
The Progressive

either the simplicity of a mere fanatic or else to cover some ugly escapade of youth or some quite criminal looseness of temperament. But Bernard Shaw did not act thus because he was careless, but because he was ferociously careful, careful especially of the one thing needful. What was he thinking about when he threw away his last halfpence and went to a strange place ; what was he thinking about when he endured hunger and small-pox in London almost without hope ? He was thinking of what he has ever since thought of, the slow but sure surge of the social revolution ; you must read into all those bald sentences and empty years what I shall attempt to sketch in the third section. You must read the revolutionary movement of the later nineteenth century, darkened indeed by materialism and made mutable by fear and free thought, but full of awful vistas of an escape from the curse of Adam.

Bernard Shaw happened to be born in an epoch, or rather at the end of an epoch, which was in its way unique in the ages of history. The nineteenth century was not unique in the success or rapidity of its reforms or in their ultimate cessation ; but it was unique in the

George Bernard Shaw

peculiar character of the failure which followed the success. The French Revolution was an enormous act of human realisation; it has altered the terms of every law and the shape of every town in Europe; but it was by no means the only example of a strong and swift period of reform. What was really peculiar about the Republican energy was this, that it left behind it, not an ordinary reaction but a kind of dreary, drawn out and utterly unmeaning hope. The strong and evident idea of reform sank lower and lower until it became the timid and feeble idea of progress. Towards the end of the nineteenth century there appeared its two incredible figures; they were the pure Conservative and the pure Progressive; two figures which would have been overwhelmed with laughter by any other intellectual commonwealth of history. There was hardly a human generation which could not have seen the folly of merely going forward or merely standing still; of mere progressing or mere conserving. In the coarsest Greek Comedy we might have a joke about a man who wanted to keep what he had, whether it was yellow gold or yellow fever. In the dullest mediæval morality we might have a joke about a progressive gentle-

The Progressive

man who, having passed heaven and come to purgatory, decided to go further and fare worse. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were an age of quite impetuous progress; men made in one rush, roads, trades, synthetic philosophies, parliaments, university settlements, a law that could cover the world and such spires as had never struck the sky. But they would not have said that they wanted progress, but that they wanted the road, the parliaments, and the spires. In the same way the time from Richelieu to the Revolution was upon the whole a time of conservation, often of harsh and hideous conservation; it preserved tortures, legal quibbles, and despotism. But if you had asked the rulers they would not have said that they wanted conservation; but that they wanted the torture and the despotism. The old reformers and the old despots alike desired definite *things*, powers, licenses, payments, vetoes, and permissions. Only the modern progressive and the modern conservative have been content with two words.

Other periods of active improvement have died by stiffening at last into some routine. Thus the Gothic gaiety of the thirteenth century stiffening into the mere Gothic ugly-

George Bernard Shaw

ness of the fifteenth. Thus the mighty wave of the Renaissance, whose crest was lifted to heaven, was touched by a wintry witchery of classicism and frozen for ever before it fell. Alone of all such movements the democratic movement of the last two centuries has not frozen, but loosened and liquefied. Instead of becoming more pedantic in its old age, it has grown more bewildered. By the analogy of healthy history we ought to have gone on worshipping the republic and calling each other citizen with increasing seriousness until some other part of the truth broke into our republican temple. But in fact we have turned the freedom of democracy into a mere scepticism, destructive of everything, including democracy itself. It is none the less destructive because it is, so to speak, an optimistic scepticism—or, as I have said, a dreary hope. It was none the better because the destroyers were always talking about the new vistas and enlightenments which their new negations opened to us. The republican temple, like any other strong building, rested on certain definite limits and supports. But the modern man inside it went on indefinitely knocking holes in his own house and saying that they were windows. The

The Progressive

result is not hard to calculate: the moral world was pretty well all windows and no house by the time that Bernard Shaw arrived on the scene.

Then there entered into full swing that great game of which he soon became the greatest master. A progressive or advanced person was now to mean not a man who wanted democracy, but a man who wanted something newer than democracy. A reformer was to be, not a man who wanted a parliament or a republic, but a man who wanted anything that he hadn't got. The emancipated man must cast a weird and suspicious eye round him at all the institutions of the world, wondering which of them was destined to die in the next few centuries. Each one of them was whispering to himself, "What can I alter?"

This quite vague and varied discontent probably did lead to the revelation of many incidental wrongs and to much humane hard work in certain holes and corners. It also gave birth to a great deal of quite futile and frantic speculation, which seemed destined to take away babies from women, or to give votes to tom-cats. But it had an evil in it much deeper and more psychologically poisonous

George Bernard Shaw

than any superficial absurdities. There was in this thirst to be "progressive" a subtle sort of double-mindedness and falsity. A man was so eager to be in advance of his age that he pretended to be in advance of himself. Institutions that his wholesome nature and habit fully accepted he had to sneer at as old-fashioned, out of a servile and snobbish fear of the future. Out of the primal forests, through all the real progress of history, man had picked his way obeying his human instinct, or (in the excellent phrase) following his nose. But now he was trying, by violent athletic exertions, to get in front of his nose.

Into this riot of all imaginary innovations Shaw brought the sharp edge of the Irishman and the concentration of the Puritan, and thoroughly thrashed all competitors in the difficult art of being at once modern and intelligent. In twenty twopenny controversies he took the revolutionary side, I fear in most cases because it was called revolutionary. But the other revolutionists were abruptly startled by the presentation of quite rational and ingenious arguments on their own side. The dreary thing about most new causes is that they are praised in such very old terms. Every

The Progressive

new religion bores us with the same stale rhetoric about closer fellowship and the higher life. No one ever approximately equalled Bernard Shaw in the power of finding really fresh and personal arguments for these recent schemes and creeds. No one ever came within a mile of him in the knack of actually producing a new argument for a new philosophy. I give two instances to cover the kind of thing I mean. Bernard Shaw (being honestly eager to put himself on the modern side in everything) put himself on the side of what is called the feminist movement; the proposal to give the two sexes not merely equal social privileges, but identical. To this it is often answered that women cannot be soldiers; and to this again the sensible feminists answer that women run their own kind of physical risk, while the silly feminists answer that war is an outworn barbaric thing which women would abolish. But Bernard Shaw took the line of saying that women had been soldiers, in all occasions of natural and unofficial war, as in the French Revolution. That has the great fighting value of being an unexpected argument; it takes the other pugilist's breath away for one important instant. To take the

George Bernard Shaw

other case, Mr. Shaw has found himself, led by the same mad imp of modernity, on the side of the people who want to have phonetic spelling. The people who want phonetic spelling generally depress the world with tireless and tasteless explanations of how much easier it would be for children or foreign bagmen if "height" were spelt "hite." Now children would curse spelling whatever it was, and we are not going to permit foreign bagmen to improve Shakespeare. Bernard Shaw charged along quite a different line; he urged that Shakespeare himself believed in phonetic spelling, since he spelt his own name in six different ways. According to Shaw, phonetic spelling is merely a return to the freedom and flexibility of Elizabethan literature. That, again, is exactly the kind of blow the old speller does not expect. As a matter of fact there is an answer to both the ingenuities I have quoted. When women have fought in revolutions they have generally shown that it was not natural to them, by their hysterical cruelty and insolence; it was the men who fought in the Revolution; it was the women who tortured the prisoners and mutilated the dead. And because Shakespeare could sing better than he

The Progressive

could spell, it does not follow that his spelling and ours ought to be abruptly altered by a race that has lost all instinct for singing. But I do not wish to discuss these points ; I only quote them as examples of the startling ability which really brought Shaw to the front ; the ability to brighten even our modern movements with original and suggestive thoughts.

But while Bernard Shaw pleasantly surprised innumerable cranks and revolutionists by finding quite rational arguments for them, he surprised them unpleasantly also by discovering something else. He discovered a turn of argument or trick of thought which has ever since been the plague of their lives, and given him in all assemblies of their kind, in the Fabian Society or in the whole Socialist movement, a fantastic but most formidable domination. This method may be approximately defined as that of revolutionising the revolutionists by turning their rationalism against their remaining sentimentalism. But definition leaves the matter dark unless we give one or two examples. Thus Bernard Shaw threw himself as thoroughly as any New Woman into the cause of the emancipation of women. But while the

George Bernard Shaw

New Woman praised woman as a prophetess, the new man took the opportunity to curse her and kick her as a comrade. For the others sex equality meant the emancipation of women, which allowed them to be equal to men. For Shaw it mainly meant the emancipation of men, which allowed them to be rude to women. Indeed, almost every one of Bernard Shaw's earlier plays might be called an argument between a man and a woman, in which the woman is thumped and thrashed and outwitted until she admits that she is the equal of her conqueror. This is the first case of the Shavian trick of turning on the romantic rationalists with their own rationalism. He said in substance, "If we are democrats, let us have votes for women; but if we are democrats, why on earth should we have respect for women?" I take one other example out of many. Bernard Shaw was thrown early into what may be called the cosmopolitan club of revolution. The Socialists of the S.D.F. call it "L'Internationale," but the club covers more than Socialists. It covers many who consider themselves the champions of oppressed nationalities—Poland, Finland, and even Ireland; and

The Progressive

thus a strong nationalist tendency exists in the revolutionary movement. Against this nationalist tendency Shaw set himself with sudden violence. If the flag of England was a piece of piratical humbug, was not the flag of Poland a piece of piratical humbug too? If we hated the jingoism of the existing armies and frontiers, why should we bring into existence new jingo armies and new jingo frontiers? All the other revolutionists fell in instinctively with Home Rule for Ireland. Shaw urged, in effect, that Home Rule was as bad as Home Influences and Home Cooking, and all the other degrading domesticities that began with the word "Home." His ultimate support of the South African war was largely created by his irritation against the other revolutionists for favouring a nationalist resistance. The ordinary Imperialists objected to Pro-Boers because they were anti-patriots. Bernard Shaw objected to Pro-Boers because they were pro-patriots.

But among these surprise attacks of G. B. S., these turnings of scepticism against the sceptics, there was one which has figured largely in his life; the most amusing and perhaps the most salutary of all these reactions. The "progres-

George Bernard Shaw

sive" world being in revolt against religion had naturally felt itself allied to science; and against the authority of priests it would perpetually hurl the authority of scientific men. Shaw gazed for a few moments at this new authority, the veiled god of Huxley and Tyndall, and then with the greatest placidity and precision kicked it in the stomach. He declared to the astounded progressives around him that physical science was a mystical fake like sacerdotalism; that scientists, like priests, spoke with authority because they could not speak with proof or reason; that the very wonders of science were mostly lies, like the wonders of religion. "When astronomers tell me," he says somewhere, "that a star is so far off that its light takes a thousand years to reach us, the magnitude of the lie seems to me in-artistic." The paralysing impudence of such remarks left everyone quite breathless; and even to this day this particular part of Shaw's satiric war has been far less followed up than it deserves. For there was present in it an element very marked in Shaw's controversies; I mean that his apparent exaggerations are generally much better backed up by knowledge than would appear from their nature.

The Progressive

He can lure his enemy on with fantasies and then overwhelm him with facts. Thus the man of science, when he read some wild passage in which Shaw compared Huxley to a tribal soothsayer grubbing in the entrails of animals, supposed the writer to be a mere fantastic whom science could crush with one finger. He would therefore engage in a controversy with Shaw about (let us say) vivisection, and discover to his horror that Shaw really knew a great deal about the subject, and could pelt him with expert witnesses and hospital reports. Among the many singular contradictions in a singular character, there is none more interesting than this combination of exactitude and industry in the detail of opinions with audacity and a certain wildness in their outline.

This great game of catching revolutionists napping, of catching the unconventional people in conventional poses, of outmarching and outmanœuvring progressives till they felt like conservatives, of undermining the mines of Nihilists till they felt like the House of Lords, this great game of dishing the anarchists continued for some time to be his most effective business. It would be untrue to say that he was

George Bernard Shaw

a cynic; he was never a cynic, for that implies a certain corrupt fatigue about human affairs, whereas he was vibrating with virtue and energy. Nor would it be fair to call him even a sceptic, for that implies a dogma of hopelessness and definite belief in unbelief. But it would be strictly just to describe him at this time, at any rate, as a merely destructive person. He was one whose main business was, in his own view, the pricking of illusions, the stripping away of disguises, and even the destruction of ideals. He was a sort of anti-confectioner whose whole business it was to take the gilt off the gingerbread.

Now I have no particular objection to people who take the gilt off the gingerbread; if only for this excellent reason, that I am much fonder of gingerbread than I am of gilt. But there are some objections to this task when it becomes a crusade or an obsession. One of them is this: that people who have really scraped the gilt off gingerbread generally waste the rest of their lives in attempting to scrape the gilt off gigantic lumps of gold. Such has too often been the case of Shaw. He can, if he likes,

The Progressive

scrape the romance off the armaments of Europe or the party system of Great Britain. But he cannot scrape the romance off love or military valour, because it is all romance, and three thousand miles thick. It cannot, I think, be denied that much of Bernard Shaw's splendid mental energy has been wasted in this weary business of gnawing at the necessary pillars of all possible society. But it would be grossly unfair to indicate that even in his first and most destructive stage he uttered nothing except these accidental, if arresting, negations. He threw his whole genius heavily into the scale in favour of two positive projects or causes of the period. When we have stated these we have really stated the full intellectual equipment with which he started his literary life.

I have said that Shaw was on the insurgent side in everything ; but in the case of these two important convictions he exercised a solid power of choice. When he first went to London he mixed with every kind of revolutionary society, and met every kind of person except the ordinary person. He knew everybody, so to speak, except everybody. He was more than once a momentary apparition

George Bernard Shaw

among the respectable atheists. He knew Bradlaugh and spoke on the platforms of that Hall of Science in which very simple and sincere masses of men used to hail with shouts of joy the assurance that they were not immortal. He retains to this day something of the noise and narrowness of that room; as, for instance, when he says that it is contemptible to have a craving for eternal life. This prejudice remains in direct opposition to all his present opinions, which are all to the effect that it is glorious to desire power, consciousness, and vitality even for one's self. But this old secularist tag, that it is selfish to save one's soul, remains with him long after he has practically glorified selfishness. It is a relic of those chaotic early days. And just as he mingled with the atheists he mingled with the anarchists, who were in the eighties a much more formidable body than now, disputing with the Socialists on almost equal terms the claim to be the true heirs of the Revolution. Shaw still talks entertainingly about this group. As far as I can make out, it was almost entirely female. When a book came out called *A Girl among the Anarchists*, G. B. S. was provoked to a sort of explosive reminiscence. "A girl

The Progressive

among the anarchists!" he exclaimed to his present biographer; "if they had said 'A man among the anarchists' it would have been more of an adventure." He is ready to tell other tales of this eccentric environment, most of which does not convey an impression of a very bracing atmosphere. That revolutionary society must have contained many high public ideals, but also a fair number of low private desires. And when people blame Bernard Shaw for his pitiless and prosaic coldness, his cutting refusal to reverence or admire, I think they should remember this riff-raff of lawless sentimentalism against which his common sense had to strive, all the grandiloquent "comrades" and all the gushing "affinities," all the sweetstuff sensuality and senseless sulking against law. If Bernard Shaw became a little too fond of throwing cold water upon prophecies or ideals, remember that he must have passed much of his youth among cosmopolitan idealists who wanted a little cold water in every sense of the word.

Upon two of these modern crusades he concentrated, and, as I have said, he chose them well. The first was broadly what was called the Humanitarian cause. It did not mean the

George Bernard Shaw

cause of humanity, but rather, if anything, the cause of everything else. At its noblest it meant a sort of mystical identification of our life with the whole life of nature. So a man might wince when a snail was crushed as if his toe were trodden on ; so a man might shrink when a moth shrivelled as if his own hair had caught fire. Man might be a network of exquisite nerves running over the whole universe, a subtle spider's web of pity. This was a fine conception ; though perhaps a somewhat severe enforcement of the theological conception of the special divinity of man. For the humanitarians certainly asked of humanity what can be asked of no other creature ; no man ever required a dog to understand a cat or expected the cow to cry for the sorrows of the nightingale.

Hence this sense has been strongest in saints of a very mystical sort ; such as St. Francis who spoke of Sister Sparrow and Brother Wolf. Shaw adopted this crusade of cosmic pity but adopted it very much in his own style, severe, explanatory, and even unsympathetic. He had no affectionate impulse to say "Brother Wolf" ; at the best he would have said "Citizen Wolf," like a sound re-

The Progressive

publican. In fact, he was full of healthy human compassion for the sufferings of animals; but in phraseology he loved to put the matter unemotionally and even harshly. I was once at a debating club at which Bernard Shaw said that he was not a humanitarian at all, but only an economist, that he merely hated to see life wasted by carelessness or cruelty. I felt inclined to get up and address to him the following lucid question: "If when you spare a herring you are only being oikonomikal, for what oikos are you being nomikal?" But in an average debating club I thought this question might not be quite clear; so I abandoned the idea. But certainly it is not plain for whom Bernard Shaw is economising if he rescues a rhinoceros from an early grave. But the truth is that Shaw only took this economic pose from his hatred of appearing sentimental. If Bernard Shaw killed a dragon and rescued a princess of romance, he would try to say "I have saved a princess" with exactly the same intonation as "I have saved a shilling." He tries to turn his own heroism into a sort of superhuman thrift. He would thoroughly sympathise with that passage in his favourite dramatic

George Bernard Shaw

author in which the Button Moulder tells Peer Gynt that there is a sort of cosmic housekeeping; that God Himself is very economical, "and that is why He is so well to do."

This combination of the widest kindness and consideration with a consistent ungraciousness of tone runs through all Shaw's ethical utterance, and is nowhere more evident than in his attitude towards animals. He would waste himself to a white-haired shadow to save a shark in an aquarium from inconvenience or to add any little comforts to the life of a carrion-crow. He would defy any laws or lose any friends to show mercy to the humblest beast or the most hidden bird. Yet I cannot recall in the whole of his works or in the whole of his conversation a single word of any tenderness or intimacy with any bird or beast. It was under the influence of this high and almost superhuman sense of duty that he became a vegetarian; and I seem to remember that when he was lying sick and near to death at the end of his *Saturday Review* career he wrote a fine fantastic article, declaring that his hearse ought to be drawn by all the animals that he had not eaten. Whenever

The Progressive

that evil day comes there will be no need to fall back on the ranks of the brute creation; there will be no lack of men and women who owe him so much as to be glad to take the place of the animals; and the present writer for one will be glad to express his gratitude as an elephant. There is no doubt about the essential manhood and decency of Bernard Shaw's instincts in such matters. And quite apart from the vegetarian controversy, I do not doubt that the beasts also owe him much. But when we come to positive things (and passions are the only truly positive things) that obstinate doubt remains which remains after all eulogies of Shaw. That fixed fancy sticks to the mind; that Bernard Shaw is a vegetarian more because he dislikes dead beasts than because he likes live ones.

It was the same with the other great cause to which Shaw more politically though not more publicly committed himself. The actual English people, without representation in Press or Parliament, but faintly expressed in public-houses and music-halls, would connect Shaw (so far as they have heard of him) with two ideas; they would say first that he was a vegetarian, and second that he was a

George Bernard Shaw

Socialist. Like most of the impressions of the ignorant, these impressions would be on the whole very just. My only purpose here is to urge that Shaw's Socialism exemplifies the same trait of temperament as his vegetarianism. This book is not concerned with Bernard Shaw as a politician or a sociologist, but as a critic and creator of drama. I will therefore end in this chapter all that I have to say about Bernard Shaw as a politician or a political philosopher. I propose here to dismiss this aspect of Shaw : only let it be remembered, once and for all, that I am here dismissing the most important aspect of Shaw. It is as if one dismissed the sculpture of Michael Angelo and went on to his sonnets. Perhaps the highest and purest thing in him is simply that he cares more for politics than for anything else ; more than for art or for philosophy. Socialism is the noblest thing for Bernard Shaw ; and it is the noblest thing in him. He really desires less to win fame than to bear fruit. He is an absolute follower of that early sage who wished only to make two blades of grass grow instead of one. He is a loyal subject of Henri Quatre, who said that he only wanted every Frenchman to have

The Progressive

a chicken in his pot on Sunday ; except, of course, that he would call the repast cannibalism. But *cæteris paribus* he thinks more of that chicken than of the eagle of the universal empire ; and he is always ready to support the grass against the laurel.

Yet by the nature of this book the account of the most important Shaw, who is the Socialist, must be also the most brief. Socialism (which I am not here concerned either to attack or defend) is, as everyone knows, the proposal that all property should be nationally owned that it may be more decently distributed. It is a proposal resting upon two principles, unimpeachable as far as they go : first, that frightful human calamities call for immediate human aid ; second, that such aid must almost always be collectively organised. If a ship is being wrecked, we organise a lifeboat ; if a house is on fire, we organise a blanket ; if half a nation is starving, we must organise work and food. That is the primary and powerful argument of the Socialist, and everything that he adds to it weakens it. The only possible line of protest is to suggest that it is rather shocking that we have to treat a normal nation as something exceptional, like a house

George Bernard Shaw

on fire or a shipwreck. But of such things it may be necessary to speak later. The point here is that Shaw behaved towards Socialism just as he behaved towards vegetarianism ; he offered every reason except the emotional reason, which was the real one. When taxed in a *Daily News* discussion with being a Socialist for the obvious reason that poverty was cruel, he said this was quite wrong ; it was only because poverty was wasteful. He practically professed that modern society annoyed him, not so much like an unrighteous kingdom, but rather like an untidy room. Everyone who knew him knew, of course, that he was full of a proper brotherly bitterness about the oppression of the poor. But here again he would not admit that he was anything but an Economist.

In thus setting his face like flint against sentimental methods of argument he undoubtedly did one great service to the causes for which he stood. Every vulgar anti-humanitarian, every snob who wants monkeys vivisected or beggars flogged has always fallen back upon stereotyped phrases like "maudlin" and "sentimental," which indicated the humanitarian as a man in a weak condition of tears. The mere personality of Shaw has shattered

The Progressive

those foolish phrases for ever. Shaw the humanitarian was like Voltaire the humanitarian, a man whose satire was like steel, the hardest and coolest of fighters, upon whose piercing point the wretched defenders of a masculine brutality wriggled like worms.

In this quarrel one cannot wish Shaw even an inch less contemptuous, for the people who call compassion "sentimentalism" deserve nothing but contempt. In this one does not even regret his coldness ; it is an honourable contrast to the blundering emotionalism of the jingoes and flagellomaniacs. The truth is that the ordinary anti-humanitarian only manages to harden his heart by having already softened his head. It is the reverse of sentimental to insist that a nigger is being burned alive ; for sentimentalism must be the clinging to pleasant thoughts. And no one, not even a Higher Evolutionist, can think a nigger burned alive a pleasant thought. The sentimental thing is to warm your hands at the fire while denying the existence of the nigger, and that is the ruling habit in England, as it has been the chief business of Bernard Shaw to show. And in this the brutalitarians hate him not because he is soft, but because he is hard,

George Bernard Shaw

because he is not to be softened by conventional excuses ; because he looks hard at a thing—and hits harder. Some foolish fellow of the Henley-Whibley reaction wrote that if we were to be conquerors we must be less tender and more ruthless. Shaw answered with really avenging irony, “What a light this principle throws on the defeat of the tender Dervish, the compassionate Zulu, and the morbidly humane Boxer at the hands of the hardy savages of England, France, and Germany.” In that sentence an idiot is obliterated and the whole story of Europe told ; but it is immensely stiffened by its ironic form. In the same way Shaw washed away for ever the idea that Socialists were weak dreamers, who said that things might be only because they wished them to be. G. B. S. in argument with an individualist showed himself, as a rule, much the better economist and much the worse rhetorician. In this atmosphere arose the celebrated Fabian Society, of which he is still the leading spirit—a society which answered all charges of impracticable idealism by pushing both its theoretic statements and its practical negotiations to the verge of cynicism. Bernard Shaw was the literary expert who

The Progressive

wrote most of its pamphlets. In one of them, among such sections as *Fabian Temperance Reform*, *Fabian Education* and so on, there was an entry gravely headed "Fabian Natural Science," which stated that in the Socialist cause light was needed more than heat.

Thus the Irish detachment and the Puritan austerity did much good to the country and to the causes for which they were embattled. But there was one thing they did not do; they did nothing for Shaw himself in the matter of his primary mistakes and his real limitation. His great defect was and is the lack of democratic sentiment. And there was nothing democratic either in his humanitarianism or his Socialism. These new and refined faiths tended rather to make the Irishman yet more aristocratic, the Puritan yet more exclusive. To be a Socialist was to look down on all the peasant owners of the earth, especially on the peasant owners of his own island. To be a Vegetarian was to be a man with a strange and mysterious morality, a man who thought the good lord who roasted oxen for his vassals only less bad than the bad lord who roasted the vassals. None of these advanced views could the common people hear gladly; nor indeed

George Bernard Shaw

was Shaw specially anxious to please the common people. It was his glory that he pitied animals like men ; it was his defect that he pitied men only too much like animals. Foulon said of the democracy "Let them eat grass." Shaw said "Let them eat greens." He had more benevolence, but almost as much disdain. "I have never had any feelings about the English working classes," he said elsewhere, "except a desire to abolish them and replace them by sensible people." This is the unsympathetic side of the thing ; but it had another and much nobler side, which must at least be seriously recognised before we pass on to much lighter things.

Bernard Shaw is not a democrat ; but he is a splendid republican. The nuance of difference between those terms precisely depicts him. And there is after all a good deal of dim democracy in England, in the sense that there is much of a blind sense of brotherhood, and nowhere more than among old-fashioned and even reactionary people. But a republican is a rare bird, and a noble one. Shaw is a republican in the literal and Latin sense ; he cares more for the Public Thing than for any private thing. The interest of the State is

The Progressive

with him a sincere thirst of the soul, as it was in the little pagan cities. Now this public passion, this clean appetite for order and equity, had fallen to a lower ebb, had more nearly disappeared altogether, during Shaw's earlier epoch than at any other time. Individualism of the worst type was on the top of the wave; I mean artistic individualism, which is so much crueller, so much blinder and so much more irrational even than commercial individualism. The decay of society was praised by artists as the decay of a corpse is praised by worms. The æsthete was all receptiveness, like the flea. His only affair in this world was to feed on its facts and colours, like a parasite upon blood. The ego was the all; and the praise of it was enunciated in madder and madder rhythms by poets whose Helicon was absinthe and whose Pegasus was the nightmare. This diseased pride was not even conscious of a public interest, and would have found all political terms utterly tasteless and insignificant. It was no longer a question of one man one vote, but of one man one universe.

I have in my time had my fling at the Fabian Society, at the pedantry of schemes,

George Bernard Shaw

the arrogance of experts ; nor do I regret it now. But when I remember that other world against which it reared its bourgeois banner of cleanliness and common sense, I will not end this chapter without doing it decent honour. Give me the drain pipes of the Fabians rather than the panpipes of the later poets ; the drain pipes have a nicer smell. Give me even that businesslike benevolence that herded men like beasts rather than that exquisite art which isolated them like devils ; give me even the suppression of "Zaeo" rather than the triumph of "Salome." And if I feel such a confession to be due to those Fabians who could hardly have been anything but experts in any society, such as Mr. Sidney Webb or Mr. Edward Pease, it is due yet more strongly to the greatest of the Fabians. Here was a man who could have enjoyed art among the artists, who could have been the wittiest of all the *flâneurs* ; who could have made epigrams like diamonds and drunk music like wine. He has instead laboured in a mill of statistics and crammed his mind with all the most dreary and the most filthy details, so that he can argue on the spur of the moment about sewing-machines or sewage, about typhus fever or twopenny

The Progressive

tubes. The usual mean theory of motives will not cover the case ; it is not ambition, for he could have been twenty times more prominent as a plausible and popular humorist. It is the real and ancient emotion of the *salus populi*, almost extinct in our oligarchical chaos ; nor will I for one, as I pass on to many matters of argument or quarrel, neglect to salute a passion so implacable and so pure.

The Critic

IT appears a point of some mystery to the present writer that Bernard Shaw should have been so long unrecognised and almost in beggary. I should have thought his talent was of the ringing and arresting sort; such as even editors and publishers would have sense enough to seize. Yet it is quite certain that he almost starved in London for many years, writing occasional columns for an advertisement or words for a picture. And it is equally certain (it is proved by twenty anecdotes, but no one who knows Shaw needs any anecdotes to prove it) that in those days of desperation he again and again threw up chances and flung back good bargains which did not suit his unique and erratic sense of honour. The fame of having first offered Shaw to the public upon a platform worthy of him belongs, like many other public services, to Mr. William Archer.

I say it seems odd that such a writer should not be appreciated in a flash; but upon this point there is evidently a real difference of

The Critic

opinion, and it constitutes for me the strangest difficulty of the subject. I hear many people complain that Bernard Shaw deliberately mystifies them. I cannot imagine what they mean ; it seems to me that he deliberately insults them. His language, especially on moral questions, is generally as straight and solid as that of a bargee and far less ornate and symbolic than that of a hansom-cabman. The prosperous English Philistine complains that Mr. Shaw is making a fool of him. Whereas Mr. Shaw is not in the least making a fool of him ; Mr. Shaw is, with laborious lucidity, calling him a fool. G. B. S. calls a landlord a thief ; and the landlord, instead of denying or resenting it, says, " Ah, that fellow hides his meaning so cleverly that one can never make out what he means, it is all so fine spun and fantastical." G. B. S. calls a statesman a liar to his face, and the statesman cries in a kind of ecstasy, " Ah, what quaint, intricate and half-tangled trains of thought ! Ah, what elusive and many-coloured mysteries of half-meaning ! " I think it is always quite plain what Mr. Shaw means, even when he is joking, and it generally means that the people he is talking to ought to howl aloud for their

George Bernard Shaw

sins. But the average representative of them undoubtedly treats the Shavian meaning as tricky and complex, when it is really direct and offensive. He always accuses Shaw of pulling his leg, at the exact moment when Shaw is pulling his nose.

This prompt and pungent style he learnt in the open, upon political tubs and platforms; and he is very legitimately proud of it. He boasts of being a demagogue; "The cart and the trumpet for me," he says, with admirable good sense. Everyone will remember the effective appearance of Cyrano de Bergerac in the first act of the fine play of that name; when instead of leaping in by any hackneyed door or window, he suddenly springs upon a chair above the crowd that has so far kept him invisible; "les bras croisés, le feutre en bataille, la moustache hérissée, le nez terrible." I will not go so far as to say that when Bernard Shaw sprang upon a chair or tub in Trafalgar Square he had the hat in battle, or even that he had the nose terrible. But just as we see Cyrano best when he thus leaps above the crowd, I think we may take this moment of Shaw stepping on his little platform to see him clearly as he then was, and even as he has largely not ceased

The Critic

to be. I, at least, have only known him in his middle age ; yet I think I can see him, younger yet only a little more alert, with hair more red but with face yet paler, as he first stood up upon some cart or barrow in the tossing glare of the gas.

The first fact that one realises about Shaw (independent of all one has read and often contradicting it) is his voice. Primarily it is the voice of an Irishman, and then something of the voice of a musician. It possibly explains much of his career ; a man may be permitted to say so many impudent things with so pleasant an intonation. But the voice is not only Irish and agreeable, it is also frank and as it were inviting conference. This goes with a style and gesture which can only be described as at once very casual and very emphatic. He assumes that bodily supremacy which goes with oratory, but he assumes it with almost ostentatious carelessness ; he throws back the head, but loosely and laughingly. He is at once swaggering and yet shrugging his shoulders, as if to drop from them the mantle of the orator which he has confidently assumed. Lastly, no man ever used voice or gesture better for the purpose of expressing

George Bernard Shaw

certainty ; no man can say "I tell Mr. Jones he is totally wrong" with more air of unforced and even casual conviction.

This particular play of feature or pitch of voice, at once didactic and yet not uncomrade-like, must be counted a very important fact, especially in connection with the period when that voice was first heard. It must be remembered that Shaw emerged as a wit in a sort of secondary age of wits ; one of those stale interludes of prematurely old young men, which separate the serious epochs of history. Oscar Wilde was its god ; but he was somewhat more mystical, not to say monstrous, than the average of its dried and decorous impudence. The two survivals of that time, as far as I know, are Mr. Max Beerbohm and Mr. Graham Robertson, two most charming people ; but the air they had to live in was the devil. One of its notes was an artificial reticence of speech, which waited till it could plant the perfect epigram. Its typical products were far too conceited to lay down the law. Now when people heard that Bernard Shaw was witty, as he most certainly was, when they heard his *mots* repeated like those of Whistler or Wilde, when they heard things like "the Seven deadly

The Critic

Virtues" or "Who *was* Hall Caine?" they expected another of these silent sarcastic dandies who went about with one epigram, patient and poisonous, like a bee with his one sting. And when they saw and heard the new humorist they found no fixed sneer, no frock coat, no green carnation, no silent Savoy Restaurant good manners, no fear of looking a fool, no particular notion of looking a gentleman. They found a talkative Irishman with a kind voice and a brown coat; open gestures and an evident desire to make people really agree with him. He had his own kind of affectations no doubt, and his own kind of tricks of debate; but he broke, and, thank God, for ever, the spell of the little man with the single eyeglass who had frozen both faith and fun at so many tea-tables. Shaw's humane voice and hearty manner were so obviously more the things of a great man than the hard, gem-like brilliancy of Wilde or the careful ill-temper of Whistler. He brought in a breezier sort of insolence; the single eyeglass fled before the single eye.

Added to the effect of the amiable dogmatic voice and lean, loose, swaggering figure, is that of the face with which so many caricaturists have fantastically delighted themselves,

George Bernard Shaw

the Mephistophelean face with the fierce tufted eyebrows and forked red beard. Yet those caricaturists in their natural delight in coming upon so striking a face, have somewhat misrepresented it, making it merely Satanic; whereas its actual expression has quite as much benevolence as mockery. By this time his costume has become a part of his personality; one has come to think of the reddish-brown Jaeger suit as if it were a sort of reddish-brown fur, and was, like the hair and eyebrows, a part of the animal; yet there are those who claim to remember a Bernard Shaw of yet more awful aspect before Jaeger came to his assistance; a Bernard Shaw in a dilapidated frock-coat and some sort of straw hat. I can hardly believe it; the man is so much of a piece, and must always have dressed appropriately. In any case his brown woollen clothes, at once artistic and hygienic, completed the appeal for which he stood; which might be defined as an eccentric healthy-mindedness. But something of the vagueness and equivocation of his first fame is probably due to the different functions which he performed in the contemporary world of art.

He began by writing novels. They are

The Critic

not much read, and indeed not imperatively worth reading, with the one exception of the crude and magnificent *Cashel Byron's Profession*. Mr. William Archer, in the course of his kindly efforts on behalf of his young Irish friend, sent this book to Samoa, for the opinion of the most elvish and yet efficient of modern critics. Stevenson summed up much of Shaw even from that fragment when he spoke of a romantic griffin roaring with laughter at the nature of his own quest. He also added the not wholly unjustified post-script: "I say, Archer,—my God, what women!"

The fiction was largely dropped; but when he began work he felt his way by the avenues of three arts. He was an art critic, a dramatic critic, and a musical critic; and in all three, it need hardly be said, he fought for the newest style and the most revolutionary school. He wrote on all these as he would have written on anything; but it was, I fancy, about the music that he cared most.

It may often be remarked that mathematicians love and understand music more than they love or understand poetry. Bernard Shaw is in much the same condition; indeed,

George Bernard Shaw

in attempting to do justice to Shakespeare's poetry, he always calls it "word music." It is not difficult to explain this special attachment of the mere logician to music. The logician, like every other man on earth, must have sentiment and romance in his existence; in every man's life, indeed, which can be called a life at all, sentiment is the most solid thing. But if the extreme logician turns for his emotions to poetry, he is exasperated and bewildered by discovering that the words of his own trade are used in an entirely different meaning. He conceives that he understands the word "visible," and then finds Milton applying it to darkness, in which nothing is visible. He supposes that he understands the word "hide," and then finds Shelley talking of a poet hidden in the light. He has reason to believe that he understands the common word "hung"; and then William Shakespeare, Esquire, of Stratford-on-Avon, gravely assures him that the tops of the tall sea waves were hung with deafening clamours on the slippery clouds. That is why the common arithmetician prefers music to poetry. Words are his scientific instruments. It irritates him that they should be anyone else's musical instruments. He is

The Critic

willing to see men juggling, but not men juggling with his own private tools and possessions—his terms. It is then that he turns with an utter relief to music. Here is all the same fascination and inspiration, all the same purity and plunging force as in poetry; but not requiring any verbal confession that light conceals things or that darkness can be seen in the dark. Music is mere beauty; it is beauty in the abstract, beauty in solution. It is a shapeless and liquid element of beauty, in which a man may really float, not indeed affirming the truth, but not denying it. Bernard Shaw, as I have already said, is infinitely far above all such mere mathematicians and pedantic reasoners; still his feeling is partly the same. He adores music because it cannot deal with romantic terms either in their right or their wrong sense. Music can be romantic without reminding him of Shakespeare and Walter Scott, with whom he has had personal quarrels. Music can be Catholic without reminding him verbally of the Catholic Church, which he has never seen, and is sure he does not like. Bernard Shaw can agree with Wagner, the musician, because he speaks without words; if it had been

George Bernard Shaw

Wagner the man he would certainly have had words with him. Therefore I would suggest that Shaw's love of music (which is so fundamental that it must be mentioned early, if not first, in his story) may itself be considered in the first case as the imaginative safety-valve of the rationalistic Irishman.

This much may be said conjecturally over the present signature ; but more must not be said. Bernard Shaw understands music so much better than I do that it is just possible that he is, in that tongue and atmosphere, all that he is not elsewhere. While he is writing with a pen I know his limitations as much as I admire his genius ; and I know it is true to say that he does not appreciate romance. But while he is playing on the piano he may be cocking a feather, drawing a sword or draining a flagon for all I know. While he is speaking I am sure that there are some things he does not understand. But while he is listening (at the Queen's Hall) he may understand everything, including God and me. Upon this part of him I am a reverent agnostic ; it is well to have some such dark continent in the character of a man of whom one writes. It preserves

The Critic

two very important things—modesty in the biographer and mystery in the biography.

For the purpose of our present generalisation it is only necessary to say that Shaw, as a musical critic, summed himself up as “The Perfect Wagnerite”; he threw himself into subtle and yet trenchant eulogy of that revolutionary voice in music. It was the same with the other arts. As he was a Perfect Wagnerite in music, so he was a Perfect Whistlerite in painting; so above all he was a Perfect Ibsenite in drama. And with this we enter that part of his career with which this book is more specially concerned. When Mr. William Archer got him established as dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review*, he became for the first time “a star of the stage”; a shooting star and sometimes a destroying comet.

On the day of that appointment opened one of the very few exhilarating and honest battles that broke the silence of the slow and cynical collapse of the nineteenth century. Bernard Shaw the demagogue had got his cart and his trumpet; and was resolved to make them like the car of destiny and the trumpet of judgment. He had not the servility of the ordinary rebel, who is content to

George Bernard Shaw

go on rebelling against kings and priests, because such rebellion is as old and as established as any priests or kings. He cast about him for something to attack which was not merely powerful or placid, but was unattacked. After a little quite sincere reflection, he found it. He would not be content to be a common atheist; he wished to blaspheme something in which even atheists believed. He was not satisfied with being revolutionary; there were so many revolutionists. He wanted to pick out some prominent institution which had been irrationally and instinctively accepted by the most violent and profane; something of which Mr. Foote would speak as respectfully on the front page of the *Freethinker* as Mr. St. Loe Strachey on the front page of the *Spectator*. He found the thing; he found the great unassailed English institution—Shakespeare.

But Shaw's attack on Shakespeare, though exaggerated for the fun of the thing, was not by any means the mere folly or firework paradox that has been supposed. He meant what he said; what was called his levity was merely the laughter of a man who enjoyed saying what he meant—an occupation which is indeed one of the greatest larks in life.

The Critic

Moreover, it can honestly be said that Shaw did good by shaking the mere idolatry of Him of Avon. That idolatry was bad for England ; it buttressed our perilous self-complacency by making us think that we alone had, not merely a great poet, but the one poet above criticism. It was bad for literature ; it made a minute model out of work that was really a hasty and faulty masterpiece. And it was bad for religion and morals that there should be so huge a terrestrial idol, that we should put such utter and unreasoning trust in any child of man. It is true that it was largely through Shaw's own defects that he beheld the defects of Shakespeare. But it needed someone equally prosaic to resist what was perilous in the charm of such poetry ; it may not be altogether a mistake to send a deaf man to destroy the rock of the sirens.

This attitude of Shaw illustrates of course all three of the divisions or aspects to which the reader's attention has been drawn. It was partly the attitude of the Irishman objecting to the Englishman turning his mere artistic taste into a religion ; especially when it was a taste merely taught him by his aunts and uncles. In Shaw's opinion (one might say)

George Bernard Shaw

the English do not really enjoy Shakespeare or even admire Shakespeare; one can only say, in the strong colloquialism, that they swear by Shakespeare. He is a mere god; a thing to be invoked. And Shaw's whole business was to set up the things which were to be sworn by as things to be sworn at. It was partly again the revolutionist in pursuit of pure novelty, hating primarily the oppression of the past, almost hating history itself. For Bernard Shaw the prophets were to be stoned after, and not before, men had built their sepulchres. There was a Yankee smartness in the man which was irritated at the idea of being dominated by a person dead for three hundred years; like Mark Twain, he wanted a fresher corpse.

These two motives there were, but they were small compared with the other. It was the third part of him, the Puritan, that was really at war with Shakespeare. He denounced that playwright almost exactly as any contemporary Puritan coming out of a conventicle in a steeple-crowned hat and stiff bands might have denounced the playwright coming out of the stage door of the old Globe Theatre. This is not a mere fancy; it is philosophically true.

The Critic

A legend has run round the newspapers that Bernard Shaw offered himself as a better writer than Shakespeare. This is false and quite unjust; Bernard Shaw never said anything of the kind. The writer whom he did say was better than Shakespeare was not himself, but Bunyan. And he justified it by attributing to Bunyan a virile acceptance of life as a high and harsh adventure, while in Shakespeare he saw nothing but profligate pessimism, the *vanitas vanitatum* of a disappointed voluptuary. According to this view Shakespeare was always saying, "Out, out, brief candle," because his was only a ballroom candle; while Bunyan was seeking to light such a candle as by God's grace should never be put out.

It is odd that Bernard Shaw's chief error or insensibility should have been the instrument of his noblest affirmation. The denunciation of Shakespeare was a mere misunderstanding. But the denunciation of Shakespeare's pessimism was the most splendidly understanding of all his utterances. This is the greatest thing in Shaw, a serious optimism—even a tragic optimism. Life is a thing too glorious to be enjoyed. To be is an exacting and exhausting business; the

George Bernard Shaw

trumpet though inspiring is terrible. Nothing that he ever wrote is so noble as his simple reference to the sturdy man who stepped up to the Keeper of the Book of Life and said, "Put down my name, Sir." It is true that Shaw called this heroic philosophy by wrong names and buttressed it with false metaphysics; that was the weakness of the age. The temporary decline of theology had involved the neglect of philosophy and all fine thinking; and Bernard Shaw had to find shaky justifications in Schopenhauer for the sons of God shouting for joy. He called it the Will to Live—a phrase invented by Prussian professors who would like to exist, but can't. Afterwards he asked people to worship the Life-Force; as if one could worship a hyphen. But though he covered it with crude new names (which are now fortunately crumbling everywhere like bad mortar) he was on the side of the good old cause; the oldest and the best of all causes, the cause of creation against destruction, the cause of yes against no, the cause of the seed against the stony earth and the star against the abyss.

His misunderstanding of Shakespeare arose

The Critic

largely from the fact that he is a Puritan, while Shakespeare was spiritually a Catholic. The former is always screwing himself up to see truth; the latter is often content that truth is there. The Puritan is only strong enough to stiffen; the Catholic is strong enough to relax. Shaw, I think, has entirely misunderstood the pessimistic passages of Shakespeare. They are flying moods which a man with a fixed faith can afford to entertain. That all is vanity, that life is dust and love is ashes, these are frivolities, these are jokes that a Catholic can afford to utter. He knows well enough that there is a life that is not dust and a love that is not ashes. But just as he may let himself go more than the Puritan in the matter of enjoyment, so he may let himself go more than the Puritan in the matter of melancholy. The sad exuberances of Hamlet are merely like the glad exuberances of Falstaff. This is not conjecture; it is the text of Shakespeare. In the very act of uttering his pessimism, Hamlet admits that it is a mood and not the truth. Heaven *is* a heavenly thing, only to him it seems a foul congregation of vapours. Man *is* the paragon of animals, only to him he

George Bernard Shaw

seems a quintessence of dust. Hamlet is quite the reverse of a sceptic. He is a man whose strong intellect believes much more than his weak temperament can make vivid to him. But this power of knowing a thing without feeling it, this power of believing a thing without experiencing it, this is an old Catholic complexity, and the Puritan has never understood it. Shakespeare confesses his moods (mostly by the mouths of villains and failures), but he never sets up his moods against his mind. His cry of *vanitas vanitatum* is itself only a harmless vanity. Readers may not agree with my calling him Catholic with a big C; but they will hardly complain of my calling him catholic with a small one. And that is here the principal point. Shakespeare was not in any sense a pessimist; he was, if anything, an optimist so universal as to be able to enjoy even pessimism. And this is exactly where he differs from the Puritan. The true Puritan is not squeamish: the true Puritan is free to say "Damn it!" But the Catholic Elizabethan was free (on passing provocation) to say "Damn it all!"

It need hardly be explained that Bernard Shaw added to his negative case of a dramatist

The Critic

to be depreciated a corresponding affirmative case of a dramatist to be exalted and advanced. He was not content with so remote a comparison as that between Shakespeare and Bunyan. In his vivacious weekly articles in the *Saturday Review*, the real comparison upon which everything turned was the comparison between Shakespeare and Ibsen. He early threw himself with all possible eagerness into the public disputes about the great Scandinavian ; and though there was no doubt whatever about which side he supported, there was much that was individual in the line he took. It is not our business here to explore that extinct volcano. You may say that anti-Ibsenism is dead, or you may say that Ibsen is dead ; in any case, that controversy is dead, and death, as the Roman poet says, can alone confess of what small atoms we are made. The opponents of Ibsen largely exhibited the permanent qualities of the populace ; that is, their instincts were right and their reasons wrong. They made the complete controversial mistake of calling Ibsen a pessimist ; whereas, indeed, his chief weakness is a rather childish confidence in mere nature and freedom, and a blindness (either of experience or

George Bernard Shaw

of culture) in the matter of original sin. In this sense Ibsen is not so much a pessimist as a highly crude kind of optimist. Nevertheless the man in the street was right in his fundamental instinct, as he always is. Ibsen, in his pale northern style, is an optimist; but for all that he is a depressing person. The optimism of Ibsen is less comforting than the pessimism of Dante; just as a Norwegian sunrise, however splendid, is colder than a Southern night.

But on the side of those who fought for Ibsen there was also a disagreement, and perhaps also a mistake. The vague army of "the advanced" (an army which advances in all directions) were united in feeling that they ought to be the friends of Ibsen because he also was advancing somewhere somehow. But they were also seriously impressed by Flaubert, by Oscar Wilde and all the rest who told them that a work of art was in another universe from ethics and social good. Therefore many, I think most, of the Ibsenites praised the Ibsen plays merely as *choses vues*, æsthetic affirmations of what can be without any reference to what ought to be. Mr. William Archer himself inclined to this view,

The Critic

though his strong sagacity kept him in a haze of healthy doubt on the subject. Mr. Walkley certainly took this view. But this view Mr. George Bernard Shaw abruptly and violently refused to take.

With the full Puritan combination of passion and precision he informed everybody that Ibsen was not artistic, but moral; that his dramas were didactic, that all great art was didactic, that Ibsen was strongly on the side of some of his characters and strongly against others, that there was preaching and public spirit in the work of good dramatists; and that if this were not so, dramatists and all other artists would be mere panders of intellectual debauchery, to be locked up as the Puritans locked up the stage players. No one can understand Bernard Shaw who does not give full value to this early revolt of his on behalf of ethics against the ruling school of *l'art pour l'art*. It is interesting because it is connected with other ambitions in the man, especially with that which has made him somewhat vainer of being a Parish Councillor than of being one of the most popular dramatists in Europe. But its chief interest is again to be referred to our stratification