them significant in view of his later attempts at fully developed plays. One reason for his failure might be explained as an understandable inability to sustain for any length the violent rhythms, the compression, or the intensity of the mood of the play--all necessary to maintaining action without recourse to a clear-cut plot. It is further possible, as Smith suggests, that the lack of objective evidence beyond Sweeney's own words for his ability to create the apparent significance of his speeches may explain the fragmentary nature of the whole work. There is no way in the play as it exists of preparing the audience to accept Sweeney as a person with

---

[1]Grover Smith, Jr., T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 118.

[2]Ibid., p. 116.

a superior and sensitive awareness of the meaning behind a very sordid action.[1] In other words, if Smith is correct in his assumption, Sweeney as the incarnation of the "average man" is a dramatic failure since he is the spokesman for a significance which only Eliot himself sees—a significance which would, in all probability, be hidden to the undeveloped Sweeney of the drama: Sweeney in this respect is a persona, not a genuine dramatic character.

One further suggestion may be in order, and it is that the nature of the material itself defies completion as a rounded action or meaning: only a fragment of an action or communication is possible to the inhabitant of the modern world acting within its framework, just as only the fragment of a prologue is possible to an action which cannot be communicated among its actors, which is without order or expression on the irrationally apprehended level of the nightmare. The term "imitative form" rises to confront the reader who would suggest what a completed Sweeney would have to be like, and he is forced to admit, in view of the material as we have it, that Sweeney is in essence complete and that to fulfill the idea of a finished product in a conventional sense, the play would have to become something other than what it essentially is. The play as an expression of the fragmentary understanding and communication of the modern world is perhaps fragmentary by intent; at least it must by nature remain so as long as it draws its materials and its order of expression solely from the world it expresses. The attempt to create a completed action while retaining the world of modern experience

---

[1] Ibid., p. 112.

embodied by Sweeney Agonistes has been Eliot's problem in his succeeding dramas and accounts in many respects for the modifications in the later plays. It is interesting to note that Eliot has consistently solved the problem of dramatizing the completion of meaningful action by sending his characters out of the typical modern world into an unknown world: Celia leaves the world of the cocktail party for martyrdom in Kinkanja and Harry pursues his Furies across "the frontier" of his pilgrimage. Even Colby retires to the organ loft at Joshua Park.

In drawing the inhabitants of the world of Sweeney Agonistes, Eliot has departed from conventional assumptions about the heroic nature of characters in verse drama. As Dobrée describes Eliot's cast, "the men . . . are 'tough guys,' and the women . . . are whores, all behaving in an almost subcommonplace manner, and half-articulating their ideas in the words of the street,"[1] and it is obvious that the language, the diction, the violent rhythms grow out of character and action and succeed in expressing them. The rhythms evolved to carry the world of Sweeney represent a complete break with the traditional stage rhythms of blank verse and mark the beginning of Eliot's practical attempts to establish contemporary rhythms and verse forms for drama as well as for poetry in general. Blank verse as an adequate medium for modern poetic drama appears to Eliot to be as hopelessly dated and irrelevant as pre-Raphaelite diction had to Yeats some twenty years earlier.

> By the time of Otway dramatic blank verse has become artificial and at best reminiscent; and when we get to the verse plays of

---

[1]Bonamy Dobrée, "Poetic Drama in England Today," Southern Review, IV (Winter, 1939), 590.

> the nineteenth-century poets . . . it is difficult to preserve any illustion of reality. . . . These plays, which few people read more than once, are treated with respect as fine poetry; and their insipidity is usually attributed to the fact that the authors, though great poets, were amateurs in the theatre. . . . It is not primarily lack of plot, or lack of action and suspense, or imperfect realization of character, or lack of anything of what is called 'theatre', that makes these plays so lifeless: it is primarily that their rhythm of speech is something that we cannot associate with any human being except a poetry reciter.[1]

Eliot's verse achievements in Sweeney were hailed by his contemporaries as practical evidence of a new possibility for verse drama, and the relevance of the verse to the world of the play, the structural use of the rhythms in creating a part of its violence, particularly offered a new direction.

> In Sweeney Mr Eliot breaks with the rhythm of the heroic line by finding another music which appears here in its crudest form. The ear discovers a line, heavily end-stopped, often sharply divided into two halves, with four strong beats. . . . The ear is aware of the time and the beat, and is occasionally gratified by rhyme, but the pleasure comes in the variety of speech rhythms that can be held to this simple base. Sweeney goes back to what Mr Eliot has called 'the essential of percussion and rhythm'.[2]

Eliot was, as Gardner points out, finding his way back to the "tradition of accentual verse,"[3] and the result is a verse flexible enough to serve both the mundane demands of ordinary, necessary conversation in Sweeney,

> WAUCHOPE: Hello dear
> How many's up there?
> DUSTY: Nobody's up here
> How many's down there?
> WAUCHOPE: Four of us here.

---

[1]T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p. 27.

[2]Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot (London: The Cresset Press, 1949), pp. 26-27.

[3]Ibid., p. 29.

Wait till I put the car round the corner
We'll be right up
DUSTY: All right, come up.
(p. 142)

or the demands of Sweeney's emotionally-charged attempt to explain,

Death or life or life or death
Death is life and life is death
I gotta use words when I talk to you.
(p. 153)

Dance hall rhythms appear again in The Rock, as well as many other verse variations which Eliot was to adapt to later dramatic purposes, but since this pageant play is not Eliot's in conception (the scenario was provided by E. Martin Browne with the length of the choruses stipulated by precise time limits),[1] it is of interest only because the play provided Eliot a chance to experiment with a chorus and to experiment with and reject for his own later use in verse drama the kind of scenic pastiche which Auden and Isherwood were to find so appropriate to their purposes. The verse of the chorus in The Rock, however, presented Eliot the challenge of reproducing a contemporary speech which could be sustained, and he met the challenge by creating a dactylic pattern, by shifting the stress to the beginning of each foot instead of maintaining the iambic foot of Shakespearian tradition.[2]

Murder in the Cathedral (1935) is Eliot's first completed dramatic work, although it is in many ways a special case since it was produced for a Canterbury Festival audience presumably sharing a common

---

[1]T. S. Eliot, The Three Voices of Poetry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 11.

[2]E. Martin Browne, "The Dramatic Verse of T. S. Eliot," T. S. Eliot: A Symposium, ed. Richard March and Tambimuttu (London: Editions Poetry, 1948), p. 197.

ground of religious belief heightened by their awareness that they were gathered within a few yards of the spot where the real Becket had enacted a real martyrdom some eight centuries earlier. In this respect, Eliot was relieved of many of the problems a more heterogeneous modern audience would have created for him--problems which he has consistently had to face in his later plays. Murder in the Cathedral can, however, no more be dismissed as an occasional piece than can Milton's Comus or Donne's Anniversaries: like them, it transcends its occasion.

In view of its special subject and its treatment of that subject, the success of Murder in the Cathedral on the London stage after the festival had ended was quite unexpected either by author or by contemporary drama critics.[1] Attempts have been made to explain the play's popularity as curiosity on the part of theater-goers since its author was the most influential poet of the age, but the inadequacy of such notions is made clear by a tribute the play received as a play from a practicing dramatist who was also a bitter critic of the religious world the play represents and of all things English. In his review of the Mercury Theatre production of Murder in the Cathedral, Sean O'Casey records his opinion that

> There is not one play in the West End of London, bar Romeo and Juliet, not one that links itself to a theatre, save this play only; and this play is on the frontier, forming an outpost of the drama that will one day attack and subdue the theatrical harlotry of London's core.[2]

---

[1]The 1951 film version of the play did not meet with the same success, a fact which Grover Smith asserts, "contributes to the estimate that the play is hard for the public to understand." (Op. cit., p. 180.)

[2]The Flying Wasp (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1937), p. 180.

Subsequent examinations of the text of this play have been many, and in general they agree on the importance of a serious attempt to present through the medium of verse drama an action which, by its nature, very nearly defies dramatic presentation. The action of the play is the acceptance by Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury, of the right reason for his martyrdom, of the divestment of self necessary to accomplish the will of God; and in spite of the general difficulty in making dramatic material of an action which is essentially passive and religious, in portraying the ineffable nature of an experience without external conflict, Murder in the Cathedral is a near-success.

Out of this difficult material of the spiritual triumph of the twelfth-century martyr, Eliot has created a drama which has meaning, coherence, unity, and a sense of rightness not dependent upon a predisposition to accept the validity of the religious world of the play. In the face of difficulties of character,[1] subject matter, and action (or lack of it), the play succeeds on its own terms and has about it a sense of permanence rare in twentieth-century drama. The reasons for its air of permanence are, I believe, to be found in its successful fusion of the elements of poetry with those of drama--in the experience

---

[1]The difficulties of presenting a religious character and of objectifying an inward illumination will be familiar to readers of Paradise Regained. Eliot also uses tempters to suggest the nature of the religious experience, but the three traditional temptations fail to provide a real challenge since they belong to a past already conquered by the priest, and, like Milton's Christ, Thomas simply returns a verdict of "no contest." The fourth temptation is to "do the right deed for the wrong reason," and in Thomas's understanding of its nature is his victory over it--a victory for which the audience can only take his word. As most commentators on the play point out, Thomas appears priggish in his complacent acceptance of the experience he is to suffer.

of form, content, and language which only a fully realized verse drama can offer to the stage; and it is from this point of view that I would like to approach the play. Extensive examinations of the play can be found in the work of Francis Fergusson, R. P. Blackmur, and Grover Smith, and on the whole the play has received generous and intelligent criticism. But in most cases, the criticism of the play has been partial, dealing primarily with the poetry or with the idea of martyrdom as dramatic action or with the play as an example of Eliot's idea of levels: there is the murder story for the average playgoer, the conflict between church and state for the politically and/or religiously enlightened, and the modern poetic language and imagery for the aesthetically inclined. There has, however, been little attempt to see the play as a completed poetic and dramatic experience, to seek the essential nature of its unity--an attempt perhaps only now made possible by the specific examination of the various aspects of the play by modern critics.

Like Sweeney and like the plays to follow it, Murder in the Cathedral has a single major character possessing a certain knowledge and undergoing an experience in which the other characters cannot participate. The nature of this experience has no common ground either for the audience or for the other characters, and its presentation cannot, therefore, depend wholly on mimetic means. Eliot uses the chorus in his play to help solve this problem. The chorus in Murder in the Cathedral is not provided primarily for contrast with the major character as is the case in The Family Reunion, and although the chorus is made up of the poor and ordinary women of Canterbury, it is an extremely sensitive reflector, however unwilling at times, of the meaning and

atmosphere of the tragedy it witnesses. The Cathedral chorus itself undergoes a change as a result of Thomas's action, and as a microcosm of the "world" it extends the scope of the action, while in its transformation it provides the audience a set of reactions within reach of the ordinary sensitivity it represents.

As the first part begins, the chorus establishes a sense of inevitability for the action which is to be completed by the play. The women are "drawn" by the danger, their "eyes are compelled to witness" the action: they are "forced to bear witness" to Thomas's action just as he is compelled on another level to bear witness to the validity of Christian sacrifice. Yet the poor women are not heroic or willing to be so; they do not wish the agony of the witnessing to begin, for it involves a kind of birth, a kind of life the ordinary man can avoid under average circumstances.

> We do not wish anything to happen.
> Seven years we have lived quietly,
> Succeeded in avoiding notice,
> Living and partly living.[1]

A reader familiar with Eliot's poetry is not surprised to find him capitalizing on the fact that the historical season is winter, the season of death, or portraying the imminent spring as "ruinous spring" and "bitter spring," the season of painful birth.

The chorus of the second part reveals the change it has suffered as the result of Thomas's action: now it is ready to accept the

---

[1]Murder in the Cathedral (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953). Further quotations from Murder in the Cathedral will be taken from this edition.

necessity of death as a part of life and of a larger pattern which Thomas's meaningful death will partially reveal.

> In our veins our bowels our skulls as well
> As well as in the plottings of potentates
> As well as in the consultations of powers.
> What is woven in the loom of fate
> What is woven in the councils of princes
> Is woven like a pattern of living worms
> In the guts of the women of Canterbury.
> (p. 65)

And it is this chorus, increased in understanding and awareness, which intones the hymn of praise to God which ends the play with the final words, "Blessed Thomas, pray for us."

In his use of the chorus Eliot has provided more than just a way for the average person to understand an action not explicit enough to be otherwise apprehended; he has made the transformation of the chorus a part of the action of the play, and it reflects and reinforces the dramatically inadequate transfiguration of Thomas. It is the change of the chorus which makes public the private act of martyrdom: Thomas's only action is to make perfect his will, and it is in the implications of his deed reflected by the chorus that another and a larger pattern—the pattern of the play itself—is revealed.

> [The women of the chorus] occupy a circumference, . . . of which Becket is the center, for they rely on him as the source of the movement they participate in. When he is the point, they are the wheel, as he is the wheel when God is the point.[1]

The principal image for the action of the play is that of the turning wheel and the still point, an image representing among other things, the moment of timeless reality in a world of time, and as Becket

---

[1]Smith, op. cit., p. 190.

insists at the moment of his murder, his death and his deed are out of time:

> It is not in time that my death shall be known;
> It is out of time that my decision is taken. . . .
> (p. 71)

References to the turning wheel in the speeches of the priests and tempters ("nothing lasts, but the wheel turns") identify it with fortune's wheel, symbol of the change and flux of the world. Only in the speeches of Thomas (as well as in the repetition of his words by his alter ego, the Fourth Tempter) is the specifically Christian context of the still point at the center of the turning wheel introduced as an image.

> They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
> They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be forever still.
> (p. 21)

Thus Thomas identifies the act of martyrdom with the image of the wheel and the still point: the martyr who has perfected his will is the center of an action in which his only action is inaction--acceptance and submission to a larger pattern "that the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still."[1] In an even wider context, the image of martyrdom as a

---

[1]"This eternally decreed pattern of suffering, which is also action, and of action, which is also suffering, Eliot symbolizes by the image of the wheel which always turns, yet at the axis, always remains still." (Louis L. Martz, "The Wheel and the Point: Aspects of Imagery and Theme in Eliot's Later Poetry," T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger [New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948], pp. 446-447.)

still point at the center of the turning world becomes identified with the archetypal symbol for deity.[1]

Thomas's initial word in the play, "Peace," sets his role, and an explicit relationship is developed in his Christmas morning sermon between peace and martyrdom:

> Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples, "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." Did He mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbors, the barons at peace with the King. . . . Those men His disciples knew no such things: they went forth to journey afar, to suffer by land and sea, to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment, to suffer death by martyrdom. What then did He mean? If you ask that, remember then that He said also, "Not as the world gives, give I unto you."
>
> (p. 48)

The peace which the archbishop speaks of is the peace of the man "who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God." Becket's death is to be an objectification of that peace: the still point at the wheel's center.[2]

The action Thomas undertakes is different from that of the world to which the action of the knights belongs, and Becket alone knows that

> Only
> The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
> He can turn the wheel on which he turns.
> (p. 21)

The actions of the four tempters in Part I are balanced by the actions

---

[1]The figure of the Mandala as identified by Jung is proposed by Elizabeth Drew as a central symbol in all of Eliot's poetry in T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 143.

[2]Martz also makes this suggestion. (Loc. cit., pp. 446-447.)

of the four knights in Part II with Thomas as the "unmoved mover" in the temporal world of the play. His role is a quietude which is meaningful in the midst of an activity which is without meaning.

The often-criticized footlight speeches of the four knights take on a special relevance in Eliot's scheme of things, for only the fool may think "He can turn the wheel on which he turns." The knights' rationalizations of their action not only bring a sudden shock of contemporary recognition to the audience (a shock enlarging the area of the reverberations of the play), but if the play has established the image of its action, and I believe it has, the audience is aware of the real meaning of the death of Becket and of the real action of the play which is an accomplished fact set against the wrong reasons given by the knights for what they believe the action to have been. In this sense, the moving of the knights out of the time world of the play to speak to the audience is not as radical as has been thought,[1] and in the overall action of the play it reinforces the image of the archbishop's martyrdom which the play has built—an image which cannot be disturbed by "Petty politicians in [their] . . . endless adventure!" Becket has been freed of the wheel to which the knights by their action (and by their concept of action) are tied:

> You still shall tramp and tread one endless round
> Of thought, to justify your action to yourselves,
> Weaving a fiction which unravels as you weave,

---

[1]By John Crowe Ransom among others: "The author softens on behalf of his villains, or he wearies of his strictness in drama—at any rate he decides to make them somebodies, to give them a big scene; a gross disrespect to a dead archbishop, to say the least. And it breaks with the tone." (The World's Body [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938], p. 170.)

> Pacing forever in the hell of make-believe . . .
> (p. 83)

and the speeches of the knights operate functionally in the structure of the play to provide one more example of the action-activity, stillness-movement paradox which is the key to the play's structure.

The sense of action which is mere activity as opposed to Becket's meaningful passivity is stressed by the urbane, comic rhythms inherent in the part of the First Tempter:

> I leave you to the pleasures of your higher vices,
> Which will have to be paid for at higher prices.
> Farewell, my Lord, I do not wait upon ceremony,
> I leave as I came, forgetting all acrimony,
> Hoping that your present gravity
> Will find excuse for my humble levity.
> If you will remember me, my Lord, at your prayers,
> I'll remember you at kissing-time below the stairs.
> (p. 25)

or by the swing of the antiphonally chanted lines of the tipsy knights closing in for the kill:

> Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
> Are you marked with the mark of the beast?
> Come down Daniel to the lions' den,
> Come down Daniel and join in the feast.
>
> Where is Becket the Cheapside brat?
> Where is Becket the faithless priest?
> Come down Daniel to the lions' den,
> Come down Daniel and join the feast.
> (p. 72)

which contrasts with the dignity and resolution of the speeches of the martyr. The effect of the speeches and rhythms throughout the play is the same: varying from the doggerel of the knights to the late speeches of the chorus based on the rhythms of the Dies Irae and the Te Deum (sung in Latin by a choir off stage), the variations in the poetry underlie and in part create the image of the action of the play.

The basic image of the still point and the turning wheel is quite clearly the image of the act of martyrdom and in the realm of external activity, of the play's hero, who is a still point in the world of petty politicians. Less obvious but quite as basic to the total pattern is the fact that the general structure of the play fulfills the apprehension of this image as it is created for the audience or reader.[1] The play is divided into two parts which are very nearly equal in activity and action, with the knights of Part II balanced against the tempters of Part I. Between these two halves of the play which suggest movement embodied in supple, fluid, changing verse forms, lies the prose interlude, Becket's Christmas sermon on the relationship between martrydom and a Peace "not as the world gives." The Interlude follows immediately upon the conclusion of Part I, which ends with Becket's resolution: "I shall no longer act or suffer," and structurally, the prose sermon, belonging to Becket and to the world of the spirit, is the still center of the play. It is the expression of Becket's state--a state of grace to which his acceptance of God's will has brought him--and this fact is stressed by the quiet, dignified, serene prose of the sermon which contrasts markedly to the restless, nervous, contemporary prose

---

[1]Louis L. Martz is suggestive in his statement: "Eliot's play, focused on a contemplative saint, displays what we might call a semi-circular structure: with Becket as the still center, and Chorus sweeping out around him in a broad dramatic action, a poetical ballet of transformation" ("The Saint as Tragic Hero: Saint Joan and Murder in the Cathedral," Tragic Themes in Western Literature, ed. Cleanth Brooks [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955], p. 175.), although he does not follow out the structural implications in the play. When Martz ascribes the success of the sermon "to the fact that it is not really an interlude at all, but a deep expression of the play's central theme, binding the play's two parts into one" (ibid., p. 169), he comes closer to describing the structural meaning of the play.

rhythms of the knights' later footlight speeches. The whole pattern of the play, then, is an approximation, an objectification of the image of the action: the prose sermon is a still center between two halves filled with a sense of activity, flux, change, and mortality. Thus the whole play on the levels of image, language, action, and structure is an emblem of itself so integrated and complete that the result is the sense of inevitability and permanence which the play yields in spite of its obvious shortcomings.[1]

The nature of the experience of accepting martyrdom and the inward, illumined, passive state of the martyr obviously defy realistic presentation, nor does the everyday world abound in objective correlatives for them. Therefore, although on one level of action the play appears to be fairly mimetic in nature, actually its poetic structure is non-mimetic, and we are presented with the image of an action. We are given simultaneously and on every level possible the image of the two worlds which in Christian context are paradoxically related.

> One is the physical, external world of temporal and spatial manifestations; the world of perpetual change. The other is the unseen world of inner unchanging pattern, whose centre is 'the still point.' Man is 'involved' with both and is part of the pattern of both.[2]

It may be objected that an audience could not be expected to apprehend the pattern of the play, especially in the sense that the

---

[1]It is even possible some of the play's shortcomings are actually explainable in terms of the demands of the overall presentation. For example, the lack of character development in Thomas, his passivity, can be seen as necessary in the larger pattern of the play: he is, by his (in)action, the still point in a frenzied world.

[2]Elizabeth Drew in her chapter on the Four Quartets, op. cit., p. 147.

overall structure is itself symbolic of the image of the action of the play. This objection is not valid, however, unless one is willing to concede the impossibility of experiencing a general sense of form from, say, a long poem or a piece of music. "Illusion . . . is form in suspense,"[1] and once the first notes of a symphony, the opening lines of a poem, or the opening speeches of a play have sounded, on a subconscious level at least, the auditor or the reader anticipates the revelation, the resolution, the completion of a total structure or form, no matter how preoccupied the conscious mind may seem to be with actions, ideas, or particularized expressions. The apprehension of the larger pattern of form is part of the total experience of a work of art, although it is most often an awareness too abstract or too complex to be a conscious process like the recognition of a smaller pattern such as the doggerel of the knights or the contemporary implications of their speeches in Murder in the Cathedral. The ordinary member of the audience who finds the sermon interlude at best only a prosaic, quiet center in the action of the play comes closer than he knows to an apprehension of the structural meaning of the drama, and if he is willing to accept it and to agree that it is a necessary part of the whole experience of the play, he has participated in the meaning and structure of the play in a way he would never be able (or care) to articulate.

The formal organization of the play also operates to support the ritual quality of Murder in the Cathedral—a quality in keeping with the sacrificial action of the play. The need of drama to recognize its

---

[1]Charles Morgan, quoted by Langer, op. cit., p. 309.

kinship to religious liturgy is discussed in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," where Eliot specifically states a need for "the human drama, related to the divine drama, but not the same. . . ."[1] The solution which Murder in the Cathedral offers is, however, a special one for special material, and Eliot soon recognized this fact.

> It was only when I put my mind to thinking what sort of play I wanted to do next, that I realized that in Murder in the Cathedral I had not solved any general problem; that from my point of view the play was a dead end.[2]

In language also, Murder in the Cathedral was a special case. The shifting variety of verse rhythms and forms, while a part of the overall design of this play, would not, under ordinary circumstances, yield the unity a more generally sustained and adaptable basic verse pattern might contribute as a formal element to a verse play. The style evolved for the festival play had been, as Eliot points out, by reason of the material and the nature of the action (historical with contemporary implications and meaning), "neutral, committed neither to the present nor to the past,"[3] and since he had desired above all to avoid the echoes of blank verse ("an avoidance of too much iambic"[4]), he had turned to Everyman for his general rhythms. The result was, however,

> . . . only a negative merit: it succeeded in avoiding what had to be avoided . . . in short, in so far as it solved the problem

---

[1]Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 36.

[2]Poetry and Drama (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 26.

[3]Ibid., p. 27.

[4]Ibid., p. 28.

> of speech in verse for writing today, it solved it for this play only, and provided me with no clue to the verse I should use in another kind of play. Here, then, were two problems left unsolved: that of the idiom and that of the metric (it is really one and the same problem) for general use in any play I might want to write in future.[1]

Further, Eliot indicated that in future plays he wished to dispense altogether with prose:

> For we have to accustom our audiences to verse to the point where they will cease to be conscious of it; and to introduce prose dialogue would only be to distract their attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression.[2]

The use of prose in Murder in the Cathedral, like the use of the verse rhythms, is a special one which cannot fulfill the needs of a less specialized verse play.

Given Eliot's conviction that the advantage verse has over prose in poetic drama is its wider range of subject matter,[3] it was to be expected that he would turn away from the historical subject of Murder in the Cathedral and seek in verse drama a presentation of the world of modern experience already identified as the world of his poems. The Family Reunion (1939) was the result. In contrast to Yeats who was content to create a verse drama which by its nature demanded a small, intimate audience, Eliot has sought increasingly to find a larger audience, a more general situation, and a wider communication for his plays

---

[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 15.

[3] "The poetic drama in prose is more limited by poetic convention, or by our conventions as to what subject matter is poetic, than is the poetic drama in verse. A really dramatic verse can be employed, as Shakespeare was able to employ it, to say the most matter-of-fact things." (Ibid., p. 22.)

in verse. In The Family Reunion he makes a step in this direction by disguising the specifically religious situation in turning to the contemporary scene and the problem of a self-convicted wife-murderer pursued by an inherited guilt, which he can only identify at the place of its inception and growth. The theme is essentially the same as in the earlier plays. The epigraph of Sweeney Agonistes becomes a line of Harry's, "You don't see them, but I see them," and he is like Sweeney in that he experiences life on a different plane from most of the other characters in the play--a dichotomy which was, of course, present in a modified way in Murder in the Cathedral. Harry differs from Sweeney by completing the entire action suggested by the epigraphs of the earlier play; he is able to fulfill the conditions of the second epigraph from St. John of the Cross and divest himself of the love of created beings so that he can follow the Eumenides (somehow miraculously transformed into "bright angels") at the end of the play, and the nature of Harry's transformation relates him both to Becket and to Celia of The Cocktail Party.

The many problems of the play as well as its many accomplishments have been discussed at length by almost every commentator on Eliot,[1] and there are, perhaps, more critical commonplaces about The Family Reunion than about any English verse play since Hamlet, the principal (and quite justified) one being that in the Eumenides Eliot has

---

[1]Among the best discussions of the play are C. L. Barber, "Strange Gods at T. S. Eliot's 'The Family Reunion'" in T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, pp. 415-443; Gardner, op. cit., pp. 139-157; and Smith, op. cit., pp. 196-213.

failed to create an adequate objective correlative for either Harry's state or the central experience of the play.[1] Besides the attempt to suggest an unknowable, or at any rate unexplainable, experience by his use of the Furies, Eliot also has experimented with the chorus in this play and, in an attempt to link it to the modern world of the drama, has modified it to consist of aunts and uncles on hand for the family reunion. These insensitive individuals, at the proper moments, yield their somewhat limited personalities to the demands of the choral chant, in which as members of the modern world they comment on their situation and on their inability to understand Harry's predicament. Since they reveal a greater awareness in the choral unit than they are allowed in their own shallow characters, there is an obvious awkwardness for the actor and for the audience.[2] To express the heightened meaning of the play while yet retaining a contemporary framework, Eliot has found it necessary that not only the chorus speak "beyond character" but also Agatha, in her incantatory, runic prayer for "the three together."

The same "beyond character" trance occurs in the ritualistic "follow, follow" ceremony of Agatha and Mary as they circle around dead

---

[1]Eliot has noted that "the deepest flaw of all was in a failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation" and that the Eumenides represent this failure. (Poetry and Drama, p. 36.)

[2]I have been assured that the audience readily accepts this convention after the initial shock, and Helen Gardner insists that this is one of the few modern plays which is better when acted than when read. (Op. cit., p. 142.) Eliot himself, however, admits that this organization of the chorus is merely a trick with definite limitations and one which involves a very difficult transition for actors to perform successfully. (Poetry and Drama, p. 33.)

Amy's lighted birthday cake, a symbol which ironically reminds us that "death is life and life is death." In dramatic terms, the death of Amy and of her ordered world (the clock has finally stopped in the dark) represents the freedom of Harry to fulfill his destiny in the world for which his experience has prepared him.[1] Mary's earlier confession to Harry,

> I believe the moment of birth
> Is when we have knowledge of death
> I believe the season of birth
> Is the season of sacrifice[2]

has been made explicit in the action of the play, which takes place in early spring—late March, to be exact—a season as appropriate here as it is in the opening section of The Waste Land. The truth about his father's and Agatha's past has freed Harry from the lie of his mother's carefully created world of Wishwood, and her death, however painful for the audience, is a symbolic statement of Harry's freedom to find a life which will no longer be the death-in-life of the modern world, but a meaningful life now possible to the protagonist who knows and accepts the meaning of the Eumenides.

---

[1]D. W. Harding discusses this and shows Amy's death as necessary both on psychological and symbolic grounds as the play represents the experience psychologists call "psychological weaning" from the mother figure. ("Progression of Theme in Eliot's Modern Plays," Kenyon Review, XVIII [Summer, 1956], 337-360.) Helen Gardner in her perceptive comments on the play has objected to the stress the last scene places on Amy's death, which is merely a consequence; "the true meaning of the play is . . . in Harry's conversion; and that, like Thomas's sanctity, we have to take for granted. It cannot be expressed in dramatic terms." (Op. cit., p. 155.) Eliot admits that the two situations are not reconciled: "we are left in a divided frame of mind, not knowing whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son." (Poetry and Drama, p. 37.)

[2]The Family Reunion (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1939), p. 60.

The difficulties this play presents are largely difficulties of theme and subject matter which could not be resolved by the same means Eliot had used in Murder in the Cathedral. Having abandoned the specifically religious world, Eliot states his theme in a structural progression much closer to the ordinary structure of a three-act play than that of Murder in the Cathedral. In spite of this, the theme of The Family Reunion is not embodied with the same clarity as that of Murder in the Cathedral.

> As Eliot himself several times remarks in the text [of The Family Reunion], the theme of the play is 'unsayable', only to be stated obliquely, and it is this fact which determines the technique he uses. This, the technique, can only be called algebraic. It is the unfocussing of what one may presume to be a concrete, personal experience until only its abstract pattern, its 'algebra', is perceived, and the superimposition of this pattern upon a different and fictitious aggregate of facts.[1]

This method of procedure, which Eliot has used successfully in some of the poems ("The Hollow Men," "Ash Wednesday," The Waste Land, and Four Quartets), is one which, to be successful on the stage, demands an action that can carry its share of the burden of the whole equation, and to ignore, or fail to fulfill the demands of this extra dimension of the drama results in a sense of incompleteness and vague dissatisfaction such as that which one receives from The Family Reunion. To avoid this failure, Eliot attempts to make the Eumenides a part of the action and theme, and they are connected with the major strain of imagery in the play, that of the eye.

---

[1]John Peter, "'The Family Reunion,'" Scrutiny, XVI (September, 1949), 219.

> In The Family Reunion, where this image is again [as in "The Hollow Men"] central, it has lost its association with the particular, however much we may feel that the force of the image derives from a particular undisclosed human situation. Dramatic form makes necessary the concrete embodiment of this general sense of being looked at, and Mr Eliot has translated the 'eyes' of the play into the figures of the Eumenides. It would have perhaps been better if he had left these watching and pursuing eyes nameless, for the classical associations rather hinder appreciation of their simple and terrifying significance.[1]

In spite of all that Eliot can do with prosody and imagery, The Family Reunion fails for lack of a formal embodiment of significant action. The Family Reunion is an attempt to move beyond the solution of Murder in the Cathedral in which the structure itself is an emblem or metaphor for the action of the play, and although Eliot has made some significant experiments in the later drama, he has failed to create in more complex terms a wholly successful play. The difficulty is that Eliot is unable through the dimensions of poetry alone to portray convincingly the problem, complications, or the nature of the solution in The Family Reunion. The play's hero is like the sparrow that flies through the banquet hall and is then lost to sight: there is too much stretching before and after on which the significance of Harry's brief experience within his ancestral walls depends, too much which Eliot has not been able to give dramatic statement to, within the formal precinct of the play. What Eliot has been able to do to extend the scope of the play, if not to encompass it in adequate dramatic terms, has been on the level of the poetry, which represents an advance over the dramatic verse of Murder in the Cathedral. The mood of the play is established

---

[1]Gardner, op. cit., p. 108.

and held by the poetry, and Eliot is able to create subtle variations in adapting the verse to the action without resorting to the extremes of doggerel or liturgy appropriate in the earlier play. The rhythms in The Family Reunion are not so violent as those of Sweeney Agonistes (and hence sustainable), although they have the same sense of contemporaneity. The desire to give contemporary relevance to the verse of the stage is for Eliot a desire to combat the traditional attitude that dramatic verse is expected and acceptable only from personages dressed in historic costumes.

> What we have to do is to 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 unreal world in which poetry can be spoken.[1]

In answer to this need for bringing poetry into the world of the audience, Eliot developed the verse rhythms of The Family Reunion which were a modification of the earlier experiments and which provided Eliot with a base to work from in his next play. He describes the verse as

> . . . a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses. The caesura and the stresses may come at different places, almost anywhere in the line; the stresses may be close together or well separated by light syllables, the only rule being that there must be one stress on one side of the caesura and two on the other.[2]

The resultant line is one flexible enough to suggest the banal rhythms behind the conversations of Ivy, Violet, Charles, and Gerald, or to compel the audience to expect the appearance of the Furies, or to carry

---

[1]Eliot, Poetry and Drama, p. 31.

[2]Ibid., pp. 32-33.

the emotional recognitions in the lyrical duets between Harry and Mary and between Harry and Agatha.[1]

In his next play, The Cocktail Party (1950), Eliot attempts and probably comes closer to a total dramatic and poetic integration than in his other plays. He has moved even further than in The Family Reunion toward disguising the Christian implications of his theme and has heightened the sense of contemporary significance by eliminating chorus and ghosts, although (in place of Agatha) the Guardians still appear as keepers of a wisdom necessary to direct the other characters toward the solutions for their problems. In particular, Eliot has achieved his aim "to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility."[2] He has achieved it so well, in fact, that it has been questioned whether there is poetry at all in The Cocktail Party. The poetry is present in this play, however, although in keeping with Eliot's desire, it often operates upon the auditor unconsciously, imposing a pattern not to be perceived by the conscious mind as "poetry" but creating and underwriting the structure, action, and meaning of the play.

W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., one of the few critics to make a serious attempt to examine the verse in this play, actually finds "the meter, or at least the rhythm, a very marked thing throughout." Wimsatt

---

[1]It is on the grounds of the overall structure of the play that Eliot later criticized these duets: "they are too much like operatic arias. The member of the audience, if he enjoys this sort of thing, is putting up with a suspension of the action in order to enjoy a poetic fantasia: these passages are really less related to the action than are the choruses in Murder in the Cathedral." (Ibid., p. 34.)

[2]Ibid., p. 39.

further indicates that Eliot is actually able to establish particular, distinctive rhythms for individual characters. For instance, in Julia's "brassy, chattery rhythms" there are echoes of the jazzy rhythms of Sweeney Agonistes:

> It's such a nice party, I hate to leave it.
> It's such a nice party, I'd like to repeat it.

or

> I don't know.
> You don't know! What's his name?

Celia's typical rhythm is characterized in the "'And if this' climax of sweet, austere discountenance, toward Edward and toward herself,

> And if this is reality, it is very like a dream.
>
> And if that is the sort of person you are—
> Well, you had better have her.
>
> And if that is all meaningless, I want to be cured
> Of a craving for something I cannot find. . . . "[1]

Thus the verse rhythms operate imperceptibly, on the whole, to carry the action of the play which, as Eliot points out in Poetry and Drama, is a Christianized and contemporary rendering of the basic story of the Alcestis of Euripides. Perhaps even more to the point in explaining the ritual quality of its contemporary action are the commentaries showing the play's obvious debt to material in From Ritual to Romance,[2] and although a knowledge of this source is no more necessary to the playgoer than it is to the reader of The Waste Land, as is the

---

[1] "Eliot's Comedy," Sewanee Review, VIII (Oct.-Dec., 1950), 670-671.

[2] For instance, Sandra Wool, "Weston Revisited," Accent, X (Autumn, 1950), 207-212.

case with the poem, the suggestive parallels of the mythology systematized by Jessie Weston provide a statement of one of the meanings available in the play.

The play's action takes place between two cocktail parties (the maimed rites of the modern world), one opening and the other closing the play. The failure of the first cocktail party (the ritual banquet at which there is no food and from which the hostess is embarrassingly absent) is an objectification of the state of the Fisher King and of its implications for those who suffer as a result of his incapacity. Edward Chamberlayne, as the Fisher King, is suffering from a spiritual dryness reflected in his inability to love, and his restoration is brought about by modern psychology (which involves questions and answers as did the traditional quest) under the direction of Harcourt-Reilly—the mysterious figure who is inspired fool, quester, and Medicine Man. The success of the restoration is symbolized by the second cocktail party which brings the play full circle: the larder is full, the host and hostess once more together in their traditional roles, and there is perhaps a hint in Edward's solicitude for Lavinia that she is about to produce an objective symbol of the restoration of the Fisher King. The same guests are assembled at the second party, with the exception of the martyred Celia (perhaps the Hanged Man), who is present through report, and her selfless martyrdom creates for the other characters a catalyst enabling them to formulate the meanings of their own actions and achievements.

A reading of the play in terms of its mythological organization and implications does not by any means exhaust its levels or exclude its Christian overtones, and it is well to remember that the play succeeds

by a translation of its sources into modern terms rather than, as is often the case in Eliot's poetry, by a juxtaposition of ancient and modern.

> In Eliot we observe a myth generated from the real contemporary situation. His plays have a literal, realistic, very contemporary surface, 'ourselves of this present time and year, upon the stage', but they develop, as they progress, into poetic rites. He portrays the scene from familiar life—the family in the country house, the barrister with wife, mistress and social circle—through which an underlying mythical pattern diffuses its meanings to the surface; so that the "real" becomes, without being negated or displaced, transparent, and through it the myth appears as the immanent meaning.[1]

The play has a well-structured coherence on every level which does not depend upon specific recourse to Weston or Euripides.

The general circular pattern of the action of the play structurally expresses its meaning, although one of the principal characters must leave the circumscribed world of the cocktail party to complete her action. The illumination which the death of Celia sheds on the world of the others does, however, make her act meaningful for those gathered at the final party to celebrate the beginning of their acceptance of the roles life has fitted them to play. The restoration of Lavinia to Edward has objectified the cyclical nature of the play, as she is reborn to him (a parallel to Christian and pagan rites as well as to the Alcestis) when he through self-knowledge is prepared to receive her. On their level of action, the second cocktail party is a celebration of a communal victory (by nature partial) complementing Celia's lonely spiritual triumph through rebirth into Vocation after the death of the former

---

[1]Ronald Peacock, The Art of Drama (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 207.

self. Her actual physical death prefigures a final transformation both in a Christian context and at the final cocktail party where an epiphany occurs as the other characters are forced to bring their understanding of her nature into agreement with their new knowledge of her sacrificial action. The Guardians, after a communal drink (Reilly now drinks only water) at the Chamberlaynes, are off again to another party at the Gunnings (the war, some ingenious critic suggests), and the cycle begins again.

Although the cyclical and circular nature of the action underwrites any reading of the plot one prefers (Christian, Euripidean, or Weston), the best explanation of structural progression in Eliot's comedies comes from William Arrowsmith in his essay, "The Comedy of T. S. Eliot." Arrowsmith (with hints from Verrall) undertakes a statement of the procedure used in both comedies, a method intending a conversion[1] in the Euripidean manner: two actions or extensions of an action are paralleled, and at some point in the play the necessity arises that the first of them be converted into terms of the other.

---

[1]Arrowsmith acknowledges the difficulty accruing to the term "conversion" particularly in an Eliot-centered context, but lacking a better one, he explains that "by 'conversion' I mean simply the transfiguration of one action or its terms, a conversion or transformation of one reality to another—but not an 'epiphany' and not a conversion of levels. The commonest form of such conversion in Euripides is that in which a story (i.e., a logos) derived from received beliefs—the world of myth and the corpus of 'things as they are said to be'—is suddenly, in all of its parts—its terms, its character, and the values it invokes—'converted,' under dramatic pressure, to another phase of reality." ("The Comedy of T. S. Eliot," English Institute Essays, 1954, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1955], p. 152.) The fact that so many of Eliot's "conversions" involve conversions is merely gratuitous and, unfortunately, confusing.

> All of these conversions replace and dislodge, but do not disown the first action by transfiguring it at every point. The first action is neither false nor even unreal, but it is inadequate. . . . And what we see is less the contradiction between the two opposed realities than the counterpointed relation of their development, the way in which, under the blow or experience and insight, one reality is made to yield to a further one, each geared to its appropriate experience. We begin with a familiar and conventional world, operating from familiar motives in a field of accepted, though outmoded, values; by the time the play closes, character, motives, and values have all been transfigured and pushed to the very frontiers of reality.[1]

Eliot, according to Arrowsmith, fails to fulfill the structural possibilities of the Euripidean "doublet-reality" because his insistence on a Christian context has led him to write double-level (instead of "doublet-reality") comedy: "one play, a well-made farce with Christian overtones, and another play, a complete Christian comedy, superimposed, like the Clementine Homilies on a Greek romance and available only to educated Christians or to meddlers like myself [i.e., Arrowsmith]."[2] Whether or not one agrees with Arrowsmith's diagnosis of the impossibility of assuming a Christian context for the modern audience, his conclusions are in all probability too exclusive and rigid to do justice to a successful Eliot comedy like The Cocktail Party. The availability of other possible statements of formal significance, such as the archetype of the Fisher King, should demonstrate this without difficulty.

The comparisons which Arrowsmith has made with Euripidean procedure are particularly enlightening, however, if they can be used to explain what has happened to Eliot's drama generally. From the struc-

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 154-155.

[2] Ibid., p. 167.

tural division, which was so marked in the first three plays, between the sensitive, focal character and the insensitive, antithetical characters, Eliot has moved in the direction of a leveling out of character, an elimination of the device in Sweeney in which the sensitive members of the audience alone know of the level of meaning Sweeney cannot communicate to the insensitive characters who surround him. This device, which found special use in the action of Murder in the Cathedral, and which was handled again in The Family Reunion with less than total success, has given way in the two comedies to an attempt at a tighter interweaving of the second level into the texture and plot of the play. That is, if Eliot has wholly succeeded, the initiated Christian becomes the "sensitive" member of the audience, and instead of seeing a division between levels of meaning and sensitivity in the characters and theme of the play, in this case he perceives throughout a series of conversions on every level of the play, involving all of the characters and the total pattern. The striking division between a character or group of characters invested with special receptivity and another group only embodying the limbo of a world without meaning has largely disappeared, and everything in the comedies works in the weaving of the total pattern. For the rest of the audience (the uninitiated), there is a great deal else in a successful play like The Cocktail Party, as the Weston reading of the play should indicate, and presumably even a modern audience not consciously Christian will feel stirrings of residual recognition which might account for the uncomfortable feelings experienced by an audience at an Eliot play.

This explanation of Eliot's structural adjustments is particu-

larly valuable because it helps to explain what has happened to the poetry in the plays where this procedure is attempted. There are no longer characters who are appropriate "speakers," bearers of the poetry (like Agatha, Harry, Mary, Becket, Sweeney), and as a result of the leveling off of character peaks, the poetry in turn has leveled out, becoming more widely distributed and more at one with the overall texture of the play. From dependence on initiated characters and a heightened poetic presentation, Eliot has moved toward a tighter integration of the whole range of dramatic elements. The result is not one we are always prepared to accept from a modern poet like Eliot, and even in The Cocktail Party, where the results are successful, critics have registered their uneasiness at what appears to be Eliot's new poetic method.

Of some value in this context is Ronald Peacock's book-length study in which he seeks to demonstrate that all art is by nature imagery, and that in verse drama we should not always insist on the post-symbolist criterion for poetry as a "tissue of imagery [in which] metaphors, tropes, rhythms and sounds are no longer secondary instruments of story, or ideas, or 'thoughts' and their associated feelings, but take control, becoming the primary texture."[1] In drama, "plot is part of an inter-texture of imagery and words,"[2] and "the persons, like the plot of which they are the agents, belong to the total imagery of the play."[3] Plot and character, then, understood as imagery, can assume some of the

---

[1]The Art of Drama, p. 211.

[2]Ibid., p. 194.

[3]Ibid., p. 198.

functions we expect ordinarily from poetry, and according to Peacock, our insistence on a poetry with a "tissue of imagery"

> . . . should not in justice lead to the rejection of poetic styles less concentrated than the symbolist; nor to an implicit depreciation of art in other forms; nor to the view that all poetry depends only on one kind of metaphor or "symbol"—the poetic image in a verse text. (This latter is the error of those who decry Eliot's plays as against his earlier poems; they do not see the transference of metaphorical power from words alone to scene and persons.)[1]

The kind of transference of metaphorical power to the other dimensions of scene and persons that Peacock speaks of is a way of explaining what Eliot has attempted in his later dramas, but it is also suggestive of the relationship which scene, person, action, and word ought ideally to create in verse drama, and it is interesting to note that when the transference of metaphorical power is so complete that it results in an impoverishment of language, the other elements (as the nineteenth century had discovered) must be inflated or the result is merely prosaic. For a modern poet with Eliot's orientation, the kind of inflation of action or scene the Romantics indulged in is impossible, and the result of the interweaving of parts on a level with impoverished verse is the dull and prosaic cloth of The Confidential Clerk.

With the publication of The Confidential Clerk in 1954, Eliot reaches the opposite side of the circle from the verse he created in Sweeney Agonistes some thirty years earlier. "The characters in The Confidential Clerk, where Eliot sacrificed poetry even more ruthlessly than in The Cocktail Party, speak lines which are verse in typography but prose in cadence."[2] From the strong, violent jazz rhythms of Sweeney,

---

[1]Ibid., p. 217.

[2]Smith, op. cit., p. 228.

Eliot has arrived at a rhythm in his latest play[1] which is basically that of prose and a language which is very colloquial but also very prosaic, being almost devoid of imagery or of the synergic potential which characterizes the language of poetry. It is almost asif Eliot had become so involved with his attempt to develop a verse for saying the most matter-of-fact things that he forgot that this is not the only requirement for verse drama and that this, indeed, is what verse drama has in common with prose drama. Eliot's characters have all learned how to say "shut the door" in a language dramatically relevant, but they are no longer able to describe the world beyond the door with the kind of conviction only poetic relevance can give.[2]

If a positive answer is in order to Eliot's question in "A Dialogue of Dramatic Poetry," "is not the question of verse drama versus prose drama a question of degree of form?",[3] one must conclude that The Confidential Clerk is indeed a prose play because Eliot has abandoned one of the most essential and basic formal units, that of language, and there is nothing in the structure or overall conception of the play to suggest that it is a poetic play beyond residual traces identifiable

---

[1]According to a report of an interview with Eliot by Don Freeman in the Dallas News, April 17, 1958, Eliot is now working on a new verse play called The Elder Statesman.

[2]Eliot is aware of a need for verse suitable to both needs of poetic drama: "I suppose that it will be agreed that if the work of the last twenty years is worthy of being classified at all, it is as belonging to a period of search for a proper modern colloquial idiom. We still have a good way to go in the invention of a verse medium for the theatre, a medium in which we shall be able to hear the speech of contemporary human beings, in which dramatic characters can express the purest poetry without high-falutin [sic] and in which they can convey the most commonplace without absurdity." ("The Music of Poetry," p. 33.)

[3]Selected Essays, p. 34.

to those familiar with Eliot's development. It is quite possible, I think, that an audience would not be as surprised to learn that Eliot's lines in his last play had been printed as prose units (which they are not) as to learn that some of the lines in prose playwright Arthur Miller's A Memory of Two Mondays had been printed as poetry (which they are).

The lines in The Confidential Clerk are not "loose, or limp, blank verse" as one antagonistic critic[1] has suggested, but rather a four-stress base line here made unfamiliar by an excessive variation of secondary stress and unstressed syllables, a variation not given poetic coherence by some of the usual Eliot devices such as repetition of phrasal units, word echoes, or metaphoric language. The end of the line has no significance in the verse of The Confidential Clerk as it has in the earlier plays, and too often there is the feeling that what one is reading or hearing are merely prose sentences broken into line units after the fourth stress count has been achieved. On a very few occasions the verse pattern does come through, but it is not sustained enough or basic enough to alter the total impression of prose as the medium of the play.

The Confidential Clerk, an Edinburgh Festival play in 1953, is comedy with the same serious intent as The Cocktail Party. The question of identity is basic here as it was in the earlier plays, and the same problems of knowing and acting within one's limitations and of the re-

---

[1]Spenser Brown, "T. S. Eliot's Latest Poetic Drama," Commentary, XVII (April, 1954), 368.

lationship between vocation and identity are presented in this play. Colby Simpkins, the frustrated organist who is the central character, Lucasta Angel, the illegitimate daughter of Sir Claude Mulhammer, and B. Kaghan, the (as it turns out) illegitimate son of Lady Elizabeth Mulhammer, are all involved in a central search for security and identity—a search translated into terms of learning who their parents are and of coming to accept them. Among the four representatives of the older generation (all of whom have lost a child in one way or another), Lady Elizabeth and Sir Claude both speak a great deal about their own parents, Lady Elizabeth wishing to escape her heritage and Sir Claude wishing to atone to a dead father. They, like the younger set of characters, have much to learn about themselves and about each other in the process of accepting who and what their children really are. Eggerson, the retired confidential clerk, who has lost a son in the war, is the only character not to reveal concern about his parentage, and this is significant in view of the fact that he is the only character who has found himself, who consistently maintains himself with dignity and shows an ability to understand others, and who, not incidentally, is an active Vicar's Warden in Joshua Park. He is, therefore, the only character suitable to become Colby's spiritual father until Colby is ready to take up his greater vocation of reading for orders so that he may finally be about his Father's business. (The double meaning of the word clerk is obvious in the context of the play's conclusion.)

The Confidential Clerk easily yields up the series of Christian conversions (in the structural sense) which Arrowsmith insists is the sole aim of Eliot comedy ("There is meant to emerge into familiar outline

the whole foreshadowed, hinted pattern of the Christian life: church, martyrdom, Easter, caritas, the perpetual conspiracy, and the life of Christ informing the lives of men."[1]), and as he demonstrates, the series of conversions, less overt than in The Cocktail Party, are more "explosive" in The Confidential Clerk.

> Eggerson mentions, en passant, that his wife gets low-spirited "around this season When we're getting near the anniversary." "The anniversary?" asks Sir Claude, "Of your son's death?" and Eggerson replies, dodging the death of his son in order to suggest the Good Friday death of The Son, "Of the day we got the news." And hard on the heels of that death comes of course the Easter of conversion, the birth of Christ in the lives of the dramatis personae: enter Athene Guzzard, dea ex machina, like a grizzled Easter rabbit, to hand out new lives all around. Down in Joshua Park, the lilies should be in bloom.[2]

The difficulty with such a statement of the meaning of the play is two-fold. For Arrowsmith, it means the overlooking of the naturalistic level of the play and the numerous comments which are made (however feebly) about the human condition. For Eliot, it means that as an unsuccessful play, where there is very little beyond the intended series of Christian conversions, The Confidential Clerk, unlike the earlier comedy, has little to offer on any level other than its complicated but low-pressure Christian statement, which might as well have been summarized in a good prose paragraph. The weaknesses of the procedure Eliot has adopted are as obvious as its rewards, and this attempt to solve his structural problem is beset by the danger of creating a play neither interesting, convincing, nor poetic.

---

[1]"The Comedy of T. S. Eliot," pp. 162-163.

[2]Ibid., p. 163.

The situation of illegitimacy and confused parentage should have provided Eliot with a genuine base for metaphoric elaboration, but he fails to take full advantage of it, and the issue never really coheres above the level of plot complication, which fails to carry its share of the metaphorical burden. Although the characters talk a great deal about the way they feel, their references to their isolated and lost conditions never take on poetic conviction. When Lady Elizabeth (a character whose spiritual life, we have been warned, isn't to be taken too seriously) says to Colby,

> Of course, there's something in us,
> In all of us, which isn't just heredity
> But something unique. Something we have been
> From Eternity. Something . . . straight from God.
> That means we are nearer to God than to anyone.[1]

the reader is aware that this is a direct clue to the "something" that should be coming through, but it is unconvincing and the play fails to carry its most important meanings on the poetic level. There is no suggestion that the idea of bastardy operates functionally as it does, for instance, in Lear where Shakespeare, through metaphor which grows out of and supports the dramatic situation, is able to create an added dimension for the meaning of his play.

The other attempts in the play to establish image patterns are not particularly convincing either dramatically or poetically. A traditional and an uncomplex use of the metaphor of the garden is introduced early, and Eggerson, as is to be expected, is the only character who

---

[1]The Confidential Clerk (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954), p. 72. Further quotations from The Confidential Clerk will be taken from this edition.

cultivates a real garden. Colby and Sir Claude have only the figurative gardens of their secretly cherished artistic worlds to which they can retire from the real and unfulfilling world of business. Colby is aware of the unsatisfactory nature of this arrangement:

> . . . my garden's no less unreal to me
> Than the world outside it. If you have two lives
> Which have nothing whatever to do with each other--
> Well, they're both unreal. But for Eggerson
> His garden is part of one single world.
>
> (p. 53)

and one is supposed to feel at the end of the play that Colby is moving toward a real garden like Eggerson's, one which represents an integration of personality achieved through an acceptance of vocation as well as an acceptance of limitations.

Una Ellis-Fermor's observations on the role that imagery plays in poetic drama underscore the failure of The Confidential Clerk and explain one reason for the lack of inner strength in the texture of the play.

> All imagery that has a functional relation with a play increases dramatic concentration. In common with all genuine metaphoric expression, it reveals a significant and suddenly perceived relation between an abstract theme and a subject closer to the experience of the senses in such a way as to transfer to the rightly apprehending mind the shock, the stimulus with which the union of these two stirred the mind of the poet himself. . . . Moreoever, dramatic imagery tends to be the most strongly charged of all kinds; the concentration natural to drama impressing itself upon the imagery, just as the imagery in its turn enables the drama to increase its native concentration.[1]

---

[1]The Frontiers of Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 79. This observation about imagery and drama does not necessarily conflict with Peacock's position that dramatic imagery is not in the verbal text alone. It leads one to the conclusion, however, that just as Eliot attempts an integrated statement through all types of imagery, he fails in them all, and for very much the same reason.

The problem of reality and unreality, of fact and fiction, runs throughout the play in connection with the problem of identity, but again Eliot is not able to present the problem in concrete metaphorical language which can carry the load it obviously must carry to make a poetic drama out of the play. In fact, the sense of dramatic concreteness and of real tensions which characterized the early poetry has completely disappeared from the verse of The Confidential Clerk, and nothing has appeared to take its place. The tension and levels of meaning which poetic image patterns set up simply do not ever form in this play in spite of Eliot's rather mechanical attempts. When Colby says that he is uncertain of his identity and of what he is to become, the reader is aware of him only as a rather mediocre young man with a second-rate talent, and when Colby is freed at the end of the play by his willing acceptance as fact of the possible fiction[1] that he is the son of "a dead obscure man" who also was a second-rate organist, it is difficult to see how his basic problems of self identity have been solved. Not unlike Harry Monchensey, he goes to fulfill himself through a vocation with religious implication, but the dramatic and poetic conviction that it makes any difference is lacking in The Confidential Clerk. Eliot's unfortunate attempt to create an objectified image out of the Eumenides has disappeared, but nothing else has appeared, and the absence is a serious one. Although the later play presents a great deal of "business" in the form of plot

---

[1]Smith (op. cit., pp. 237-242), by an ingenious indication of Eliot's use of A. W. Verrall's criticism of Euripides' Ion, demonstrates that Mrs. Guzzard probably settles things by lying in her distribution of children and parents. The play itself fails to give conclusive evidence that she is accurate as well as judicious.

and automatic "conversions," it lacks the sense of commanding form which is as necessary to a successful verse drama as to a successful poem--and it was this sense of commanding form, of total conception, which gave Eliot the structure of the play as image of the action in Murder in the Cathedral, the figures of the Eumenides (however unsuccessful) in The Family Reunion, and the mythological organization and expression of meaning in The Cocktail Party.

In The Confidential Clerk, Eliot has not observed his own early (1920) critical dictum:

> . . . where you have "imitations of life" on the stage, with speech, the only standard that we can allow is the standard of the work of art, aiming at the same intensity at which poetry and other forms of art aim.[1]

and the singular lack of intensity and tension in the play (reflected in the flat, prosaic lines and the failure of a significant structural conception) may be a result of the breakdown of Eliot's structural levels of the initiated or sensitive characters and the ordinary, insensitive members of the modern world. On the naturalistic level, the play represents a more equitable distribution of sensitivity and worth among its characters than even The Cocktail Party had. As a matter of fact, part of the "idea" of the later comedy seems to be that nobody is really a "clod" and that every human being has similar needs and will respond to sympathy and understanding.

There is no reason why a verse play cannot encompass some such idea as this, but to do so successfully the poet-playwright must create

---

[1]"The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1932), pp. 67-68.

his poetic rhythms, images, and structure with the same intensity and care as he would if he were writing about an inherently "poetic" subject, if there is such a thing. The need for a commanding form, for structural relevance, for all the resources of language and myth[1] is perhaps of even greater importance to a play which deals with a subject matter not considered traditionally poetic. This fact has already been amply demonstrated in Eliot's earlier plays. In spite of this, Eliot's development from the limited but genuinely poetic form of Murder in the Cathedral to the almost naturalistic, prosaic, plot-ridden form of The Confidential Clerk is not a movement from success to failure; rather it is a movement from a success of one kind to a failure of another kind, with two plays between which stand as two of the most significant verse dramas of Eliot's generation.

---

[1]To point out, as does Grover Smith (loc. cit.), that The Confidential Clerk derives from Verrall's Euripidean criticism of the Ion has no particular relevance and points up the failure of this play since recognition of a source cannot give a statement of significance for anything that happens in the play; whereas, in The Cocktail Party, a successful translation into contemporary terms of the meaning of its sources, the identification of the prior material provides a statement of, an insight into the experience already created by the play.

CHAPTER IV

AUDEN, ISHERWOOD, AND SPENDER

The experiments of Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood with the verse play are all centered in the thirties, and in every case reveal the political and social preoccupations of the three men. Their experiments cannot, however, be dismissed merely as the products of a Leftist political bias, now outdated by the varying conversions of their creators to more conservative positions. The plays are of interest in the development of modern verse drama because in them there is an attempt to convey a wholly modern content in the most immediately relevant terms. The fact that the experiments often resulted in uncontrolled extremes or in a failure to rise above the chaotic mass of experience they sought to express, made their contrast with conventional verse drama even more marked.

The availability of the direction of Rupert Doone and of the facilities of the experimental Group Theatre made it possible to reach an audience with a direct statement, and Auden and Isherwood, in particular, took full advantage of the stage of the Westminster Theatre. As the energetic heirs of the poetic idiom of Eliot, the activities of this group were impressive enough to make Ashley Dukes caution that

> Our new dramatic poetry in the English theatre did not begin (as is often supposed) with the production of Murder in the Cathedral at the Canterbury and the Mercury. It began with the occasional work of the Group Theatre around 1930 under Rupert Doone, . . . Eliot's only contribution to this particular movement was a permission to perform Sweeney Agonistes which had been written some time earlier.[1]

Spender's principal contribution is represented by his play, Trial of a Judge, which was written at the end of the thirties, and it was Auden and Isherwood who startled the little theater public with demonstrations of the variations possible to modern verse drama. What Sweeney had suggested on the linguistic level, Auden and Isherwood extended to the level of action and of theatrical effects. Their methods were always startling, "modern," and iconoclastic, if often a little high-handed.

In this respect, the verse plays of Auden and Isherwood bear a direct relationship to the other work of these men in the thirties. As is particularly the case with the poetry of Auden, the plays often reveal marks of immaturity or carelessness reflected in an extravagant handling of contemporary political and social issues, or in an almost adolescent delight in viewing the modern world exposed by contemporary psychology. The result, in spite of virtuoso techniques, is often bad verse and careless construction, whether on the printed page or on the stage, but the stance is always the same: it is that of a slightly Byronic version of Peck's bad boy facing a world in which it is impossible to be good, in which to be serious means admitting the betrayal of one who stands in no-man's land between the We's and the They's, the

---

[1]"T. S. Eliot in the Theatre," T. S. Eliot: A Symposium, ed. March and Tambimuttu, p. 111.

Westlanders and the Ostnians, knowing the one choice unsatisfactory, the other impossible. The expression of this dilemma and its possible solution meant for Auden and Isherwood the statement of uncomfortably modern themes in vocabulary and images drawn from contemporary science, clinical psychology, Marxian economics, power politics, and mechanized warfare.

Even before collaboration with Isherwood began, Auden's interest in the dramatic can be seen in his early charades, Paid on Both Sides (1928) and The Dance of Death (1933). Both of these works reveal his usual preoccupations. Paid on Both Sides is an expression of the Angst besetting man in a world broken up into "sides" for perpetual, unmeaning warfare in which all human relationships are wrenched out of normal context. The Dance of Death is an ironic presentation of the death of a society (the English bourgeoisie) and includes the use of a dancer, group calisthenics, parodies of popular songs, and participation from members of the cast seated in the audience.

The Dance of Death opened the Group Theatre season in 1935, with Sweeney Agonistes as the curtain raiser, and a contemporary reviewer noted as its principal weakness that "the theme it treated was developed with a naivete which might pass muster at a very earnest Communist summer school, but nowhere else."[1] And although the performance received, in general, a bad press, this critic's comments reflect the contemporary interest which was shown in the methods of presenta-

---

[1]A. V. Cookman, "The Theatre: 'The Dance of Death.' By W. H. Auden," London Mercury, XXXIII (November, 1935), 56.

tion.

> Poor in ideas as the satire conspicuously was, the theatrical form in which it was treated, something between that of musical comedy and the drawing-room charade, seemed unusually successful in mixing fun and serious interest. And the verse, though it touched no height and in places showed marks of carelessness, was remarkable for its command of contemporary speech-rhythms. If poetry is to be reintroduced to the theatre, Mr Auden's use of verse even in this obviously immature and botched drama may represent a useful step in evolution.[1]

In the same year as this staging of The Dance of Death, Auden and Isherwood came forward with The Dog Beneath the Skin: or, Where is Francis?, a play in verse and prose which uses, in a slightly more coherent manner, the techniques Auden had experimented with in his earlier work. There is a highly fantastic plot in this play, which gives it a sense of direction the earlier, largely plot-free, Auden lacked; but here, as before, the cast is enormous and the interest is primarily in caricature rather than in individual characters, in cutting through cross-sections of social types rather than in the revelation of the individual. Exaggeration, grotesque juxtapositions, and mass hysteria are used to present the distorted modern world of the play, and these methods are particularly useful to the propagandistic bent of Auden and Isherwood.

The rapid shift from scene to scene, the kaleidoscopic sequence of scenes fading into one another were adapted by Auden and Isherwood from German Expressionism, which, according to Austin Clarke, "achieved a rhythmic form which poets failed to find for themselves."[2] The form

---

[1]Ibid.

[2]"The Problem of Verse Drama To-day," London Mercury, XXXIII (November, 1935), 34.

suggested by Expressionism, the rhythmic consequences of a psychologically-viewed, nightmare world with its symbolic distortions, found expression in the fluid, rapidly-changing, stylized unrealities of the subconscious world of the individual (or mass hero) in a hostile society. The presentation of this state called for distortion, concentration, foreshortening, and a disruptive element which made this dramatic movement representative of the influences not only of modern psychology, but also of modern physics. Since the theories of Einstein had established the fact that time does not exist in traditional terms of continuity and that it must be viewed as a time-space continuum only to be subjectively perceived, a corresponding shift in formal focus was to be expected from an art which concerned itself with presentation of modern experience. Contemporary poetry, such as The Waste Land, was demonstrating the formal effects of its attempt to express the modern experience, and the technique of free association and subjective time evaluation, which is basic to Expressionistic drama, has been a major influence in the poetry and prose of the twentieth century.[1] The bringing together of modern verse and Expressionist techniques on the stage involved no major adjustments since they had been moving in the same direction as the result of a common stimulus.

The plays of Auden and Isherwood also show a debt to Bertolt

---

[1]"I do not think it is stretching a point too far to say that the work of Joyce and Proust, the poetry of Eliot and Rilke, is an attempt to present the material of human and supernatural affairs in the form of poetic continuum, where the language no less than the objects observed are impregnated with the new time." (Lawrence Durrell, A Key to Modern British Poetry [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952], p. 31.)

Brecht's Epic Theater, particularly in their community of propagandistic aim, and Eric Bentley, a translator and admirer of Brecht, identifies the work of Auden and Isherwood as being among the best of the imitations of Brecht. Therefore, Brecht's chart indicating the aims of the Epic Theater compared to those of the ordinary theater is interesting as it suggests some of the formal adjustments necessary to the presentation of social and political aims by modern dramatists.

The Dramatic Theatre:	The Epic Theater:
the stage embodies a sequence of events	the stage narrates the sequence
involves the spectator in an action and	makes him an observer but
uses up his energy, his will to action	awakes his energy
allows him feelings	demands decisions
communicates experiences	communicates pieces of knowledge
spectator is brought into an action	is placed in front of an action
is plied with suggestion	with arguments
sensations are preserved	till they become insights
man is given as a known quantity	man an object of investigation
man unalterable	alterable and altering
tense interest in the outcome	tense interest in what happens
one scene exists for another	each scene exists for itself
linear course of events	curved course of events
natura non facit saltus	*facit saltus*
the world is what it is	the world is what it is becoming
what man should	what man must
his instincts	his reasons
thought determines reality	social reality determines thought[1]

Like most tables, this one is an oversimplification, but it is useful as a summary of the Epic Theater as Brecht ideally conceived it, and

---

[1]Quoted by Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 215.

as it reveals the modifications present in the dramas of Auden and Isherwood (particularly in F.6), modifications basic enough to suggest that Hoggart has overstated the case when he claims that the theatrical debt of the two was almost wholly to Brecht's example.[1]

The Dog Beneath the Skin makes use of a wide range of materials and forms, but in its failure to achieve any sense of commanding form, the play never brings its varied, catholic materials and presentations into any kind of conceptual unity. Although each scene may exist "for itself," it is still the function of art to give order to disorder. In this play the fragments remain fragments, and the nature of the experience of the whole is fragmentary and disproportionate. In an attempt to avoid this, the playwrights have created a generalized plot based on the idea of a mythic quest in modern terms: a search for the missing heir, Sir Francis Crewe.

Within this framework, the play begins with a great deal of ritual hocus-pocus. Amid a gathering of the villagers, Iris Crewe makes her vow to marry the gallant young man who will restore her brother; there is a reading of the names of those who have set out and not returned; and the Vicar with the magical incantation,

> Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Di
> Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Divvy Di
> Swans in the air. Swans in the air.
> Let the chosen one appear![2]

---

[1]Richard Hoggart, Auden: An Introductory Essay (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 73.

[2]The Dog Beneath the Skin (New York: Random House, 1935), p. 21. Further quotations from The Dog Beneath the Skin will be taken from this edition.

draws by lottery the name of Alan Norman, the hero who comes forward to kneel and pledge his faithfulness. The chorus then provides a series of incantatory verses in the runic measures of the charm

> When he to ease
> His heart's disease
> Must cross in sorrow
> Corrosive seas
> As dolphin go,
> As cunning fox
> Guide through the rocks,
> Tell in his ear
> The common phrase
> Required to please
> The guardians there. . . .
> (p. 22)

Alan Norman's quest in the company of his faithful companion, the dog Francis, becomes a structural excuse for taking him rapidly through scenes of social commentary laid in Europe between the wars. He has the expected encounters with Grabstein, the international capitalist; corrupt journalists; and oppressed workmen who suffer a parodic (but fatal) execution by the king, queen, and priests of Ostnia. The lunatic asylum of Westland provides a chance for pointed comments on the insanity of fascism, and the Paradise Park episode gives an opportunity for satire at the expense of various forms of withdrawal. The Park is a haven for the self-centered poet, the two lovers who use love as a mutual escape from responsibility, and the female invalids who, in keeping with Auden's favorite Groddeckian theories, have sublimated their unsuccessful lives into illnesses.

The idea of the quest as a controlling motive is largely forgotten by Auden and Isherwood, and the audience is only briefly reminded of it when Alan sees the ruins of two former questers. One has become

a dope addict in the red light district of Ostnia; the other at the point of death in the operating theater of Paradise Park. In this last scene the satiric verse ranges freely from a singing by the medical students of a parodic Church of England chant ("The Surgeon is great: Let his name appear in the birthday honours.") to a Wagnerian duet between the dying man and Alan Norman. This particular comedy of errors ends with the revealing stage direction, typical of the Marx brothers scrambles which serve as transitions between the incidents of the play,

> [The Surgeon] becomes aware that he is staring into a DOG'S face. There is an awful pause. The SURGEON makes some inarticulate sounds as if about to have a fit. The DOG utters a long-drawn howl. Then it turns and bolts for the door, its cap flying from its head. General dismay, confusion, screams, laughter, pursuit. ALAN rushes out after the others.
>
> (p. 98)

After other adventures, Alan finally arrives home to find his village of Pressan Ambo assembled to celebrate the formation of a boys' brigade and the marriage of Iris Crewe to a munitions manufacturer, although the successful Alan brings home Sir Francis Crewe, who has, of course, been hiding in the dog's skin, having a dog's-eye view of the dog beneath the skin of the human race. After a general denunciation, Francis, Alan, and five of the villagers go off through the audience to become "a unit in the army of the other side." The villagers who remain on the stage have donned the masks of various animals, and in a prefiguring of Orwell's Animal Farm, the General as a bull bellows an address to them as they reply appropriately with barking, mewing, quacking, grunting, or squeaking.

The effect of all this energetic parody is one of chaos and general disintegration which is relatively meaningless since the play

remains too nearly on the level of improvisation to attain the coherent presentation one expects of the dramatic experience. The means of unity in the play, such as the search for Francis, are largely superficial, and although there is a chorus, it functions only in setting up backgrounds for particular actions or in intoning generalized social commentary. The unevenness of the episodes of the play also tends to work against a sense of unity, and the incidents which are memorable stand out without relationship to the whole. The creation of Destructive Desmond, the Rembrandt-slasher, is a remarkable portrayal of the anti-intellectualism of the middle class, but structurally it is without significance: it is only one of the many "numbers" in the revue-like series of incidents making up the play.

The experiments of The Dog Beneath the Skin are continued in the other plays, although with modifications. The influence of the music-hall and revue elements is not so obvious in the two later plays; there is in general a greater seriousness in presentation. The organization is tighter, characterization more strongly suggested, and a unified conception more nearly achieved. In brief, many of the more obvious shortcomings of the schoolboy theatrics of Dog Beneath the Skin have been eliminated, although in general technique and interests, the plays bear an obvious relationship to one another.

On the Frontier: A Melodrama in Three Acts (1938) is described by Hoggart as an "animated cartoon on the quarrels of national states, the machinations of international capitalists, the deceptions of the Press, the psychology of fascism and the inner decay of the democra-

cies."[1] This play makes clearer than any of the others the formal relationship between this treatment of material on the stage and a corresponding treatment of similar material in the novels of Dos Passos. The same alternating presentation of simultaneous narrative pictures is used in the organization of each act. There are representative scenes devoted to the industrialist, Valerian, and the Leader, which trace the course of their fall in the face of the final revolt of the people. Cutting through society, there is a contrasting presentation of two middle-class families, one in Ostnia (the monarchy) and one in Westland (the totalitarian state), which shows the effect of war on each of them. And there are the prologue and interludes falling between and commenting on these simultaneous portrayals of the two levels of society. Characteristically, the interludes are entitled: "At the gates of the Valerian Works," "A prison in Westland," "A dance-hall in Westland," "In the Westland Front Line," and particularly reminiscent of Dos Passos, "The English Newspaper."

Although the play is, on the whole, dull and badly dated by its particularized political orientation, an interesting dramatic attempt is made to achieve a metaphorical statement of the concept of the impassable, psychological Frontier that exists between the people of two nationalities. The stage directions call for the presentation of a room divided between representative inhabitants of the two rival nations:

> The Ostnia-Westland Room. It is not to be supposed that the Frontier between the two countries does actually pass through this room: the scene is only intended to convey the idea of

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 85.

> the Frontier—the left half of the stage being in Westland; the right half being in Ostnia. The furnishing of the two halves should suggest differences in national characteristics, and also the nature of the two families which inhabit them. . . .[1]

A concentration of lighting "should heighten the impression of an invisible barrier between the two halves of the stage," and on either side of this barrier the two families carry on their affairs simultaneously, each completely oblivious of the existence of the other, with the exception of the two unfortunate young lovers, Anna and Eric, separated by an insurmountable barrier of nationality. As a genuine metaphorical extension of the convention of the double room, the two young people watch each other across the invisible barrier.

A practical and obvious advantage of this staging for the political statement of the authors is the simultaneous double reaction of the characters to the same events, thus making tangible a portrayal of the failures of communication, the narrowness of national loyalties, and the manipulation of the people by propaganda techniques. Dr. Thorvald in his Westland (totalitarian) home and Mrs. Vrodny in her Ostnian (monarchial) home lecture their respective families on causes of tension between the two countries:

> DR. THORVALD. They're jealous of our liberty and power of creative progress.
> MRS. VRODNY. The trouble is, they've no traditions. That's why they're jealous of us. They always have been. They're spoilt children, really.
> DR. THORVALD. A decadent race is always jealous of a progressive one.

---

[1] On the Frontier (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 41. Further quotations from On the Frontier will be taken from this edition.

MRS. VRODNY. You may say what you like; tradition and breeding count.

(p. 46)

This play is largely in prose, as verse is used only for several of the interludes, for patriotic songs or their parodies, and for the fantasy encounters of Anna and Eric. In the two young people is symbolized the "love" which was Auden's answer to the world of the thirties. They both seek "the good place" familiar to the readers of Auden's poems, but it cannot exist in the world in which they find themselves. Their final "meeting" takes place as they lie dying on their respective sides of the stage, and verse is used in the fantasy-meetings of the young lovers to heighten emotional effects as well as to mark off their separate world from the politically-oriented world of the play.[1]

Auden and Isherwood more nearly create a poetic drama in The Ascent of F.6 than in either of their other plays. F.6, although written in 1936, is not so closely tied to political topicalities or hysteria as On the Frontier, and it is much more unified and comes closer to finding a meaningful structure than Dog Beneath the Skin. Significantly, the verse in F.6 assumes a more sustained relevance than in either of the other plays. In Dog Beneath the Skin, the verse in its many forms and uses fails to achieve significance because of the sheer virtuosity with which it appears. Ranging from the early, five-part stichomythia of the village hubbub to the Wagnerian duet, the effect of the verse on the audience is like that of everything else in the play. An impression

---

[1]This special use of verse to heighten a sense of unreality is one the nineteenth century would have recognized, although it is doubtful that the idiom of the verse would be recognizable to the earlier period.

of hysteria, high-jinks, high-handed parody, and adolescent slapdash is carried out on the level of verse as well as of action, and the total effect is one of meaningless disorder. In On the Frontier, it is prose which carries the burden of political hysteria, and when verse is used for the heightened emotional situation of the young lovers, its appearance is so brief that it cannot be said to have structural significance for the play as a whole. In the politically-focused interludes, the verse is merely (and appropriately) maintained on the level of I.W.W. slogans or of parodies of national anthems or marching songs.

The Ascent of F.6, as its title implies, is organized around the ascent of a politically important mountain known officially as F.6, and the plot quite adequately carries the thematic statements of the play. The overshadowing mountain stands as a symbol of the necessary trial of the extraordinary man (again, the quest motive), and its symbolic values are especially appropriate in view of Michael Ransom's particular, personal demon: his struggle with the mountain is an assertion of his will to power, and the Oedipal basis behind his desire for personal power gives the mountain an obvious Freudian significance.

As the play opens, Michael Ransom is seated on the summit of Pillar Rock; he is located symbolically, as in the end of the play, above the others in his party—a dramatic reflection both of his superiority and of his isolation. His opening speech is a prose soliloquy on the illusory nature of virtue and knowledge and on power—the real driving force of mankind. This soliloquy establishes one of the thematic directions of the play, and in keeping with the general circular structure of the action, echoes of this soliloquy are picked up in the

final scene of the play as all of Ransom's own motives are made clear when he lies at the point of death. This opening speech also introduces the motive of the contrast between the mass of men who dwell in the valley of greed and pettiness and those few who make the dangerous ascent for all of them. Ransom's reflective mind recognizes partially that he is bound in "the web of guilt that prisons every upright person," and although he is not ready to face the implications of his words, "O, happy the foetus that miscarries and the frozen idiot that cannot cry 'Mama'!", he introduces (quite unsubtly) the Freudian motive which runs throughout the play and finally displaces all other thematic statements at the end of the play.

Ransom is the most fully conceived of all the characters created by Auden and Isherwood in their plays, and in his assault upon the mountain of self-knowledge, the play finds its principal means to unified statement. As both of his names suggest, his is not merely a private tragedy, he is also a national sacrifice and culture hero, a quester-scapegoat who climbs the politically right mountain for the wrong personal reasons. The public heroism of his act can release his fellow countrymen, Mr. and Mrs. A., from the ennui of their daily lives; and as they live vicariously through the sacrificial act of the racial hero, they are inspired to action of their own (a weekend at Hove), which for a moment gives them identity. Ransom's ascent is the "something" that happens to take them out of themselves, and it answers their plea: "Give us something to live for." The defection of Mr. and Mrs. A. as admirers just as Ransom faces his real test on the summit of the mountain is an effective irony. They have become bored with the extended climb

and turn back to their own immediate and circumscribed world. The sacrifice of a man like Ransom cannot touch their lives in any lasting way, although his death is always useful to the professional nationalists and propagandists like Stagmantle and Isabel.

> Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
> Scribbling on the sky the message: He is dead.
> Put crepe bows round the white necks of public
> doves.
> Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.[1]

The will to power and its Oedipal source, which Ransom is brought to recognize in himself, are actually related in the play[2] (the one is cause, the other effect), but the embarrassingly immature handling of the Oedipal theme and the crudely-managed Freudian symbolism obscure the proper relationship between the two themes to cause a lack of balance in the play. The result of this mismanagement is the warranted criticism levied against the end of the play that "a mother-fixation may properly be shown as part of the problem, but to make it the culmination of the whole climb and the climax of the play is to ignore the more complex problems already posed. . . ."[3] Auden and Isherwood leave the audience with no doubt that Mrs. Ransom is a sufficient objective correlative[4]

---

[1]The Ascent of F.6 (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937), p. 117. Further quotations from F.6 will be taken from this edition.

[2]Cf. Auden's comment, "Essentially Napoleon was an opportunist, a Machiavellian. He wanted to astonish his mother." Quoted by Howard Griffin in "A Dialogue with W. H. Auden," Hudson Review, III (Winter, 1951), 590.

[3]Hoggart, op. cit., p. 83.

[4]There are a number of interesting parallels suggested between Michael Ransom and Hamlet, beyond the mother-fixation. Ransom's reflective, isolated character is established by the opening soliloquy, and like Hamlet, he is melancholy and finds an overwhelming corruption in

for Ransom's actions, and it is a lack of taste and of proportion which spoil the play rather than any failure in basic conception. Both acts of the tragedy end with fantasy encounters between Mrs. Ransom and her son, and as though the appropriate nursery rhythms of Mrs. Ransom's songs were not enough, the verse moves into overt statements such as this one closing the first act:

> When the Demon you have drowned
> A cathedral we will build
> When the Demon you have killed.
> When the Demon is dead,
> You shall have a lovely clean bed.
>
> You shall be all mine, all mine,
> You shall have kisses like wine,
> When the wine gets into your head
> Mother will see that you're not misled;
> A saint am I and a saint are you
> It's perfectly, perfectly, perfectly true.
> (p. 55)

The unity of the play depends heavily on repetitions and echoes of structure and language, and it is unfortunate that the crudely-handled stage business, falling at the most crucial spot in each act, should so overshadow the accomplishments of the action and language which have preceded them. Mrs. Ransom's verses at the end of the play are put into some perspective by the distancing effect of the public rhythms of the interspersed choral comments on man's estate. This use of the verse choruses and the mother's nursery rhythms is partially successful in bringing together the two views of Ransom as both the public sacrificial hero and the man who can only face his personal Demon at the moment of

---

those around him. He even has a soliloquy addressed to the skull of some unknown climber who has gone to the "Country of the Dead, where those to whom a mountain is a mother find an eternal playground." (The Ascent of F.6, p. 86.)

death. In this respect, the verse supports the two general patterns of development in the play. The regressive rhythms and words of the nursery verses suggest the circular nature of Ransom's personal tragedy, whereas the verse of the chorus carries the movement of the play on its more external level.

Although the development of the play is linear on the level of plot, its poetic pattern of organization, which relates to Ransom's inner life, is circular, and the two lines of development work together to give the play its general sense of meaningful structure and unity. For instance, in terms of plot progression, Ransom is persuaded by his mother to undertake the ascent of F.6, and as the British party races with the Ostnian for possession of the summit, he is presented temptations to a particular kind of power at the half-way monastery, and he comes to the realization that all the members of his party, as well as the Abbot, are corrupt. As the ascent continues, the other climbers are killed, one by one, in a kind of stripping away process, until Ransom is left alone to face the demon on the mountain top.

In terms of inner development, he has been brought, in the course of the ascent, to recognize his guilt toward the other men: they are the victims of his thirst for personal accomplishment; he is as tainted as they are--and, perhaps, more responsible because of his greater awareness. As he reaches the summit in the final scene of the play, he falls unconscious, and the phantoms of his guilt arise from the past to confront him. In delirium, he moves backward in time, confronting them one by one in an expressionistic fantasy which brings him full circle as he finally reaches the source: he sees on the mountain top, Mrs. Ransom as

a young mother and he falls with his head in her lap.[1]

It is this circular pattern in Ransom's tragedy which accounts for the numerous repetitions and echoes in the play, and this structural device makes the last scene a crucial one—so crucial, in fact, that it cannot carry the burden which is placed on it. The last scene of the play is, however, interesting in terms of what Auden and Isherwood attempt to accomplish in order to make a completely realized poetic and dramatic statement, and it is unfortunate that lack of restraint and a failure to achieve proper proportions spoil their final comment. As the scene opens, Ransom falls exhausted, alone, on the summit of F.6, and all the characters of the play assemble in expressionistically modified roles to take their places in an objectification of Ransom's inner guilts which he can no longer avoid facing.

A chorus introduces the scene ("Let the eye of the traveller consider this country and weep"): it is a wasteland awaiting a deliverer who will conquer the dragon which has laid ruin about him. When the dragon appears, it is Michael's twin brother James, the weakling and the power politician, whom Mrs. Ransom has always (falsely) treated as her favorite son. After a chess game between the two brothers is played with the figures of the people who have been used in their power-contest in the past, James, with the nodded agreement of the veiled Figure seated on the summit (Mrs. Ransom, of course), dies with the words: "It

---

[1]A comment by Auden is of interest in view of the psychology and the structure of the play: "It seems to me that in man's search for God he creates before him a number of images. I believe that the mother-image is one of the last to be outgrown." (Griffin, loc. cit., p. 591.)

was not Virtue--it was not Knowledge--it was Power!" The Chorus's cry,

> What have you done? What have you done?
> You have killed, you have murdered her favorite son!
> (p. 115)

applies now on two levels; in the actual political situation, James has sacrificed Michael (the favorite son), but more immediately, within the action on the mountain top, Michael has killed James, whom he had always believed to be the favorite son. He also recognizes in James his alter ego in his own previously concealed desire for power which was his real motive for the ascent.

This whole scene is given depth by the interaction of levels of meaning, and when the mock trial begins and the victims of Michael's pride confront him, Michael and the others speak significant lines repeated from earlier scenes. This device is psychologically accurate in view of Ransom's delirious state in which he would remember these earlier words, although the lines are now subtly changed in their applications. Ransom, no longer the self-deluded avatar, quite uncharacteristically uses Shawcross's own apologetic words in addressing him, and the Doctor turns Ransom's own words back on him, until Ransom is brought to a recognition of the source of his own weakness, and he falls with his head in his mother's lap to be soothed to sleep. Fortunately, the play does not end at this point. The stage darkens, and when the light of the rising sun falls on the mountain top, the stage is empty except for the body of Ransom who lies on the summit while a hidden chorus intones:

> Free now from indignation,
> Immune from all frustration
> He lies in death alone; . . .
> (p. 123)

The attempt to present a complex statement in this final scene (and, by extension, in the play) fails because it is overworked in every respect. There are too many strands to tie any of them convincingly, and the very clutter of characters and issues on the stage is made worse by a typical (and, in this situation, unbelievable) stage direction:

> Confusion. During the following speeches, STAGMANTLE, the GENERAL and ISABEL jostle each other, jump on each other's shoulders to get a better hearing and behave in general like the Marx brothers. (p. 115)

Part of the failure in the play is also reflected in the verse, which for a large part is the generally mediocre and one-dimensional language typical of much of Auden. The play's failure is a failure of execution more than of conception; and, strangely enough, the play fails more obviously on the level of its poetry than on the level of its dramaturgy. Verse is often used in the play for a heightening of emotional effects, although the prose in the dialogue between Ransom and the Abbot is probably more effective than any comparable passages of verse in this play. Prose is largely used for the meditative or philosophic passages, except in the choral speeches or when some special effect is desired as when Ransom fronts the "senseless hurricanes" after Gunn's death and delivers a highly rhetorical, Hamlet-like soliloquy which indicates his scorn of life and his readiness for death.

> Is Death so busy
> That we must fidget in a draughty world
> That's stale and tasteless; must we still kick our heels
> And wait for his obsequious secretaries
> To page Mankind at last and lead him
> To the distinguished Presence?
>
> (p. 106)

Verse is used for the conversations of the modified chorus, Mr. and Mrs. A., the reflectors of the meaning of the ascent of F.6 for the ordinary man. They are placed in the right stage-box and listen to highly ironic prose radio broadcasts on the progress of the climbing party which emanate from the stage-box on the opposite side of the theater. The verse conversations of the A.'s, in keeping with the colorless, drab lives they lead, reflect their boredom:

> No, nothing that matters will ever happen;
> Nothing you'd want to put in a book;
> Nothing to tell to impress your friends--
> The old old story that never ends:
> The eight o'clock train, the customary place,
> Holding the paper in front of your face,
> The public stairs, the glass swing-door,
> The peg for your hat, the linoleum floor,
> The office stool and the office jokes
> And the fear in your ribs that slyly pokes;
> Are they satisfied with you?
> Nothing interesting to do,
> Nothing interesting to say,
> Nothing remarkable in any way; . . .
>
> (p. 18)

On the whole, such verse is as boring as the life it represents, but occasionally there are significant variations, such as the one which occurs at the report of Lamp's death in an avalanche. The event moves Mrs. A. beyond character to pronounce in the elegiac rhythm used in the last section of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

> Death like his is right and splendid;
> That is how life should be ended!
> He cannot calculate nor dread
> The mortifying in the bed,
> . . . . . .
> Never know how in the best
> Passion loses interest;
> Beauty sliding from the bone
> Leaves the rigid skeleton.
>
> (pp. 90-91)

If any one of the Auden-Isherwood plays is to have a measure of permanence as verse drama, it is certainly The Ascent of F.6, a play which, according to J. Isaacs, was "still powerful and dramatic in its effect" in a 1950 radio broadcast.[1] The approach of Auden and Isherwood to the verse drama has not been the steady and unrelenting one of Eliot and Yeats, and after 1938, no new dramas by the two collaborators have appeared. Auden, in the ensuing years, has made extended use of the dramatic structure in several of his later long poems such as The Age of Anxiety, For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, and The Sea and the Mirror. He has availed himself in these poems of the advantages of characters to speak through as well as of a general dramatic situation or setting for each poem, and in this later work he has concentrated on the poetry (which is more complex and satisfactory than that of the plays) without having to worry about the actual dimensions of the stage, which apparently were of interest to Auden and Isherwood primarily for the immediacy of effect they offered.

The critical principle that poetic drama must have a double life, that of the stage and that of the armchair,—and satisfy the demands of each[2]—points up the failure of the Auden-Isherwood plays which, with the possible exception of F.6, made a brief and startling essay upon the stage but do not stand up under close examination. Their importance in suggesting formal possibilities for modern verse drama is out of pro-

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 142.

[2] T. S. Eliot restates this principle in "The Need for Poetic Drama," Good Speech (April-June, 1937), pp. 1-6.

portion to the individual achievement of separate plays.

Part of the importance of Auden and Isherwood to modern verse drama lies in the attitude with which they approached the poetic stage. Their lack of respect for the conventional tone of poetic drama and their attempt to build a contemporary myth for the stage out of any available materials suggested a whole new approach to verse drama, although they themselves made use (not always successfully) of traditional conventions such as the soliloquy. The very school-boyish stance, the unserious statement of serious issues, is a basic part of the modern attitude, diagnosed in The Dehumanization of Art as a kind of waggery resulting from the ban on all pathos in art.

> . . . the modern inspiration—and this is a strange fact indeed—is inevitably waggish. The waggery may be more or less refined, it may run the whole gamut from open clownery to a slight ironical twinkle, but it is always there. And it is not that the content of the work is comical—that would mean a relapse into a mode or species of the "human" style—but that, whatever the content, the art itself is jesting.[1]

It is in this basic respect that Spender differs from Auden and Isherwood. His "Tragic Statement in Five Acts," Trial of a Judge, is quite serious in every respect, and there is none of the parodic or slapstick element which found its way into even the most serious of the Auden-Isherwood productions. Although this is Spender's only important dramatic production, it is worth a brief examination, I think, if for no other reason than that his contemporaries felt that they had witnessed an important dramatic event; the play was referred to "as the most ef-

---

[1]Ortega y Gasset, op. cit., p. 43.

fective piece of poetic theatre since Otway's Venice Preserved."[1] Although more recent critics like G. S. Fraser agree with this estimate of the play, it is less widely known than the plays of Auden and Isherwood with the same political bias. There is in Spender's play, however, a clear and consistent attempt to create a formal coherence of language, theme, and structure, and the play's failure is again, I believe, at the level of execution.

The play moves from verse to prose and back again more fluently than the Auden-Isherwood plays, although sustained prose passages are used for special purposes. The verse in the play is more constantly rhetorical than that of Auden's "style which is no style," and its images, like those of Auden's verse, are drawn from the contemporary scene and presented in the modern idiom and rhythm—a rhythm which, under Spender's hand, often comes closer to being that of prose than that of poetry. The imagery of the play stresses the violence of the world of the action, and it is a heavily mechanized imagery of machine guns, engine wheels, "mournful telegraph wires," bombed roads, leaden bullets, steel knives, and "implacable aeroplanes." Set against this pattern is another major strain of imagery drawn from nature, often contrasting, although sometimes itself distorted by the context of the man-made world (e.g., "violence and riot flowered" or "Their cities began to decay; green summer flooded / The last houses and factory yards"). The presence of natural images often provides a contrast and a comment on the world of

---

[1]G. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World (London: Andre Deutsch, 1953), p. 180. The comparison with Otway was originally made by Nevill Coghill in The Spectator.

the play in the distortions of natural imagery by a world of mechanical and bestial violence, and the play depends heavily on the development of its image patterns in what is apparently an imitation of the Shakespearian tragic mode; but unlike Shakespeare, Spender is not able to use the dimensions of character and action for a statement metaphorically integrated on every level.

The mechanistic images ("Our light floods the machinery of State power") and images drawn from predatory nature are usually linked to the Blacks (the totalitarians--obviously Nazis), whereas natural images of growth are typically associated with the oppressed Reds (communists), whose unjust deaths are the seeds which will bear the fruit of the future. This dichotomy in the imagery is not, of course, stated with such overt neatness in the play, but it is sufficiently reiterated to move the reader or hearer toward a perception of the total patterns and their implications.

Examples of this use of imagery run throughout the play. For instance, to the Blacks,

> Europe is a jungle where the tiger
> Vegetable silence breaks
> --A sun through branches.
> As the spurned ground of all earth's disk
> Which man advancing tramples,
> Slaying grass, axing forests, blasting rock,
> Rejecting the inanimate as trash,
> So are weak men to the strong.[1]

and the Black soldiers consider themselves

---

[1]Trial of a Judge: A Tragic Statement in Five Acts (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1938), p. 17. Further quotations from Trial of a Judge will be taken from this edition.

> . . . slayers, springing
> Upon the weak from the topmost branches,
> Killing the okapi, the kid, the pascal lamb.
> (p. 18)

The mechanical images associated with the Blacks are sometimes those of violence, but always those of blind, unswerving, brute force. Such an image is implicit as the Catholic mother of the murdered Polish Jew, Petra, accuses the Blacks:

> You who carved furrows through my son, as wastefully
> As if one intolerable night of flight
> Had passed with engine wheels not over his mind alone
> But also across his sensible eyes—
> (p. 24)

or in the bragging of the Black Troop Leader:

> Take care. Take care.
> Your doom hurries. Wait here an hour
> And our engine will ride the track we've laid
> Under which your bodies will be sleepers.
> (p. 55)

or in the accusation of Petra's Fiancee to the Blacks:

> Your violence runs
> Along rigid lines to destroy each other.
> All we need is love. And yet we play
> The meaningless game of a machine
> Running in grooves laid down by death.
> (p. 68)

The two major strains of imagery come together in the single image of the overpowering sea in the Black Troop Leader's final statement to the audience:

> Those who opposed the walls of our advancing sea
> Are crushed to pebbles. Their minds faded and failed
> O failed and faded like flowers before our enormous
> tide.
> (p. 109)

The natural imagery linked with the Reds is presented in terms of potential growth made fertile by present sacrifice. This idea is

objectified by the love of the Fiancee for Petra and for his brother ("We forced love— / To grow in improbable places—") and by the child she carries in her womb ("Petra's child will be the fruit of our will.") The idea of new growth from sacrifice is stated by one of the Red prisoners as he faces death:

> As for our lives
> When they are killed they fall like seeds
> Into the ground to bear the tenfold fruit
> O, all the statistics show, where three comrades
> die.
>
> (p. 107)

It is impossible to indicate all the passages developing such imagery, but it is necessary to note that there are variations within the patterns. The Judge, as a humanist, identifies himself with natural imagery, although he does not stand in the communist camp, and on several occasions he relates natural images of growth to the world distorted by violence:

> The precedent
> Licenses their acts to flourish like a tree
> Spreading murder which grows branches
> Above that soil where the law is buried.
>
> (p. 57)

or

> We are driven to violence by violence
> Of groups hidden in crowds, like a ripe core
> Packed with black seeds driving outwards.
>
> (p. 14)

In the apotheosis of war and brute force by the Judge's militaristic wife in the last major speech of the play, natural imagery is joined to a mechanical burden in the play's final statement of the distorted totalitarian world:

> Our men's faces in uniform all one face,
> The face of those who enter a wood

Whose branches bleed and skies hail lead.
And the aeriel vultures fly
Over deserts which were cities.
(p. 115)

There are several other patterns of imagery developed within the play. One of them is based on the idea of the foundation stone which has been displaced by the failure of law in the face of force:

To establish my world on stone
I grope for the foundations
On which the past was built. . . .
(p. 88)

and Petra's death is the cornerstone on which the vegeance of the oppressed will be built. His name takes on special significance in view of its biblical echoes (which are probably not intended to be ironic in a play Spender takes so seriously). In this function, Petra is linked to the natural imagery of growth, for by his death

A word was planted in his brother's mouth
A will was planted in his brother's mind.
(p. 94)

Yet another pattern of imagistic development in the play is one which Spender obviously borrowed from Murder in the Cathedral, and that is the image of the wheel and the center. There are a number of indications in Trial of a Judge that the Eliot play was strongly in Spender's mind, suggested perhaps by the Judge, who occupies a position in the play roughly analogous to that of the Archbishop. As the Archbishop stands in the center of worldly activity, so the Judge stands between two opposing forces, the Red and the Black. His abstract justice fails, however, where Thomas's principle succeeds, and the Judge's personal failure creates a tragedy, whereas Thomas's death fulfills a triumph.

In lines twice repeated by the Judge at crucial moments, law and

justice are identified with the center to which the people must be held by the spokes of the state's collected powers:

> Whoever having authority
> Errs from the centre of collected powers
> Pointed into the State, is friend to murderers
> And to that wandering outward fringe of rebel
> Disintegrators.
>
> (p. 28 and p. 36)

The idea of justice held within the individual, the Judge insists even within sight of death, is a fixed point about which a world may circle.

> Yet I believe
> That if we reject the violence
> Which they use, we coil
> At least within ourselves, that life
> Which grows at last into a world.
> Then from the impregnable centre
> Of what we are, we answer
> Their injustice with justice, their running
> Terroristic lie with fixed truth.
>
> (p. 103)

Spender makes an attempt to objectify this concept by always locating the Judge, as guardian of justice, in the center of the groupings or movements on the stage, with the Black troopers symbolically and ominously surrounding the Judge at the end of two acts. At one point, Spender makes this intention quite explicit when he describes the Judge in relation to the others, "as it were, at the centre of a wheel." Spender is unable, however, to make this image function consistently in meaning and structure as it does in Murder in the Cathedral. Part of the difficulty lies in the weakness of the character of the Judge, whose vacillations and final failure preclude the depth of association which Eliot found for the image in the history of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The extent of the influence of Murder in the Cathedral is most clearly seen in the treatment of the four Black Troopers at the trial of the Judge: they show an obvious affinity with Eliot's four knights. Like the knights, "they give the impression of being hilariously tipsy," and as they present the charges against the Judge, the same kind of rationalizations (also in a highly colloquial prose) are made. There is the same disarming quality as the Troop Leader begins to speak:

> Before I say anything else, I want to repudiate emphatically the suggestion that there is anything sinister or alarming about us. . . .
> As a matter of fact, we're ordinary, decent, bourgeois people—most of us happily married and myself, I may add, the proud father of six. . . .
>
> (p. 86)

There is little doubt that the Black Troopers are lineal descendents of Eliot's four knights. Just as the knights implicate the audience with their speeches, the Black Troop Leader steps forward to threaten and implicate the audience. When the trial has failed to provide the Blacks the show of justice they had hoped for, the decision is made to "destroy all photographs taken and all reports of speeches in this Court. The last ten minutes are wiped out. They never happened.," and the audience is warned from the front of the stage:

> If your imaginations
> Invent and publish any pictures of this scene,
> Remember that the lines cut by memory
> Into the brain may cut so deep
> They kill life altogether.
> Deplete those lines. Make your brains blank. Or—
> You have seen and heard nothing
> Except the fate of those who are traitors. [Calling behind the stage.] Ring down the curtain.
>
> (p. 95)

In spite of the borrowings from Eliot, and Spender's own efforts to create formal coherence, the play fails to achieve the kind of total

identity the Eliot play achieves. Spender is trying to present a complex problem, that of the role of abstract justice in an age of expediency and of the liberal who would attempt ineffectually to maintain justice when the rest of the world has taken sides, and it is this complexity of treatment and of attitude which makes this play superior to the one-dimensional, relatively immature handling of political issues by Auden and Isherwood. But like the final scene of F.6, Trial of a Judge deals with too many issues at once to leave the reader with any sense of ordered resolution, although admittedly this shortcoming might be somewhat neutralized in a carefully directed stage production.

As I have suggested, there is much attention paid to the development of imagery as a means of carrying the unity and ideas of the play, but the image patterns themselves do not always rise naturally out of or further the action. They are too often used rhetorically, and what is more serious, somewhat mechanically, with the result that the language of the play is often abstract, disengaged. The language has an unreal, tenuous quality in contrast to the pointed violence of the action being portrayed, so that the reader senses two discontinuous levels at work simultaneously, but not always together. The language works best, perhaps because of its weakness, in relation to the mechanical, sterile world of the Black Troopers. Spender has largely eliminated dependence on a chorus and has attempted instead to give the incantatory speeches to the characters, with the result that the idiom and the rhythm have been too much sacrificed for the sake of incantation: "the idiom is throughout slightly falsified. . . ."[1] In spite

---

[1]Dobrée, loc. cit., p. 598.

of its heavy imagistic burden, the language is too nearly made up of political counters to keep the imagination of the reader engaged, and there are too many soap-box speeches, too many elaborations of causes which merely interrupt the movement of the play.

The defects which G. S. Fraser finds typical of Spender's poetry are perhaps not so obvious in dramatic verse, but I cannot agree with his estimate that these defects are somehow transformed into assets in the language of the play.

> The very qualities and defects of language which sometimes make Mr Spender seem a little thin as a poet of the personal life assist him as a dramatist. . . . What some of these poems, such as I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great, convey is less the inward experience, noted and examined, than the tone of a public speech on some high occasion: an expression of noble sentiment, vibrant and sincere, but not directly related to any grasped experience. . . . But all this, which sometimes weakens Mr Spender as a poet, strengthens him as a dramatist: for his way of writing is equivalent to the confused but dignified and moving way in which men, in tense and crucial circumstances, do actually speak under the stress of strong feeling. What makes for confusion in the personal poem makes for convincingness in the dramatic speech.[1]

The play also fails to achieve a satisfactorily ordered action to represent its basic conflict of might and right, of power and law. This is a conflict which, within the structure of the play, must be resolved in relation to the figure of the Judge, unless Spender wishes to suggest its resolution at the dramatically unsatisfactory level of a political program. The Judge fails, however, as the unifying focus the play needs, partly perhaps because Spender's sympathy and attention are too much engaged in political issues, and his division of attention results in a similar division in the audience. As the title suggests,

---

[1] Op. cit., pp. 179-180.

the play enacts the trial of a Judge, but the action fails to resolve the implications of that trial either on the level of the external world in which the Judge is both uncertain and ineffectual, or on the level of the Judge's own personal tragedy in which he does not convincingly come to terms with his failure. Spender is never able to make up his mind where the real action of the play lies, and he fails to unify or make mutually significant the two levels of possible action.

The play relies heavily upon expressionistic techniques in an attempt to locate the action in the perception of the Judge. The first act, "Illusion and Uncertainty," is presented as "a dream in the Judge's mind," and Act IV supposedly takes place in Hummeldorf's mind as he undergoes an experience similar to that of the Judge. The structural significance of the other externally located scenes does not, with any sense of overall direction, make itself felt in relationship to the inner perception of the individual, and the undifferentiated action of the play builds on an unrelieved violence so that by the time the final nightmare outrages of the last scene are presented, the reader is too numb to feel much reaction.

Spender's play is worthy of some recognition, in spite of its defects, because it shows a conscious attempt to come to grips with the problem of formal coherence for verse drama, and it is unfortunate that Spender did not persist in his attempt to write verse drama. Like Auden and Isherwood, however, he abandoned the stage with the close of the thirties, and one is led to suspect that perhaps the stage was only a briefly challenging political platform or safety valve for writers with

the orientations of these three men. Whatever the reasons for their interest in the stage, their experiments have the value which extreme manifestations of any genre always have. They aid in defining limits and in exploring possibilities as well as in objectifying an inherent dissatisfaction with the conventionally established products of the past.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTOPHER FRY

Christopher Fry differs from the other poet-playwrights considered in this study in that he did not first gain a reputation as a poet and then turn to the stage. Instead, Fry began with an early interest in the theater which led to practical experience as an actor and director for the Tunbridge Wells Repertory Players a full five years before the publication of his first festival play, The Boy With a Cart, in 1939. Yet, although his principal interest is the theater, and not poetry as a possibility in itself, all of Fry's published plays (with the exception of his translation of Jean Anouilh's L'Invitation au Chateau) are verse plays, and this in itself is worth remarking in an age in which realistic prose drama has proven the staple fare of the theater.

Fry's conception of reality and his attempt, through the stage, to shake the world alert again to the reality it has lost explain his use of verse in the theater. The reality Fry seeks to give dramatic form to is the miracle of man experiencing freshly the eternal miracle of the world. This is a reality obscured and staled by custom; and, from Fry's angle of vision, that which the modern world calls real is a commonplace substitute passing as reality.

> The reality we have made for ourselves by two million years of getting used to it is the domestication of the enormous miracle. . . . And in the theatre of the twentieth century, so far the search has been for this particular reality. We have put four walls around the stage, and obliterated space; used familiar words for Time—such as dinner-time, early-the-same evening, two-days-later—and obliterated eternity. And because speech (that strange, brilliant, mature achievement of the human animal) has become subdued to a limited game of hit-or-miss, stage dialogue—in its pursuit of the surface reality—goes to the limit of imitation and tinkles in tune with the breakfast cups. . . .[1]

The obvious medium for Fry's attempt to state his rediscovered miracle of the world is the language of poetry since the language of prose has become identified on the stage with the limitations of the false reality Fry wishes to break through: "Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement."[2]

This view of the world, as it appears in Fry's work, probably accounts for much of the criticism Fry's plays receive. Certain characters, speeches, or attitudes in the plays may ring false or hollow because they appear too irresponsibly separated from the world of reality known to the theater-goer. Sometimes the reader or viewer senses that Fry does protest too much for a man firmly grounded in the "enormous miracle" of the world, and the atmosphere of his plays often has the effect of sheer fantasy on an audience which has experienced a world quite different from the world of the plays. The use of distant times

---

[1]Christopher Fry, "Poetry in the Theatre," Saturday Review, XXXVI (March 21, 1951), 18. This article is reprinted in essence as "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts, XXXVI (August, 1952), 27. Both articles are from a common source: a BBC Third Programme talk by Fry.

[2]Ibid.

and scenes adds to a sense of fantasy, and it would seem particularly unfortunate that, if Fry's aim is to reestablish wonder in modern man, he should feel the necessity for setting his dramas in a world removed from the present by time and distance. A Sleep of Prisoners, with its modern wartime setting, is an exception, and Venus Observed and even The Dark Is Light Enough can be viewed as comments on the contemporary dilemma, but Fry's plays are never "modern" in the sense that Eliot's, Auden's and Isherwood's, or Spender's are. Fry does not seek to come to grips with the modern world by taking it as the area of his explorations; rather, he works by indirection, indicating in the world of his plays the importance of the individual, the meaning of humanity, the futility and needless cruelty of wars, and the possibilities for life through love. Having demonstrated the vitality for life latent in the world, Fry has made his comment on the situation in which his audience finds itself. This approach is misleading in view of Fry's claim to be interested in the problems of his own time, for the emphasis in his work appears to be not on modern man, but on Mankind, as if Fry thought he could best restore man to his proper heritage, not by showing him the paltry thing he has become in the twentieth century, but by showing him what he has been and may yet be capable of being. Thus Fry's manner of dramatic presentation stems from his romanticism, which expresses itself in an undaunted humanism and draws its vocabulary from natural and biblical sources. In Fry there is none of the peculiarly modern vocabulary that one finds in the poetic playwrights of the thirties; and as a general rule, the science Fry draws upon for his images is that of alchemy or astronomy; his psychology is that of the theory of humours

—his textbook, Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. It is not surprising, then, to find the charge of romantic escapism leveled against Fry: the dangers inherent in his approach and use of materials are obvious.

Fry claims that verse is necessary to conveying reality: "If you accept my proposition that reality is altogether different from our stale view of it, we can say that poetry is the language of reality,"[1] and that "the facts of reality are the same in the theatre of poetry as they are in the theatre of prose. What is different is their implication."[2] The difference of implication (presumably that of showing not the surface reality of routine but of suggesting the reality behind things as they seem) is partially expressed by the use of verse, and as Fry's verse partakes of his general notion of the use of the theater, it is open to and suffers from the dangers inherent in his approach. Given his orientation, the problem Fry faces in terms of language is perhaps clearer when one considers that the main stream of poetic idiom for the modern verse play is that established by Eliot and manipulated by Auden and others. This is an idiom, on the whole, expressive of the modern world as it has appeared to these poets, and such a language could be of little use to Fry in his typical approach. He needs a language not to embody the dreary failure and, at best, partially reclaimed successes of the modern world, but a language to carry as much as possible the wonder, the miracle, the exuberance of the world. Against Eliot's habitual language of understatement, the necessities of Fry's

---

[1] Ibid., p. 18.

[2] Ibid., p. 19.

intent posit a language of overstatement, and the demands of such a language have led Fry to many of his excesses: the uncontrolled rioting of images which often impede the dramatic progress of a passage, the wit or whimsy which sometimes seems to exist for the sake of its own good nature, and the verbal coinages which can be effective theater for a while, but begin to pall by the end of a three-act play.

Fry's linguistic debts have been traced to various and varying sources; and, if all of Fry's critics are right in their assumptions of sources, his verse has an impressive (but impossibly) cosmopolitan paternity. The Elizabethan playwrights as well as the Jacobeans, Beaumont and Fletcher, are often named as literary ancestors, and Fry's desire to recapture a sense of life and wonder does suggest certain early seventeenth-century parallels, as do specific literary borrowings from the Shakespeare comedies among other sources. In this respect also, Fry's rhythmic patterns are usually considered to be dominantly blank verse, and this is quite often the case, although he makes extensive use of variations involving a four-stress line and the triple rhythm (anapestic foot) which gives his verse its characteristic speed. William Arrowsmith has claimed that Fry looked "to the example of that lonely figure, Charles Williams, and before Williams, to the plays of Beddoes."[1] He further insists that Fry's verse is like that of Marlowe,[2] a claim easily disproved by Marius Bewley, who demonstrates the similarities

---

[1]"English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," loc. cit., p. 205.

[2]Ibid., p. 208.

between Fry's dramatic verse and that of Bottomley and the Georgians.[1] This comparison of Fry to the Georgians or to various members of the turn-of-the-century revival of verse drama is often made, although as Fry's most constant admirer, Derek Stanford, points out, as the result of its dramatic wholeness Fry's work is free of many of the pitfalls of the romantic plays of the "revival."[2] Bewley links Fry's verse drama to the early part of this century and suggests that the reason Fry's verse appears original to his contemporaries is that "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 century."[3] Under the "surface smartness, the verse is thoroughly conventional and academic."[4] The tendency of Fry to write "literary" verse, often self-conscious literary verse, has also been noted by one of his fairer critics, Monroe K. Spears,[5] and it is relatively easy to determine the extent to which Fry's verse depends upon literary and academic echoes it awakens in the hearer or reader--often, in this way, satisfying the uncritical, conventional notion of what "poetic" drama should sound like.

---

[1]"The Verse Drama of Christopher Fry," Scrutiny, XVIII (June, 1951), 79.

[2]See Stanford's chapter, "Comparisons," Christopher Fry: An Appreciation (London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1951), pp. 172-195.

[3]Bewley, loc. cit., p. 84.

[4]Ibid.

[5]"Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," Poetry, LXXXVIII (April, 1951), 42.

In these respects, Fry's verse drama has taken a direction quite opposite to Eliot's, and one need only compare The Cocktail Party and Venus Observed, both published in 1950 and both dealing thematically with the acceptance of limitations and the discovery of identity, to discern the differences in verse and treatment. In the Eliot play the verse is submerged, approximating in general the common speech of modern man, rising to poetry only in moments of emotional intensity. In the Fry play, as we shall see in more detail, the verse, although more controlled than in his earlier three-act comedy, is still very much in evidence throughout. Although both playwrights are concerned with the human being in his social context, the verse of The Cocktail Party seems much more solid and genuinely grounded in an action which itself has a depth that the action in the Fry play lacks.

Fry's less than successful use of language suggests that he cannot always meet the demands of the theory of language he has set forth:

> He's a strange man who will write words for their own sake alone. The pleasure, the excitement of words is that they are living and generating things which in their generation bring us nearer to understanding, or at least to the sensation of understanding. But a word that exists for its own sake alone is as dead as a man who exists for his own sake alone.[1]

This theory of words and their generative ability recalls that of Dylan Thomas, another neo-romantic whose verse suffers from the same kind of failures that Fry's language suffers, although Thomas is an innately superior poet. The comparison between these two contemporaries is not as arbitrary as it might at first appear. In general terms, their view of man, their sense of wonder grounded in an acceptance of life (and

---

[1]Fry, loc. cit., p. 19.

death), and a similar celebration of nature suggest the more particular response of the two men in their use of language. In both, one finds a poetic vocabulary belonging to nature and to a humanistic acceptance of mankind, and there are also similar excesses arising from the use of words for the sheer sound of them, the rhetorical gesture, the cataloguing of words for sound, the coinage of words and word pairs, and a coherence often imposed primarily by an emotional pattern or perception.

In Thomas's play for voices, Under Milk Wood, he shows the same tolerant acceptance of his characters that one finds in Fry as well as the ability to create and sustain mood as a unifying principle for the whole. The comic touch is similar (although more overtly bawdy in Thomas), and it reveals itself in delineating the eccentricities of the individual in his private and public worlds, while the language in its amplitude and generative capacities suggests the wealth of life waiting to be expressed by those willing to live it. The success of Thomas's poetic prose[1] in Under Milk Wood explains something about the failure of Fry's language in many of his plays. Where Fry's verse ordinarily falls short, Thomas's Milk Wood idiom succeeds for two particular reasons. First, it is strongly rooted in a sense of reality which Fry's "literary" verse too often lacks. Granted that Thomas's is a romantically-biased reality, but it is a flesh-and-blood reality when compared

---

[1]The printing of the play establishes its primary medium as "poetic prose" with verse for special uses such as songs. The language of the play is defined as "poetic prose" only by the technicality of the printing, however, for in general the phrasing, the rhythms, the verbal devices are all those of poetry, and it is the impression of verse and not of prose one gains from hearing Under Milk Wood.

to much of the air-and-vapour that Fry produces. Thomas's images have a foundation under them that Fry's usually lack, and the surroundings and characters in Under Milk Wood are put solidly into the world in a way that Fry's never are. The ability to realize his characters and to speak for (if not always through) them is the second advantage that Thomas's play has over much of Fry. Strangely enough, Fry, as a dramatist, has failed to master the third voice of poetry.[1] Fry's characters, no matter how exorbitant their humours, generally reveal in their speech the voice of the poet, slightly academic and a little self-conscious, and it is for this reason that so many of Fry's characters sound alike. Thomas's ability to catch the different temper of the various voices living under Milk Wood suggests that, had he lived and actually carried out his intention of turning to dramatic writing,[2] the possibility for a poetic drama different from that toward which Eliot has been moving with his latest plays might have been within his powers. It is yet possible that Fry may create a drama capable of embodying his conception and special use of verse; at any rate, his present accomplishments are of sufficient stature to make his plays worth a consideration, and they are numerous enough to provide a wide and varied field for examination.

---

[1]Identified by Eliot in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (pp. 6-7) as "the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse: when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character."

[2]Daniel Jones, Preface to Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1955), p. v.

Fry has written eight original plays, and I propose to examine three of them in some detail: a one-act comedy, A Phoenix Too Frequent (1946); a three-act comedy, Venus Observed (1950); and the one-act expressionistic fantasy, A Sleep of Prisoners (1951). Of the other verse dramas, two are one-act festival plays which frankly accept their occasion for specific religious comment. The Boy With a Cart: Cuthman, Saint of Sussex is Fry's first published play, and it uses, without reservation, the conventions of the miracle play. Episodic in structure, it is the only play by Fry to depend upon a chorus. The chorus of "The People of the South of England" have approximately a third of the lines in the play, and the strong echo of Eliot's choral verse reveals Fry's model. In Thor, With Angels (1949) Fry has eliminated the chorus altogether, although the speeches of Merlin have the effect of choral commentary, and on one particular occasion, all action stops while Merlin delivers fifty-eight lines of philosophizing about man, God, and the world. The play in general, however, shows a major advance over the earlier one-act festival play in creating a unified statement of action, theme, verse, and character. The symbolic crucifixion of Hoel in anticipation of the Augustinian conversion of Cymen, the Jute, sums up the whole pattern of the play, which involves a foreshadowing in its action of the rediscovery of Christianity in the British Isles. The language of the play is more flexible than that of The Boy With a Cart,[1] and its range includes the comic speeches of Colgin, the horizon-

---

[1]In this respect, note the opening speech with its approximation of Anglo-Saxon verse:

> Hyo, there! Who's awake? Where's
> The welcome of women for wayfarers?
> Where's my Wodenfearing mother?

(Thor, With Angels [London: Oxford University Press, 1949], p. 1.)

tal steward, one of Fry's notable humour characters and one of the gallery of amusing, if stock, servants who people the plays. The humor in Thor is primarily verbal and depends upon the kind of wit developed in the comedies; there is little of the humor based on physical situation found in The Boy With a Cart, and by and large, this is true of most of the plays. Fry's humor lies in verbal sources and not in ludicrous physical predicaments enacted upon the stage.

Another festival play, Fry's only tragedy, The Firstborn (1946), deals in three acts with the biblical incidents beginning with Moses's reentry into Egypt and ending with the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. The play's structure heightens the sense of struggle between two peoples by alternating its scenes between the palace of the Pharoah Seti and the tent of Miriam, Moses's sister. This opposition of the family units does not have the effect of neatly separating good from evil; instead, as Miriam is contrasted to Anath, the ambitious Shendi to the noble Prince Ramases, and Moses to Seti, the device of character juxtaposition becomes an expression of the play's tragic statement of the inexplicable intermingling of good and evil and of the cost in individual sorrow of a public triumph.

Seti's words, early in the play, justifying the toll in human lives necessary to the completion of his pyramid,

> Would you have the earth never see purple
> Because the murex dies? Blame, dear Moses,
> The gods for their creative plan which is
> Not to count the cost but enormously
> To bring about.[1]

---

[1]The Firstborn (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 42. Further quotations from The Firstborn will be taken from this edition.

take on a new meaning when he sees Ramases, his firstborn, die as a part of the price of the freedom of the Israelites. Moses himself has seen in the young prince the image of his own childhood, and he too questions the necessity of the death of one so promising:

> I do not know why the necessity of God
> Should feed on grief; but it seems so.
> (p. 100)

The sympathy which the innocence and goodness of Ramases and his young sister, Teuseret, engage illustrates the complex nature of the problem of the play: we see them losing their way in a world made dark by the "good" which Moses represents.

The figure of Moses towers over all the characters and incidents of the play. He is the instrument of an inexorable purpose, and even he does not know the full extent of what he has wrought until he has futilely sought to preserve the life of the Prince of Egypt. In the figure of Moses, the play finds its central unity, for his influence controls all of its scenes, whether in tent or palace, whether he is present or absent; and in him Fry comes close to building a character of heroic proportions, on a one-dimensional scale at least. Moses is a man so given to a purpose that he can accept and exult in the horror which is his instrument of necessity.

> We with our five bare fingers
> Have caused the strings of God to sound.
> Creation's mutehead is dissolving, Aaron.
> Our lives are being lived into our lives.
> (p. 50)

It is only in the final scene of the play, when Moses suffers at the death of Ramases, that he reveals his humanity, and this, as Fry admits,

has not been prepared for.[1]

The mood which opens the play is that of the quivering, violence-exciting heat of Egypt, although as the play progresses, it is the terror-ridden night which predominates; and the play ends with a midnight appropriate to the unavoidable death which grips the Egyptian world made diseased so that the Hebrew people may find health. It is night which also becomes identified with Moses in the end of the play. He has arrived in the light of morning, but his purpose is accomplished in the dark (both of the night and of its unknown consequences), and it is the dark wilderness into which he must lead his people. Fry has telescoped time in the play so that, symbolically at least, the movement of the play is from the bright light of day revealing Seti's evil, through the uncertain time of evening, to the night and the accomplishment of Moses's "good" with its accompanying darkness. There is an attempt to suggest in Act II, scene ii, a sense of the terrible necessity of the endless plagues and broken promises following one after another; but this brief treatment is awkwardly handled in relation to the larger unifying scheme of an "ideal" day encompassing a single action.

The Lady's Not for Burning (1949) and The Dark Is Light Enough (1954) are two of Fry's three-act comedies which will not be considered in any detail. They belong, with the other comedies, to Fry's notion of a "comedy of mood"[2] or "comedy of seasons," which "means that the

---

[1]Christopher Fry, An Experience of Critics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 31.

[2]Related apparently to Fry's use of verse: "The playwright must work continually at making the main theme or conflict of his play as bold as he dare, without spoiling the mood. But he can only go so far:

scene, the season, and the characters are bound together in one climate,"[1] and Fry's plan for a comedy for each season of the year has already been completed if Derek Stanford is correct in his assumption that the one-act, A Phoenix Too Frequent, symbolizes summer.[2] Fry has identified the others himself: Venus Observed is symbolic of autumn, The Dark Is Light Enough of winter, and The Lady's Not for Burning of spring.

The Lady's Not for Burning is probably Fry's most popular comedy, though hardly his best. The play sets two eccentrics--the rationalistic, accused witch and the disenchanted soldier who wants to die--against the petty claims of the world that

> The standard soul
> Must mercilessly be maintained. No
> Two ways of life. One God, one point of view.
> A general acquiescence to the mean.[3]

Typically, in a Fry play, love reclaims them to an acceptance of life and the intuitive wonder of the world. In the course of their reclamation, however, there is a great deal of sheer "talk" for its own sake, and the verse in this play seldom engages. Even when the dialogue advances the action, the language is so circuitously poetic that the most notable thing about it is its derivative quality.

---

the nature of poetry is to work not didactically, but by implication." (Fry, "Poetry in the Theatre," loc. cit., p. 33.)

[1]Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry, "British Book News Supplement," (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), p. 22.

[2]Ibid., p. 23.

[3]The Lady's Not for Burning (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 71. Further quotations from The Lady's Not for Burning will be taken from this edition.

> They tell one tale, that once, when the moon
> Was gibbous and in a high dazed state
> Of nimbus love, I shook a jonquil's dew
> On to a pear and let a cricket chirp
> Three times, thinking of pale Peter:
> And there Titania was, vexed by a cloud
> Of pollen, using the sting of a bee to clean
> Her nails and singing, as drearily as a gnat,
> "Why try to keep clean?"
>
> (p. 25)

The verbal highjinks, the excesses of language and imagery are as obvious as the literary derivations, and although Fry intentionally does this sort of thing at times in a scheme of romantic mockery, the device does not always work since he is quite capable of coming forth with a passage bearing the same verbal characteristics when his intention is entirely otherwise.

The Dark Is Light Enough is a "winter comedy" presumably because it involves the physical decline and death (but spiritual victory) of its heroine, who triumphs in death as in life, not so much through her own action as through her influence on those about her. This is a comedy, not of manners, but of the spiritual fiber which informs the world of manners, even in a no-man's land between two warring forces. As in The Firstborn, the play is held together by a single, commanding character, that of the Countess, and her sphere of influence is the area of the play, even in the final moments after she has suffered death and yet controls the action about to be performed. The language, as befits a winter comedy, is sober in comparison to that of the other comedies, but on the whole it is undistinguished either by Fry's excesses or by his achievements. At its worst, the language of the play suffers from the same sentimentality that mars the whole work. At its best, it is

a language which rises out of the situation to catch and hold the mood of the play, as when the dying Countess descends the stairs for a final Thursday evening with her devoted group of admirers and tells them

> We must value this evening as the one
> Thursday in the universe, for the rest
> Have gone, and no more may come,
> And we should be on our most immortal behaviour.[1]

In his attempts to find a significant form and language for his conception of verse drama, Fry is set apart from the earlier twentieth-century dramatists he is said to resemble. In Fry there is a clearly stated desire to create a verse drama which can fill the stage in all its dimensions.

> A verse play is not a prose play which happens to be written in verse. It has its own nature. . . . The dramatist must view the world of his play, and the people of that world, with great precision: the poet-dramatist with the greatest poetic precision. The whole structure depends upon it. . . . The poetry and construction are inseparate. Who understands the poetry understands the construction, who understands the construction understands the poetry, for the poetry is the action, and the action—even apart from the words—is the figure of the poetry.[2]

The verse drama Fry envisions will have, in terms of its own nature, the kind of precision and relationship of parts which we have been brought to expect of the successful poem. It will not be a drama "cloudy with insubstantial symbols and spiritual sea-wrack,"[3] but will provide a completed form in which structure, symbols, and verse are mutually relevant. It is in his explorations in search of this ideal that Fry

---

[1]The Dark Is Light Enough (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 88.

[2]Fry, An Experience of Critics, p. 27.

[3]Fry, "Poetry in the Theatre," loc. cit., p. 19.

belongs to a consideration of modern verse dramatists seeking to recover for verse the theater which it lost after the Restoration.

Fry's early one-act comedy, A Phoenix Too Frequent, is an example of a special use of verse successfully integrated as a part of the total creation of the play. This use of verse is explained in Fry's reply to the critical observation that The Lady's Not for Burning is wordy:

> It means, I think, that I don't use the same words often enough; or else, that the words are an ornament on the meaning and not the meaning itself. That is certainly sometimes--perhaps often--true in the comedies, though almost as often I have meant the ornament to be, dramatically or comedically, an essential part of the meaning.[1]

The purposeful use of the ornamental aspects of comic language achieves a clearly defined pattern in A Phoenix Too Frequent (which it does not in The Lady's Not for Burning) and is itself a part of the structural coherence of this play.

The principal character, the Ephesian matron, Dynamene, has determined to follow her husband to the Underworld, and with all good intentions, she and her maid, Doto, are fasting in the underground tomb of the dead Virilius. The imprudently high-motived romanticism which has involved Dynamene[2] in her prospective death is a source of gentle irony, which is itself a part of the comic mode of the play, and the ironic comment upon such impractical sentimentality is made through the

---

[1]An Experience of Critics, p. 25.

[2]Her name, meaning "the powerful or capable woman," is, of course, ironic in the context of the play.

language Dynamene uses. Her speech, as one would expect, is unknowingly self-mocking as she reveals in high-flown sentiments and images the unrealistic and wasteful nature of the romantic gesture.

> Now, if you wish, you may cry, Doto.
> But our tears are very different. For me
> The world is all Charon, all, all
> Even the metal and plume of the rose garden,
> And the forest where the sea fumes overhead
> In vegetable tides, and particularly
> The entrance to the warm baths in Arcite Street
> Where we first met;—all!—the sun itself
> Trails an evening hand in the sultry river
> Far away down by Acheron. I am lonely,
> Virilius. Where is the punctual eye
> And where is the cautious voice which made
> Balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound
> Like balance-sheets?[1]

The unromantic, unimaginative nature of Virilius, the object of such sacrifice, heightens the ludicrousness of the situation as does the presence of the practical, down-to-earth comic servant, Doto, who adds to the contrast by attempting throughout the play to improve both her grammar and her unruly thoughts so that they may be worthy of her high-minded mistress.

> Honestly, I would rather have to sleep
> With a bald bee-keeper who was wearing his boots
> Than spend more days fasting and thirsting and crying
> In a tomb. I shouldn't have said that. Pretend
> I didn't hear myself. But life and death
> Is cat and dog in this double-bed of a world.
> My master, my poor master was a man
> Whose nose was as straight as a little buttress,
> And now he has taken it into Elysium
> Where it won't be noticed among all the other straightness.
> [The owl cries again and wakens Dynamene.]
> Oh, them owls. Those owls. It's woken her.
>
> (p. 2)

---

[1] A Phoenix Too Frequent (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 5. Further quotations from A Phoenix will be taken from this edition.

The comic situation (drawn basically from Petronius's tale, The Matron of Ephesus,) is tightened when Tegeus, a soldier who is as romantic in his view of the world as Dynamene, enters the tomb. His particular romanticism, however, has led him to the kind of distaste for life that Thomas Mendip, the soldier in The Lady's Not for Burning, has conceived. At the moment of the play, Tegeus is on guard duty over the corpses of six executed citizens, a duty which is in keeping with the world as he had conceived it:

> I'd begun to see it as mildew, verdigris,
> Rust, woodrot, or as though the sky had uttered
> An oval twirling blasphemy with occasional vistas
> In country districts. I was within an ace
> Of volunteering for overseas service. Despair
> Abroad can always nurse pleasant thoughts of home.
> (p. 12)

As a romantic, Tegeus can be deeply (and quickly) moved by the picture of faithful Dynamene at her husband's bier.

> This is privilege, to come so near
> To what is undeceiving and uncorrupt
> And undivided; this is the clear fashion
> For all souls, a ribbon to bind the unruly
> Curls of living, a faith, a hope, Zeus
> Yes, a fine thing. I am human and this
> Is human fidelity, and we can be proud
> And unphilosophical.
> (p. 12)

His language, like that of Dynamene, is used to mock the view of life it represents, and the comic irony of the whole situation reflects this mockery on the level of plot. Dynamene, as the perfect figure of the faithful wife, restores to Tegeus his willingness to accept life; and, of course, he cannot help loving such a paragon of fidelity. His love in turn reawakens her to love and subsequently to a desire for life as she recognizes a nature much like hers. When Tegeus then discovers that

relatives have stolen one of the hanged men while he was busy falling in love, it is Dynamene, the prototype of the faithful wife, who offers the body of her late husband, Virilius, to fill the gap among the holly trees and save Tegeus from hanging for desertion of his duty. Thus Virilius's death makes possible both love and a renewed acceptance of life for the two of them, and the romantic vision of life is fulfilled at the same time it is a source of mockery.

As the title indicates, the whole play embodies the idea of the phoenix in its associations with perpetual renewal, particularly in its traditional role as a symbol in love poetry (cf. Donne's poem, "The Canonization"). The appropriate setting of the play is the dark tomb, and out of it rises the flame of new love and new life. Tegeus brings the masculine principle into the tomb, thus creating the possibility of new life, and Dynamene renames him in symbolic recognition of his new acceptance of life. He is born for her as Chromis, a name suggesting the color yellow and its identification with light and with the sun, symbol of generative energy.[1] The force of life proves stronger than the force of sentiment, and significantly, the final line of the play is given to Doto, the unassuming voice of life, as she toasts, "The master. Both the masters."

A Phoenix Too Frequent makes use of most of the tricks of language which Fry's other plays exhibit, but the situation itself controls them for the most part and turns them to good use. An example of

---

[1]The symbolism is extended by the fact that traditionally the phoenix itself is identified as the solar bird.

this is to be found in Dynamene's speech describing the traditional, romantic picture of the tomb—a description which ends with the anti-climax familiar (and often forced) in Fry's comic verse. The anti-climactic technique is particularly apt here since Dynamene wears her high-minded resolve a little uncomfortably, and her final comment reveals the conflict between the romantic inclination and the unpleasant reality encountered in its enactment.

> Light itself is a trespasser; nothing can have
> The right of entrance except those natural symbols
> Of mortality, the jabbing, funeral, sleek-
> With-omen raven, the death-watch beetle which mocks
> Time: particularly, I'm afraid, the spider
> Weaving his home with self-generated
> Threads of slaughter; and, of course, the worm.
> I wish it could be otherwise. Oh dear,
> They aren't easy to live with.
>
> (p. 16)

The success of A Phoenix Too Frequent depends upon its integration and full use of the resources of language, setting, and plot. Fry in this play has used his limitations to best advantage, and he is able to sustain the effect he desires for the space of this short, one-act comedy. Venus Observed, a later comedy, makes a more ambitious attempt of the same general kind, and although it is a play richer in thematic possibilities, it fails to suggest the unity which the earlier and less ambitious comedy achieves.

Venus Observed (1950) is an autumnal comedy, set in the declining season of the year, and its hero, the Duke of Altair, is well past the green age of youth; he has a grown son who becomes his rival in love and teaches him that he must accept the encroachments of age. At the beginning of the play, the Duke has accepted the limited possibilities

left him by the decline of life, and he has gathered three of his former mistresses in his bedroom observatory to watch an eclipse of the sun through his beloved telescope. (The symbolism is obvious.) The Duke sets the mood of this meeting with his former lovers in an early speech:

> We're here this morning to watch
> The sun annulled and renewed, and to sit affectionately
> Over the year's dilapidation. 'Mellow'
> Is the keynote of the hour. We must be mellow,
> Remembering we've been on earth two million years,
> Man and boy and Sterkfontein ape.[1]

The Duke's son, Edgar, is to perform the Judgment of Paris for his father and present one of the three women with the symbolic apple, also appropriate to the day of the year, All Hallow's Eve, and to the autumn harvest. The apple is further to be identified with the legendary apple of the Fall, so that through symbol and image, the scene of the play is extended to include the whole ruined Eden of the world. This is one of Fry's two plays with a contemporary setting, and the implications of his comment extend to the contemporary world, although, as is always the case, there is no emphasis in the play on the modernity of the situation or problem.

The memory of Eden, of his first, unspoiled love, remains in the Duke, in spite of his autumnal resolves. And when the eclipse has passed and the first renewed light of the sun reveals Perpetua Reedbeck standing in its rays, the Duke forgets that "'mellow' / Is the keynote of the hour," and takes the apple to offer it to her youth and beauty. Reacting

---

[1]Venus Observed (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 13. Further quotations from Venus Observed will be taken from this edition.

instinctively to this threat to her freedom, Pepetua—in best Annie Oakley style—whips out a small pistol and, with deadly aim, shatters the apple in the Duke's hand. This incident is an example of the rather silly stage business which can result from Fry's failure of control, although there is some functional use for the incident in the action of the play. It inspires Rosabel to the destruction in Act II of the observatory, which she sees as symbolic of the Duke's isolation and his invulnerability. She explains to him:

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

Through Rosabel's action, the Duke is brought to realize that so much he had "delighted in is all of ash." Rising out of the fire and out of the situation of the play, the phoenix again appears as a symbol. The Duke, momentarily believing that Perpetua's love for him has emerged from the observatory fire, calls her "the little firebird," but she rejects him in favor of Edgar, who for the first time emerges from his father's shadow, and the Duke has to admit that a limited happiness is possible with a love like Rosabel's

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

Out of the ash finally arises the Duke's acceptance of a love befitting his declining years. The action of the play brings the Duke into har-

mony with its autumnal mood, and like that of The Cocktail Party, it leads all of the characters to an examination of their limitations and to the adjustments necessary to make the best of the fading world in which they find themselves. In this respect, the play is close to the traditional function of comedy as a revelation of the follies and foibles of mankind, bringing man into an acceptable balance with the society in which he finds himself. As a part of this function, the speeches of certain characters (particularly of the Duke as Age pursuing lost Youth) are self-mocking like those in A Phoenix Too Frequent, although Fry has achieved on the whole a quieter and less highly-pitched verse.

There are still the excesses of comic rhetoric, but they occur at meaningful points in the action such as Reedbeck's loss of patience with his priggish son:

> You're a vain, vexing, incomprehensible,
> Crimping, constipated duffer. What's your heart?
> All plum duff! Why do I have to be
> So inarticulate? God give me a few
> Lithontriptical words! You grovelling little
> Gobemouche!
> . . . . . .
> You spigoted, bigoted, operculated prig!
>
> (p. 42)

Typical marks of Fry's comic verse are effective in this passage: the torrent of coined and heavy-weight words used for a light-weight object; the comic, feminine, internal rhymes—"spigoted," "bigoted"; the alliteration—"vain," "vexing"; and the use of identical words or word roots in different senses, "duffer," "duff." The verse in this play shows, in general, a certain flexibility not achieved in the earlier comedies, and it is a verse that wears for three acts with much less friction than the verse of The Lady's Not for Burning. The language itself is closer

to the contemporary idiom, and it is "poetic" in unobtrusive ways which involve concealed end-rhymes, internal rhymes, and alliteration. This is, on the whole, a more mature play than the earlier three-act comedy, and the language reflects this maturity. The verse almost entirely avoids the non-dramatic philosophizing one ordinarily expects in a Fry play, and when such general comments do occur, they are part and parcel of the action or mood of the play. An example of this can be found in Reedbeck's explanation of his larceny, an explanation which comments on the larger world in which the play takes place:

> The reason was the fading charm of the world.
> The banquet of civilization is over—
> (p. 36)

The major weakness of this play is its failure to find a structural unity and coherence. The scenes of the play alternate between the bedroom observatory and the Temple of the Ancient Virtues beside the ducal lake in an organization reminiscent of that of The Firstborn, but not as meaningful in terms of the overall action of the play. The major structural criticism of the play is that Act I stands too nearly as a separate and completed unit in itself rather than as an introduction to the whole. The idea of the Judgment of Paris is a clever one, but it has the effect of making a separate tale of Act I, since Fry abandons it with the close of the curtain. To compensate, Fry depends heavily upon symbol and mood for coherence and unity throughout the three acts of this play; and although he very nearly succeeds, the failure of the play to create a significant structure for its action is one which cannot be balanced by the other methods that Fry uses.

The festival play, A Sleep of Prisoners (1951), can be described

as the most immediately modern of all the plays of Fry, not simply because it has as its characters, four war prisoners, and as its setting, an interlude in World War II, but because in this play, Fry draws on the experimental formal techniques of the modern theater. The scene of the play is a church converted into a temporary prison for four captured soldiers who, under the pressure of their surroundings, reenact biblical scenes in their dreams. Within this framework, Fry describes his intent and his design in the play's prefatory letter to Robert Gittings:

> 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 though in a complicated design where each of four men is seen through the sleeping thoughts of the others, and each, in his own dream, speaks as at heart he is, not as he believes himself to be. In the later part of Corporal Adams' dream 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.[1]

The structure of the play achieves a welding together of the spiritual history of Mankind and the dreams of the four sleepers in an expressionistic fantasy which expresses the theme of the play. The dreams are made up of significant moments in "the growth of vision," and the treatment of the material, the weaving of the patterns of the dreams and the final dream shared in common, suggests that the technique of the play owes something to the Jungian idea of a racial memory or perhaps more

---

[1] A Sleep of Prisoners (London: Oxford University Press, 1951) [p. iii]. Further quotations from A Sleep of Prisoners will be taken from this edition.

specifically, to the tendency in modern poetry to suggest a composite experience and protagonist as in The Waste Land or in Paterson.

The dreams of the soldiers involve moments of passion, of suffering, of sacrifice, and the dream-lives of the four men are determined by their actual temperaments. The play opens with a brief interchange which establishes the characters of the four men. Peter Abel, outwardly easy-going, uncommitted, and even-tempered, is attacked by his friend, David King, whose nerves are frayed by the whole experience and by his concern for Peter's apparent untroubled acceptance of the situation in which they find themselves. In their subsequent dreams these two re-enact the conflict in the roles which their names and natures suggest—Able and Cain, Absalom and David, Isaac and Abraham—until they finally join Corporal Adams in his dream, and the three of them become Shadrac, Meshac, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, the crucible of man's experience.

All of the dreams are created in terms of the army life the men have been leading, and this gives the whole play a sense of immediacy while underwriting its structural stress on the repetitive nature of history and of the cumulative meaning of man's experience. The mixing of biblical situations and military terminology provides a very effective vocabulary for the verse of the play, and it enables the verse to create the same kind of tensions which the larger design of the play encompasses. The inextricable weaving of the two sources and the extensions of meaning it creates are illustrated in the following dialogue from the first dream, in which Meadows appears as God and Corporal Adams

as the figure his name suggests.

MEADOWS. As you were, Adam.

ADAMS. No chance of that, sir.

MEADOWS. As you were, as you were.

ADAMS. Lost all track of it now, sir.

MEADOWS. How far back was it, Adam?

ADAMS [with a jerk of the head]. Down the road. Too dark to see.

MEADOWS. Were you alone?

ADAMS. A woman with me, sir.

MEADOWS. I said Let there be love,
And there wasn't enough light, you say?

ADAMS. We could see our own shapes, near enough,
But not the road. The road kept on dividing
Every yard or so. Makes it long.
We expected nothing like it, sir.
Ill-equipped, naked as the day,
It was all over and the world was on us
Before we had time to take cover.

MEADOWS. Stand at peace, Adam: do stand at peace.

ADAMS. There's nothing of that now, sir.

(pp. 10-11)

Tim Meadows, an older man actually beyond the maximum age for enlistment, has accepted his involvement with mankind by the symbolic act of voluntary enlistment in man's struggle, and he provides the structural links between the waking and sleeping worlds. For the most part, as the other dreamers act out their passions, Meadows lies awake in his bunk; the others wake fitfully from time to time, and the waking men interact on the edge of their dreams. For instance, after Adams as Joab has cut down Absalom with his tommy-gun, David (no longer the king)

awakens, and in the anxiety of his guilt which had been objectified by his dream, he asks Meadows, who has been awake, if he has heard a shout (the cry of the dying Absalom). Meadows's reply, "Nobody shouted," indicates the complexity of the formal convention of the dream, which is to be compared to the interior monologue technique in the sense that the world of the dream creates its own significant content and form although its larger setting is the real, external world.

There is a progression in the dreams which David and Peter enact, moving from the wrathful killing by Cain when Abel wins at dice to the meaningful, but averted, sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. In the final experience of the furnace, when all join in a single dream, Meadows appears as Man and delivers the "messages" of the play in an ending unfortunately weak after a tense and tightly integrated action.[1] Fry's technique is maintained, however, and Meadows's final dream-speech moves without a break into the waking world:

> 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.
> Where are you making for? It takes
> So many thousand years to wake,
> But will you wake for pity's sake?
> Pete's sake, Dave or one of you,
> Wake up, will you? Go and lie down.
> Where do you think you're going.
>
> (p. 49)

The same technique of language that appears in the comedies is present

---

[1]Stanford (Christopher Fry, "British Book News Supplement," p. 21) discusses this weakness of the play in some detail.

here—for instance, that of creating a double context for an expression by its general context set against its grammatical usage, as in "for pity's sake"—illustrating the fact that when Fry has his language grounded in a genuine situation, he can make effective use of his verbal tricks.

In A Sleep of Prisoners, the state of man in the modern world is dealt with by Fry more directly than in any of his other plays. David, for example, has the same obsession Auden expressed in the thirties that the world is divided into "we's" and "they's," "ours" and "theirs";

> I've got to know which side I'm on.
> I've got to be on a side.
> (p. 42)

The total intent of the play is to suggest, however, that sides and the wars and hatreds they represent offer no solutions. Meadows as Man explains that no man is an island,

> . . . there's not a skipping soul
> On the loneliest goat-path who is not
> Hugged into this, the human shambles.
> And whatever happens on the farthest pitch,
> To the sand-man in the desert or the island-man in the sea,
> Concerns us very soon.
> (p. 46)

The involvement of man in his history is a purifying experience just as the flames in the biblical furnace suggest the purgatorial nature of the dreams the men have endured. The flames in the furnace become human figures, the unquenchable fire of breath and blood, which "can only transform."

Fry comes closer in A Sleep of Prisoners (a more complex play than the slight A Phoenix Too Frequent) to achieving a totally realized

verse drama than in any of his other attempts. Significantly, Fry in his one-act plays (with the exception of his first published play) is able to master the formal relationship between content, structure, and verse which creates an approximation of the fully-dimensioned poetic and dramatic experience the verse play ideally should offer. In this respect, Fry does not stand alone. One need only recall Yeats's perfection of the formal aspects of the short verse play and Eliot's triumph with Murder in the Cathedral, a play that is only about half as long as The Cocktail Party. Fry's problem is one shared by his contemporaries: he needs to find for his longer plays, as he has for his shorter ones, a form which can put his particular kind of language into a sustainable relationship to the whole. The most critical problem encountered in the longer play, the three-act or the five-act, appears to be that of a structure in which verse can play an integral part and which will, in turn, justify the use of verse. The problems of a totally relevant verse drama appear to be intensified and complicated by the necessities of the longer play, but the successes with shorter plays and the kind of advances made in language and formal relationships in verse drama since Yeats's experiments create a base from which verse playwrights may begin in their pursuit of the sustainable longer play, and the near-success of The Cocktail Party suggests that the successfully-realized long verse play is no more impossible in the twentieth century than the successfully-realized long poem.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Texts of Plays

Auden, W. H. The Dance of Death. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1933.

_____. "Paid on Both Sides," Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1950, pp. 199-223.

Auden, W. H., and Isherwood, Christopher. The Ascent of F.6: A Tragedy in Two Acts. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937.

_____. The Dog Beneath the Skin: Or, Where Is Francis?. New York: Random House, 1935.

_____. On the Frontier. New York: Random House, 1938.

Eliot, T. S. The Cocktail Party: A Comedy. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

_____. The Confidential Clerk. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954.

_____. The Family Reunion. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1939.

_____. Murder in the Cathedral. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935.

_____. "Sweeney Agonistes," Collected Poems 1909-1935. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936.

Fry, Christopher. The Boy with a Cart: Cuthman, Saint of Sussex. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951.

_____. The Dark Is Light Enough: A Winter Comedy. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.

_____. The Firstborn. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

_____. The Lady's Not for Burning: A Comedy. London: Oxford University Press, 1950.

_____. A Phoenix Too Frequent: A Comedy. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

_____. A Sleep of Prisoners. London: Oxford University Press, 1951.

_____. Thor, with Angels. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

_____. Venus Observed: A Comedy. London: Oxford University Press, 1955.

Spender, Stephen. Trial of a Judge: A Tragic Statement in Five Acts. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1938.

Yeats, W. B. The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats: New Edition with Five Additional Plays. New York: Macmillan Co., 1953.

Books

Bentley, Eric. The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times. New York: Meridian Books, 1957.

Bickley, Francis. J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1912.

Bjersby, Birgit. The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats. Upsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1950.

Cassirer, Ernst. An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1953.

Drew, Elizabeth. T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.

Dukes, Ashley. The Youngest Drama. Studies of Fifty Dramatists. Chicago: Charles H. Seigel and Co., 1924.

Durrell, Lawrence. A Key to Modern British Poetry. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952.

Eliot, T. S. Poetry and Drama. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951.

_____. The Three Voices of Poetry. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954.

Ellis-Fermor, Una. The Frontiers of Drama. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

_____. The Irish Dramatic Movement. London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1939.

Ellmann, Richard. Yeats: The Man and the Masks. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1949.

Feidelson, Charles, Jr. Symbolism and American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

Fenollosa, Ernest, and Pound, Ezra. 'Noh' or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1916.

Fergusson, Francis. The Idea of a Theater. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1953.

Fraser, G. S. The Modern Writer and His World. London: Andre Deutsch, 1953.

Fry, Christopher. An Experience of Critics. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.

Gardner, Helen. The Art of T. S. Eliot. London: The Cresset Press, 1949.

Gassner, John (ed.). A Treasury of the Theatre. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956.

Gwynn, Stephen. Irish Literature and Drama. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936.

Heilman, Robert B. This Great Stage. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948.

Henn, T. R. The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1950.

Hoggart, Richard. Auden: An Introductory Essay. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.

Isaacs, J. An Assessment of Twentieth Century Literature. London: Secker and Warburg, 1951.

Kermode, Frank. Romantic Image. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.

Langer, Susanne K. Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

MacNeice, Louis. The Poetry of W. B. Yeats. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Matthiessen, F. O. The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry. London: Oxford University Press, 1935.

Moore, Virginia. The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1954.

Morgan, A. E. Tendencies of Modern English Drama. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924.

O'Casey, Sean. The Flying Wasp: Essays on the Modern Theatre. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1937.

O'Donnell, J. P. Sailing to Byzantium. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939.

Ortega y Gasset, José. The Dehumanization of Art. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1956.

Peacock, Ronald. The Art of Drama. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.

_____. The Poet in the Theatre. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946.

Quinn, Sister M. Bernetta. The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955.

Reynolds, Ernest. Modern English Drama: A Survey of the Theatre from 1900. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951.

Scarfe, Francis. Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1920-1941. London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1942.

Smith, Grover Jr. T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Spender, Stephen. The Creative Element: A Study of Vision, Despair and Orthodoxy among Some Modern Writers. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953.

_____. The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936.

Stanford, Derek. Christopher Fry: An Appreciation. London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1951.

Thomas, Dylan. Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices. Preface by Daniel Jones. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1955.

Thouless, Priscilla. Modern Poetic Drama. Oxford: Blackwell, 1934.

Ure, Peter. Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats. London: University Press of Liverpool, 1946.

Waley, Arthur. The Nō Plays of Japan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922.

Weston, Jessie L. From Ritual to Romance. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1957.

Wilson, Edmund. Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931.

Winters, Yvor. Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry. New York: Arrow Editions, 1937.

Yeats, W. B. Autobiographies. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1955.

_____. The Cutting of An Agate. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1919.

_____. Essays. New York: Macmillan Co., 1924.

_____. The Herne's Egg and Other Plays. New York: Macmillan Co., 1938.

_____. The King of the Great Clock Tower, Commentaries and Poems. New York: Macmillan Co., 1935.

_____. Last Poems and Plays. New York: Macmillan Co., 1940.

_____. The Letters of W. B. Yeats. Edited by Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.

_____. Plays and Controversies. New York: Macmillan Co., 1924.

_____. Poems 1899-1905. London: A. H. Bullen, 1906.

_____. Wheels and Butterflies. New York: Macmillan Co., 1935.

Articles and Essays

Anderson, Maxwell. "Poetry in the Theater," in Off Broadway: Essays About the Theater. New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1947, pp. 47-54.

_____. "The Uses of Poetry," in Off Broadway: Essays About the Theater. William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1947, pp. 87-91.

Arrowsmith, William. "The Comedy of T. S. Eliot," English Institute Essays, 1954. Edited by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1955, pp. 159-171.

_____. "English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," Hudson Review, III (Summer, 1950), 203-216.

_____. "English Verse Drama II: The Cocktail Party," Hudson Review, III (Autumn, 1950), 411-430.

Barber, C. L. "Strange Gods at T. S. Eliot's 'The Family Reunion,'" in T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique. Edited by Leonard Unger. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948, pp. 415-443.

Bentley, Eric. "On Staging Yeats' Plays," New Republic, CXXVIII (June 15, 1953), 17-18.

_____. "Yeats as a Playwright," in The Permanence of Yeats. Edited by James Hall and Martin Steinmann. New York: Macmillan Co., 1950, pp. 237-248.

Bewley, Marius. "The Verse of Christopher Fry," Scrutiny, XVIII (June, 1951), 78-84.

Blackmur, R. P. "From 'Ash Wednesday' to 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" in Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952, pp. 163-191.

_____. "Language as Gesture," in Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952, pp. 3-24.

Brecht, Bertolt. "A Model for Epic Theater," translated by Eric Bentley, Sewanee Review, LVII (Summer, 1949), 425-436.

Brown, Spenser. "T. S. Eliot's Latest Poetic Drama," Commentary, XVII (April, 1954), 367-372.

Browne, E. Martin. "The Dramatic Verse of T. S. Eliot," in T. S. Eliot: A Symposium. Edited by Richard March and Tambimuttu. London: Editions Poetry, 1948, pp. 196-207.

Carter, Paul J. Jr. "Who Understands The Cocktail Party?," Colorado Quarterly, II (Autumn, 1953), 193-205.

Clarke, Austin. "The Problem of Verse Drama To-day," London Mercury, XXXIII (November, 1935), 34-38.

Coghill, Nevill. "Sweeney Agonistes," in T. S. Eliot: A Symposium. Edited by Richard March and Tambimuttu. London: Editions Poetry, 1948, pp. 82-87.

Colby, Robert A. "Orpheus in the Counting House: The Confidential Clerk," Publications of the Modern Language Society of America, LXXII (September, 1957), 791-802.

Colum, Padraic. "Poet's Progress: W. B. Yeats in the Theatre," Theatre Arts, XIX (1935), 936-943.

Cookman, A. V. "The Theatre: 'The Dance of Death.' By W. H. Auden," London Mercury, XXXIII (November, 1935), 56.

Daiches, David. "W. B. Yeats—I," in The Permanence of Yeats. Edited by James Hall and Martin Steinmann. New York: Macmillan Co., 1950, pp. 118-139.

Dobrée, Bonamy. "Poetic Drama in England Today," Southern Review, IV (Winter, 1939), 581-599.

Donoghue, Dennis. "Yeats and the Clean Outline," Sewanee Review, LXV (Spring, 1957), 202-225.

Dukes, Ashley. "T. S. Eliot in the Theatre," in T. S. Eliot: A Symposium. Edited by Richard March and Tambimuttu. London: Editions Poetry, 1948, pp. 111-118.

Eliot, T. S. "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," in Selected Essays: New Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950, pp. 31-45.

_____. "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," in Selected Essays: New Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950, pp. 91-99.

_____. "Hamlet and His Problems," in Selected Essays: New Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950, pp. 121-126.

_____. "Marie Lloyd," in Selected Essays: New Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950, pp. 405-408.

_____. "The Music of Poetry," in On Poetry and Poets. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957, pp. 17-33.

_____. "The Need for Poetic Drama," Good Speech No. 35 (April-June, 1937), pp. 1-6.

_____. "Noh and the Image," The Egoist, IV (August, 1917), 102-103.

_____. "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," in The Permanence of Yeats. Edited by James Hall and Martin Steinmann. New York: Macmillan Co., 1950, pp. 331-343.

_____. "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," in The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1932, pp. 60-70.

_____. "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," in Selected Essays: New Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950, pp. 25-30.

_____. "The Social Function of Poetry," in On Poetry and Poets. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957, pp. 3-16.

_____. "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933, pp. 113-149.

Eliot, T. S., and Hamilton, Iain. "Comments on T. S. Eliot's New Play, The Cocktail Party," World Review N. S. No. 9 (November, 1949), pp. 19-22.

Fergusson, Francis. "Notes on the Theater," Southern Review, V (Autumn, 1940), 562-564.

_____. "Poetry in the Theater and Poetry of the Theater: Cocteau's Infernal Machine," English Institute Essays, 1949. Edited by Alan S. Downer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, pp. 55-72.

_____. "Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder, and Eliot," Sewanee Review, LXIV (Autumn, 1956), 44-73.

Fry, Christopher. "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," Theatre Arts, XXXVI (August, 1952), 27.

_____. "Poetry in the Theatre," Saturday Review, XXXVI (March 21, 1951), 18-19, 33.

Fulton, A. R. "Expressionism Twenty Years After," Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), 398-413.

Gittings, Robert. "Christopher Fry," World Review, N. S. No. 41 (July, 1952), pp. 55-59.

Griffin, Howard. "A Dialogue with W. H. Auden," Hudson Review, III (Winter, 1951), 575-591.

Hailey, Foster. "An Interview with T. S. Eliot," New York Times, April 16, 1950, sec. II, p. 1, cols. 5-7; p. 3, cols. 4-6.

Hamalian, Leo. "Mr. Eliot's Saturday Evening Service," Accent, X (Autumn, 1950), 195-206.

Hamilton, Iain. "A Critic's View [of The Cocktail Party]," World Review, N. S. No. 9 (November, 1949), p. 23.

Harding, D. W. "Progression of Theme in Eliot's Modern Plays," Kenyon Review, XVIII (Summer, 1956), 337-360.

Hawkins, A. Desmon. "The Poet in the Theatre," New Criterion, XIV (October, 1934), 29-39.

Heilman, Robert B. "Alcestis and The Cocktail Party," Comparative Literature, V (Spring, 1953), 105-116.

Hynes, Sam. "Religion in the West End," Commonweal, LIX (February 12, 1954), 475-476.

Lipton, Lawrence. "More on Poetry and Drama," Trace, No. 13 (August, 1955), pp. 15-20.

_____. "Some Shop Talk on Poetry and Drama," Trace, No. 11 (April, 1955), pp. 3-10.

MacLeish, Archibald. "The Poet as Playwright," Atlantic Monthly, CXCV (February, 1955), 49-52.

_____. "A Stage for Poetry," in A Time to Speak. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1940, pp. 74-81.

Mandel, O. "Theme in the Drama of Christopher Fry," Études Anglaises, X (October-December, 1957), 335-349.

Martz, Louis L. "The Saint as Tragic Hero: Saint Joan and Murder in the Cathedral," in Tragic Themes in Western Literature. Edited by Cleanth Brooks. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, pp. 150-177.

_____. "The Wheel and the Point: Aspects of Imagery and Theme in Eliot's Later Poetry," in T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique. Edited by Leonard Unger. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948, pp. 444-462.

McLaughlin, John J. "A Daring Metaphysic: 'The Cocktail Party,'" Renascence, III (Autumn, 1950), 15-28.

Miller, Arthur. "The Family in Modern Drama," Atlantic Monthly, CXCVII (April, 1956), 35-41.

Mizener, Arthur. "Poetic Drama and the Well-made Play," English Institute Essays. Edited by Alan S. Downer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, pp. 33-54.

Morgan, Frederick. "Notes on the Theater," Hudson Review, III (Summer, 1950), 288-297.

O'Conner, Frank. "A Lyric Voice in the Irish Theatre," in Highlights of Modern Literature: A Permanent Collection of Memorable Essays from The New York Times Book Review. Edited by Francis Brown. New York: New American Library, 1954, pp. 130-134.

Parkinson, Thomas. "W. B. Yeats: A Poet's Stagecraft, 1899-1911," Journal of English Literary History, XVII (June, 1950), 136-161.

Pearce, Donald R. "Yeats' Last Plays," Journal of English Literary History, XVIII (March, 1951), 67-76.

Pellegrini, Alessandro. "A London Conversation with T. S. Eliot," Sewanee Review, LVII (Spring, 1949), 287-292.

Peter, John. "'The Family Reunion,'" Scrutiny, XVI (September, 1949), 219-230.

Prior, Moody E. "Poetic Drama: An Analysis and a Suggestion," English Institute Essays, 1949. Edited by Alan S. Downer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, pp. 3-32.

Ransom, John Crowe. "A Cathedralist Looks at Murder," in The World's Body. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938, pp. 166-172.

_____. "T. S. Eliot as Dramatist," Poetry, LIV (August, 1939), 264-271.

Schevill, James. "The Audience and Verse Drama," Trace, No. 25 (February, 1958), pp. 30-36.

_____. "A Style for Action: Notes on Verse Drama," Trace, No. 17 (June, 1956), pp. 2-9.

Shapiro, Leo. "The Medievalism of T. S. Eliot," Poetry, LVI (July, 1940), 202-213.

Shattuck, Charles H. "The Spreading Whimsy," Accent, X (Autumn, 1950), 250-252.

Spears, Monroe K. "Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," Poetry, LXXXVIII (April, 1951), 28-43.

Spender, Stephen. "Writers in the World of Necessity," in Modern British Writing. Edited by Denys Val Baker. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1947, pp. 137-148.

Stamm, Rudolf. "The Orestes Theme in Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill, T. S. Eliot and Jean-Paul Sartre," English Studies, XXX (October, 1949), 244-255.

Thwaite, Anthony. "Yeats and the Noh," The Twentieth Century, CLXII (September, 1957), 235-242.

Ward, Anne. "Speculations on Eliot's Time-world: An Analysis of The Family Reunion in Relation to Hulme and Bergson," American Literature, XXI (March, 1949), 18-34.

Weisstein, Ulrich. "The Cocktail Party: An Attempt at Interpretation on Mythological Grounds," Western Review, XVI (Spring, 1952), 232-240.

Wilkinson, Burke. "A Most Serious Comedy by Eliot," New York Times, February 7, 1954, sec. II, p. 1, col. 7; p. 3, cols., 4-6.

Wimsatt, W. K. Jr. "Eliot's Comedy," Sewanee Review, LVIII (October-December, 1950), 666-678.

Wool, Sandra. "Weston Revisited," Accent, X (Autumn, 1950), 207-212.

Yeats, W. B. "A Note on 'At the Hawk's Well,'" in The Wild Swans at Coole, Other Verses and a Play. Churchtown, Dundrum: The Cuala Press, 1917, pp. 42-47.

Pamphlets

Bradbrook, M. C. T. S. Eliot. "British Book News Supplement." London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950.

Stanford, Derek. Christopher Fry. "British Book News Supplement, No. 54." London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954.