

SHAW, THE FORMIDABLE MAN

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By Colton Johnson: Dean of the College Emeritus and Professor of English

In 1908, Bernard Shaw wrote to a schoolmate, Matthew McNulty, a Bank of Ireland employee in Newry. The two had talked some 30 years earlier of a proposed collection of their writings, and McNulty had written to Shaw's sister, recounting family woes and recalling a pledge of Eternal Friendship the two friends had once sealed in blood, declaring they would share one another's prosperity and adversity. Shaw replied that he had, from time to time, mentioned McNulty to influential friends as a sort of Irish Dickens, and he offered a vignette of their situation:

...you did nothing fresh; and I had to drop the subject. Have you any stuff unpublished? On your known record it is a case of thirty years, three children, and three books. It is now clear that you are not going to stun the world by mere brute bulk of work. Think of my five novels, my sixteen plays, my million words of journalism, my thousand lectures! Do you wonder that you cannot open a newspaper without finding some silly lie about me in it, the cumulative effect of all the lies being what you call my reputation...

Now please observe that you have all the fun of this and I have all the drudgery. You are much better off than most of the public in the quantity of emotional luxury and dramatic situation-imagining you get out of the great Shavian idol. He, my ancient friend, rich, famous, successful: I poor, obscure, starving (in a manner of speaking). He growing colder, more distant, dropping me: I proud, silent, sitting with an iron face by the side of my sick wife and the three beings I have brought into the world but enough of this weakness, etc. etc. You get a whole days romance out of saying all this to Lucy; but what do I get out of it?

...As between you and me there is obviously a grotesquely inequitable distribution of money: that is why I am a Socialist. But the rest is all imagination.

...I am neither a rich man nor a successful man as riches and successes are imagined, but simply a Great Mana man of genius still playing on the old Newry lines. And how small and timid a thing the reality behind the Great Man is, you know very well.

Whatever McNulty made of this response, we may take it as characteristic of the brilliant, boundlessly energetic, hard-headed Irishmans ability to introduce chill candor, complexity, irony, and dramatic narrative any time and anywhere, while keeping part of our attention on his difficulty with being himself.

Born in 1856, two years after Oscar Wilde and nine years before William Butler Yeats, Shaw hadn't parents like Wilde's mother (as Speranza, a contributor of nationalist essays to Thomas Davis' The Nation) or Yeats' father (abandoning, in the poets youth, a promising career in law to take up painting and travel in Bohemian and Fenian circles) to at least nudge his eventual career. Like Wilde and Yeats, he created intellectual, literary, and public personalities, but Shaw's never seem either in his long life or in the half-century since his death to have cohabited at all as comfortably. This may be the reason why, of the three mid-Victorians, he seems,

edgily, our closest contemporary.

Shaw's Irish Protestant lineage was solid, but his father's father had gone bankrupt, his father was an alcoholic failure, and his mother, who aspired to a singing career, ran away to London with her singing teacher just before Shaw's sixteenth birthday. Shaw found work in Dublin as a clerk and three years later came to London, where he educated himself at the British Museum, wrote reviews, and completed five novels none of which was published before landing a position as a music critic for *The Star*. Adopting the pseudonym Corno di Bassetto and noting of this obsolete, wretched instrument its peculiar watery melancholy and the total absence of any richness or passion in its tone, he both parodied the London critical elite and joined it. Corno's critical credo: Modesty, hard work, contentment with plain fare, development of ear, underestimation by the public: all these are the lot of the ass and the last of the Bassettos.

After a year and a half di Bassetto disappeared, and a flood of music and drama criticism signed G. B. S. began first for *The World* and, after 1895, for *The Saturday Review*. Reading *Das Kapital* in 1883 had propelled Shaw into philosophizing, organizing, and propagandizing for the fledgling Fabian Society. Thus, he told his aspiring biographer Archibald Henderson in 1903, simultaneously with his criticism, he had written countless economic & political essays and delivered about three harangues every fortnight...before audiences of all sorts, from university dons & British association committees to demonstrations of London washerwomen, always followed by questions & discussions.

Concurrently, Bernard Shaw wrote six plays, saw his first, *Widowers Houses*, open to poor reviews and upon publication sell only 150 copies, and had his second, *Mrs. Warrens Profession*, banned by the Censor in London and closed by the police in New York.* The result of this overlapping toil is the peculiar blend of dramatic narrative, brilliant argumentation, and restless personal declamation that has charmed, annoyed, and worried, respectively, his respective disciples, detractors, and opponents for over a century.

Shaw's continuing hold on us arises in part, surely, from the disturbing equivocation in his writings that prompted Bertolt Brecht, observing Shaw's 70th birthday, to famously declare It should be clear now that Shaw is a terrorist. We smile with him, but his words, taken at face value, are dangerous. Shaw's friend, the journalist Henry Hamilton Fyfe, wrote of this wittiest of men that behind there is always the prophet, the reformer would it be an exaggeration to say, the fanatic? Questioned by Fyfe about his trick of turning everything to ridicule, Shaw declared in grim earnest: If I said what I really mean without making people laugh, they would stone me. Shaw himself described the intentional duplicity in his style: I found that I had only to say with perfect simplicity what I seriously meant just as it struck me, to make everybody laugh. My method is to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say, and then say it with the utmost levity. And all the time the real joke is that I am in earnest.

The line of political dramatists claiming descent from Shaw extends from Brecht at least to Michael Frayn, and the gradual shift in W. B. Yeats' apprehension of him, from dismissal to amused amity to a kind of fearful awe, describes another enduring influence. Meeting him in 1888 at William Morris', the younger man found Shaw certainly very witty. But, like most people who have wit rather than humour, his mind is maybe somewhat wanting in depth. The two writers enjoyed congenial and sometimes collaborative relations, commending each others work from time to time. Writing in 1907 to their mutual friend Florence Farr, Yeats praised a letter to *The Times* from Shaw as logical, audacious and convincing, a really wonderful letter, at

once violent and persuasive, while wistfully wishing Shaw was not such a barbarian of the barricades. Three years later, the serviceable man was an ominous avatar. Writing to Edmund Gosse, Yeats identified the first generation in which the spirit of literature has been conquered by the spirit of the press, of hurry, of immediate interests, and Bernard Shaw is the Joseph whose prosperity has brought his brethren into captivity. He vividly amplified this notion in 1922, the year of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In a section of his *Autobiographies* Yeats recalled his reaction, in 1894, to *Arms and the Man*:

I listened with admiration and hatred. It seemed to me inorganic, logical straightness and not the crooked road of life, yet I stood aghast before its energy. It is possible to write with great effect without music, without style, either good or bad, to eliminate from the mind all emotional implications.. Presently I had a nightmare that I was haunted by a sewing-machine, that clicked and shone, but the incredible thing was that the machine smiled, smiled perpetually. Yet I delighted in Shaw, the formidable man...

Yeats goes further, asserting that when Shaw, booed during his curtain speech, uttered his famous reply, *My dear fellow, I quite agree with you, but what are we two against so many?* he became the most formidable man in modern letters.

⇒ The power of Shaw's intellect and his personality, refracted and multiplied through the volume and diversity of his writings beyond the plays: the lengthy and essential prefaces he attached to them; the criticism (his musical writings alone run to over 2,800 pages); his correspondence (probably over 250,000 items) apparently excites each generation anew. Witness the actor David Staller, who, fascinated at an early age by an archival recording of Shaw on the radio, is observing the 150th anniversary of the Great Man's birth with *Project Shaw*, a series of readings, begun last March and continuing over the next three years, of every one of Shaw's plays. This daunting project has attracted an impressive array of artists, eager to take part in the readings, and Mr. Staller speaks with authenticity of the contemporary urgency of Shaw's plays. And interviewed by *The New York Times*, he confessed a selfish reason: I'd really just like to be able to hear them all.