Gene A. Barnett

THE THEATRE OF ROBERT BOLT

Robert Bolt, author of *A Man For All Seasons,* once stated in an interview that he was "a committed man, but . . . not a committed playwright."[1] He seemed to imply that an artist of stature and integrity could lead two lives. Actually he was admitting that a writer as citizen might take a stand on a major public issue, but that his job as dramatist was to "illuminate a theme", not to offer solutions. Bolt admitted further that he "did not work on a play with only one part of his mind or being", but wrote as "a complete man", and so would be "much surprised if his values and attitudes were not discovered in the fabric of his work." We thus have his description of himself as a "committed man" and an acknowledgment that the artist cannot be separated from the citizen.

Bolt's public commitments are not difficult to sum up. He is a member of the highly militant Committee of 100, a group participating in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and headed by Bertrand Russell. He is an exponent of civil disobedience and an outspoken critic of atomic weapons. "It seems we can do anything we want now", he has written. "What we want is all that now concerns us", and "At the moment it seems that what we want is mutual death."[2] Since his concern has a universal implication, the committed playwright takes over from the committed man, for Bolt does not confine himself in his dramas to the political aspects of the Bomb, but confronts the spiritual predicament behind it. The alarming vision of a faithless, irresponsible humanity and an "absurd", meaningless universe places him in the spiritual dilemma common now to much of mankind. As Bolt sees it, this dilemma involves a choice for the individual: to confront this threatening new era by attempting to return to the values implied in the term "Christian tradition", or to embrace a "valueless universe, an absolute and outright existential position. . . ."[3] It is Bolt's determination to examine honestly this very personal yet universal dilemma which allows him to state that he is not a "committed playwright." As a "committed man", however, he investigates man's ability to survive with integrity in the world that he has made.

This dilemma in which man is seemingly forced to choose between the tradition of Christianity and an existential stance quite opposite in its values has placed many people in a hypocritical position. Attempting to stay safely within the aura of Christianity and shunning an avowal of meaninglessness, they have found themselves adhering to an empty Christian tradition. It is empty because underlying beliefs and values are maintained through the dogma, the tradition itself, and not through a Christian ethic. For Bolt, this ethic means a belief that Christ was God, "or the incarnation of God or the son of God, or that he was crucified, died and rose from the dead. This if one believes it, is, at least to my mind, what really makes a Christian distinct from somebody who is mushily going along with something he vaguely thinks of as Christian."[3] A subscription to Christian ethic without a belief in the Christian dogma, or "to subscribe to Christian values and to behave otherwise", is, for Bolt, a basic twentieth-century hypocrisy. In summation, he writes: "I have no clear position. I am one of the trimmers. I'm halfway between either of the respectable positions and the position I am in is not respectable, but I believe that it is the position that 99.9% of the people are in today, and I think the only thing that can endow you with any kind of respectability is the effort that you put into sustaining it and trying to resolve it."[3]

For Bolt the dramatist, the important thing is to depict the struggle of a character to achieve personal stability, integrity, and self-respect—what he has called "selfhood." Such a struggle, according to Bolt, is more precisely defined for a person strongly committed to the Christian tradition. For Thomas More, the "man for all seasons", and "for any Christian the identity of the self is clear. It is your soul."[3] More's insistence that "there's a little . . . little, area . . . where I must rule myself" makes him an ideal character for depicting a successful conception of "selfhood."[4] Having this quality, More does not have to search for it or struggle within himself to find it. Jim Cherry in Bolt's first published drama, *The Flowering Cherry,* never fully understands the dimensions of the search for self, for his courage is not equal to self-discovery.[5] For Jack Dean, a college master in Bolt's third play, *The Tiger and the Horse,* the achievement of selfhood is more successful, but the price he pays for his initial unwillingness to become responsibly involved with his family and with society is high, as it was for Sir Thomas More in the dramatist's fourth play. Finally, in *Gentle Jack,* his most recent work to be staged, any struggle toward selfhood is already lost. Here Bolt is concerned with man's compromise between his paradoxical tendencies toward both good and evil, a compromise which, as expressed in "Gentle Jack", cannot long stand.

Since *A Man For All Seasons* constitutes the dramatists's most perfect statement of a man with a soul who maintains his self in the face of death, it must come first in a consideration of Bolt's treatment of the problems of selfhood and commitment. It is a play about a man of many sides: a lawyer, scholar, author, and statesman. Perhaps most important, Sir Thomas More is a man of conscience and a martyr, the former leading, as it sometimes does, to the latter. If this is first a play about selfhood, a strong secondary theme is that of public duty versus private conscience. Here is a "history play" that is unusually relevant for our time; it is, in fact, a play for any time.

From the beginning, Bolt leaves no question as to the type of man Henry VIII will have to win over before he can put Catherine of Aragon away and marry Anne Boleyn. Matthew, Sir Thomas's steward, confides to the audience in anticipation of the coming dilemma: "My master Thomas More would give anything to anyone. Some say that's good and some say that's bad, but I say he can't help it—and that's bad . . . because some day someone's going to ask him for something that he wants to keep; and he'll be out of practice. There must be something that he wants to keep. That's only Common Sense." Sir Thomas himself first appears in argument with Richard Rich, an ambitious young man in search of a patron, who maintains that "every man has his price"—in suffering if in nothing else. This interests More: "Buy a man with suffering?" he muses, and introduces the motif of martyrdom into the play. Cardinal Wolsey, who is willing to oblige the King in regard to his divorce, accuses Sir Thomas of having a "horrible moral squint" —of not being able to "see facts flat on"—when More refuses to go along with them. This "squint" is the uncompromisingly moral attitude which turns on man's faith in God and adherence to the immutable standards of conduct God expects of His true servants. To compromise oneself with God is to compromise oneself with one's King and fellowmen, or as More puts it later, "when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties . . . they lead their country by a short route to chaos." In one of the best moments of the play, Thomas replies to the Earl of Norfolk, a close friend who urges assent to Henry's marriage and the new church: "As a spaniel is to water, so is man to his own self. I will not give in because I oppose it—*I* do—not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but *I* do—*I*. . . . You might as well advise a man to change the colour of his eyes. I can't. . . . To me it *has* to be, for that's myself! . . . *that's* my *self*."

His sense of selfhood is most apparent near the climax of the play when

More rejects the pleading of his family that he swear to the Act of Succession. Believing that the importance of an oath is too great to allow for any misuse, he says, "When a man takes an oath, . . . he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water and if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again." An oath is the most important matter of conscience, he tells Master Secretary Cromwell, his most ardent persecutor, adding "In matters of conscience, the loyal subject is more bounden to be loyal *to* his conscience than to any other thing." This is "very and pure necessity for respect of my own soul." "Your own self you mean!" Cromwell replies. "Yes", says More, "a man's soul is his self!" Nothing in the play is more to the point; nothing defines so precisely the dimensions of the theme. Here is a man who will not give his soul in order to gain the whole world. The soul—the self—weighs too heavily.

A chorus called the Common Man appears in several guises throughout the play, first and most frequently as Matthew, the household steward. Not surprisingly, it is he, just fresh from his role as More's executioner, who has the final word of the play: "[*to the audience*] It isn't difficult to keep alive, friends—just don't *make* trouble—or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected. Well, I don't need to tell you that. Good night. If we should bump into one another, recognize me."[6] This "master statesman of us all", as Cromwell calls him, confronts us with our own lack of selfhood through an implied bond with him: our willingness to be, as Bolt says, "one of the trimmers", and our silent acquiescence in the martyrdom of a man of integrity, in our time or any time.

A Man For All Seasons is a very complete statement; that is why it is an ideal introduction to Bolt. His first published play, *The Flowering Cherry* (London, 1958), is another matter, however. First produced in London in 1957 and later in New York, it is a realistic, straightforward treatment of a character completely without selfhood. It may even be assuming too much to apply the term here, and yet one can see that Jim Cherry's predicament anticipates, though in a negative way, the full-blown situation and character we have in the play just discussed. Cherry works in the offices of the Home Counties Insurance Society, but all his life he has dreamed of owning an orchard in Somerset and selling its produce for a living. His wife, Isobel, is the stalwart member of the family, for she is entirely realistic in her assessment of her husband and two teen-age children who have inherited their father's tendency to alter the truth to fit his needs. In the first act, Jim Cherry returns from work one evening and, with a mousy colleague for an audience, proudly

but falsely allows his wife to believe that he has defied his boss and resigned his position, an act he had been threatening in favour of retirement to his orchard-utopia. He is a dreamer, a drinker of scrumpy (cider), and an incorrigible liar—especially where his dream is concerned. He is a seed-catalogue farmer, a planner on paper, a planter of land not owned, and a gatherer of fruit not planted. "Fifteen acres of apple trees in blossom, with a few white hens on the grass, perhaps, and some high white clouds in a blue sky, like you get it in May and early June down there; it's a sight for the gods, it's Shangri-la." It is a good dream, but that is all. As the act ends, Jim is forced to retract his boast that he has resigned, but a salesman for a nursery company is allowed to conclude his visit thinking he has contacted a bona fide customer who will soon place a large order for fruit trees.

The second act completely strips Jim Cherry of any illusions or dignity that he might have left. By this time, he has been discharged by the insurance company but has continued to leave the house daily rather than tell his wife. He attempts to keep up his courage by hitting the bottle, or more precisely, lacing his scrumpy with gin. The climax of the play comes when Cherry is offered a much lower position by his former employer and is about to accept, even though Isobel has just made arrangements to sell their home in order to attain the long cherished dream of owing an orchard. Jim, forced to choose between the two situations, does so by default; he takes the insurance job and his wife walks out. In a final childish act of exhibitionism, he tries to bend the poker for her—as he had earlier for a teen-age admirer—and dies of a heart attack while a pastoral vision of the orchard—the never-attained dream—fades behind the scrim.

The Flowering Cherry—an ironic title, since Jim's orchard never bloomed, just as he himself never matured in any meaningful sense—is an honest, well-written drama on a significant theme, despite the fact that this theme is approached through a negative character. It suffers most in an inevitable comparison with *Death of A Salesman,* which is an altogether more artistically mature drama. Miller's Willy Loman is a more universal symbol of a dreamer and his inability to make his dream come true. Both Willy and Jim look back on earlier, better times; both long for some contact with nature; both have a knack with clients; both have wives who defend them to children who are unsympathetic while having some of their father's weaknesses; both are liars and dreamers. Willy is the more moving and meaningful character because his condition implies a criticism of the society which helped to cultivate in him the dreams of material success based on dishonesty and immorality.

Poor Willy had all the wrong dreams and went about attaining them in the wrong way. There is nothing wrong with Jim Cherry's dream, nor the way he might have attained it. There is only something wrong with Cherry, and finally he stands for no more than the dreamer he is.

The Tiger and the Horse (London, 1961) was produced in London in August, 1960, only a few weeks after the presentation there of *A Man For All Seasons*. In this work, the themes of commitment and selfhood do not remain in the background. They are, in fact, so much insisted on that the drama begins to seem "preachy", perhaps because it is the most personal treatment of a problem Bolt is much concerned with, nuclear disarmament. Thus, his characters are interesting as people, but they are first of all mouthpieces for the dramatist, more so than in any of his other plays. Bolt himself admits that he made the characters "unnaturally articulate and unnaturally aware of what they 'stood for'."[7] The themes of selfhood and commitment here relate first and specifically to a stand on nuclear disarmament and only secondly to a more universal dilemma of man's search for integrity.

Jack Dean, a philosopher, a one-time astronomer, and the master of a college in an English university, has been chosen to fill the post of the cautious, conservative university vice-chancellor on that gentleman's retirement. He refuses to sign a petition for unconditional nuclear disarmament, dodging his daughter Stella's criticism of his refusal by saying, "The diplomatic and military considerations must be grotesquely complicated. I haven't the facts. . . ." The degree of Dean's withdrawal from responsibility is further emphasized in Act II when Stella informs her father that she is two months pregnant as a result of a weekend with her fiancé and that, though he has offered to marry her, she does not want to trap him. When the question comes up of the effect of this new development on Dean's election to the vice-chancellorship, he reassures her: "I'm not really involved. They won't hold it against me. You'll be—my misfortune." At the conclusion of this second act, when he and Stella look through his old telescope at the stars, the master again implies his aloofness from life, earthly and celestial, when he insists, "I'm not involved . . . I'm extremely distressed on your behalf, my dear. But I am not involved."

Though Dean is clearly the central figure, his wife, the "tiger" of the title,[8] is the pivotal character, since the effect of the play and the transformations of the other characters depend on her. Gwendolyn Dean has two great concerns: her horror of warfare, more particularly its effect on children; and her husband's lack of any sense of personal responsibility or involvement. The close connection between the two is fully clarified in the third act. Here a

major symbol is a fine painting by Holbein of a family of eleven children, one of whom Gwen thinks is a hunchback. The portrait, recently restored and evaluated at forty thousand pounds, is the pride of the college. The act that precipitates the climax is Mrs. Dean's slashing of this picture, utterly ruining it. She leaves it leaning against a courtyard fountain, attaching to it the petition for disarmament which she has signed. When her horrified husband demands an explanation, Gwen recounts, in some of the most dramatic speeches of the play, how she had hidden the petition and dreamed she had signed it. The Holbein portrait, of course, is the symbol of Gwen's love for children and for victimized humanity in general. Her destruction of it parallels the destructive evil that she believes she sees operating in her own nature and in a world which wants the bomb "to happen". Even the little hunchback in the portrait reflects her "fear of monstrosity", of what radioactivity can do to children. In this character and in this scene, the personal and political applications of the themes of commitment and selfhood, involvement and responsibility, are joined. Though Gwen is in the tradition of mad heroines, not many are used with such thematic and theatrical validity.

As Gwen's confession goes on, the emphasis shifts to Jack Dean through his wife's ironic insistence that he is a saint, that she can feel the goodness in his touch, hear it in his voice. Then Dean's failure with her is revealed, the failure of his whole approach to life, as Gwen recalls asking herself: "'Why does he never associate with me? Why have we never, never in anything been together?' And the answer. . . . I *was* the answer . . . 'a man who is the very lettering of sanity; married to me who have always been evil, and am now mad. No wonder he keeps what distance he can.'" The shock of his wife's madness, heightened by her final admission, finally brings Dean to a realization of the extent of his failure as a husband and a man. In a statement to the press, he prepares to say that the destruction of the painting was a joint action, that he and his wife had allowed the subject of nuclear warfare "to prey upon our minds to a possibly obsessive extent, and that we did it together!" And he concludes, "Let it be clearly understood that I am *associated* with my wife! . . . My wife's actions are my actions." This climactic act of commitment assumes the end of any hope for election to the post of vice-chancellor, but it shows the rebirth of selfhood in Jack Dean. Further, since he is more realistic and intelligent than the others, he insists, though signing the petition, that in spite of every hindrance, the bomb will be put to use. ". . . Nothing will stop humanity from using that thing. Nothing *you* can do. What, a folly of those proportions within our very grasp, and you think

you can turn us back with a petition?" Though the playwright fears that mere protest will avail little, yet the act of protest must still be registered.

After *A Man For All Seasons,* Bolt's next work in order of composition, came *Gentle Jack* (New York, 1965), the playwright's fifth production, which opened in London in November, 1963. It was not well received by the critics and has not been produced in the United States. Though it is a complex, mature play, it is less interesting than its predecessors. Though it shows growth and development in the dramatist, such growth is not evidenced satisfactorily in all aspects of his dramaturgy. The work might be described as a modern parable or an adult fairy tale. That Bolt decided "to break the writer's golden rule and 'explain' what is meant to happen in it" suggests that the play does not speak effectively for itself. In addition to examining the play and Bolt's "explanation" of it, one must also consider how *Gentle Jack* relates to the other works discussed and wherein its weakness lies.

The "gentle Jack" of the title is Jack Cadence, called Jacko, whom Bolt sees as "a natural man in headlong flight from Nature about which he knows too much (p. vi)." Nature, the playwright explains, is "that world which we have risen above or fallen from but which still claims us, which we long for and fear (p. v)." Expressed another way, "nature" is that ambivalent human capacity for both good and evil. Jacko, "a man no one can leave alone, a natural butt", is employed by Miss Violet Lazara, a fabulously wealthy old lady, cruel, selfish, with a liking for young men—but not Jacko. She is Bolt's representative of "Man-outside-Nature, subject to government, awareness and judgment" (p. vi). These are the two opposing characters who dramatize Bolt's conclusion that the world of pure reason, evoking the non-physical, and the world of pure impulse "are alike uninhabitable by human beings."

> The only habitable world is one where some kind of compromise is achieved. But no compromise is possible. Where the two worlds meet and appear reconciled what has really happened is the secret surrender of one to the other. Hence our irreducible dissatisfaction. No truly habitable world exists (p. vii).

Gentle Jack, then, is a play about the paradoxical human condition. It reflects, in abstract terms, the human dilemma referred to earlier in this essay, a dilemma involving a choice between traditional Christian values and those of a "valueless . . . existential position."

At a yearly ceremony in Attis Abbey, Jack-in-the-Green—the "English variant" of Pan—is invoked, and a King of Folly is elected to reign for seven

days. Through an ironic twist, Jacko is elected to this office, and is unexpectedly confronted by the god materialized, Jack-Pan, a creature "of no age, . . . a fallen god suffering and withdrawn" (p. xiv). "If you don't believe in wood gods, even in the theatre", Bolt explains, "then Jack and Jacko may be taken to be two halves of a split personality" (p. vii). Jacko is persuaded by Jack to borrow certain powers of nature (courage, ease, and dignity are mentioned) to use while he is King of Folly. These powers will not only give Jacko what he "wants", but with them he can help other people to what they "want." This largesse is "what d'you-call-it, *Christian*", says Jack. Indeed, the price for this loan is simply that Jacko do what he "wants". He may even be allowed to keep these powers permanently. After using his new abilities for seven days, Jacko finds that the loan from the god entails something else he does not "want": violence and killing. "Don't tell me there's nobody you want to kill", Jack-Pan insists, and forces Jacko to take his knife. After all, "You borrowed me. Not just a bit of me—so far and no farther—all of me. *Do* you want me?" Jacko does, but without having to kill. "What —you think that you can have it both ways?" the god replies. This indeed is what Jacko thinks and "wants": the good without the necessarily accompanying evil. "He will retain the gentle and liberating attributes of Nature while rejecting Nature's senseless destructiveness", Bolt explains. "He will be both free and moral, spontaneous and rational" (pp. vi-vii). Reluctantly Jacko keeps the knife, but in the climax of the play, it is Jack-the-god who kills. Or, "if you look at it the other way", says Bolt, "Jacko kills . . . while he is insane, and since insane not fully human." Jacko is then in turn killed in revenge by a chorus of labourers who are somehow reminiscent of the Common Man in *A Man For All Seasons.* As the play ends, rain begins, "as naturalistic as possible and as beautiful as rain sometimes is". The rain is a symbolic cleansing, the result of Jacko's having taken what the dramatist calls a "Promethean stance", not only against the evil in his own natural self, but against the lack of humanity in the other characters, chiefly Miss Lazara, who are all "men-outside-Nature."

There are several reasons why all of this does not seem to work on the stage or even in a reading. Here, the characters, like those in *The Tiger and the Horse,* "stand" for something, as well they might in this less realistic, more poetic kind of play. But unlike the Dean family, just *what* they stand for is not clear without Bolt's explanation. Jacko's association with the natural and spontaneous comes only when he is possessed by his worse half, Jack-Pan; before this, he is not convincingly good, natural, or even "gentle"—just not

very interesting. That he is meant to be "a natural man in headlong flight from Nature about which he knows too much" is not likely to occur to an audience. Nor is Miss Lazara's "meaning" made entirely clear, and this is especially important since she tends to dominate the play. Furthermore, so varied are the "citizens" of her empire that one could not be blamed, although this does not seem to be intended, for assuming that there might be equal variety in their significance and relationship to the theme. Jack-Pan, the most theatrical character, comes off best, partly because he *is* theatrical. Also, it is his nature to express himself bluntly and simply, thereby allowing his amorality and destruction to be all the more shocking. The principal characters here might sustain being forced to say and stand for something, but what they say and do leaves them mysterious, ill-defined, and therefore not completely successful.

To conclude a discussion of Robert Bolt's plays with *Gentle Jack* is to leave the dramatist at a somewhat unsatisfactory point in his development, for while the play is an admirable effort, it lacks clarity and focus. Furthermore, in the world of his drama, there is no room for anything like selfhood. There is no tenable position; "no truly habitable world exists." In this respect, the view is less optimistic than in earlier work. But for the playwright, as well as for "gentle Jack", the final stature is determined by the "Promethean stance", which requires that some part of a man—some men of mankind—battle against the innate impulse toward evil and destruction. This in itself constitutes a commitment, a kind and degree of selfhood.

NOTES

1. Thomas Lask, "Bolt from Britain", *The New York Times,* Nov. 19, 1961, Sec. II, p. 1.
2. "Return of the Hero", *The New York Times,* April 22, 1962, Sec. II, p. 3.
3. Richard A. Duprey, "Interview with Robert Bolt", *The Catholic World,* CXCV (September, 1962), 366, 365, 369, 367.
4. *A Man For All Seasons* (London, 1960), p. 35.
5. Bolt's first major production was of a play, still unpublished, entitled *The Critic and the Heart,* which was given at the Oxford Playhouse in 1957. See *World Premieres,* VIII (July, 1957), 155-6.
6. (New York, 1962), pp. 162-3. This speech, added for the New York production, is not in the English edition.
7. *A Man For All Seasons* (New York), p. xvi.
8. The title is taken from one of William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" from *The*

Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1793: "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." The "horse" refers, of course, to the college master, Dean.

IOS

Lawrence Dakin

I came to Ios of the small *chora*
When swallows cried a gentian joy
Over last year's nest. Blest anew
By their mud masonry in the eaves,
Each grey neglected church,
No larger than a fisher's means
When storms have passed . . .
Waited the Mystery, the swallows' tale
Of lands beyond the Cyclades,
Whose blue unaltared skies
Imaged Apollo.
But I had come to ask of Homer,
And if he sang from his dark place
Of Izmir or of Chios? When the flower girl
To whom I spoke held to my face
A spray of cherry blooms,
And said: "Why trouble Death
When I have Life to sell,
How much of April will you buy,
How much of Spring?"
But I had seen more mirrored in her eyes
Than flowers or the wine-dark sea,
And sang of Ios in the mists of Spring,
And of her poet somewhere on the shore . . .
But more of what had made me buy a flower.