

PETER SHAFFER'S QUEST FOR FAITH

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Peter Shaffer seems to have gone out of his way to escape being labeled. Each of his plays has worked out its themes within a completely different genre from the preceding one; his works include a well-made play (Five Finger Exercise), a pair of light comedies (The Private Ear, The Public Eye), an epic (The Royal Hunt of the Sun), a farce (Black Comedy), what may be loosely described as a psycho-drama (Equus), and a Shavian style drama of ideas (Shrivings). At no point in his career have critics been able to place him within the general trend of modern British drama, and consequently they have largely ignored his work. In slighting Shaffer's plays, however, critics are also ignoring an issue which is central to the dilemma of twentieth century civilization: how can we spiritually compensate for the God which we have destroyed?

Shaffer refuses to conform to the tradition of anti-tradition, that revolt against theatrical convention which was heralded by John Osborne's Look Back in Anger in 1956. The playwrights associated with this revolution--Wesker, Arden, Pinter, the writers involved with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop--have abandoned conventional forms in an attempt to bring a new vitality to the theatre. In expressing himself via traditional dramatic forms, Shaffer has exposed himself to the charge of being a throwback to the tame pre-war drama of Coward and Rattigan.¹

Beneath these accusations lies an implicit assumption that if one is to be original, he must completely abandon traditional forms of expression. However, the most skillful writers of the past--

Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Dryden--have illustrated that rather than stifling the creative impulse, the adherence to conventional form can channel one's energies into a forceful expression of the sublime. Like these masters, Shaffer is a very deliberate craftsman who uses all of the conventions associated with a certain genre to produce a work which is both unique and powerful. In an interview following the opening of Five Finger Exercise, he stated, "...as the man said there are many tunes yet to be written in C major. And there are many plays yet to be written in a living room...."² Through these "living room" plays, Shaffer has explored crucial issues which the "bed room" playwrights have left untouched.

Shaffer's devotion to the craft of playwrighting has exposed him to yet another objection to his style. John Russell Taylor, who has taken the most critical interest in Shaffer to date, has commented on the impersonal tone of his plays. While Taylor does not actually reprimand him for this, he clearly considers it an eccentricity which tends to weaken the impact of his plays: "Five Finger Exercise is immensely clever, extremely well written, and completely theartical in the best possible sense of the term. It is also quite impersonal, almost as though the author has felt it his duty to keep himself entirely out of the picture. This is not necessarily a bad thing--most authors err in the other direction--but it is disconcerting."³

Those objections to Shaffer's art as conventional and impersonal were both countered nearly forty years before they had been formulated by a man totally immersed in the literature and art of western civilization. T.S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual

Talent," observed that we "insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors . . . Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously . . ."4 Eliot goes on to define the task of the artist as the refinement of that which has gone before him; he cannot simply ignore the generations of artists which have preceded him, for ". . . no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (p. 15). The artist's mind is compared to a catalyst, which remains unchanged, though its presence causes a significant change in the composition of the matter to which it is exposed. Thus ". . . the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (pp. 19-20).

It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that if Shaffer has not been directly influenced by Eliot's views, he at least concurs with them. If so, he must take Eliot, one of the most prominent of the "dead poets," into account. The poet had articulated

the sense of numbness, of deadness, which has settled like a veil over modern civilization; one has no faith, no hope of salvation, of rescue from the eternal boredom of existence. Eliot had defined the problem, but could at best only partially resolve it through the consolation of religion. Shaffer in his turn has undertaken the quest for new alternatives.

II

In many of Shaffer's plays, a pattern emerges which is strikingly similar to the mythical substructure of Eliot's The Waste Land. Since its publication in 1922, this poem has elicited a landslide of critical attention, and much of this attention has been focused upon the poet's use of myth. In order to establish the existence of similarities between the two men, it will be necessary to review what is commonly accepted as the mythical base of Eliot's poem.

The central metaphor of The Waste Land is based primarily upon the various fertility myths surrounding the quest for the holy grail, as discussed in Jesse Weston's study, From Ritual to Romance. The myth generally involves an archetypal figure, the Fisher King, who is suffering from old age or from a wound, either of which causes sexual impotence. Because of this infirmity, his dominion has ceased to reproduce, and has become a barren waste land. The questing knight, by inquiring into the nature of the grail and the lance, unknowingly has the power to restore the Fisher King's youth and vitality, and thus restore his kingdom to verdure. Eliot has translated this legendary waste land into a metaphorical one, and has applied it to the twentieth century.

The primary characteristic of this waste land is the absence of a god and thus of the order that a god insures. With no source of spiritual fortitude, the inhabitants can perceive only chaotic turbulence about them. This is reinforced by the jamming together of images and the intermingling of ideas. Without purpose, human beings have become automatons, mechanically repeating their daily rituals out of force of habit, as if habit itself could impose some order upon their lives:

The hot water at ten
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock
upon the door.⁵

(ll. 135-38)

Consequently, these automatons are incapable of passion. It is safer to suppress emotion than to commit oneself to it. The crowd crossing London Bridge and pushing into the city becomes the procession of the dead to Dante's hell: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (l. 63) is taken directly from the Inferno. Like the souls which Dante had seen just outside the gates of hell, these husks of men live a tepid existence "without disgrace and without praise." It is this type of timid existence which Eliot later condemned in his essay on Baudelaire: "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: At least, we exist" (p. 429).

Eliot depicts a world badly in need of regeneration, and yet, paradoxically, one which resists any suggestion of rebirth. "April is the cruellest month" because the regeneration which it promises is intense and painful, whereas "Winter kept us warm, covering/Earth in a forgetful snow . . ." (ll. 1-6). These mysteries which at one time had formed the core of life have degenerated into shrivelled and meaningless forms. Religion has been reduced to the stature of magician's trick:

There is shadow under this red rock
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(ll. 25-30)

Similarly, culture has become degraded ("O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag-"), and sex generates only indifference:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths er hair with automatic hand
And puts a record on the gramophone."

(ll. 253-56)

Within the bound of this sterile land, the narrator is engaged in a metaphysical quest; he is repeatedly associated with the symbolic act of fishing, which signifies the quest for eternity and salvation.⁶ This quest carries the narrator throughout

the land, where he finds little but desolation and darkness. His efforts are finally rewarded with partial success: the waters are freed, promising at least partial regeneration of nature. The poem ends with the three-fold message of the thunder, which Eliot translates as "give, sympathize, control," followed by the Hindu benediction roughly equivalent to "The Peace that passeth understanding." Thus to Eliot's mind, if we are to regain our souls, if we are to find a purpose for our existence, we must first learn to be charitable, compassionate, and temperate; and we must hold to these qualities in and for themselves, without hope of personal gain.

Several of Shaffer's plays--The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Equus, and Shrivings--appear to follow a pattern similar to that of The Waste Land. Each of these plays revolves around a spiritually restless figure who is engaged in a metaphysical quest. In Equus and Shrivings the quest is purely figurative, a mental wrestling match; in The Royal Hunt of the Sun it is literal as well, the physical quest reflecting the search for a soul. The protagonist of each of these plays, like Eliot's narrator, resembles the questing knight of the grail legends: surrounded by a spiritual waste land, he continues the quest for a reason to live. Eliot in The Waste Land had pointed out the discrepancy between science and the supernatural, between the inherent cynicism of the modern mind and the universal need to believe that there is a purpose to life beyond suffering and death. Shaffer in his plays seeks to resolve that discrepancy dramatically by pitting cynicism against faith. The resolution which he achieves is not always convincing or complete:

Eliot similarly could not supply a totally satisfactory answer to such an intricate problem. However, as in the myths surrounding the quest for the grail, the revival of the spirit depends not so much upon receiving an answer as it does upon asking the proper question; regeneration is achieved not because one has found what he was seeking, but because he has had the courage to seek it.

III

The Royal Hunt of the Sun deals ostensibly with the conquest of Peru by the Spanish. At the core of the play, however, is the relationship between Pizarro, the aging and cynical conquistador, and Atahualpa, the youthful and naive god. In Shaffer's words, "The play is about the relationship, intense, involved, and obscure, between these two men, one of whom is the other's prisoner: they are so different, and yet in many ways--they are both bastards, both usurpers, both unscrupulous men of action, both illiterate--they are mirror images of each other. And the theme which lies behind their relationship is the search for God--that is why it is called the Royal Hunt of the sun--the search for a definition of the idea of God. In fact the play is an attempt to define the concept of God . . ."⁷

Pizarro's quest is both physical and metaphysical. Outwardly, it is a search for wealth and fame, the solid worldly comforts which would partially compensate for his spiritual numbness. Pizarro is one of the "hollow men:" he possesses too much insight either to swallow the Spanish concept of god, with all its inconsistencies,

or to deny the existence of god altogether. He is able to see through the trappings of church and state to the fraud which is at their core. As he tells Martin in Act I, "Men cannot just stand as men in this world. It's too big for them and they grow scared. So they build themselves shelters against the bigness, do you see? They call the shelters Court, Army, Church. They're useful against loneliness, Martin, but they're not true. They're not real, Martin."⁸ Unable to believe in a Christian god who condones suffering and injustice, Pizarro chooses instead to seek eternity through personal fame.

Underlying this physical quest, however, is an unconscious but profound yearning to fill that spiritual void, which transforms the quest for fame into a quest for metaphysical alternatives. Pizarro becomes a courageous figure because he seeks not spiritual comfort but truth. Rather than clinging to his faith and ignoring or attempting to explain away its inconsistencies, he chooses the more painful route of living with emptiness, while continuing to seek a more truthful vision. Perhaps that vision would be found in Peru. He confesses as much to de Soto: "When I began to think of a world here, something in me was longing for a new place like a country after rain, washed clear of all the badges and barriers, the pebbles men drop to tell them where they are on a plain that's got no landmarks" (1.x.31).

Pizarro seeks eternity: he wishes to escape the temporal framework in which he is imprisoned. He needs a "Grecian urn" to

cling to: "Everything we feel is made of Time. All the beauties of life are shaped by it. Imagine a fixed sunset: the last note of a song that hung an hour, or a kiss for half of it. Try and halt a moment in our lives and it becomes maggoty at once . . . but that's the awful trap of life. You can't escape maggots unless you go with Time, and if you go, they wriggle in you anyway" (I.x.31). As he reaches the land of the Incas, he realizes that this civilization offers an alternative to the Christian means of escaping time. The Spain which he has left behind him, ruled by a Christian god, was the epitome of injustice and corruption; Peru, governed by Atahualpa, is a model civilization, in which there is no hunger, no inequality, and no unhappiness. The god who reigns in Peru is immanent, the source of all life, the sun, whereas the Christian god is transcendent, indifferent to life, a threatening shadow. Pizarro, though remaining cynical, is irresistibly drawn to this vital god: "When I was young," he tells de Soto, "I used to sit on the slope outside the village and watch the sun go down, and I used to think: if only I could find the place where it sinks to rest for the night, I'd find the source of life, like the beginning of a river . . . If it settled here each evening, somewhere in those great mountains, like a God laid down to sleep? . . . like the coming of something eternal, against going flesh. What a fantastic wonder that anyone on earth should dare to say: 'That's my father. My father: the sun! It's silly--but tremendous . . .'" (I.x.32-33).

Thus, if Pizarro physically conquers Peru and Atahualpa, the Inca overcomes the Spaniard metaphysically: the god conquers the

atheist. Atahualpa, as Shaffer says, is the mirror-image of Pizarro. He represents that part of Pizarro which needs to believe, that part which the soldier had thought to amputate long ago, that part which denoted hope. Atahualpa firmly believes in his godhead and in his father, the sun. And through this conviction he gradually overcomes the skepticism of Pizarro, and rekindles the hope which the Spaniard had thought was gone forever: "It's the only way to give life meaning! To blast out of time and live forever, us, in our own persons. This is the law: die in despair or be a God yourself! . . . look at him: always so calm as if the teeth of life never bit him . . . or the teeth of death. What if it was really true, Martin? That I've gone God-hunting and caught one. A being who can renew his life over and over?" (II.xi.75).

Atahualpa resembles the Fisher King in that he is the source of vitality for the paradise over which he rules. When he is captured by the Spanish, he is no longer able to supply this vitality. The perfectly tuned social mechanism of the Incas grinds to a halt: "That night," Martin remembers, "as I knelt vomiting into a canal, the empire of the Incas stopped. The spring of the clock was snapped. For a thousand miles men sat down not knowing what to do" (II.i.40). The crops are not tended, all normal functions cease, and the greed, corruption, and hypocrisy of the Spanish begin to creep across the land. Pizarro is the questing knight in the midst of this potential waste land. He searches for the key which will free the waters and cause regeneration. He is partially successful, for he asks the essential questions, thus causing regeneration within himself.

Ultimately, however, he fails. Atahualpa is not restored to life, nor does his kingdom ever again become the paradise which it had been. Pizarro has imposed spiritual pollution upon Peru in the form of clergy, statesmen, and adventurers, who rather than recognizing the superiority of the Inca civilization, insist upon dragging it down to their own level of experience.

There is consolation for Pizarro, just as there is for Eliot's narrator; and in each case this consolation springs from the same source--humanity. It lies in those intangible values which we ourselves create, whether or not the gods in which we believe actually exist: "The sky sees nothing, but you saw. Is there comfort there? The sky knows no feeling, but we know them, that's sure. Martin's hope, and de Soto's honour, and your trust--your trust which hunted me: we alone make these. That's some marvel, surely. To make water in a sand world: surely, surely . . ." (II.xii.79-80). To obtain these values, however, it is necessary to undertake the quest. They can never be gained through skeptical sloth. To experience bliss, one must expose himself to pain and disappointment, as Old Martin's final benediction clearly indicates: "General you did for me, and now I've done for you. And there's no joy in that. Or in anything now. But then there's no joy in the world could match for me what I had when I first went with you across the water to find the gold country. And no pain like losing it. Save you all" (II.vii.80-81).

IV

The appeal of The Royal Hunt of the Sun is primarily intellectual; rather than drawing its audience into emotional involvement, it presents them with a debate. In Equus, however, by blending naturalistic investigative dialogue with "total theatre" techniques such as pantomime and choral effects, Shaffer has achieved a delicate balance between mind and feeling which had previously been missing. If, like Dysart, we seek to understand Alan's experience intellectually, in terms of the fusion of apparently unrelated phenomena, we also experience Alan's flight through the "field of Ha-ha" in all of its emotional intensity. Equus obliterates the charge that Shaffer's plays are too impersonal; the author of this play is a man who feels as well as thinks.

The world of Equus is spiritually desolate; it is a world of concrete and plastic, where nature is disfigured, and the only true god is the "normal." Dysart, the psychiatrist, is the high priest of this god, as he suggests to the audience in Act I: "That night, I had this very explicit dream. In it I'm a chief priest in Homeric Greece . . . I'm officiating at some immensely important ritual sacrifice, on which depends the fate of the crops or of a military expedition. The sacrifice is a herd of children: about five hundred boys and girls."⁹

However Dysart, like Pizarro, cannot unquestioningly accept this role: he is too intelligent to deceive himself, and too courageous to relax into complacent cynicism: "I've started to feel distinctly nauseous. And with each victim, it's getting worse. My face is going green behind the mask. Of course, I redouble my efforts

to look professional--cutting and snipping for all I'm worth: mainly because I know that if ever those two assistants so much as glimpse my distress--and the implied doubt that this repetitive and smelly work is doing any social good at all--I will be the next across the stone" (I.v.24). Dysart's professional function is to restore the order of things, so that the society which he serves can function normally. The "normal" is a painless, routine existence, in which each moment, hour, and day is identical to the next. Where pain exists, it is Dysart's duty to remove it. However, pain is requisite to passion; as he explains to Hesther, "to go through life and call it yours--your life--you first have to get your own pain. Pain that's unique to you. You can't just kip into the common bin and say 'That's enough! . . . He's done that. All right, he's sick. He's full of misery and fear. He was dangerous, and could be again, though I doubt it. But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life" (II.xxv.80).

Dysart, too, would like to gallop. He would like to break free from the limitation of normality, but the chains holding him in place are too strong: "I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling. All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only suspect is there. I can't see it, because my educated, average head is being held at the wrong angle" (I.i.18). Dysart looks to the Greeks, and would pattern his theology after theirs: "Look! Life is only comprehensible through a thousand local Gods. And not just the old dead ones with names like Zeus--no, but living Geniuses of Place and

Person! . . . Worship as many as you can see--and more will appear!'"

(I.xviii.61). And yet his faith is sterile, purely intellectual; his devotion to the "normal" has robbed him of the ability to feel: "Some pagan! Such wild returns I make to the womb of civilization. Three weeks a year in the Peleponnese, every bed booked in advance, every meal paid for by vouchers, cautious jaunts in hired Fiats, suitcase crammed with Kao-Pectate! Such a fantastic surrender to the primitive . . . And while I sit there, baiting a poor unimaginative woman with the word, that freaky boy tries to conjure the reality! I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos--and outside my window he is trying to become one, in a Hampshire field!" (II.xxv.81). Like the automatons of The Waste Land, Dysart lives a tepid existence which encompasses neither pain nor passion.

Within this sterile world devoted to the normal, Alan Strang is a freak. He is a freak because he has a soul, and he has a soul because he has experienced both intense pain and intense passion. Yet this has not come about because of some unique characteristic of his personality, but rather because of the fusion of a random set of circumstances. His early experience with the horse on the beach, the story of Prince, the substitution of the picture of a horse for a picture of Christ--these and other seemingly chance occurrences have coincided to create a firm chain of association in Alan's mind. What frustrates Dysart is that he is unable to explain away the force which causes that fusion: "A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in their power to enslave. It sniffs--it sucks--it strokes its eyes over the whole uncomfortable range. Suddenly one strikes. Why? Moments snap together like magnets,

forming a chain of shackles. Why? . . . These questions, these Whys, are fundamental--yet they have no place in a consulting room. So then do I? . . . This is the feeling more and more with me--No place. Displacement . . . 'Account for me,' says staring Equus. 'First account for Me! . . .'" (II.xxii.75).

If Dysart is similar to Pizarro in his dedication to truth and in his courage in pursuit of that truth, Alan is in many ways similar to Atahualpa. He exhibits unshakable faith in god. His god may not be acceptable conventionally, but he transcends the "normal" through his belief. The sun, the horse--these are both examples of Dysart's "thousand local deities:" They are palpable aspects of nature, as opposed to the invisible godheads of Christ and "normal." Pizarro, unable to extricate himself from his cultural background, had brought about the collapse of the Inca religion. Dysart, likewise chained to the social norms of his milieu, must rob Alan of his passion: "I'll give him the good Normal world where we're tethered beside them--blinking our nights away in a non-stop drench of cathode-ray over our shrivelling heads!" (II.xxxv.105). He will remove Alan's vital passion and replace it with the synthetic joys which are acceptable in this world. "Hopefully, he'll feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh. I doubt, however, with much passion! . . . Passion! . . . Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created" (II.xxxv,106).

Like Pizarro, the good doctor is ultimately frustrated. He has, however, willingly placed himself in a dilemma from which he can find no escape, for he has chosen to ask the essential and finally unanswerable question: "What force controls our lives so that things

happen in the way that they do?" In this question he has discovered his own unique kind of pain, the pain which is necessary before one can discover passion. And rather than stifling this pain, he chooses to endure it:

And now for me it never stops: that voice of
Equus out of the cave--'Why Me? . . . Why Me? . . .
Account for Me! . . . All right--I surrender! I say
it! . . . In an ultimate sense I cannot know what
I do in this place--yet I do essential things.
Irreversible, terminal things. I stand in the
dark with a pick in my hand, striking at heads!
. . . I need--more desperately than my children
need me--a way of seeing in the dark. What way
is this? . . . What dark is this? . . . I cannot
call it ordained of God: I can't get that far.
I will, however, pay it so much homage. There
is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it
never comes out.

A long pause.

Dysart sits staring.

BLACKOUT

(II.xxxv.106)

V

The original production of Shrivings (then The Battle of Shrivings) was a miserable theatrical failure. It is generally agreed that it failed primarily because of its ponderous rhetoric, coupled

with a corresponding lack of physical action.¹⁰ However, its discursive nature makes it Shaffer's most explicit dramatic statement. Shrivings is Shavian in tone; it seems to have been written to be read as well as performed, the issues are clearly defined, and the characters argue these issues out rather than acting them out. Since its failure on stage in 1970, Shaffer has made extensive changes in the script, but he has not significantly changed its rhetorical base. He states in the preface, " . . . in this one I wanted the electricity to be sparked almost exclusively from the spoken words-- . . . My dissatisfaction with the piece, therefore, had nothing to do with its rhetoric, which if anything I wanted to extend. I desired only to make the play more purely itself" (pp. 111-12). The fact that the new version of the play has yet to be produced reinforces the idea that in this play Shaffer was less concerned with commercial success than with the explicit statement of ideas.

Shrivings is a house of retreat. It had formerly been a stronghold of Christianity, a house of confession and repentance; it is now a stronghold of modern humanism, the headquarters of the World League of Peace, and the home of its president, Sir Gideon Petrie. The structure of Christianity has collapsed; the Christian god is impotent. But upon the ruins of that structure Gideon has erected a new faith, which he sees as mankind's only hope for survival. That faith is a belief in the improbability of man through reason. For the sake of spiritual evolution, Gideon would cast off man's animal instincts: "'We know more and more about our aggressions: We can't ever hope to remove them by reason alone: but if we don't

make the attempt, not merely to concentrate their fury on to everlessening objects, but absolutely to starve them to death, we are doomed. Let me simplify it for you the point of a crazy imperative. The Drug Children of today cry: "Unite with Nature!" I say: Resist her. Spit out the anger in your daddy's sperm! The bile in your mother's milk! The more you starve out aggression, the more you will begin yourselves!" (I.ii.148). Gideon's aim is a noble one: universal peace. But the realization of that aim involves sacrificing those very emotions which make life worth living. The problem is very concisely stated in Shaffer's preface: " . . . an absolute non-aggressive position seems unattainable by Man without tangible loss of warmth and cherishable humanity--(what warm man will spare the Ruffian With the Pistol threatening his beloved?)--and yet a relative, 'human' attitude which permits retaliating under extreme provocation inescapably leads to horrors unenvisioned and unintended at the start of it: witness Hiroshima as the end of the Second World War" (pp. 113-14).

Into Gideon's idealistic world of peace and harmony rushes Mark Askelon, the "Ruffian With the Pistol." Mark would like to accept Gideon's faith, for, like Shaffer's other cynics, he needs to fill the spiritual void within him. However his experience tells him that man's condition is not improvable, but inalterable. Emotion will inevitably overcome reason, just as spring inevitably follows winter. And the pollen that heralds the arrival of spring signifies to Mark the inevitable resurgence of the animal instincts of man:

MARK: The dust. It seeks converts . . . Do
you know how long it took me to fall finally
from your faith? The time it takes vomit
to slide down a wall. Now I know--and have
to make others know.

GIDEON: What do you know?

MARK: That the Gospel According to Saint
Gideon is a lie. That we as men cannot alter
for the better in any particular that matters.
That we are totally and forever unimproveable.

GIDEON: No.

MARK: We will kill forever. We will persecute
forever. We will break our lust forever on
enemies we invent for the purpose.

GIDEON: No.

MARK: We are made of hostility as the spring
is made of pollen. And each birth renews
it, as the spring renews the year.

GIDEON: No.

(I.ii.156)

Mark represents the questing figure in Shrivings. He desperately wishes to believe that there is something to life beyond suffering and death, but he has been able to find nothing which will stand the test. As a result, his life is spiritually sterile; he possesses intellect, but no joy. As he explains to Lois, "the only music I ever heard was words, and the clear thought of Gideon Petrie. When I yoked them, I became your admired Poet.

I slew Generals. I drowned Presidents in spit. The insane Popes! The Rabbis of Repression! Oh, they kept me going for years, good hates--the scapegoats for myself. The only thing was, they ran out. Even atheism itself ran out, the moment I felt one poem as an act of worship. The next second--when I realized how worship demands the Present--then hell began. I was no longer a Revolutionary Poet. I was a self-ordained priest without a faith" (II.ii.190). Mark's cynicism has destroyed his wife and his poetry, and now he turns it against Gideon.

Of all of Shaffer's characters, Gideon most clearly resembles the Fisher King. Shrivings is his castle. Formerly a center of Christianity, it had bestowed fertility upon the land. It is now a center of reason, a new type of faith; the throne which David fashions for Gideon is the throne of reason. However, Gideon is old, and his faith, like his life, is sterile, as reflected by his vow of chastity. Mark, through asking the proper questions, has the power to inject new life into this world. His seduction of Lois is a symbolic sacrifice of the virgin which restores fertility to the house, and spiritual vitality to the waste land surrounding it.

The resolution of Shrivings, as in the other plays, is only partial. It embodies a compromise between reason and instinct, between spirit and flesh. When Gideon strikes Lois, a former disciple whom Mark has converted to cynicism, he wavers in his faith, for he realizes that man is not perfectable. Yet if man were perfect, he would no longer be human and thus capable of feeling. Mark has by the final curtain accepted Gideon's hope. When Mark mercilessly

recounts how he had destroyed David's mother's will to live, David raises a clenched hand to strike his father, but instead he embraces him. This reconciliation with David proves to him that reason can control emotion. And Gideon has passed Mark's test as well, for he does not drive Mark away from Shrivings. The reversal of positions at the end of the play is not just cynical irony; rather it represents the ability of each man to understand both sides of the question. Each of them has shriven the other, thus rescuing him from his own fanaticism.

Shrivings shows us that though man can never entirely overcome his inherent weaknesses, he must maintain the struggle against them. The final vision of human nature which Shaffer presents is a synthesis of the higher and lower parts of our being. To live wholly, we must opt to apply ourselves to acts of creation rather than acts of destruction, to acts of love rather than acts of hate. Eliot had implied as much in the final section of The Waste Land, and Shaffer restates it dramatically in the final scene of Shrivings:

MARK: Here! This. This tool for making.

A killer's hand. It's all you've got . . .

Take it.

Gideon ignores it, staring straight ahead.

What will it do without you? Squeeze some
more napalm out of my cock? Drive some
more Red tanks over dreaming heads? . . .

Don't leave me with this God's hand, Giddy.

. . . Have you no word for me? No word at all?

GIDEON: Dust:

Appalled, Mark sits down at the table.

He takes up a spoon. He dips it in the
soup, and presents it to Gideon.

MARK: Peace!

Gideon sits rigid . . .

A long pause

Then, very slowly, Gideon begins to lower
his head to the spoon held before him.

He does not look at Mark. He opens his
mouth, and drinks.

The light fades.

(III.i.211)

VI

Shaffer is not among the majority of contemporary artists whose primary aim is commercial success and personal gratification. Rather, he is one of the few who insists upon preserving intellectual and artistic integrity. While he is available upon request for interviews concerning his work, he is basically a private individual who allows his plays to speak for themselves. Within the conventional framework of his plays, he asks the complex questions which tap the roots of life: what is man? Why does he exist? He approaches these questions in a sincere and humble manner, and he does not pretend to be able to answer them fully or irrevocably. But he does attempt to put a few pieces of the universal puzzle together.

These few pieces deal with those moments when life somehow seems to be worth living. They are moments of intense emotional revelations in the midst of tepid existence. Pizarro's encounter with Atahualpa, Dysart's treatment of Alan, Mark's struggle with Gideon--out of all of these arises the realization that hope still exists, that man, if he is willing to struggle and endure pain, is yet able to transcend the barrenness surrounding him. Salvation does not depend upon the object of faith, but in the experience of that faith itself. And faith can only be achieved through a combination of intellectual courage and emotional fortitude.

For Shaffer there can be no salvation through the Christian cosmic conception in which Eliot eventually found relief. The inherent contradiction of a benevolent creator who condones misery and suffering is spelled out very clearly in The Royal Hunt of the Sun. Equally unacceptable are Dysart's local deities, Alan's fantastic demon-god, or Pizarro's sun god, merely because they are incapable of sustaining faith. The faith in humanity which Gideon and Mark finally arrive at appears to be Shaffer's only plausible alternative. It is a faith which must involve both mind and feeling, for neither of these may stand alone. The good in man, the instinct toward creation, ultimately outweighs the evil, the instinct toward destruction. This is the one factor in which we may place our faith, and by doing so attain the spiritual regeneration which we so desperately need.

Shaffer's optimism isolates him from the majority of contemporary playwrights who dwell primarily upon despair. Rather than

presenting a simplistic vision of goodness and light which ignores evil and darkness, he delves into that evil, that suffering and pain, and points out the vitality which arises out of it. It is only by experiencing evil that we can know goodness, it is only by feeling pain that we can feel passion, and it is only by running the gauntlet of skepticism that we can know true faith. Shaffer chooses to forge his own path through the waste land, combatting hypocrisy, aggression, and aimlessness in his own unique way. And as he carves this path he is guided by a single speck of light amidst the darkness: an unwavering faith in the human condition.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a more extensive account of the critical reactions to Shaffer's plays, see Charles A. Pennel, "The Plays of Peter Shaffer: Experiment in Convention," Kansas Quarterly, 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1971), 100-09.

2. Barry Pree, "Peter Shaffer Interviewed by Barry Pree," Transatlantic Review, 14 (Autumn, 1963), 62-65.

3. John Russell Taylor, Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 275.

4. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Selected Essays, 3rd ed. (1951; rpt. London: Faber, 1972), p. 14. All subsequent parenthetical references are to this edition of Eliot's essays.

5. T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land (London: Liveright, 1922), rpt. in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M.H. Abrams, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1968), II, 1781-97. All subsequent parenthetical references are to this edition.

6. See Jesse L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (1920: rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1941), pp. 107-29 for more extensive treatment of the symbolism involved in fishing and the Fisher King.

7. John Russell Taylor, "Shaffer and the Incas: John Russell Taylor Interviews Peter Shaffer," Plays and Players, April 1964, 12.

8. Peter Shaffer, The Royal Hunt of the Sun: A Play Concerning the Conquest of Peru (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964).

9. Peter Shaffer, Equus and Shrivings: Two Plays by Peter Shaffer (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 24. All subsequent parenthetical references to either of these plays are to this edition.

10. John Elsom, "SHAFFER, Peter (Levin)," Contemporary Dramatists, ed. James Vinson (London: St. James Press, 1973), pp. 687-90, states that Shrivings fails because the language "becomes too conscious, too literary, and a little sententious . . ."

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PETER SHAFFER'S QUEST FOR FAITH

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Peter Shaffer's Quest for Faith

Shaffer's plays are conventional in form and impersonal in tone, and as such they coincide with Eliot's views as expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." If Shaffer shares Eliot's views, he must take Eliot, one of the most prominent of the "dead poets," into account. He does so by renewing the quest for spiritual regeneration which Eliot had undertaken in The Waste Land. He attempts to resolve the discrepancy between science and the supernatural by pitting cynicism against faith. In The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Pizarro struggles to cast off his cynicism and believe in Atahualpa. Ultimately he fails, but is ennobled for having the courage to undertake the quest. Dysart in Equus envies the passion which Alan feels for his god, a passion which can only exist because of suffering. In removing Alan's pain, he must also remove this vital passion. By facing squarely the consequences of his action, Dysart develops his own unique kind of pain, and thus the potential for revitalization. In Shrivings, Mark would like to accept Gideon's optimistic belief in man's potential, but he must first put it to a rigorous test. Gideon's altruism cracks under the strain, but Mark's cynicism does as well. Each man shrives the other, and the resolution involves an integration of the higher and lower parts of our beings. Each play indicates that man is yet able to transcend the spiritual barrenness surrounding him if he is willing to suffer and endure pain.