Animal Sensibility and Inclusive Justice in the Age of Bernard Shaw

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For “she who must be obeyed”

(St. John Hotchkiss in Bernard Shaw, 
*Getting Married*, Part 5, 1908)
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I have benefitted greatly in the preparation of this book from the works of numerous biographers of persons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as is evident from the notes at the end of the book and from the bibliography. Chief among these biographers are Michael Holroyd and A.M. Gibbs, whose books are indispensable to the scholar interested in matters Shavian. Gareth Griffith, too, has shed much light. Their studies rendered my task very much easier than it otherwise would have been.

I am also grateful to the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the Lake, Ontario, for providing me the opportunity over a number of years to witness Shavian drama on the stage and not merely read it in print. The festival’s dedication to the theatre in general and Bernard Shaw in particular has proved a boon to the continued popularity of Shaw in North America.

My wife, Lorna Chamberlain, has continued the support and keen editing I have always received from her. I recall Jane Carlyle’s 1837 remark concerning her irascible husband, Thomas: “Let no woman who values peace and soul ever dream of marrying an Author.” And I am consequently even more grateful for Lorna’s forbearance and generous encouragement.

Once again, my acquisitions editor at UBC Press, Randy Schmidt, has been all that a writer would wish in an editor. Dorothy Van Daele made an invaluable suggestion to help me clarify my purpose in Chapter 1. Bernard Rollin and John Sorenson read the manuscript for the publishers and made eminently sensible suggestions that I have tried to follow as far as the parameters of the book would allow. I have been most fortunate in
having the counsel of such erudite and sympathetic scholars. I am very happy to record my debt to them.

I mused over Shaw, his associates, and their contributions to inclusive justice almost daily at the Second Cup coffee shop at Masonville Place, London, Ontario. A welcome escape from the computer! Their libations fortified my constitution and afforded me congenial space for working relaxation.

Throughout this book, the reader will encounter the terms “lower animals,” “subhuman,” “brute,” “savages,” and “man,” “mankind,” “men,” or “he” (when both genders are meant), although the terms would be quite inappropriate and unacceptable today. We have no recourse but to accept them as the language of a culture with different habits of usage than our own. The terms were usually employed with far fewer of the negative connotations that such terms carry today. Even though I am writing now of an earlier period in history, it would appear artificially contrived to ignore entirely the customs of that period.

I have touched on some of the central figures mentioned in this book before, in my Awe for the Tiger, Love for the Lamb: A Chronicle of Sensibility to Animals (2002), in my Brute Souls, Happy Beasts, and Evolution: The Historical Status of Animals (2005), and in my Sins of the Flesh: A History of Ethical Vegetarian Thought (2008). But these figures are there treated in shorter compass and to quite different ends.

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Animal Sensibility and Inclusive Justice in the Age of Bernard Shaw
Writing to the *Nottingham Daily Express* in 1891 in response to a request for information about him in regard to two lectures he was to give in the city, Bernard Shaw explained in part, “I am a bachelor, an Irishman, a vegetarian, an atheist, a teetotaller, a fanatic, a humourist, a fluent liar, a Social Democrat, a lecturer and debater, a lover of music, a fierce opponent of the present status of women and an insister on the seriousness of art.”

If this book were a biography of Shaw, what would remain to be done would be to fill in the details, adding his marriage, his anti-vivisectionism, his views on evolution, and his career as a dramatist, which at the time of the Nottingham letter he had not yet begun; moreover, Michael Holroyd and A.M. Gibbs have already written masterly biographies duly describing the details and circumstances of Shaw’s extraordinary life.

This book is, however, neither a biography of Shaw nor a biography of others who may have been relevant to Shaw or the issues of his time. It is instead a study in the history of ideas, specifically those of radical idealism in relation to animal sensibility. The ideas in focus are primarily those of Bernard Shaw but also to some degree those of others of his age. Although this book is not a biography, ideas are often better understood in the context of knowing at least something of the lives and minds of the thinkers, and thus the first chapter is a summary of Shaw’s life, concentrating on the various themes of his remarkably broad intellectual interests. In the remainder of the book, I attempt to examine Shaw’s animal sensibilities in relation to other views he espoused and the sensibilities of others in relation to Shaw. After the first biographical chapter, the concentration is on
the extent to which Shaw’s animal views correspond to, or differ from, those of others of the age in which he lived, with special attention to the inclusivity of Shaw’s vision, as well as the inclusivity of several of his contemporaries. By “inclusivity,” I mean the fact that Shaw is concerned with the elimination of suffering of all species, human and nonhuman alike. Inclusivity is the implicit basis of his philosophy.

Why, it will (and should be) asked, is the book centred on Shaw rather than Henry Salt (1851-1939), who is, arguably, the father and premier representative of the Victorian inclusivist approach and the most eloquent and prolific of the proponents of the interests of animals? It is because Shaw, as we shall see, was not only acknowledged as the foundation of the modernist world by many of his literary contemporaries but was also deemed by later-twentieth-century mainstream socialists to have been the greatest influence on them. For many, Shaw was the central figure of his time. Some will argue persuasively that Henry Salt deserves pride of place in the annals of inclusive justice. The reality, perhaps an unfortunate reality, is that he failed to achieve the great public recognition that was heaped upon Shaw. Perhaps as a consequence, relatively little is known of Salt’s life. In the decades following his death, he was completely forgotten, other than by a stalwart few. As the biographer of his circle wrote of him, “Henry Salt died unhonoured and unsung.” It is as the acknowledged conscience of his age that Shaw is here in focus.

As mentioned, Shaw was not devoted to animal well-being especially but to the well-being of all sentient creatures. Justice could not be achieved, he believed, unless nonhuman animals were included in the sense of justice. The idea of “humanitarianism,” as employed by the Humanitarian League, of which Shaw was an enthusiastic supporter, implied not only a bridging of the chasm between human and animal but also, almost as novel a notion at the turn of the twentieth century, a crossing of the gulf between gender and gender and between class and class. If “humanitarianism” was a poor choice of epithet, for the concept separates the human from other species, its usage by the league was intended to imply inclusivity. Just as the socialist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concerned itself not merely with the role of labour in the workforce but also with a societal transformation in the arts, sciences, technology, and religion, so too did the socialist “humanitarians” seek to include the position of animals in the transformation. This was the era of what was called “deeper and broader” socialism, by contrast with “bread and cheese” socialism, being concerned not just with a fairer economic distribution and a thorough overhaul of the health and education systems but also with a complete
rethinking of the way life was lived and the values society embraced, as well as with the place of animals within it. The primitivist Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) called it the “Larger Socialism.” This is not a book intended in the first instance for Shavian scholars, although, of course, I shall be very pleased if Shavian scholars find it of some relevance to their studies. It is written primarily for those interested in the human-animal relationship and the historical figures who have taken an ethical stance on this relationship.

William Shakespeare excluded, Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, is by consensus the most popular, most prolific, and most studied playwright of the English language. In Shaw’s lifetime, a few adventurous thinkers, two of Virginia Woolf’s nephews, for example, even deemed him greater than Shakespeare. More common was the view of the New York Times that he was the greatest Englishman (sic) since Shakespeare. As A.M. Gibbs tells us, “by the end of his career [Shaw] had written fifty-one dramatic works, including twenty-eight full length plays, nineteen playlets, and a puppet play.” He also wrote five novels, countless journalistic essays, a part-translated and part-invented dramatic work co-authored with Siegfried Trebitsch, Jitta’s Atonement (1923), and numerous other compositions, the best known of which is The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (1928). The Guide, as it is commonly known, was the result of a three-year endeavour to satisfy a request for information from his sister-in-law Mary Cholmondeley on behalf of a women’s study group. But his contemporary Stephen Winsten said it was really “to work out in his own mind where he stood with regard to the fundamental principles of social organization.” The book was generally well received, but not all judgments were favourable; his good friend Henry Salt deeming it unduly verbose and overly complex. Shaw added more chapters in 1937, and the title was expanded to The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism. It was this book that inaugurated the extremely successful Pelican series of inexpensive works of educational merit, the Guide selling at the extraordinarily low price of six pence a copy. For publication on Shaw’s ninetieth birthday, an issue of ten Shaw titles of 100,000 copies each was prepared by Allen Lane’s Penguin company, proprietors of Pelican. The “Shaw Million” sold in its entirety in six weeks. Penguin/Pelican books became as much a British institution as did Shaw. Constable’s “Standard Edition” of Shaw’s works, published in the 1930s, almost twenty years before his death, amounted to thirty-seven volumes, and most of the minor essays and reviews were omitted. By comparison, the collected writings of
William Morris, Shaw’s fellow Victorian icon, published shortly after his death in 1896, amounted to twenty-four volumes, although with some of his many lectures and articles on socialism omitted, and he was considered a remarkably prolific Victorian writer. His biographer Fiona MacCarthy said, “Words ... poured out of Morris. There is a neurotic basis to his fluency.” Shaw was visited by an even more voracious muse.

Shaw proselytized socialism in voice and in print, was music critic for the London Star, art critic for the World, and drama critic for the Saturday Review. By 1885 he was music critic for the Dramatic Review and a regular book reviewer for the Pall Mall Gazette (edited by the Liberal politician John Morley, chief secretary for Ireland in William Ewart Gladstone’s administration, who suffered Shaw’s reviewing venom). His employment in journalism ceased at the time of his marriage in 1898. He was a proficient artist and a perhaps less proficient poet, despite occasional fine lines.

Along with Sidney Webb – whom Shaw thought “the ablest man in England” – and a little later Beatrice Webb, who eventually became the Fabian Society’s honorary president, Shaw played a prominent role in the Fabian Society, in several respects a forerunner of, and certainly an important influence on, the modern Labour Party. He was a vitriolic opponent of animal experimentation and an adamant advocate of vegetarianism and teetotalism. The food historian Betty Fussell has observed that “a lot of our personal identity is wrapped up in food.” In Shaw’s case, this would involve the ethics of food, for food in itself was of little import to him. His vegetarianism and teetotalism were a part of his carefully constructed image as well as his seriously held tenets. Over time, Shaw became addicted to the self he had sculpted, and it was in accord with this artful construction that he behaved. For him, there were no shibboleths. Everything commonly approved in society was subject to rational doubt and denunciation. Shaw was forever unimpressed by conventional wisdom.

His was a progressive and often politely caustic voice on the social, political, moral, and religious issues of his own time, some of which remain contentious matters in our own era, such as the wages Shaw advocated for the domestic labour of stay-at-home homemakers. His politeness was merely tactical; the vituperative tone he found unnecessary. His graceful manner was the art of hammering his opponent into submission through generosity and courteousness – “his usual disarming courtesy in debate,” A.M. Gibbs called it. Although it is his plays for which he is best remembered, it is in their remarkable prefaces (often wordier than the plays themselves and often written much later than the plays) that his views are elaborated in masterly prose and with mordant wit.
There is already a voluminous literature on Shaw, and there are indeed a few academic and societal journals devoted to the study of Shaw, but to the best of my knowledge there is nothing of both length and substance on Shaw’s animal sensibilities, although much of relevance is contained in passing in other studies, especially in the various biographies of Shaw and his associates. These commentaries led me to the relevant parts of Shaw’s oeuvre. I have availed myself of them unashamedly.

By referring to Shaw’s radical idealism, I do not use “idealism” in the manner employed by philosophers to refer to a system of thought in which the idea of something is in a manner more real than its physical counterpart or to a system of thought in which the objects of knowledge are somehow dependent on the mind perceiving these objects. Rather, by Shaw’s radical idealism, I mean his refusal to be constrained by the prevailing values of his culture, even where this may have required a thorough denunciation of dominant beliefs and practices. He lacked the habit of viewing his values with the reflective circumspection that often comes with a prolonged study of history. Shaw’s idealism involved a belief that human character, human nature even, can become quite different from what it is. It is a belief that a different kind of societal organization can, and will, produce a significantly more altruistic human being. As Shaw put it to the novelist H.G. Wells (1866-1946) in 1917, we “must reform society before we can reform ourselves ... personal righteousness is impossible in an unrighteous environment.”

Of course, Shaw’s atheism encouraged him to deny the doctrine of original sin, which recognizes strict limits to human benevolence. What he did not grasp was that the doctrine was grounded less in religious metaphysics than in the irredeemable forces inherent in the primeval animal being of the human species. It was a side of the human animal he steadfastly ignored, imagining, at least most of the time, all failings to be cultural and permanently eradicable.

Despite his spasmodic optimism, Shaw’s radicalism was of a meliorist rather than an all-or-nothing bent, and his optimism was filled with a healthy dose of skepticism. Shaw saw little wisdom in many of the perceived virtues of the past or of his own present. He was especially dismissive of “middle-class morality” – a phrase repeated with evident disdain by the Cockney dustman Alfred Doolittle, the flower girl’s father, in Shaw’s Pygmalion (1912). He showed much more sympathy for the mores of what he called the “intellectual proletariat” and of his newly coined “gentleman” class, which personified the morality of service. For the aristocracy, whom he savaged for their unearned wealth and their idleness, he felt contempt. And, he thought, “capitalist mankind in the lump is detestable.”
Shaw, the “gentleman” morality he admired must be directed toward suppression of the exploitation of the lower classes, including animals. He often despaired about his compatriots’ inability ever to see what he himself thought so clear. “I don’t expect anybody but myself to see as far as I do,” he averred. His utopian idealism is perhaps best exemplified in his extravagant belief that “ecstasy ... may one day be the normal condition of conscious intellectual activity.” He did not always take into consideration the constraints laid upon humanity’s potentialities by the persistent drive of the biological animal in the human breast that is ever in play. Or, if and when he did, he thought a very different kind of human was capable of being evolved through the will and imagination. Equally utopian was the notion he ventured that “death is the last enemy to be overcome, and we have not overcome it even yet.” At times, he leaves the impression that it can be overcome and that, in his version of socialist society, in a manner it will be overcome. On his mother’s death, he exclaimed, “I do not believe in mortality.” A week before his own death, he offered a confusing clarification: “I believe in life everlasting but not for the individual.” What it is that endures we are not told with any clarity, but it does not appear to be the human species, for in Shaw’s view this too is vulnerable. Perhaps it was a return to what his fellow inclusivist Edward Carpenter called the “All-Self.” With greater probability, as he intimated in Back to Methuselah (1921) with deadly earnest, it was the potential for the human to become disembodied mind that he envisaged. Carpenter, too, believed that the final barrier of death might dissolve. Exaggerated expectations of personal, social, and political change were not confined to Shaw or Carpenter. They were a symptom of the age. For example, H.G. Wells in his Anticipations (1901) sketched an imaginative utopia that he believed would come into existence within a decade. And Shaw relied for his view of effective immortality on the then reputable science of the biologist August Weismann, who had declared, Shaw said, that “death is not an eternal condition of life but an expedient introduced to provide for continual renewal without overcrowding.”

Like Leon Trotsky, for example, Shaw was convinced a new socialist order would create a world in which the average man would be superior to all the heroes of history. An idealist’s vision concerns how humankind can be and ought to be, and it sees few limits to the potential; a realist’s vision sees early limits to what humankind can become beyond what it already is. Shaw himself knew full well the folly of utopianism. He tells us that the “man who has grappled with real life, flesh to flesh and spirit to spirit, has little patience with fools’ paradises.” He adds, however, “for
all that, the land of dreams is a wonderful place.”22 When there were so many active anarchist groups, as there were especially in the 1880s and 1890s, to decry utopianism was not necessarily to move one far toward pragmatism. Shaw was often misled by his utopian dreams, his unfulfillable expectations.

In his idealism, Shaw followed one of his mentors, William Blake, in wholly rejecting “Rationalism and Determinism.” People come to their conclusions not by reason, he opined, but, having reached their conclusions, use their reason to justify their conclusions: “A man has his beliefs: his arguments are only excuses for them ... The province of reason is the discovery of the means to fulfil our wills; but our wills are beyond reason.”23 The world is not determined by strict laws but is subject to influence by individual and collective wills. For Shaw, the determinism assumed by the methods of natural science was contrary to sound reason, and, accordingly, natural science must change its ethos. He viewed Einsteinian relativism as an important step in this direction. Yet even though Shaw denounced both historical and scientific determinism – unlike Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who shared a determinist view of history – he thought worldwide socialism ultimately inevitable. In the 1880s there was a general feeling among socialists not only that capitalism was doomed but also that it was ready to implode. Capitalism’s final days were thought to be at hand. In October 1897 the inclusivist Edward Carpenter and his Millthorpe socialist acolytes debated whether the revolution was about to pass. The answer was in the negative. A decade earlier the reverse conclusion would have been reached.

In his literary critique *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), a foretaste of much of his own philosophy of drama, Shaw divided populations into philistines, idealists, and realists. For Shaw, the realists are the creators of progress. Seven years later, in a major essay on *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), he revised his trilogy. The gods are now the idealists, and the realists must perforce create their own idealists: the political and social heroes who are able to appeal to, and arouse, the philistines. Ultimately, the improvement of society rests on the philistines, who must implement the ideas of the realists. On the other hand, in Shaw’s *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906), the physicians, Michael Holroyd tells us, “are the idealists of Shaw’s philosophy who are paid to give the philistines what they want and will be out of a job unless they do.”24 And yet again, Shaw avers, most worthwhile progress is brought about by heretics – that is, the enemies of the dominant culture. The hero is the Superman who embodies the ideals of the people of which they are as yet unaware. Unfortunately, this is exemplified in his aberrant
early expectations of Benito Mussolini, although he was not above doing comic impersonations of him. He was also hopeful of Adolf Hitler, Oswald Mosley, and, more permanently, Joseph Stalin, although he was never a friend to Nazi racism, arguing to the contrary for racial fusion through miscegenation: “The future is to the mongrel, not the Junker. I, Bernard Shaw, have said it.” On one occasion, he expressed the view that “the future lies with the Mulatto.” “Judophobia,” he added, “is as pathological as hydrophobia.” His adherence to the aims of the Führer were not long-lived. In 1944, discovering that the seeds of the poppies his gardener grew were poisonous, he said, “We must get a packet and send them off to Hitler.” Much of his early support for Hitler was based on what he saw as the injustice that the Treaty of Versailles had done to the sense of German pride and promise. To the last, Shaw was confident that Hitler would refrain from war.

Embarrassing to his friends was his recommendation of Stalin for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was not alone in his audacious admirations. W.B. Yeats and Mohandas Gandhi were among those also tempted by the fascist leaders. After initial wariness, fellow Fabians Beatrice and Sidney Webb regarded early Soviet Russia as the land of milk and honey. Beatrice chided Shaw for his naivety with regard to the fascist tyranny, but, after greater initial circumspection, was herself ultimately no less gullible when it came to Stalin. She was not a total exception in her gullibility; the American ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Joseph E. Davies, was equally taken in. H.G. Wells was initially no less myopic but began a guarded retreat from his former enthusiasm before Stalin rose to power. The real Stalin evokes, as do all other dictators, Paul Johnson’s description of the biblical reign of King David: “the epitome of personal monarchy with all its glories and miseries.” Shaw’s stinging rebuke of the autocracy of the Tsarist regime at the time of the Great War was unquestionably valid, but the same censure could have been levelled against the Soviet successor so stoutly defended by Shaw. Much of Shaw’s effort was spent in trying to demystify Soviet Marxism through cleansing it of the fear it evoked in the British public by the use of an alien ideological language. The Soviet Union was, Shaw thought, a society in which the realists were in charge of the philistines. For very many who initially welcomed the October Revolution in St. Petersburg, its palpable failures were soon apparent. Just as the euphoric expectations of the French Revolution had not been met, and most former sympathizers were soon loud in their denunciations, so too were most rudely awakened by the new Bolshevik Terror. An early visitor to the Soviet Union, the philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell had
recognized the cruel persecutions readily enough. So had Andrew Cairns from the Fabian Research Bureau. Not so Shaw or the Webbs. William Beveridge, head of the London School of Economics, was aghast at the incredulity. “Do not make light of hateful things,” he wrote. “It hurts me to think of ... any persons for whom I care being associated with the kind of brutality represented by the ... Russian régime.”31 Revealingly, during his 1931 visit to the Soviet Union, Shaw announced, among a plethora of otherwise laudatory comments, “the more I see of the proletarians the more I thank God I am not one.”32 On his meeting the seminary-educated Stalin during the same visit, he seemed impressed that the Soviet leader was a Georgian gentleman rather than a Russian workingman.

In Act 3 of Man and Superman (1903), in which Shaw offers a warning about the excesses of eugenics, he advises us to be wary “of the pursuit of the Superhuman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human.”33 It was sound advice that he sometimes chose to ignore. The potential to be misled is expressed clearly in Misalliance (1910), where Shaw has Lord Summerhays tell us that “Democracy reads well; but it doesn’t act well.”34 Disarmingly, he adds, “like some people’s plays.” The significant fact is that Shaw does not ask himself whether the autocratic utopian alternatives to democracy do not act even worse. He could certainly have learned from Sir Winston Churchill’s famous and oft-repeated observation that “parliamentary democracy is a very unsatisfactory form of government” but nonetheless “immensely superior to any other.” On the other hand, in his more sober moments, Shaw understood, commenting on his play Saint Joan (1924), for example, that “when you get your dictatorship you may take it from me you will with the greatest certainty get a secret tribunal dealing with sedition, with political heresy, exactly like the Inquisition.”35 But if the rule applied to the Inquisition, somehow, for Shaw, it eluded the Soviets. Shaw’s analysis of realism and idealism reflects an undemocratic presence that casts its occasional pessimistic shadow across the more customary sanguine Shavian landscape.

Shaw lauds realism over idealism, but his realism turns out to be a form of idealism. The Shavian realist is sometimes what everyone else calls an idealist. Playwright of the successful The Green Goddess (1923) and fellow reviewer and friend of Shaw, William Archer described him as “the most uncompromising, not to say fanatical, idealist I have ever met.”36 In flippant voice, the London Figaro in 1889 declared, “He is, of course, an Irishman – most idealists are.”37 Shavian scholar A.M. Gibbs calls him “a satirical idealist.”38 Edward Baughan of the Daily News in 1903 deemed Shaw “an anaemic idealist.”39 The biographer Julia Briggs calls him a
“curious blend of cynicism and idealism.” Even his wife, Charlotte, described him as “an idealist and an individualist.” However different their conceptions of Shaw, that he was an idealist is not in dispute. Shaw wrote of “Platonic realists” when Platonism involves a theory of ideas, or “forms,” in which the ideas reflect a greater level of reality than the material world. Shaw’s idealism was based on an assessment of political reality as evidenced through facts and reason. The Shavian paradoxes are never far from the surface of Shavian life or thought. In fact, ambiguity and inconsistency are the Shavian trademark. “There are so many Shaws,” exclaims Gareth Griffith in a pique of exasperation. Shaw’s soul was divided into sometimes competing compartments of intellectual endeavour. It is not unreasonable to conclude that Shaw lacked a measure of nuance, a factor that was at once both a contributor to his great popularity in his lifetime and afterward and a detriment to his lasting fame beyond the realm of drama.

Shaw’s plays, he willingly confessed, are expositions of the values he espoused, which are clustered around the elastic epithet of socialism, a doctrine to which Shaw remained committed from his conversion at the age of twenty-six until his death in 1950. Before his plays were successful, Shaw told his Fabian friend Graham Wallas in 1898, “My contempt for the status quo grows from year to year and I do not despair of expressing it yet in a mind-changing manner.” Shaw was a consistent reformer, but he was nonetheless quintessentially, rather than merely superficially, a man of paradox. He refers to his own “celebrated volte-faces.” The reader will not find consistency in Shaw but will encounter the full array of the mesmerizing tensions from which one must extract the underlying essence, if there is one, that is Shaw. He embraced at different times both individualism and collectivism as the keystone of his socialist philosophy. At times he embraced the ideological left of socialism; at other times he was more comfortable with the pragmatic right of socialism. The paradoxes are also quite visible in Shaw’s relationships with certain women. His involvement with the actresses Ellen Terry and Janet Achurch, for example, were sentimentally romantic relationships. Yet Shaw was a man determined to stamp out romantic sentimentalism. In his consummated affair with Stella Campbell, he lived the tension of being both a man and a child. Paradoxical and irreconcilable conflicts are also present throughout his plays. In John Bull’s Other Island (1904), for example, the paradox is between a geographical patriotism and a universal standard of justice. In The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism, he complained of those authors who wrote of “he,” or some other masculine form, when “she” was implied
equally: “You might read a score of them without ever discovering that such a creature as a woman had ever existed.” Yet elsewhere he did exactly the same as those writers of whom he complained, and even in the Guide he wrote of “man” and “mankind” rather than “human” and “humankind.” As we shall see, his animal sensibility is also infused with a palpable tendency to paradox. Perhaps, however, at least some of the more abstract paradoxes are more apparent than real, for, having announced himself as a devotee of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Shaw tells us, “Shelley, the realist, was an idealist too.” Shaw does not see these concepts as antithetical.

Paradoxical, nonetheless, is that, as inter alia Saint Joan (1924) and Shaw’s theory of Creative Evolution attest, he was a devoutly religious atheist. W.B. Yeats described him as “an atheist who trembles in the haunted corridor.” Dame Laurentia, prioress of the Benedictine Stanbrook Abbey, called him Brother Bernard. Such apparent anomalies were not uncommon at a time of turmoil in response to what was perceived as the nightmare of Darwinism in a religious world. Beatrice Webb, for example, dubbed herself a “religious agnostic.” Annie Besant called herself “a religious Atheist.” Even H.G. Wells enjoyed a temporary religious respite from his customary abnegation of all forms of deity. One chapter of his God the Invisible King (1917) is titled “The Religion of Atheists.” Religion is the medium through which, for Shaw, and Beatrice Webb and Annie Besant, and even Wells for an incongruous instant, human animality is to be transcended. Secular morality accepts human beings for what they are and tries to improve human morals within the fixed boundaries of the possible. Religious morality tries to extend humanity beyond the impassable boundaries of its animal being. Shaw’s moral conceptions belong decidedly in the religious category, the reality of which he was at most times aware.

Earnestness and jocularity emerge in constant contrast from his mouth and pen. It is sometimes difficult to discern whether the seriousness is leavened by the laughter or whether it descends into burlesque. Paradoxical or not, Shaw was always a man to be reckoned with. For Shaw, “the golden rule is that there are no golden rules.” It was in part because there were no golden rules for Shaw that totalitarian abominations became legitimate avenues of consciousness and, on the other hand, that the socially un-acceptable became the practically possible. For Shaw, following Henrik Ibsen, all morality is relative. In Ibsen’s dramas, Ghosts (1881) in particular, traditional Christian virtues are depicted as destructive of the human personality. In line with Ibsen, Shaw believed morality to be constantly evolving, a factor that played an important part in the development of his
atheistical religious notion of Creative Evolution, which became such a prominent leitmotif in his œuvre. Shaw was, perhaps above all, a polemicist, and the expectations of the audience – and, often enough, Shaw’s expectations of the reception of the audience – played a vital role in the substance of the polemic. The polemic sometimes masqueraded as and sometimes contained deep intellectual insight.
I
The Long Life and Varied Interests of G.B.S.

In this chapter, I do not discuss Shaw’s animal sensibilities in detail, although they are introduced, but rather examine the whole range of Shaw’s multifarious interests within which his animal sensibilities may later be understood as a part of his sense of inclusive justice. The intention here – and in the second chapter, which treats the prevailing sensibilities in Shaw’s time and his relationship to them – is to provide the context for later chapters.

The youngest child of a genteel-shabby branch of a prominent Irish Protestant dynasty, George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on 26 July 1856. Hating his first name, he became known variously as G. Bernard Shaw, Bernard Shaw, or simply G.B.S., a popular name derived from his so signing his reviews for the World from 1890. His mother had begun the practice of referring to him by forename as G.B. He lived a few months short of twenty years in the city of his birth and then left for London to become “a professional man of genius.” “The Genius” was how his wife later often referred to him. And Shaw referred not infrequently to himself in this manner; at other times, the phrase was “a great man.” Henry Salt called him this, too.

Shaw viewed London as a cultural magnet and necessary for his own artistic development, a development he deemed impossible in what he regarded as the backwater of Ireland as it then was. “Dublin exhales melancholy” was how Virginia Woolf expressed it. The anarcho-socialist William Morris described the Ireland of the 1870s as containing “cotters’ houses in outside appearance the very poorest habitations of man I have
ever seen.” Still, he enjoyed the “cosy shabbiness of Dublin,” a view stimulated by its clean air, which London lacked. Shaw’s Dublin music mentor George Vandeleur Lee ventured, “Dublin in those days seemed a hopeless place for an artist; for no success counted except a London success.” London was what Arthur Conan Doyle called the “great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.” But it attracted far more than just the loungers and idlers, as Shaw’s endeavours amply reflect. It was the path to fame and fortune, which required escape from the cultural confines of Ireland. Shaw deplored the religious prejudice of Catholics and Protestants alike, the poverty, the parochialism, the political narrow-mindedness, and the cultural myopia of Ireland. He viewed the competing denominations not as aspects of religion but as political factions and badges of rank. Yet he admired Ireland’s earlier traditions – he called himself a seventeenth-century Irishman and had great hopes for its potential. If Ireland was a backwater, the Irish would, Shaw believed, eventually make it a land of the chosen people, or, at least, of “the almost chosen people,” as Abraham Lincoln said of the Americans. Whereas England was a place for hustle and bustle, Ireland lived at a slower, more ancient pace and was thus a country for thinking and talking rather than always doing; and therein lay its prospects. W.B. Yeats said of Shaw that Ireland was the only subject on which he was entirely serious. He lived his London life first and foremost as an Irishman. And, as Colm Tóibín has written, “There is nothing more essentially Irish than a displaced Irish Protestant.”

After emigration, Shaw lived in and around London for the remaining seventy-four years of his life, always having one home in London itself and, after his marriage to Charlotte Payne-Townshend in 1898, another residence in a rural area of southern England very convenient to the metropolis. Mostly, he lived in the village of Ayot St. Lawrence, some five miles from Welwyn and twenty-five miles from the capital. The London he discovered on arrival from Ireland was a quizzical mixture of the old and the new. One could still encounter the occasional coach and pair attended by a powder-wigged and formally garbed coachman and footman. But the new was increasingly evident and dominant, epitomized by the steam-driven London Underground, the first section of which had been opened in 1863 and which was operating electric trains by 1890. The Thames froze twice during the early years Shaw lived in London (1880 and 1895), with gross inconveniences to daily living, together with the attendant death of wildlife and mature plantation such a deep freeze brings in its wake; it had been six and a half decades since the Thames had previously
frozen. Today, the Thames no longer freezes. London is warmer, pollution is greater, the Thames is dredged deeper, and the water flows faster. Living London life was a far different experience at the time of Shaw’s arrival than it had become by the time of his death.

Shaw did not return to Ireland until 1905—a thirty-year hiatus—but was thereafter a not uncommon visitor, especially to rural West and South Ireland. There were five Irish trips in the six years immediately following the Great War alone. The visits were purported vacations with Charlotte; but they were not furloughs from work for Shaw, who was addicted to his writing. For example, Shaw wrote much of *Major Barbara* (1905) during his first return visit to Ireland, and he completed *Saint Joan* there in 1923. Charlotte was well aware of his dedication to his destiny, telling T.E. Lawrence that G.B.S. was “not interested in anything but his work.”

Despite his years in England, Shaw always retained his Irish Protestant Ascendancy brogue, which became one of his most readily identifiable, and endearing, characteristics. It also proved remarkably persuasive. It has been said that it was a muted upper-class accent—half English and half Irish, commonly known as a Rathmines accent, after a wealthy and especially class-conscious district of Dublin. His refined accent was not taken amiss. Most prominent socialists of the era came from wealth and were often of independent means, Shaw, H.G. Wells, Edith Nesbit, and Sidney Webb being among the notable exceptions. Several were quite lavish in their spending habits, including Shaw, William Morris, Wells, and Nesbit. Shaw said his “native language was the English of Swift.” In reality, their roles were reversed, Jonathan Swift being an Englishman who developed his literary talents in Ireland.

Memorably, Shaw declared himself “a man up to the chin in the life of his own time.” He was able to be “up to the chin” in a broad medley of the issues of the times on account of his unbounded energy. Encountering Shaw at a luncheon at the Maynard Keyneses, Virginia Woolf could only marvel of him as late as 1933: “What life, what vitality! What immense nervous spring!” And his was a very long and busy life, encompassing the Boer War and two world wars, the October Revolution in the Soviet Union, the Irish and Spanish civil wars, the Great Depression, the birth and death of fascism, the British Empire in its decline, the close of the Victorian era, and the whole of the Edwardian period; and he lived in the reigns of three more monarchs (one uncrowned) besides those of Victoria and Edward VII. Slavery was not abolished in the United States until after his ninth birthday. His life bestrode the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Art Nouveau,
Art Deco, and the Arts and Crafts Movement, a Ruskin and Morris–inspired successor to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, of the last of which Shaw was an enthusiastic proponent. Around him was the predominantly radical and pacifist Bloomsbury Group – founded in the image and under the influence of the philosopher of aesthetics and ethics G.E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles – where the economist John Maynard Keynes, the painter Clive Bell, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, the critic and political essayist Leonard and his wife the novelist Virginia Woolf, and Lytton Strachey, prominent conscientious objector and famed author of *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), found their intellectual home, a home not too distant from that of Shaw himself. In fact, symbolizing the interconnectivity of the artists’ world, Virginia Stephen (later Woolf), together with her brother Adrian, followed the Shaws (mother Bessie, sister Lucy, and Bernard) as the occupants of a house at 29 Fitzroy Square in Bloomsbury. Maynard Keynes, too, had rooms at Fitzroy Square. William Morris and his associate Edward (Ned) Burne-Jones had lived nearby for a number of years and had then started the famous avant-garde decorative-arts business of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company in Red Lion Square adjacent to where they had first lodged. The formerly fashionable area had become a retreat for radical intellectuals by this time. Like that of Shaw, the Bloomsbury Group’s raison d’être was the bursting of Victorian pretensions. The more urbane Vita Sackville-West, no friend to modernism, called it “Gloomsbury.” But, by contrast with Shaw, Maynard Keynes had what Beatrice Webb called an “unmitigated contempt” for communist students, a view he shared with others of his group. The Bloomsbury Group was not attracted to the intellectual extravagances that captivated Shaw.

This was the era in which the inventions of Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and Guglielmo Marconi were being developed. Shaw even worked for the Edison Telephone Company for a while in his early maturity (1879-80). His plays were made into film and seen at the cinema. Radio broadcasting livened his late middle age – his first broadcast was carried by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1924 – and television was aired before his death. This was an era of great technological innovation as well as a reordering of the mind.

Shaw was witness to the writings of fellow Celts Robert Louis Stevenson, who very much admired Shaw’s novel *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (1882), W.B. Yeats, who was sometimes an acerbic critic of Shavian drama, and Oscar Wilde, whom Shaw judged a dilettante, but whose lover, Alfred
Lord Douglas, Shaw nonetheless helped with biographical details of the famous aesthete for Douglas’s own writings. Wilde dubbed himself and Shaw the Hibernian School. Shaw reviewed Wilde’s An Ideal Husband (1895) favourably but was disappointed by his The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). James Joyce, who thought Shaw a mountebank sermonizer, and the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas were also active Celtic writers in Shaw’s lifetime.

Among his contemporaries were John Ruskin, fellow abominator with Shaw of vivisection; Thomas Hardy, one of his most revered artistic icons, who was a contender with Shaw for the 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature (Shaw thought Hardy’s poetry superior to his prose); and G.K. Chesterton, who wrote an incisive critique of Shaw’s work in 1910 and to whom Shaw told, stressing his origins and his chosen country of residence, “I’m a typical Irishman; my family comes from Yorkshire.” Shaw called the physically imposing Chesterton the “Man Mountain.” Along with John Galsworthy and Rudyard Kipling, Shaw was a pallbearer at Hardy’s funeral. He shared his time with E.M. Forster, whose Howard’s End (1910) displayed Shavian influence and who invited Shaw to become a member of a left-wing Permanent Bureau of writers; Virginia Woolf, whom he told that he always connected his play Heartbreak House (1917) with her; and H.G. Wells, who was a sometimes antagonistic fellow Fabian. Shaw described Wells as “our nearest to a twentieth century Dickens,” perhaps a more accurate description than the customary depiction of Wells as the English Jules Verne. Impressed, as had been Stevenson, by Cashel Byron’s Profession, Virginia Woolf declared the novel “much the best thing Shaw ever wrote.” Later, she claimed Heartbreak House to have been her favourite of all his works. It has even been said to have been inspired by her. In addition, there was the medievalist artist-craftsman and fellow socialist the Pre-Raphaelite William Morris, whom Shaw admired immensely but who surreptitiously, through his wife, fed suet to the vegetarian Shaw. Morris had a rare understanding of Shaw, identifying with his own Welsh ancestry almost as much as Shaw with his Irish heritage, ranking Irish and Welsh traditional poems above the ordinary standards by which literature could be measured. Shaw saw the inside of Morris’s home in Hammersmith as a display of Morris’s “artistic taste of extraordinary integrity.” There were also John Galsworthy, who thought that Shaw as a dramatist was “ephemeral”; the poet Max Beerbohm, who was Shaw’s successor as reviewer at the Saturday Review; and the master of polemical rhetoric Hilaire Belloc, who thought Shaw “a gentleman pretending to be a cad” and who, in
1913, together with Chesterton, held a celebrated series of public debates with Shaw as their adversary on traditional Catholic Christianity versus socialism.\footnote{29} “Chesterbelloc” the pair was called in tandem.

Hesketh Pearson, a contemporary biographer of Shaw, began his *Modern Men and Mummers* (1921), “We moderns are products of Bernard Shaw,”\footnote{30} adding later that “Shaw and Wells ... [were] the chief thought-influences of their age.”\footnote{31} J.B. Priestley observed that “Shaw, like Wells, dominated the world in which I grew up.”\footnote{32} Also producing their works in Shaw’s lifetime were George Orwell, who thought Shaw had squandered his talents when he ceased to write novels in the 1880s, and T.S. Eliot, who deemed Shaw “the gadfly of the commonwealth”\footnote{33} and who was one of the few in the 1920s unimpressed by Shaw’s *Saint Joan* – another, surprisingly, was Shaw’s good friend Henry Salt. Poet and literary critic Eliot also described Shaw’s concept of the Life Force from his *Creative Evolution* “a gross superstition.”\footnote{34} The classicist Gilbert Murray dedicated a book to Shaw as a “lover of ideas and hater of cruelty.”\footnote{35} The composer Sir Edward Elgar and Bernard Shaw had a respect for each other that they rarely extended to others, Elgar having come to appreciate Shaw as Corno di Bassetto, music reviewer for the *London Star*, without knowing who he was. His *Severn Suite* he dedicated to Shaw. Arthur Wing Pinero, the foremost English dramatist of the early twentieth century, signed a letter to Shaw in exasperation, “With admiration and detestation.” Shaw is nonetheless thought to have influenced, if not orchestrated, Piner’s knighthood in 1909, the influence being applied on behalf of the theatre rather than Pinero personally. D.H. Lawrence thought *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928) too boring – “Too much gas-bag”\footnote{36} – but Shaw complimented him, albeit obliquely, in *Too True to Be Good* (1931). Fellow anti-vivisectionist Wilkie Collins’s *The Evil Genius* (1886) was reviewed unfavourably by Shaw in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Henry James, whom Shaw recommended for election to the British Academy of Letters, James Barrie, who knew of Shaw’s adulterous affair with Stella Campbell from its very inception, Somerset Maugham, and Noel Coward were also of Shaw’s time and place. All of the above-mentioned non-Celts were writing in England when Shaw lived there. And even the Celts spent some of their time there. Almost all of them enjoyed – or suffered – some relationship to Shaw. The modernist era in British literature was remarkably fulsome and remarkable in its orientation to Shaw.

T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) was a close friend, whom Shaw’s wife, Charlotte, almost regarded as the son she never had – as has been said also of the actor and director Harley Granville-Barker – and to whom...
in her letters she poured out her soul. Shaw’s Private Meek in *Too True to Be Good* is based closely on Lawrence as very gifted in languages and dialects and decidedly superior to his officers in military strategy. Shaw wrote detailed and copious notes on the typescript of Lawrence’s monumental *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), most of which were incorporated into the final book. In effect, Shaw served as its editor. When Shaw turned ninety in 1946, most of his illustrious literary associates had already died. Still, Stephen Winsten, a neighbour of Shaw in Ayot St. Lawrence, as well as a Great War conscientious objector, fellow vegetarian, and author of *Henry Salt and His Circle* (1951), edited a festschrift with contributions from the poet laureate John Masefield, J.B. Priestley, H.G. Wells, John Maynard Keynes, C.E.M. Joad, Aldous Huxley, Gilbert Murray, Max Beerbohm, and Dean Inge. When Shaw died in November 1950, tributes were bestowed from around the world – not least from Harry S. Truman, Eamon de Valera, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Winston Churchill, and Clement Attlee. At the time of Shaw’s death, the former world heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney deemed him “the saintliest man I have ever known.”37 In 1891 the *Sunday World* had remarked, fifteen years after his arrival in London, “Every-body in London knows Shaw.”38 Indeed, Shaw seemed to be known and admired, if not always liked, by just about everybody, although the admiration was sometimes reluctant. With trenchant, if caustic, wit, Oscar Wilde observed that Shaw “has not an enemy in the world and none of his friends like him.”39 Even those who did not always appreciate his work or share his stance on issues were often in awe.

Not quite everyone, however, was impressed by Shaw. For example, top-hatted and black frock-coated40 former Etonian Henry Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), where Shaw had dallied for a while before joining the Fabians, felt, or at least said, that Shaw’s buffoonery had retarded the progress of British socialism by a good couple of decades.41 Their antipathy was mutual. “An assuming man” was Shaw’s caustic phrase for him.42 “Pseudo-Marxists” was how Shaw referred to the SDF. The “Micawber Club” was what graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and former Sussex cricketer Hyndman called the Fabians. When Hyndman declared, “There is no God,” Shaw retorted, “Don’t take the Commandments too seriously. There may be another God besides you.”43 The self-styled Marxist revolutionary Hyndman—who had plagiarized Marx without any acknowledgment in his own writings, much to Marx’s consternation44—said he was opposed to the socialist “movement [becoming] a depository of odd cranks: humanitarians, vegetarians, antivivisectionists, anti-vaccinationists, arty crafties and all the rest of them.”45
Belonging to all five of the denigrated categories, Shaw could not help but feel slighted. Within Hyndman’s view of scientific socialism, Shaw counted as a disreputable “sentimentalist,” for which socialism should have no brook. On the other end of the political spectrum, Catholic Action called him with distaste that “mocking Irishman.”

After years of strained relationship, the final breach between Wells and Shaw came over their diametrically opposed views on the Great War, Shaw deeming Wells a callow amateur and Wells responding with remarks about a shallow attention-seeker with second-hand views. In 1910 Virginia Woolf wrote of Shaw that “his mind is that of a disgustingly precocious child of 2 – a sad and improper spectacle to my thinking.” The Welsh-born Camden Town Group painter Augustus John, who completed three portraits of Shaw in 1915, found his monologues lengthy and dull. Having been asked to sculpt Shaw, Auguste Rodin declared he knew nothing of Shaw’s reputation. The esteemed literary analyst F.R. Leavis ignored Shaw but attacked his fellow foe of Victorianism Lytton Strachey without reserve. For Shaw, being dull, unknown, or ignored was worse than being condemned. Nor were Shaw’s family relationships always in the best of health. He described his father, perhaps unfairly, as if he were addicted to alcohol; vilification of the dead father was a recurrent Victorian theme. Still, Shaw’s description of his extended family as having “minor specialties in drink and lunacy” was not entirely inaccurate. He thought his father a wastrel at the very least. His accomplished music-teacher mother thought Bernard had become “a dreadful procrastinator.” She even thought he had “an awful lack of taste in music.” To his invalid former actress sister Lucy, he was “a smug and preposterous idler.” Nonetheless, there were other times of cordiality and sympathy among them, Lucy even being known to call her brother “the Super-One.” Whatever the range of emotions directed toward him, Shaw was a man for the ages, controversial though he remained.

Karl Marx was still alive and living in London when Shaw arrived there. Although Shaw never met him, Marx was to be an important figure in Shaw’s intellectual life, without his ever becoming a Marxist. So too was Charles Darwin, also living near London, against whom Shaw wrote at length. As well, John Ruskin was still alive but usually to be found studying paintings, landscape, and architecture on the Continent, or ensconced in his home of Brantwood in the Lake District at Coniston, or serving as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford and only occasionally in London; moreover, in his waning years he was not always *compos mentis*. Ruskin had significant influence on Shaw with regard to the purpose of art.
Ruskin’s sardonic dismissal of the autocratic pretensions of the classical tradition in pictorial art appealed to Shaw. The Ruskin whom Shaw admired was the one who married his commentary on art and architecture with a devastating social critique of the epoch in which he lived, a pairing that was as appealing to Henry Salt and William Morris as it was to Shaw. As Ruskin wrote in *Fors Clavigera* (1871-80) (meaning, loosely, “The Power of Good Work”), the “teaching of art ... is the teaching of all things.”

The book was addressed to the “Working Men and Labourers of Great Britain.” For Ruskin, there was an indelible unity of aesthetics and economics. “The art of any country,” he wrote, “is the exponent of its social and political virtues.”

What impressed Shaw was Ruskin’s understanding of art as an expression of social cohesion and his understanding of the division of labour as an instrument for the dehumanizing of the worker, which rendered the artisan no more than a tool; industrialism as practised produced monotony and neurosis. Ruskin would also have been endeared to Shaw by the fact that at least until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Ruskin’s battle for J.M.W. Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites seemed finally to have been won, Ruskin was still anathema at Oxford, the professed guardian of cultural purity, which had also rejected Percy Bysshe Shelley, the greatest of Shaw’s literary heroes.

Having witnessed the birth of the bicycle and then the automobile, Shaw became first an avid cyclist, remaining a member of the Cyclist Touring Club until his death, and then an adventurous early motorist. The habit of omnibus and rail travel, cruises by steamship, and ultimately aircraft travel had begun during his lifespan. Shaw said, after a flight in South Africa, he yearned to pilot a plane himself. He even made a balloon ascent in 1906, accompanied by his sister-in-law and two stage personalities. It was the time of the first higher-education opportunities for women, with University College, London, accepting women in 1870 and Oxford and Cambridge each instituting a women’s college later in the same decade. It was the era of the suffragettes and later, a few years before Shaw’s death, of higher-education opportunities for the working class and, after some ups and downs along the way, of the resounding electoral victory of the Labour Party of 1945, which envisaged a whole new world. There were immense differences between the realities of life at the time of Shaw’s birth, just five years after the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace trumpeted the glories of the Industrial Revolution, and the realities of life at the time of his death, when Britain was rebuilding from the ravages of the Blitz. It was a momentous century that Shaw’s life spanned, and Shaw was something of a Renaissance man within it. He was undoubtedly one
of the most memorable characters of his day and was almost universally regarded as such.

If there is a general theme coursing through Shaw’s veins, whether expressed in his plays, his novels, his essays, his correspondence, his conversation, or his politics, it lies in an endeavour to expose the pretence, prudery, cant, and hypocrisy that pervaded bourgeois society. It is what Gareth Griffith calls “a kind of guerrilla war against established values and practices.” Shaw thought all art didactic; and his plays were emphatically and deliberately so. Along with H.G. Wells, Shaw was the Cassandra of detached literature. Art for art’s sake was anathema to them. As Michael Coren has written of Wells, he believed “it is the job of the writer to provoke, annoy, and if at all possible, alter the way people think and act.” The same could be said of Shaw. By contrast, Oscar Wilde averred that “an artist has no ethical interest at all,” by which we must assume Wilde meant that the artist has no ethical interest qua artist. It evokes John Keats’s famous but enigmatic line from “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819): “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Shaw’s stance was also to be contrasted to some degree with, for example, William Wordsworth and the Romantic Lake Poet tradition. In his 1805 The Prelude, Wordsworth had written of his earliest poetic inclinations:

    My ears began to open to the charm
    Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
    For their own sakes – as a passion and a power –  

As a tyro poet toward the end of his teens, Rupert Brooke wrote in a letter, “The ear I suppose is the only judge of what is right and wrong ... I generally trust to luck and put down anything that sounds all right.” He would later add, a point Shaw would have rejected out of hand, a “poet should write for himself, for God, and for one reader – probably ideal.” As Juliet Barker says of Wordsworth’s study of Italian, the “sheer musicality of the language appealed to his poetic ear.” By contrast, English was conducive to reflection. Of course, it was not melody alone that moved the patriotic and republican young Wordsworth; his evident intention was to promote compassion through his poetry, but melody remained an important part of his versification. Wordsworth’s poetry was written to be read aloud, not read silently in books. Accordingly, rhythm and cadence increased in importance. Even if the verse were written in the language of “low and rustic life,” because that is where “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil,” it was still intentionally lyrical. In an important sense,
Wordsworth was the first democratic poet; his was a poetry alien to the carriage trade, to those comfortable in polite society. “The thoughts, feelings and images,” he asked, “on which the life of my Poems depends ... what have they to do with routs, dinners, morning calls, hurry from door to door, from street to street, on foot or in carriage[?]”62 But he never lost his love for the rhythm of language itself.63 For Shaw, by some degree of contrast, art was, first and foremost, the most useful tool of socialist propaganda, even though, ultimately, for Shaw, “you use works of art to see your soul.”64 He still paid attention to the tonalities and sonorities of the English language, but they were in the first instance the vehicle of effective persuasion. He was not above bending art for the sake of the message. And he was not above consciously rewriting history for the same purpose in his drama: “I care not for historical accuracy if I can get a handsome pictorial effect,”65 Shaw said in response to a question about The Six of Calais (1934). What Oscar Wilde called “careless habits of accuracy” did not plague Shaw’s research. It was undoubtedly broad in scope but neither always precise nor current. G.B.S. was as careless about current events as about history, confessing in 1891 that he was “a fluent liar.”66 But there was always a strictly honest Bernard Shaw sitting on G.B.S.’s shoulder and whispering in his ear. More often than G.B.S. would have liked, Bernard Shaw had the final say.

Shaw wanted to use the theatre as a vehicle for social, cultural, and political change. Yet he claimed “it is art that makes life,”67 seeming to suggest that art was an end in itself. In fact, Luigi Pirandello, the renowned author of Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore (1921) (Six characters in search of an author), believed, against Shaw’s ambitions, that Saint Joan was through and through a work of art: “There is a truly great poet in Shaw.”68 Certainly, music was not absent from Shaw’s prose. Griffith refers to Shaw’s “sweet sound” and “elegance” in argument.69 Nonetheless, the sound in itself stood higher in Wordsworth’s priorities than in those of Shaw. And Wordsworth was less prone to didacticism or polemic, even though he believed that “Every Great Poet is a Teacher.”70 True, a number of his poems were verses to liberty or patriotism, but they did not pontificate on matters of policy or law. Nor did he hector or preach, perhaps the essence of the polemicist. His was not the sometimes harping voice of the didact. Shaw hectored politely with mirth, a rare talent. What Wordsworth and Shaw could be said to share in their passions was what Wordsworth said about his own poetry: “The feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”71 Shaw once told an interviewer, “Every play, every
The preface I wrote conveys a message. I am the messenger boy of the new age. If you piece the various messages together, you will find an astonishing unity of endeavour, often I admit, disguised and embroidered.”72 In the preface to *Man and Superman* (1903), Shaw congratulated himself on not being a belletrist. The belletrist is effete and gentlemanly; Shaw was not or did not wish to be seen so. Even before he wrote his first play, he acknowledged that when he completed the dialogue for the play, it would constitute a sermon. In reality, however, any contrast between didact and aesthete is likely to be overdrawn, for each is but a matter of emphasis, of individual interpretation.73 For the one, the message has priority; for the other, beauty. But each propounds a message, even if it is sometimes a clandestine message, and each seeks beauty, even if it is sometimes given less emphasis.

By the time he became a dramatist of distinction – for many critics throughout his life his distinction lay more in being an infamous than famous dramatist – Shaw had already been a not very successful novelist; and all the novels had been sermons. Initially, he fared no more successfully with his plays. The first five were rejected by all the London commercial theatres. His plays were received well in private readings – “by social reformers, industrial investigators and revolted daughters,” Shaw said.74 But once subject to public display, even in private theatres, the response was far from universally enthusiastic. Yet they did not go unnoticed. In 1897, aged forty-one, he remarked sardonically, “My reputation as a dramatist grows with every play of mine that is not produced.”75 He told his German translator, the Austrian Siegfried Trebitsch, “nothing succeeds like failure.”76

Shaw told H.G. Wells, “the longer I live the more I see that I am never wrong about anything.”77 Michael Holroyd describes this Shavian self-importance as his “Everest of vanity.”78 Early in his dramatic career, he once told Kate Salt, “Mozart is bigger than Wagner as I am bigger than Ibsen.”79 On a world cruise in 1934, he was asked by journalists in India what he thought of Mohandas Gandhi. His immediate response was, “the second greatest man in the world.”80 Perhaps Shaw’s blithe hubris should not surprise us. On the same trip, Shaw was described in a newspaper editorial as “the greatest man ever” to visit Hong Kong.81 A rare moment of humility was expressed by Shaw when he quipped that his sculpture by Rodin would be recognized in another millennium as “Shaw, Bernard, subject of a bust by Rodin: otherwise unknown.”82 The humble awe in which he held Edward Elgar, composer of the *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius*, was an equal scarcity. Existing theatre was infused,
in Shaw’s view, with an aura of unwarranted sentimental romance. The task he set himself was to turn it on its head. Eventually, Shaw’s destiny, his unique contribution to the English theatre, was to write didactic and realistic drama through the medium of comedy. In Shaw’s opinion, “All truly sacred truths are rich in comedy.” In Back to Methuselah (1921), he advised his audience, “When a thing is funny, search it for a hidden truth.” Even politics was infused with humour for Shaw: “The Fabian vein was largely the vein of comedy, and its conscience a sense of irony. We laughed at Socialism and laughed at ourselves a good deal.” A youthful Rupert Brooke reminded us, “Shakespeare’s fools are never merely fools. They are intended to do more than make us laugh.” Bernard Shaw and William Shakespeare shared the same resolve.

**Early Life**

Although Shaw received no more than a smattering of formal education from the four Dublin schools he attended, he developed an earnest attachment to music, art, novels, and drama early in his youth. His university, he used to say, had three colleges: Dalkey Hill (from where he could gaze over Dublin’s Killiney Bay and discern nature along the winding paths of its surround), George Vandeleur Lee’s Amateur Musical Society (where he first heard the sounds of learned music), and the National Gallery of Ireland (where he learned his art and its history). In his will, he described the gallery, within a few minutes’ walking distance of his childhood homes, as that “to which I owe much of the only real education I ever got as a boy in Eire.” He also attended the Dublin theatre and opera whenever funds would permit. When he commenced employment after leaving school, he attended the theatre almost weekly. “At twelve or thereabouts,” Shaw tells us, “I began to read Macaulay, George Eliot, Shakespeare, Dickens and so on.” The “and so on” included an amazing variety for an untutored schoolboy. He became especially attached to Charles Dickens and adopted Dickensian attitudes toward the unjust oppression of the disfavoured. Indeed, Dickensian attitudes formed the basis of Shaw’s disposition that led him to adopt a socialist philosophy. In fact, he confessed in the preface to Back to Methuselah that in his plays he lifted “characters bodily out of the pages of Charles Dickens.” Nearing eighty, he would still observe that “writers like Dickens are privileged to tell the truth without malice or partiality.” About 1870, aged fourteen, he acquired
his first overweening passion: art, especially drawing. In fact, Shaw always felt a measure of regret he had failed to become a reputed painter. In the 1930s, when John Farleigh was employed to draw illustrations for Shaw’s *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), Farleigh realized, he said, that he “was learning the business of illustration from the best master possible.” Shaw spent many hours in his teens studying the paintings in Dublin’s National Gallery, and he enrolled in courses at the Royal Dublin Society School of Art. His tastes in art were eclectic, but as he matured he became especially attracted to the works of Turner, Ruskin, and Morris. As a generality, he was drawn toward Impressionism and the Pre-Raphaelites. He learned music at the eccentric George Vandeleur Lee’s Dublin Amateur Musical Society, which practised its performances in the home the Shaws shared with Lee. Thus, by the middle of his teens, he knew Ludwig van Beethoven’s Mass in C, Felix Mendelssohn’s *Athalie*, George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*, Giuseppe Verdi’s *Trovatore*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and several other such works. Charles-François Gounod’s *Faust* turned him to decorating his room with pictures of Mephistopheles, a figure who played an important role in Shaw’s artistic development, being treated by Shaw as the patron saint of skeptics and mockers. A second major influence on Shaw’s youth with enduring effect was John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), representing the virtues and repudiating hypocrisy. It served for Shaw as a denunciation of the respected establishment. Later, in London, when Shaw was reviewing for the *London Star* under the name of Corno di Bassetto (Italian for “basset horn”), he described music as “the sublimest of the arts.” And “the artistic sense” he believed to be “the true basis of moral rectitude.” Even after he had become a dramatist, Shaw explained, “my method, my tradition, is founded upon music,” mentioning explicitly his indebtedness to Mozart, from whom he had learned that profound matters could be expressed in a light manner. The evolution of ideas he had learned from Beethoven. Shaw regarded music as storytelling. If there were epiphanies in Shaw’s life – what Thomas Hardy called “moments of vision” – they probably occurred through the galleries, theatres, recitals, and books of his intellectual awakening in those Dublin years, just as his mentor Ruskin had experienced his epiphany on his early visits to the Continent, beginning with the old houses of Calais and fulminating in the “scathed old rocks” of the Swiss Alps, the simple architecture of the Swiss cottage, and the hoary stones of Italy. But if there were sacred places in Ruskin’s vista (the “grace with glory” of Chamonix, for example), one looks in vain for a sense of the material sacred and sublime in Shaw.
Ruskin bonded with things and places, Shaw with ideas; ideas constituted the world in which Shaw lived as an artist; they, rather than sites, deeds, and facts, were the bricks and mortar of his being. Still, they shared together the goal of unity and wholeness of knowledge.

Despite his early love of painting, music, and literature, having finished his formal education at the age of fifteen, he found himself at sixteen deprived of all three and firmly ensconced as a clerk in an estate office. To escape the drudgery and indulge his artistic passions, he bought himself a musical handbook and taught himself musical notation. He learned the keyboard – most members of both his nuclear and his extended families played an instrument tolerably well – and began to practise Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* on the family piano left behind in Dublin when his mother, an accomplished amateur concert singer, had followed George Vandeleur Lee to London. Practice and voracious reading gave Shaw the means to acquire the knowledge necessary to become a respected London music critic a few years later.

After he had departed his homeland, the British Museum Reading Room served as his major source of intellectual stimulation, as it did for Lytton Strachey, leader of the Bloomsbury Group. “My debt to that great institution is inestimable,” Shaw reported. It was important for Virginia Woolf, too, playing a pivotal role in her *Jacob’s Room* (1922). For some eight years, it served as Shaw’s “office,” where he educated himself in all the many fields that stimulated his receptive mind. Shaw was a self-constructed man. Indeed, Shaw, the master of self-dramatization, created the public G.B.S. from his own imagination. He played the role of the character he created the whole of his life. Throughout his life, Shaw appeared aggrieved that he lacked the formal education that the university-trained had acquired. He felt strongly that his self-education had equipped him to deal with the vital questions of life just as effectively as did those with formal sheepskins who chose to assume airs of pre-eminence. He was sufficiently dismayed by their pretention that he wrote, presumably not entirely in earnest, “persons with university degrees will have to be politically disfranchised and disqualified as, in effect, certified lunatics.” His self-education and his interests were so broad that after he had become heavily involved in other forms of remunerative activity, he still continued to write regularly for newspapers such as the *Evening Standard*, the *Daily Graphic*, the *Times*, and the socialist *Clarion* on matters as varied as disarmament, polygamy, international financial aid, women’s suffrage, censorship, and marriage. He contributed to the *Daily Mail* his views on vegetarian diet. He continued his contributions to newspapers until the
outbreak of the Second World War, when he slowed down his pace considerably but still managed more than a score in the year of his death. Yet Shaw’s learning, although quite remarkable in its breadth, was superficial in a number of areas in which he pontificated, evolution being one of them. A second failure was his lack of understanding that the human domination over nature that he welcomed would lead to ecological devastation. Shaw’s was a magpie mind, but he lived in an age so rich in the development of specialized knowledge that it had become no longer possible to achieve fully the glory of the classical ideal of the polymath.

**Shaw’s Novels and Early Drama**

Shaw’s first few years in London were notable only for their lack of success. He applied for jobs in vain. He wrote ambitiously, but his novels were continually returned by publishers great and small, the customary complaint being that they were too intellectual for the general reader. “Perverse and crude” was the general judgment of *The Irrational Knot* (1880) by the publishers. The first novel, *Immaturity* (1876), the very antithesis to a *Bildungsroman* in that the principal character does not develop, remained unpublished until 1930, when Shaw was seventy-four years of age. After his fifth novel, *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), had, like the previous four, been rejected by established publishers, he sent the manuscript to fellow vegetarian and Shelleyan James Leigh Joynes, whom he had previously met at a Henry George lecture on “Land Nationalization and Single Tax.” Joynes had recently departed his teaching post at Eton, an appointment also held by Shaw’s friend Henry Salt – to whom Shaw had been introduced by Joynes at Eton in 1880 before either Shaw or Salt had become vegetarians or confirmed socialists. Joynes was co-editor of the new socialist magazine *To-Day* (the other was Henry Hyndman).100 To Shaw’s surprise and delight, in light of all the previous rejection letters, the book was accepted (without remuneration) and published in serial form in the magazine between March and December 1884. At last, G.B.S. the novelist was in print! *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, a novel contrasting the relative innocence of boxing with the vicious cruelties of Victorian society, followed from April 1885 to March 1886. The later convert to Theosophy Annie Besant, a Londoner of Irish descent who had recently met Shaw, published two of his previously rejected novels, *The Irrational Knot*, the knot being marriage, and *Love among the Artists*, comparing artistic meritocracy with
aristocratic inertia, in her socialist-leaning magazine *Our Corner* from, respectively, April 1885 to February 1887 and November 1887 to December 1888. This time he was paid, and although he did not know it, the payment came out of Besant’s own pocket. Finally, Shaw was a reputed professional novelist, at least in the circles that mattered most to him. Yet he remained an unsuccessful novelist in his own mind. His audience was limited to the converted. It was the unbelievers he wanted to convert.

Shortly after his books had been published in socialist magazines, and with some established publishers now awakening to his commercial and artistic value, Shaw decided that his novel-writing days were done. Certainly, he became entirely disenchanted with the novel as an art form. In fact, Shaw regarded his novel writing as an abject and unmitigated failure. He replied to an 1891 inquiry from the publisher Fisher Unwin: “No thank you; no more novels for me. Five failures are enough to satisfy my appetite for enterprise in fiction.” His real interest, he decided, lay in the socialist political realm directly. The Fabian Society – it was often called just “the Fabian” – became his primary home.

In desperation at his self-perceived failures, Shaw felt the need to join societies that were in rebellion against the reigning social order. This led him as a matter of course to the Fabians and the Spelling Reform Society. In 1880 and 1881, respectively, Shaw joined the Zetetical Society (from the Greek for “search”) and the London Dialectical Society, both, in effect, debating societies with socialist leanings. Shaw felt himself quite inadequate in public debate and joined the societies to help overcome his shyness and to be able to express himself in a confident and convincing manner. This was the era of public lectures and debates that were regularly attended in large numbers. Persuasive oratory was the primary medium of being noticed and respected. He eventually emerged from these societies as, by consensus, one of the premier orators in England. The New Shakespeare Society and the Shelley Society were among the other organizations Shaw joined around this time, although he had reservations about what he later called “bardolatry.” It was the proto-anarchist Percy Bysshe Shelley in particular to whom Shaw was attracted, describing him as a “Republican, a Leveller, a Radical of the most extreme type.” Shaw had no difficulty in identifying himself with Shelley. In *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), Shaw drew a parallel between Wilhelm Richard Wagner in the *Ring of the Nibelung* (1852) and Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), each composing dramas of cosmic conflict occasioned by opposition to the instincts of the capitalist order. However, Shaw found the Shelley Society personifying
Percy Bysshe as a pillar of the religious and social establishment. It would appear that the society had succumbed to the ploy of his wife, Mary Shelley, ably abetted by her daughter-in-law, Jane St. John, to present Percy Bysshe, after his early death, as an anodyne conformist rather than as the radical rebel he was. Following the Shelley centenary meeting at Horsham in 1892, where Shelley was presented in genteel disguise, Shaw wondered whether the atheist poet would soon be depicted “in a tall hat, Bible in hand, leading his children on Sunday morning to the church of his native parish.”104 With an apparent change of heart, in 1888 Lady Jane Shelley wrote to Henry Salt to thank him for correcting the Shelley image in a sympathetic monograph of the poet he had written.105 Salt had not hidden the rebel in Shelley. It was Shelley’s radical opposition to animal suffering that led Shaw to become a vegetarian in 1881 at the age of twenty-five, even before his conversion to socialism, to decrying the cruelties of vivisection in several of his plays, and to denouncing the iniquities of hunting in all its forms.

Although Shaw had been long attached to the theatre, it was primarily his awakening to the prominent but controversial Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen that persuaded him in his mid-thirties to devote his life to being a playwright. In January 1890 he announced that his next venture into the realm of fiction, if there were to be one, would be a play. It was at this time that Shaw became interested in avant-garde dramatist Ibsen — the iconoclastic playwright and his meaning having become a common topic of discussion in socialist circles in the 1880s. Shortly thereafter, he wrote the significant critical essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). Ibsen’s work became the model on which Shaw based his social, religious, moral, and philosophical approach to his own drama in opposition to the prudery and sentimentalism of the Victorian stage, although he was never tempted to adopt Ibsen’s style. Ibsen was valued not for his dramatic form but for his repudiation of those hypocrisies now known scornfully as “Victorian” and for his substitution of a competing (and, to Shaw’s mind, decidedly superior) set of social values dramatically inspired. He advised his readers in *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* that “Ibsen’s women are all in revolt against Capitalist morality.”106 On another occasion, however, he was reported to aver that the seventeenth-century nonconformist John Bunyan was the only author from whom one could learn anything. But perhaps he was excluding fellow dramatists. Whatever the source of his ideas, Shaw was adamant that “I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinion ... I have no other effectual incentive to write plays.”107 His respect for Ibsen was
such that the obituary Shaw wrote for him in the *Clarion* began, “The greatest dramatic genius of the nineteenth century is dead.”

Shaw’s first serious venture into the realm of drama resulted in *Widowers’ Houses*, a play about the iniquities of slum landlordism, being first performed at the Royalty Theatre, Soho, in December 1892, when Shaw was thirty-six. Following the initial performances of *Widowers’ Houses* and the hostile reaction of the theatre critics – nasty, dirty, impure, was the verdict – but seemingly rather more favourable response of the public to its run of only two performances, Shaw determined to be even more forthright in his next play. He resolved to uplift the New Woman, show the evils of the marriage laws, and demonstrate the horrors of vivisection and their merciless perpetrators. This play, begun on a visit to the home of his radical vegetarian friends Henry and Kate Salt at Easter 1893, was *The Philanderer*. It is a farce that displays the conflict between individual autonomy and mutual obligation, lauds Ibsenism, denounces animal experimentation, contrasts the self-respecting New Woman with her self-regarding imitator, and distinguishes between the philanderer who is attracted to several women but can never commit to one and the Don Juan who is full of indiscriminate lust but becomes ensnared by his passion. The response of the critics was the same, but Shaw was not too disconcerted. If the plays had been unsuccessful commercially and critically, they had certainly stimulated a clamorous response. And with this outcome Shaw was content, for now. He determined upon a third play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893), of which prostitution (all work for money is seen as a form of prostitution), slum landlordism again, and incest and the marriage laws again are the subjects. Lack of success with his early dramatic ventures convinced Shaw to turn to comedy as the medium for “plays of life, character and human destiny” rather than to write plays concerned directly with currently contentious social problems in a manner likely to arouse the ire of the censor. The critics, however, remained unconvinced of their theatrical quality. Of *Arms and the Man* (1894), which followed *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, often viewed by contemporaries as an unrealistic and unjustified attack on the military profession, Shaw declared, “I created nothing, I imagined nothing, I perverted nothing. I simply discovered drama in real life.” Shaw viewed *Arms and the Man* as a thinly veiled portrait of the contest between dogmatic and programmatic revolutionary socialism and Fabian practical and empirical socialism. More prosaically, it is a play that recasts the traditional hero. The hero is not Sergius the handsome cavalry officer but Bluntschli the private who prefers chocolate to bullets. It is he who is ultimately the recipient of Raina’s affection. Despite the censure,
yet again, of many of the critics, *Arms and the Man*, which opened in April 1894 at the Avenue Theatre, managed by Florence Farr, was something of a modest success, certainly theatrically and even somewhat commercially, although it had an even more successful run in America. On opening night at the Avenue Theatre, all but one of the audience, a future professional critic, rose in applause. The play ran for fifty performances.

However, following *Arms and the Man*, Shaw would have to await the religious melodrama (his first melodrama) *The Devil’s Disciple* (1897) for another success, both theatrical and commercial, this time again in America. The play takes place in eighteenth-century New Hampshire immediately prior to the American Revolution and depicts Puritan oppression there, ending in a rescue from the gallows and a triumphant heralding of the coming rebellion. As Michael Holroyd rightly estimates, “Failure in the West End theatre had diverted him into local politics; disenchantment with local politics and the sudden success of one of his plays abroad were to pull him back to the stage.” Despite his overall lack of success in the theatre, Shaw had become one of the more formidable figures of London life. His blatant self-advertisement through journalism and politics had resulted in a figure never absent from the public eye.

There was a great deal of criticism in concert, much of it not without merit, in the reviews of Shaw’s early plays. Max Beerbohm summed up the customary objections to Shaw’s work with clarity in the *Saturday Review*:

> Mr. Shaw, it is insisted, cannot draw life; he can only distort it. He has no knowledge of human nature; he is but a theorist. All his characters are but so many incarnations of himself. Above all, he cannot write plays. He has no dramatic instinct, no theatrical technique.\(^\text{112}\)

It was not only the critics who complained. The director (then called producer) who was trying to stage *Candida* (1894) in New York, a play in which Shaw explored the *ménage à trois* based on his own experience of what he called the “Sunday husband,” was adamant that the play contained too much philosophizing, “talk. talk. talk.” It was not a play. Shaw thought of it as “THE Mother Play,”\(^\text{113}\) meaning one in which the mother imposes her will on her offspring and the wife infantilizes her husband. Even Shaw’s long-time friend, the reviewer William Archer, judged his plays negatively, even though Shaw said it was through his introduction to Archer that he started writing plays.\(^\text{114}\) In Archer’s view, Shaw was a wonderful philosophical humourist but not a good dramatist, not a dramatist at all. The