

Giovanna Franci, *Back to Methuselah. A Metabiological Pentateuch*, in *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, edited by Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson (Paris: Champion, 2000), pp. 77-78.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950, IRL)

Dates: It was written by G. B. Shaw in 1920 and published for the first time in 1921.

Summary: *A Metabiological Pentateuch* is presented as a collection of five plays, a type of human Pentateuch. The plays are preceded by a long Preface – “The Infidel Half Century” – in which the author once again takes up the theme of evolution (already dealt with in *Man and Superman*), not as a follower of Darwin, the “celebrated Buffoon,” but of Samuel Butler and, to a certain extent, the philosophy of Henri Bergson. While his investigation of the problem of time and the mystery of life is theoretically important, there is also a merciless analysis of the causes of the failure of Western civilisation in the aftermath of the First World War.

Analysis: The first play, in two acts, entitled *In the Beginning: B.C. 4004 (In the Garden of Eden)*, takes place in the Earthly Paradise, with Adam, Eve and the Serpent as protagonists. The sight of a dead fawn causes Eve to fear the death while Adam is more worried about an immortality without feelings and emotions. The serpent offers, as a solution to these two forms of impasse, the idea of rebirth through the generation of new beings, that is, the miracle of the creation of life. In the second act, however, confirming the dark humour which underlies the entire discourse, Cain appears, bringing to the world the seed of violence and the desire for domination.

The second play, *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*, takes place in the author's time. The theme of the duration of life returns, alongside the theme of the impossibility, on the part of man, to reach full maturity, something at the root of the unease of society. Despite the sceptical opinion of the Reverend Haslam, the Barnabas brothers believe that it is possible to live to the age of 300. The ironic spirit of the play is seen in the fact that it is Reverend Haslam himself who reaches this age. The metaphysical theme is intertwined with political satire, which confirms the social and political stability of England, despite the socialist and evolutionary ideas which characterised the philosophical and scientific discussion between the two centuries.

In the third play, *The Thing Happens: A.D. 2170*, the scenario shifts about three hundred years, to a future which has little technological science fiction but goes back to the Utopian and satirical tradition as a critique of the present, from Swift onwards. England is no longer a monarchy (remember that in *The Last Man*, set in 2100, the last year of the world according to Mary Shelley, this important institutional revolution took place), but a republic, with a president and a prime minister, named Confucius. The English notables maintain the highest positions, but have conceded to foreigners (Chinese and blacks), the administration of public services. The play is characterised by its critique of the English constitutional system.

The fourth play, *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman: A.D. 3000*, in three acts, is the longest in the collection and opens in Galway Bay, in Ireland. There are still men with short lives, including the subjects of a British Empire with its capital in Baghdad and those of the Empire of Turania. The men who have the privilege of long lives, on the other hand, reside in the old British Isles, especially in Ireland. The irony of the Irishman Shaw is not spared on his fellow countrymen who have erected a monument to Falstaff, champion of cowardice, now at the apex of civil virtues after a series of wars which led to the end of European civilisations. Around the oracle of a Pythoness, we find some of the key personalities of history: an elderly gentleman from Baghdad, especially uncomfortable because of his "old age," a politician who will go back to Baghdad giving a false version of the oracle of the Pythoness, and the Emperor of Turania, a caricature of Napoleon. The Pythoness will order death for the Emperor, so that he does not outlive his glory. Implacable, the Pythoness will also see to the death of the old gentleman by shaking his hand with a lethal grip, when he asks her to be able to remain in the kingdom of men with long life.

The fifth and last play, *As Far as Thought Can Reach: A. D. 31,920*, is pure science fiction. In the year 31,920 AD, the human race has become egg-shaped. There are no more children because, as soon as they come out of the shell, the human beings start talking like adults. The prototype of this new race is a four-year old girl who prefers philosophical reflection about mathematics to children's games and feelings of love. Despite the control exercised on life, death and matter, it is impossible to know what will happen in the remote future and death may come unexpectedly, not with illness, but only by accidents of a various kind. A long discussion on the destiny of life takes place

between a creature just born and the elderly. Finally the protagonists of the first play, Adam, Eve, Cain and the Serpent return, in the form of ghosts while the long finale is given to Lilith, both mother and father of humans, who predicts the continuity of life, even if our short sight can no longer see its developments. The phrase which closes the play, and the entire collection, is: "It is enough that there is a beyond."

Analysis: In this collection of plays, almost a philosophical saga, Shaw displays not only his extraordinary verbal skills, but also his anti-conformist ideas about scientific progress and political, educational, religious and family institutions. Taking inspiration from the discussion about evolutionary and socialist theories, many of which were reopened after the catastrophic outcome of the First World War, namely, Darwin and Marx, who he simultaneously supports and desecrates, Shaw asks himself whether there is real progress in the form of civil development (in the biological and social senses), if the "human animal" can solve the problems caused by his "civilisation" and if there can be hope in the educational process. To do this, he starts from the beginning of human history, that is, what the first five books of the Bible have given us, and he writes a metabiological Pentateuch using many systems and modules of Utopian literature and science fiction. In both the Preface and the first play, where the Serpent is questioned not so much about the origin of words but the cynical and two-faced and ambiguous and multiple use of meaning and structure, Shaw is passionate and eloquent and extremely efficient in doing away with clichés. If, from a certain point of view, we can talk of a "science-fiction" Shaw, who anticipates the experiences and models of our contemporary society, there is also a Utopian and fundamentally positive vision of the value of human life, of the "life force," with special emphasis on the intellectual life and the responsibility of the artist.

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