

REVIVAL OF POETIC DRAMA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A STUDY OF CHRISTOPHER FRY PLAYS

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Abstract

Poetry is one of the earliest aesthetic activities of human mind. The earliest plays and the greatest epics of the world, the Divine Comedy, the Bible, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita and the Khuran etc. have been written in verse. Verse has been the medium of world's greatest playwrights such as Shakespeare and Kalidas. The earliest miracle and morality plays of England, notably Everyman, Grammar Gurton's Needle and Ralph Roister and Doiter are in verse. 18th century was primarily an age of prose; hence drama had to suffer in this century. Attempts were made to revive poetic drama in 19th century by Byron. Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and so on tried their best, but they fail because they were poets and not playwrights. The leaders of Irish Literacy Revival, W.B Years Lady Gregory and J.M Synge establish the Abbey Theatre in Dublin to encourage the poet playwrights. Later on the plays of W.H.Auden, Eliot and Fry. In early years of the 20th century, dramatists, such as Barker, Galsworthy and Shaw, were more interested in presentation of the social and economic problems of their times in a realistic manner. Fry's development as a dramatist is gradual and he has wide experience of the theatre. He served as an actor, director, and a staff dramatist before he started writing plays. He has been influenced by the ancient Greeks, the Elizabethans, the Restoration dramatists, Oscar Wilde, Eliot, even Shaw and the contemporary French dramatists such as Anouilh and Giraudoux. Thus his plays contain several features of the Medieval, the Renaissance and the Restoration drama. He has a keen interest in history, religion, theology, poetry and philosophy. His comedies may best be termed "comedies of climate" or "comedies of seasons." Fry's imagery is function and is drawn from the contradictory clusters such as dark and lights, cold and heat, death and life and so on. Thus, his plays mark the beginning of a new attitude to world, to religion and new belief about its place in modern life. He preserves and interprets than observes and dissects. He

has peeped us anew into eternity and spirituality. Such things lead to us to see Fry as a successful poetic dramatist in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Poetic drama, classics, poets attempts, dramatists attempts, establishment of theatre, imagery, history, religion, comedies of seasons, down fall, growth of mass media etc..

Poetry is one of the earliest aesthetic activities of human mind. The earliest plays and the greatest epics of the world, the Divine Comedy, The Bible, The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita and the Khuran etc. have been written in verse. Verse has been the medium of world's greatest playwrights such as Shakespeare and Kalidas. Main practioners of poetic drama in the 20th century are W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, John Masefield, J.M.Synge, Drink Waters, Eliot and Fry. Verse most to the old English drama. The earliest miracle and morality players of England, notably Everyman, Grammar Gurton's Needle and Ralph Roister and Doiter (Nicholas Udall) are in verse. Shakespeare's characters in the Tempest like Ariel and Caliban describe beautifully in poetry. Verse went unchallenged until the 18th century in England.

The English poetic drama had its heyday during the Elizabethan age. The University Wits, in general, and Marlowe and Shakespeare, in particular, contributed their mite line to the growth and development of poetic drama. With the tremendous influence of the Renaissance, Marlowe poetised the Elizabethan drama. He breathed into English drama the life spirit of poetry through his "Mighty line". Shakespeare, the master dramatist, gave a touch of perfection to the poetic drama especially through his tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and his tragic-comedies like *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* which are notable for their poetic excellence.

Shakespeare took drama to such poetic heights that none of his successors could continue it with the same spirit and vigour. After Shakespeare, only in Webster, particularly in his *The Dutchess of Malfi*, do we find almost perfect touches of poetic drama. Nevertheless, we may say that poetic drama died a natural death with Shakespeare.

The 18th century was primarily an age of prose; hence drama had to suffer in this century. Attempts were made to revive poetic drama in 19th century by Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and Landor tried their best, but they fail because they were poets and not playwrights. From 1860 on words spectators and actors were trained in the naturalistic forms. Drama became the vehicle of social criticism and propaganda. Isben, Jones, Shaw, Glasworthy and Granville Barker become the chief exponents of the naturalistic drama which is prosaic.

Under various modern influences such as the Noah drama of Japan, the plays Materlinck, the symbolist poet dramatists, the Russian ballet drama took a turn towards to the imaginative and symbolic tendency. It again became poetic. The leaders of Irish Literacy Revival, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M Synge establish the Abbey Theatre in Dublin to encourage the poet playwrights. Later on the plays of W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, John Masefield, Dr. Bottomley, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M.Synge, Drinkwaters, Eliot and Fry. The last poetic dramatist is Christopher Fry, a master of eloquence. He is inspired by the noble aim of exploring the mystery of human life where God is not merely a sleeping partner, by means of comedy which he believed to be a good handmaiden of serious spiritual drama.

The most remarkable quality of Fry's verse is its perfect suitability to the requirements of the theatre. It is fluent and flowing. It is free from poetic tricks such as inversion and ellipsis. Above all, it is progressive in movement. It can come down to colloquial level and then rise to lyrical intensity without the least trace of strain or effort.

Poetry is the chief motive force of Fry's genius. His muse sustains itself mainly on the sound, colour and pomp of verse. His most successful play, *A Phoenix Too Frequent* has simplicity and spark of liveliness. As a true poetic drama it is as successful as Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

In early years of the 20th century, dramatists, such as Barker, Galsworthy Shaw, were more interested in presentation of the social and economic problems of their times in a realistic manner. Another factor responsible for the emergence of poetic drama was the large scope of themes offered by poetic drama. The conception such as Hell and Heaven could be conceived in poetic drama. Again characters like Ariel and Caliban could be portrayed only through poetry. Here, poetry proved to be superior expression to poetic drama. Poetry can communicate the incommunicable. In its tower passion can be best realized and expressed. Poetry has a flexible scope. It extends the range of expression over that available to prose.

The *Firstborn* was Fry's first attempt of writing a full length play with a theme of the tragic seriousness. He himself intended that *The Firstborn* was his major and serious dramatic work. *The Firstborn* is Fry's first serious attempt to deal with the ideas that flash in out of all his plays. The play is based on a very complicated story. It is the story of Moses, who learns something of himself and of mankind as he realizes a horrifying nature of the plagues that God sends to aid his struggle against the Pharaoh. This play does not specifically deal with a set of social and political problems. It shares an anxiety about impending destruction and a sense of frustration caused by the baffling difficulty of choosing right from wrong.

Fry's choice and treatment of the story of Moses struggling against Pharaoh's tyranny has the implications of the democratic free world preparing to fight the evil of Hitler's fascism. He treats the dilemma on a deeper level and assimilates this moral question of ends and means into the essentially religious question of God's ways to man. His experiences of destruction made him see deeper implications in the themes with which he had originally set out to write his tragedy. The lines which Moses speaks to describe the death of his own spiritual vision derive from Fry's own condition:

"The Shadows are too many
God has turned against itself and become
Its own enemy. Have we to say that truth
Is only punishment? What must we say
To be free of the bewildering mesh of God
I followed a light into blindness."

Fry worked very hard on to write *The Firstborn*. He continued to struggle with the script for twenty years from 1938-1958. Since it is a tragedy, it brings about a reorganization of the materials so as to make the play theatre worthy. "There in the question 'Who am I'. Fry could hear the voice of a bewildered man in the fall of God's will, and the surprise of a finite man being harnessed to the purpose of infinite magnitude. For his portrait of Moses, Fry keeps these two issues to the forefront, and attempts to treat them in the human context. He makes Moses

illustrate the tragic dilemmas of the man who does not know himself, and is used against his will by an incomprehensible power to which he blindfolded submits. As Moses says:

"There is little difference
Be ourselves and those blindfolded oxen.
We also do the thing we cannot see,
Hearing the creaking pivot and only knowing
That we labour."

In fact, Fry invented situations and characters to suit his own purpose. Moses is suggested to be a human figure, sensitive, powerful, determined and roused to action by the miserable plight of his own people. We find an existential vein in the speeches of Moses. He speaks under the existential compulsion and the reference is still to the law underwritten by nature. Moses jerks back his head to listen to the word of God in thunder and waits for a fresh command:

"Behind
The door that shuts into life, there is
An ear. Am I given the power?
To do what I am?
What says the infinite eavesdropper?"

Ramses death would have made a tragic impact if the remorse and suffering it causes in Moses were convincingly personal and real. Fry's chief concern is deeper spiritual reality in the context of Christianity. It has a perfect dramatic action reaches very gradually to the climax.

As a verse play, Fry's early plays clearly have the initiative rhythm and imagery of poetry. It attains a comic vision. Many plays of Fry represents a "cosmos of puzzles and mystery, the idiom is substantially interrogative often distractingly so, with question answering question." We find a series of contrasts in the play such as palace and tent, garden and desert, role and identity, honesty and guile, nature and god, sickness and health and others.

Fry has also paired and contrasted his characters making the advocates of disinterested compromise. These verse dramas are ambitious effort and thus called as "ambitious play". In fact, Fry has chosen to represent both the force behind history against which man's efforts appear ineffectual and puny, and the human aspirations which shape his force into coherent significance. The Firstborn deals competently and in an interesting way with most of the themes which will occupy Fry for the rest of his career.

Fry's development as a dramatist is gradual and he has wide experience of the theatre. He saved as an actor, director, and a staff dramatist before he started writing plays. He has been influence by the ancient Greeks, the Elizabethans, the Restoration dramatists, Oscar wiled, Eliot, even Shaw and the contemporary French dramatists such as Anouilh and Giraudoux. Thus his plays conation several features of the Medieval, the Renaissance and the Restoration drama. He has a keen interest in history, religion, theology, poetry and philosophy.

As a write of verse comedy he is an iconoclast. His stress is on the metaphysical and spiritual rather than on the social or moral codes of conduct. His comedies have an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into the light and the surface into depth. To him comedy is an escape from despair into faith. So his comedy is a discerning of truth, a comment on the

human dilemma. Briefly speaking it is an exploration into God. It is Sui generic; it cannot be classified into pigeon holes. His comedies may best be termed “comedies of climate” or “comedies of sessions.”

In tragedies he does not follow the tradition canons of Aristotle. His concern is not so much with destiny of the protagonist as with the sorrow of mankind in general. So his tragedy is the demonstration of the human dilemma. According to Fry the difference between tragedy and comedy is not the difference between laughter and tears, but between experience and intuition. Hence his plays are not comedies and or tragedies in the traditional sense but serious-comic or comic serious place. Fry’s is theatre of verse full of striking metaphor and similes, kingfisher hrases-flashes and glittering, glorious and golden images. His verse is lyrical and melodious. Fry’s dram is hot-ice. It is made of paradox, mystery, and poetry. It is spun by imagery and ignored by spirituality. It contains intellectual ideas religious beliefs, philosophy, mysticism, faith, mystery, wit, humor, satire, eloquence, gaiety, wonder and lyricism. It is a union of the natural and the supernatural, prose and poetry, appearance and reality, and verisimilitude and truth. It also blends the comic and the tragic, the symbolic and the moral, the physical and the spiritual.

Fry thought his episodes are unconventional and climaxes spellbinding, he is not very much interested in building the plot and the developing the characters. He is more interested in porting mood. His plots are not realistic in the customary sense. He distinguishes between the true and the actual. In his view what we touch, what we see, what we know is not the truth but the actual. His plots are not bound by dramatic unties of time and space, but are set against the background of the time lessens and speechlessness. He proposes not ‘a theatre cloudy with insubstantial symbols and spiritual sea wreck but a drama full of the facts of life. Round the renewal of life and hint at man’s spiritual hollowness. His characterizes are busy not in revealing their personalities but in exploring their inner selves. There are not types but individuals at the mercy of themselves. Most of them try to attain spiritual heights some them attain their goals while other are lost in the material.

Fry regards poetry is the language of reality, economy and correctness. In his opinion the use of poetry in the theatre necessary became of the spiritual obligations of our wildly unprosaic age. It is a powerful medium to show us several planes of reality at once-the sensuous, the logical, the psychological and spiritual. It is the language of mystery and paradox. In his theatre poetry is action and action his poetry. So he is not a poet and a playwright separately but all the time a poet-playwright. He finds it a pity to divide drama into the poetic and the prosaic. To Fry such rivalry is nonsense. It is by his characters’ specters rather than actions that he is able to explore the greater reality. His words are ‘felt in the blood and felt along the heart’. His verse has his dramatic function. It has adaptability and flexibility.

Fry’s imagery is function and is drawn the contradictory clusters such as dark and lights, cold and heat, death and life, pain and pleasure, wasteland and garden and hell and heaven. Most of the images are drawn from everyday life and nature. He also uses the imagery of seasons and circles. Many a time his imagery is evocative. The scope of his imagery is very wide. He sees, smells, and tastes in terms of verbal images. The chief features of his imagery are coherence, elasticity and relevance.

Fry’s humorous is witty and his humorous. His fun is seldom if ever without an intellectual touch. Whereas Shakespeare’s humour tends to please the pit first. Fry’s humour first please the gallery as it written for a very sophisticated audience quite different from the Elizabethan audience.

The most outstanding quality of Fry's humour is that it treats life as a joke, quite funny and laughable. Mocking at life it also mocks at death, and thereby it become the 'humor of annihilation' where characters regard death as a gateway to eternal rest, anew interest. Fry's humour is not merely the ticking of thoughtless laughter. It is neither farcical nor Mephistophelian it is the contemplation of a philosopher. Fry's business is not to ridicule man's follies in characters of conduct but to expose the errors and weakness of the soul. If Fry is a mystic and a prophet, he is also a past master of low comedy, exaggeration, deflation, anti-climax and caricature. His humour is sunny, kindly and for all its keenness never barbed with poison.

Thus, his plays mark the beginning of a new attitude to world, to religion and new belief about its place in modern life. Some of his plays may be religion, but the religion in them cannot be equated with any particular sector or creed. It interprets a common understanding of man's relation to the reality being, behind and within. He has got nearer to the roots of a universal religion in the human soul by rendering a very broad meaning to religion. His genuine concern is not to convert but to articulate. He preserves and interprets than observes and dissects. He has peeped us anew into eternity and spirituality. Such things leads to us to see Fry as a successful poetic dramatist in the twentieth century.

To conclude, the prospect of poetic drama is not very encouraging in view of the rapid growth of mass media like cinema, radio and television which have jeopardized the very existence of the theatre, in general, and of the poetic theatre, in particular. So, the survival of poetic drama in our prosaic age will depend largely upon its capacity to adapt itself to the unfavourable circumstances created by hostile forces. Let us, however, hope that poetic drama will survive in its own right and by its own strength as a bulwark against forces which tend to desiccate and degrade the human heart. Let us be convinced that the poetic drama, as practised by Fry, is one of the best instruments for arresting the rot which is eating into the vitals of the human heart and mind at present.

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