

## A Possible Christian Approach to Aspects of Contemporary British Drama \*

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### ABSTRACT

*The essay hinges on two basic premises. The first is that after due consideration of purely aesthetic concerns, the ultimate impact of the work is to be evaluated with reference to the framework of the Christian faith. The second is a firm affirmation that the approach is a lay one from the viewpoints of both philosophy and theology. Artistic merit is the first concern of the literary critic.*

*The works discussed in the course of the essay are Butley and Otherwise Engaged by Simon Gray and A Day in the Death of Joe Egg by Peter Nichols. In terms of literary considerations these are striking plays: characterisation is impeccable, the structure is sound in each instance and the language is highly evocative and dramatically effective. The stylized elegance of the language, in fact, is often an ironic counterpoint to the fragmented consciousness evoked in the play. Because of the sure linguistic touch, the tone is consistently ironic, unsentimental, acerbic – and it allows Gray to make illustrate the desolating vision he has of contemporary man.*

*Gray's personal convictions are irrelevant in that he succeeds effectively and honestly in creating a vision of contemporary humanity imperfectly striving to live meaningfully in a universe that they themselves have robbed of meaning. The bleakness of his vision will ultimately come under attack, because he portrays a world lacking awareness of God and which is, therefore, an incomplete paradigm for life. In the works discussed, the imaginative recreating of a world peopled by despairing homunculi is both provocative and evocative: we accurately perceive reality as Gray portrays it and we realise, too, in the bleakness of the vision, as if by negative contrast, the fulness of reality as it can be.*

*It has been found that the contemporary sensibility is best to be expressed in terms of the genre of comedy, but then a particular form of contemporary comedy, a form which allows contemporary playwrights, in the terms of Walter Kerr (1967) to ridicule the new pretension of mankind to being the most wretched being ever (p. 323). Modern comedy is therefore to be seen mostly as rejective of values held to before, and is therefore to a large extent an incomplete picture of created reality, but it is still revelatory, for Cary (1975) has said that "even the most pessimistic, bleak work of literature, for example, contains implicit assumptions about human experience of the world – its specificities and concreteness – and of other people as well" (p. 37).*

*Finally – the Christian critic is not a tame moralist, nor should the Christian author abstain from using the truth in an aesthetically satisfying and tasteful manner. The Christian critic is not a guardian of public morality, he is not prescriptive. He will best fulfil his calling if he points out the extent to which*

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*the literary artist has succeeded in conveying the complex and variegated nature of created reality so that the glory of God will be seen to emerge in only subtly and implicitly.*

The entire matter of Christian literary criticism is fraught with confusion and difficulties if not dangers. To many modern British critics accustomed to the fastidious detachment of Formalist criticism the idea of value judgment implied by the appellation *Christian* is positively repugnant – and rejected on the grounds of not being ‘pure criticism’. This reservation will be put into perspective in the first of the basic premises postulated below.

The essay will hinge on two basic premises. The first is admirably and concisely expressed by Elder Olson (1968). He states that the “last kind of criticism must involve extra-literary, indeed extra-artistic considerations; for it must depend upon such values as we hold in life itself”, and “to practise this kind of criticism one must be a human being of a somewhat high order” (pp. 127-128). The point to be kept in mind here is that *after* due consideration of purely aesthetic concerns, the ultimate impact of the work is to be evaluated with reference to the framework of the Christian faith.

The second basic premise to this study is a firm affirmation that the approach is a lay one from the viewpoints of both philosophy and theology. The foremost formal responsibility of the literary critic is to literary principles and practices, so that artistic merit is his first concern. This has the result that, when a work is judged to be inferior artistically speaking, it is to be rejected on those grounds already, and not even subjected to the scrutiny on the grounds of ultimate values expressed.

The approach is therefore to the Christian via the aesthetic – the sovereignty of the work of art is to be acknowledged in the sense that no prior value judgment is allowed to impede the critical process as practised by the literary critic using literary norms. Once the artistic quality and value of the work in question has been demonstrated in critical terms the evaluative function of the critic comes into play. Of course even in the consideration of artistic matters such as coherence and balance, implicitly, one recognizes the nature of the work as reflecting the coherence and balance of created reality itself, but at this stage the realization is still implicit and oblique.

One of the most popular misconceptions about the Christian approach to literary criticism resides in the concern with thematic content. Often the en-

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the idea is derogated because it is assumed that to be amenable to Christian criticism a work of art has to have an overtly Christian theme or content. This is not so by a long shot, nor is the idea that one should of necessity concur with an author's doctrinal beliefs in order to enjoy and approve of his writing. Harp (1976) has asserted that "a great writer's work contains the ring of truth; it is no more incumbent upon the Christian to look expectantly for cataphorical statements of faith in a literary work than it is for the non-Christian to guard himself tenaciously against them :we know it is not the purpose of the poet to provide them" (p. 9).

In the same vein Roper (1979) has pointed out that "Christians, however full of faith they may be, can still make bad art . . . . they may have little technical ability. On the other hand a person who does not confess the name of Christ may have a far greater appreciation of the God-given norms for artistic activity. Hence, a work of art is not good simply when we know the artist to be a Christian. It is good when we perceive it to be good" (pp. 18-19).

At this stage, a return to concrete considerations seems to be called for. Certain dramatic works established as good and successful works of literary art will be examined in some detail: afterwards their ultimate impact will be evaluated in the light of Christian belief.

In the approach to the work of literature Roper (1979) suggests a useful guide. He maintains that "an art work is an object that has been *culturally formed* by man so that it embodies an *aesthetically coherent symbolic objectivation* of an imaginative insight *into certain meaning aspects of some features of reality*" (p. 17).

The works to be discussed will be analysed loosely under the headings suggested by Roper's statement. These works are *Butley and Otherwise Engaged*, both by Simon Gray. Passing reference will be made to Peter Nichols' *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. These three plays constitute an important part of the contemporary canon of British drama and can be regarded as embodying the most prevalent concerns of writers of serious drama at the present time.

#### **AESTHETICALLY COHERENT SYMBOLIC OBJECTIVATION**

In this respect one should look at the formal aspects of the work of art. In dealing with drama, one finds that the formal aspects are those of plot, character analysis, theme, dramatic tone and dramatic language.

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In looking at a play like *Butley* from a technical point of view, one is struck immediately by its excellence. The plot is compact and well-structured, allowing the maximum dramatic impact with the minimum of confusion and obscurity. The playwright deals with terrifying clarity with the disintegrating life of a man who seems to have been denuded of all faith and hope and love. Butley, the university lecturer, is increasingly being deserted by all those nearest and dearest to him, and the playwright maps his increasing alienation with great compassion and great honesty.

Character portrayal, especially as it centres on Butley himself, is very successful. Butley emerges as a prototype of modern disillusioned man: the new pathetic anti-hero struggles with a shaving cut, and reveals his fears and weaknesses inadvertently and then savagely tries to deny them: he tries to skip all responsibility in an outrageous manner and sits at the end of the play trying to switch on the desk lamp ("feebly") three times, his whole world shattered by the desertion of wife, close colleagues and friends – all through his own doing and his loveless and forlorn view of himself and of the world.

In his pitiless clarity of vision Gray illustrates an important truth about contemporary man. He has no illusions about himself. Butley does not for a moment doubt that his own nature is vicious and unworthy: this idea drives him on to further alienating acts. He does not for a moment pause to consider and acknowledge his sharing in the goodness that is also inherent in man. His own vision, baleful and sardonic, is seen by him to be sufficient (and damning) evidence of his essentially unredeemed and unredemptive nature. (This point will be reiterated later.)

Likewise, the language of the play is highly evocative and dramatically effective: witty, revealing and elegant. One can in no way fault this language as a means for character revelation or a vehicle for the nihilistic themes so commonplace in contemporary drama. The stylized elegance of the language of contemporary drama is often in ironic counterpoint to the fragmented consciousness evoked in the play. Because of the sure linguistic touch, the tone of the play is never allowed to falter. It is ironic, unsentimental, acerbic in places, and utterly consistent.

The same characteristics may be found in *Otherwise Engaged*. In this play too language plays an important part in characterization. Simon Hench, the main character, speaks with a detached elegance, courtesy and wit, that drive

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his companions to distraction. His very detachment is a measure of his inability and unwillingness to commit himself to anyone fully. While his wife drifts away and a casual acquaintance is driven to suicide through a casual, unconsidered and intrinsically uncaring but potentially destructive remark, Simon withdraws into his shell and plays Wagner, being "otherwise engaged" when the claims on his commitment become too enveloping and onerous. Once more, in this play, one has to laud the formal aspects: the plot structure, while episodic, is also organic. The characters are memorable and consistently evoked. The tone changes from neutral to reproachful to bitter and back to an enforced neutrality, involving the spectators in a wounding spectacle of another man painfully trying, in the midst of very abrasive interrelationships, to disentangle himself and to deny his commitment to the human race – with disastrous results for more than one of them. Once more the main character, Simon Hench, has a clear-eyed, dispassionate and totally unforgiving and rejective attitude towards himself that negates all values such as love and redemption, so that the play is an incomplete paradigm of reality as the Christian perceives reality.

This same impression is gained in when one looks at the play by Peter Nichols *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. Nichols' hero is equally unwilling to accept his weaknesses in other than a fatalistic and rejective mood, negating the fullness of himself as a part of created reality, insisting on his own imperfection to the exclusion of any redeeming qualities whatever. (Cf. in this regard William Lynch's statement: ". . . the mud in man, . . . is nothing to be ashamed of. It can produce the face of God . . . . To recall this, to recall this incredible relation between mud and God, is, in its own distant, adumbrating way, the function of comedy", 1960, p. 109.)

From this brief look at the artistic merits of three representative British plays, it should emerge that each of the plays could be regarded as a work of art in terms of aesthetic principles. They are all adequate in terms of plot, language, theme, character and tone – the aesthetic demands that one imposes to determine the merit of a play.

**AN ART WORK IS CULTURALLY FORMED**

No art work can be regarded as existing outside the cultural injunction, our God-given task of exercising dominion over the creation in obedience to the will of God. To see art as existing outside this framework is idolatrous: this only means, however, that in art, reality should be symbolized in a way which

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may be considered as reflecting that which gives valid (but subtly recognised) insight into God's creation. This carries the secondary implication also that evaluation of art can never be a purely personal matter: objectivity of aesthetic judgment is necessary as a reflection of the meaningfully structured reality created by God.

Thus, in dealing with the above plays, one could maintain that whatever Gray's personal convictions may be, they are irrelevant in the sense that he succeeds effectively and honestly in evoking a segment of created reality, and sets before us a vision of contemporary humanity imperfectly striving to live meaningfully in a universe that they themselves have robbed of meaning. The bleakness of his vision will ultimately come under attack, because he portrays a world lacking awareness of God and which is, therefore, an incomplete paradigm for life, but, the reservation lies rooted not in Gray's artistic representation but in the very reality that he so accurately depicts.

### IMAGINATIVE INSIGHT

Roper warns that "because we live in the background of a culture that has defied the scientific attitude of apprehending the meaning of the creation," we may be deluded into thinking that this approach, because it is "objective," is the only valid one (1979, p. 16). He rejects this way of thinking and claims that the imaginative artistic way of looking at the variegated meaning of God's created cosmos has an equally strong validity. The imaginative way of looking and knowing is *different* but not *wrong* and helps us in more fully apprehending the integral fulness of God's creation. In the works under discussion, the imaginative recreating of a world peopled by despairing *homunculi* is both provocative and evocative: we accurately perceive reality as Gray portrays it and we realise, too, in the bleakness of the vision, as if by negative contrast, the fulness of reality as it can be. In rejecting and negating the totality of experience, in not both understanding and accepting forgiveness of perceived limitations, these characters negate the fulness available to them.

Scott has in fact taken this consideration a great deal further. He has maintained that the "Christian imagination does not shrink from the tangibility and gross concreteness of our life in time, and is not afraid to face the limited, conditioned nature of human existence" (1966, p. 115) — thus, "the Christian mind has no desire to be an angel, but, rather, . . . it persists in wallowing about in all the temporal, creatural stuff of human life, for it was in this stuff

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that God Himself became Incarnate" (p. 116). (Cf. in this respect also Lynch, quoted earlier.)

From here one can go on to another important consideration. In dramatic literature, two distinct genres exist which each deals with different angles of vision upon life. Generic distinction is thus based on a particular and usually mutually exclusive manner of looking at the complex reality constituting life. Comedy usually deals with man in his horizontal relationships: man's social interrelationships, his essential limitations and his acceptance of and adaptation to his imperfection are the themes of comedy. Tragedy, on the other hand, deals more particularly with man's vertical relationship, his awareness of and usually his revolt against a deity or deities.

In earlier ages, when beliefs were not so fragmented, when the concept of faith was not an ironic one, and a firm and stable world view was the rule rather than the exception, both comedy and tragedy acknowledged the complexity and essential orderliness of creation. Tragedy portrayed the disorder following upon man's presumption in the province of the gods (Greek) or God, a disorder followed by the inevitable elimination and destruction of prideful man and the re-establishment of order, justice and harmony.

Comedy portrayed men's foibles and weaknesses, saw man ridiculed: yet always also saw man as accepted and accepting in reasoned surrender the state of affairs induced by the humbling process of comedy. Upon the dramatic form of comedy the traditional playwright would then impress the almost ritual pattern of action leading to a marriage and thus a socially regenerative implication: the typical pattern of comedy in traditional terms can justly be regarded, in its symbolical insistence on reconciliation, as a paradigm for redemption and regeneration. However, this pattern has changed radically. In the second half of the present century, tragedy has momentarily fled, to be replaced by a broader-based and bleaker comedy as a means for translating despair. In the absence of gods tragedy makes no sense, so that the raucous voice of comedy now has to say it all.

This new vision of comedy demands some investigation. It is well exemplified in the work of Simon Gray (and other playwrights of the present time such as Nichols, Orton, Pinter, Griffiths and Stoppard). The one quality of comedy that always gave it a firmly fixed base as a true translator of the heterogeneity of created reality, the quality of forgiveness, reconciliation and thus ultimately

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redemption, has disappeared into the abyss modern man perceives as yawning terrifyingly before him, an abyss created by his loss of faith in whatever form. Contemporary man has got to the point where he is not purely terrified of the implications of the abyss or the void now but has instead come to investigate the void actively as appears from the number of plays in which man's wretchedness is uncompromisingly dissected. It is this activity which to my mind imparts to contemporary comedy the peculiar lack of grace and redemptiveness that is its strongest distinguishing characteristic. The characters created by Gray and others revel in their misery; so that Walter Kerr (1967) has been prompted to observe that man's claim to being the most wretched being ever has become the new pretension to be ridiculed in comedy (p. 323). In this respect Scott (1966) has spoken of a recoil into sensibility (such as is experienced in art based on existentialist premises): an attitude that denies much of the fulness of created reality.

While we then criticize this on the one hand as an incomplete picture of reality as envisioned by God (man's lack of redemptive forgiveness of self and others is hard to accept within the context of God's ultimately forgiving attitude), there is still the point made by Cary (1975) that "even the most pessimistic, bleak work of literature, for example, contains implicit assumptions about human experience of the world — its specificities and concreteness — and of other people as well" (p. 37).

Thus, while one has to concede that in contemporary drama (where comedy is for the moment the reigning genre) the rejective mood predominates and gives an incomplete picture of created reality, it still reveals a great deal and for that reason would still be regarded as important to art even by the outspokenly Christian critic.

In summing up the approach advocated in broad outline here, then, one can make the following observations.

The themes of contemporary comic drama would seem to include a fascination with the abyss, the void. This is rejective in Christian terms. Yet the reality portrayed by the playwright is recreated as a coherent and balanced structure. From this then emerges the realization that the characters and not the author himself hold the distorted and incomplete view, characterized by T.S.



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Eliot in these lines from his poem *East Coker*; a desperate vision of the plight literary art has come to, being a desperate

“ . . . raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating,  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion.”

The critic can now criticize the view held by the characters but cannot deny its reality nor its artistically valid representation. Here the extra-literary concerns that Olson spoke of come into play, for the Christian critic knows of the Biblical injunction that God made the whole of creation, and in Genesis is reported as looking at the work of his hands and finding it good: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Modern man, however, as he is portrayed so clearly by a writer like Gray, has suggested for himself that the transiency and fragmentariness are in themselves evil (Scott, 1966, p. 111), in a move explicitly against the view held by Niebuhr (1943) when he maintains that “the fragmentary character of human life is not regarded as evil in Biblical faith because it is seen from the perspective of a centre of life and meaning in which each fragment is related to the plan of the whole, to the will of God. The evil arises when the fragment seeks by its own wisdom to comprehend the whole or attempts by its own power to realize it” (p. 168).

Thus the idea to be criticized within the broader Christian context is that man should not deny his rootedness in the complex and variegated creation of God — he should rather be truly and humbly accepting and conciliatory, whereas the modern dramatic hero seems to be resolutely rejective and to be seeking sustenance in the sort of despairingly heroic and dignified stance made popular by the works of Sartre and Camus.

In closing then, Roper's final cautionary words would be quoted. He says unequivocally that the scriptures do not hide the hideous sins of David — “described as a man after the Lord's own heart” (p. 21). These acts are not condoned either, but recorded simply as symptoms of the Fall. The Bible deals very explicitly indeed with issues such as prostitution, drunkenness, adultery and idolatry, because those issues form part of the true lives of men. The Christian critic is *not* a tame moralist, nor does the Christian author abstain from using the truth in a aesthetically satisfying and tasteful manner. “Christian art should steer clear of depicting virtue and vice in moralistic terms. It should take care to show both that even the best and most goodly men have foibles and weak-

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nesses and even the worst man have touches of tenderness and nobility. Moreover, it should witness to the fact that the Great Drama of Life that forms the background to the lives of us all is one in which the kingdoms of Christ and Satan wage mortal combat over the whole created order" (1979, p. 21).

The Christian critic is not a guardian of public morality if that idea is to be taken to mean that he is going to prescribe what may and what may not be read. This unfairly circumscribes and limits the function of the Christian critic of literature. He will best fulfil his calling if he points out the extent complex and variegated nature of created reality so that the glory of God will be seen to emerge if only implicitly and subtly. His particular point of view will be operative in the final evaluation, but will be a reasoned consideration and not an emotional and sentimentally motivated rejection based on an idealized and romanticised concept of what is included in the created reality.

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