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# George Bernard Shaw: Theory, Language, and Drama in the Nineties

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'Never have an Ism: never be an ist' Shaw wrote to Lady Mary Murray, declaring in the same letter that 'the object of Fabianism is to destroy Impossibilism'. Shaw's preoccupation with 'right' as well as 'wrong' Isms and ists is evident in the letters, reviews, political and critical essays, and plays of the nineties. A demonstration of the systematic character of this preoccupation may provide a useful perspective for a consideration of Shaw's understanding and dramaturgical use of rhetoric in that decade.

As a self-professed meliorist, Shaw could hardly have gone through the nineties without identifying and challenging pessimism. His enthusiasm for the theoretical side of the task is evident in his essays, letters, and prefaces, but the occasional nature of his writing tends to obscure his consistent approach to the subject. A coherent view of pessimism only really becomes apparent when his discussions of its various kinds are collated.

Shaw's descriptions of pessimism can broadly be classified as 'philosophical', 'scientific', and 'ethical'. His speculations on philosophical pessimism are most concentrated in *The Perfect Wagnerite*. There, the relationship of Schopenhauer to Wagner is seen as one of a pessimist to a meliorist with pessimistic inclinations. Schopenhauer's theory of the Will (as Shaw understood it) is set out: 'to Schopenhauer the Will is the universal tormentor of man, the author of that great evil, Life; whilst reason is the divine gift that is finally to overcome this life-creating will and lead, through its abnegation, to cessation and peace, annihilation and Nirvana. This is the doctrine of Pessimism'.<sup>1</sup> Shaw's own attitude to this was mixed admiration and contempt. Writing to William Archer for instance, he accepts 'his metaphysics' and denies 'his philosophy' by inverting the Schopenhauerist process: 'the real and of course eternally indispensable function of Reason is to devise the means for the satisfaction of the will'. This assertion explains his indignation at being thought anything other than a meliorist: 'His pessimism, and his conviction that the will was the devil and the intellect the divine saviour, marks him off from me . . . in the clearest and most fundamental way.'<sup>2</sup> The opposition

<sup>1</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, standard edition (London, 1976), p. 248. References to *The Perfect Wagnerite* and *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Letters*, edited by Dan H. Laurence, 2 vols (London, 1965 and 1972), 1, 316, 317.

of Wagner and Schopenhauer is seen as less clear cut. Wagner must first be cleansed of Schopenhauerist impurities. His conversion on reading *The World as Will and Representation* is seen as an effect of an impressionable and impulsive nature. In a section of *The Perfect Wagnerite* headed 'The Pessimist As Amorist' Shaw ridicules the would-be Schopenhauerist's advertisement of human love as a panacea. But, ironically, such celebrations of love *do* show Wagner as 'a Pessimist and Nirvanist' since these deny the will. The end of *The Ring of the Niblungs* sins in this respect, advancing 'a clear option that the supreme good of love is that it so completely satisfies the desire for life that after it the Will to Live ceases to trouble us, and we are at last content to achieve the highest happiness of death'. *The Perfect Wagnerite* as a whole, however, is devoted to another Wagner, 'a most sanguine revolutionary Meliorist'. This Wagner dramatizes his affirmation of the will through the personae of (the early) Siegfried and Wotan. It is Wotan who 'seeks . . . some foreknowledge of the way of the Will in its perpetual strife with these helpless Fates who can only spin the net of circumstance and environment round the feet of men'.<sup>1</sup>

The use of quasi-scientific terms to describe the subjugation of humanity speaks of Shaw's preoccupation with controversies over the determinate status of matter. A mechanist interpretation of man and the universe was of course incompatible with a meliorist point of view in its designation of both as 'helpless'; the Fates are as helpless as their subjects because they are seen as part of the mechanical process they perpetuate. George Eliot (as portrayed in a letter to Elizabeth Robins) was in a similar way: 'she got her gift paralyzed by the fatalism which was the intellectually-and-morally-snobbishly-correct thing among advanced people in her day. None of her people have any power of moulding their own destiny: they drift along helpless in the clutch of heredity and environment'. And this happened because she had become 'lost, numbed and hypnotized by "Science"'.<sup>2</sup> In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* George Eliot is bracketed with Darwin, Tyndall, and Huxley. Against their 'advanced' culture stands Ibsen, a true progressive: 'His prophetic belief in the spontaneous growth of the Will made him a meliorist without reference to the operation of Natural Selection'. Unfortunately, Ibsen superficially resembles a pessimist opposition, his predilection for a 'Darwinian atmosphere' laying him open to misinterpretation:

his impression of the light thrown by physical and biological science on the facts of life seems to have been the gloomy one of the middle of the nineteenth century. External nature often plays her most ruthless and destructive part in his works, which have an extraordinary fascination for the pessimists of that period, in spite of the incompatibility of his individualism with that mechanical utilitarian ethic of theirs which treats Man as the sport of every circumstance, and ignores his will altogether.

<sup>1</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, pp. 251, 219, 248, 207-08.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Letters*, II, 77.

Nevertheless, a rejection of the scientific avant-garde is seen as implicit in his attack on old-fashioned 'idealists'. These are recognized by their attempts to impose on themselves and everybody else conduct that is based on abstractions, be these moral systems or romantic fictions. More aware of the implications of this than those of Darwinist theory, Ibsen insists (with Shaw's approval) that 'conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal. And since life consists in the fulfilment of the will, which is constantly growing, and cannot be fulfilled today under the conditions which secured its fulfilment yesterday, he claims . . . private judgment in questions of conduct'.<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere in the essay, this defence of the will is seen to involve a rehabilitation of matter: changing 'conditions' are no longer the property of the pessimist but the opportunity of the meliorist, since they are the arena in which the 'growing' will operates. For all its nods in the direction of 'the gloomy Norwegian' *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is remarkable for this emphasis on 'circumstance' as a creative entity opposed to the control of 'ideals'.

Although his critique of Ibsen explores ways in which ideals retard the life process, it does not directly relate idealism to pessimism. But in his preface to *Plays Pleasant* Shaw describes 'romance' as 'the great heresy to be swept off from art and life — as the food of modern pessimism and the bane of modern self-respect'. The same can be said of the other systems of abstractions since they are virtually interchangeable: 'idealism, which is only a flattering name for romance in politics and morals, is as obnoxious to me as romance in ethics or religion'. In all cases abstractions occasion pessimism through their discrepancy with the realities they bypass. The victim of this sort of pessimism therefore is of two (open and closed) minds. In his article 'A Dramatic Realist to his Critics' this duality is seen in the 'conscious hardy pessimist' who 'dare[s] face facts' but interprets these according to 'certain ethical systems', so concluding that 'all human beings fall into classes labelled liar, coward, thief, and so on'.<sup>2</sup> His predicament is that described in the preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*: 'The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair.'<sup>3</sup> Various of Shaw's correspondents are seen to be either in this predicament or in danger of it. E. D. Girdlestone is warned of the consequences of upholding ethical abstractions and beholding Shaw: 'Morality makes you my deadly enemy (it is your DUTY to burn me at the stake).' Lady Mary Murray is urged to relax her moral attitudes, 'moral attitudes being themselves more potent than alcohol as generators of madness, ruin and despair', while behind Henry Arthur Jones's

<sup>1</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, pp. 53, 52, 53, 125.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw Collected Plays with their Prefaces*, edited by Dan H. Laurence, 7 vols (London, 1970-74), I, 381, 385, 487-88. He also has a shadow, an 'unconscious fearful' pessimist, who 'cannot bear to look facts in the face . . . and yet cannot see real life otherwise than as the pessimist sees it'.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Plays*, II, 37.

'frightfully pessimistic play', *The Masqueraders*, are seen the 'idiotic moral systems according to which human nature comes out base and filthy'.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly the distance between Schopenhauer, George Eliot, and Henry Arthur Jones is narrower than might at first appear. Shaw has estimated dissimilar bases for pessimism according to a theory of the life process as one of creative (as opposed to mechanistic) evolution achieved through the continuity of will and circumstance. Consequently each is found wanting according to this theory: Schopenhauer by seeking to tame the powerful will, Henry Arthur Jones by insisting on abstractions that invalidate circumstance, and George Eliot by asserting the force of circumstance but the impotence of will. Each is ignorant of the life process. Although Shaw does not see pessimism simply as the product of this ignorance, he does see this ignorance as a condition of pessimism.

Of the three types of pessimist it was the idealist who most preoccupied Shaw in this decade. He was a key figure in Shaw's understanding of realism, closely related to the realist and yet estranged from him. The outward sign of this relationship was an acceptance of fact. 'A realist' in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is identified as 'daring more and more to face facts and tell himself the truth';<sup>2</sup> but so also are 'conscious hardy pessimist[s]' in 'A Dramatic Realist to his Critics', who, predictably, 'are great admirers of the realist playwright, whom they embarrass greatly by their applause'.<sup>3</sup> For pseudo-realist and realist alike 'facts' signified an emancipation from the *totalitarianism* of idealism, a totalitarianism which was outlined in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: 'the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct, absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral, may therefore be described as the policy of Idealism'. Such a policy entailed a censorship of facts: 'The idealist rule as to truth dictates the recognition only of those facts or idealistic masks of facts which have a respectable air, and the mentioning of these on all occasions and at all hazards.' To break this rule and yet remain conditioned by ethical (or romantic) systems was to achieve the relative freedom of the lapsed or disillusioned idealist who experienced a dualism unknown to an orthodox idealist like Nora Helmer, who at the beginning of *A Doll's House* is seen as 'happy in the belief that she has attained a valid realization of all these illusions; that she is an ideal wife and mother; and that Helmer is an ideal husband'. By contrast, the realist asserted not merely the right to know, but also the right to interpret what was known

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Letters*, I, 269; II, 61; I, 444.

<sup>2</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 487.

according to his will. In this sense he stands out against *all* idealists, orthodox and unorthodox:

The idealist says, 'Realism means egotism; and egotism means depravity'. The realist declares that when a man abnegates the will to live and be free in a world of the living and the free, seeking only to conform to ideals for the sake of being, not himself, but 'a good man', then he is morally dead and rotten, and must be left unheeded to abide his resurrection, if that by good luck arrive before his bodily death. Unfortunately, this is the sort of speech that nobody but a realist understands.<sup>1</sup>

However, the conflict between the realist and the idealist (orthodox/pessimist) was not beyond resolution. It was only from a narrow perspective that idealism and realism were seen as alien; from a wide perspective they appeared complementary. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* idealism and realism were presented as consecutive stages of a dialectic of developing consciousness. Thus 'Philistinism' although available to circumstance was unable to interpret it, having no ordering capacity. Idealism was intrinsically systematic even though this achievement incurred a removal from circumstance. Idealism therefore, was 'at once higher and more dangerous than Philistinism'. With realism, the ordering capacity was no longer founded on codes of abstractions but on the free play of the hitherto restricted will, so that it was responsive to circumstance in a creative way. The organization of the idealist therefore, prefigures that of the realist, though the new order will signify chaos to the old, occasioning its hostility: 'The idealist, higher in the ascent of evolution than the Philistine, yet hates the highest and strikes at him with a dread and rancor of which the easy-going Philistine is guiltless'. Thus while idealists and realists are outwardly irreconcilable, a solution is possible through internal change: it is open to 'the idealist' to become 'more and more a realist'.<sup>2</sup> Shaw's meliorism is very much in evidence in his treatment of all ide lists a, proto-realists.

His understanding of realism inspired a complex response to rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Shaw was of course, opposed to rhetoric whenever it appeared as an agent of idealist mystification. His occasional writing meant that he could attack such rhetoric from different angles. As a Fabian essayist he criticized the politically polarized attitudes and ideological generalizations attendant on 'ideal Socialism' by (gently) ridiculing un-Fabian speech: 'Our preference for practical suggestions and criticisms, and our impatience of all general expressions of sympathy with working-class aspirations, not to mention our way of chaffing our opponents in preference to denouncing them as enemies of the human race, repelled from us some warm-hearted and eloquent

<sup>1</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, pp. 27, 63-64, 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, pp. 36, 30, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw does occasionally use the term to indicate genre. For example, writing to his publisher Grant Richards, he says: 'I have three realistic plays' (referring to *Plays Unpleasant*). Contrasted with these are his 'Pleasant' plays, of 'dramatic art purely'. *Collected Letters*, 1, 698.

Socialists'. Guilty of such verbal excess were the Social Democratic Federation (H.M. Hyndman's relish for phrases like 'every pauper's tomb' was noted) and the Socialist League, whose purple prose appeared nonsensical beside the matter-of-fact language of The Fabian Society:

Here is the Fabian resolution:

'That the conduct of the Council of the Social Democratic Federation in accepting money from the Tory party in payment of the election expenses of Socialist candidates is calculated to disgrace the Socialist movement in England.' — 4th Dec. 1885

Here is the resolution of the League, characteristically non-Fabian in tone:

'That this meeting of London members of the Socialist League views with indignation the action of certain members of the Social Democratic Federation in trafficking with the honor of the Socialist party, and desires to express its sympathies with that section of the body which repudiates the tactics of the disreputable gang concerned in the recent proceedings.' — 7th Dec. 1885.<sup>1</sup>

But 'fervid orators' and 'stale speeches' were by no means a monopoly of the political platform.<sup>2</sup> Shaw's endurance of these in the theatre drove him to the point of nervous breakdown. In the theatre, however, rhetoric was associated with what in a letter to William Archer Shaw termed 'genteel idealism' which signified conformity to 'the pet ideals of middle-class England, such as the honor of a gentleman, the glory of the nation, or patriotism'.<sup>3</sup> Writing for *The Saturday Review*, Shaw complained of the theatre-going public's appetite for rhetoric of the 'genteel' kind:

What the English public demands in that line is the sort of person whose hand rough men, husky with emotion, can grasp with a resounding slap as they exclaim: 'I declare, Sir, you are the noblest man I ever met!' and on whose knuckles women, with bending knees, can imprint reverent kisses. To this no reasonable person can take any exception: it is a capital thing to know quite clearly and satisfactorily exactly what you want. The only difficulty is to invent the strokes of virtuous conduct that will entitle your hero to such ovations.

Hostility to 'genteel idealism' was also the basis of Shaw's criticism of those actors and actresses who appeared to prefer 'declamation and rhetoric' to 'sympathetic acting', the prince of these being Henry Irving:

Years ago — how many does not matter — I went to the theatre one evening to see a play called *The Two Roses*, and was much struck therein by the acting of one Henry Irving, who created a modern realistic character named Digby Grand in a manner which, if applied to an Ibsen play now, would astonish us as much as Miss Achurch's Nora astonished us. When next I saw that remarkable actor, he had gone into a much older established branch of his business, and was trying his hand at Richelieu. He was new to the work; and I suffered horribly. . . . When some unaccountable impulse led me to the Lyceum again (I suspect it was to see Miss Ellen Terry), *The Lady of Lyons* was in the bill. Before Claude Melnotte had moved his wrist and chin twice, I saw that he had mastered the rhetorical

<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Fabian Socialism*, standard edition (London, 1932), pp. 66, 127, 131, 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Essays in Fabian Socialism*, pp. 133, 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Letters*, I, 258.

style at last. . . . It was a hard-earned and well-deserved triumph; and by it his destiny was accomplished. . . . But suppose he had foregone this victory! Suppose he had said, 'I can produce studies of modern life and character like Digby Grand. . . . But if I try this rhetorical art of making old-fashioned heroics impressive and even beautiful, I shall not only make a fool of myself as a beginner where I have hitherto shone as an adept, but — what is of deeper import to me and the world — I shall give up a fundamentally serious social function for a fundamentally nonsensical accomplishment.'<sup>1</sup>

Shaw's dramatic writing was continuous with his Fabian and theatrical journalism in its criticism of rhetoric as an instrument of idealism. As in his theatre reviews, Shaw focused on 'genteel idealism'; *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *The Philanderer*, *Candida*, and *Arms and the Man* all associate rhetoric with idealism of this kind. At the beginning of *Mrs Warren's Profession* Praed appears cured of the idealist habit: 'When I was your age, young men and women were afraid of each other: there was no good fellowship. Nothing real. Only gallantry copied out of novels, and as vulgar and affected as it could be. Maidenly reserve! gentlemanly chivalry!' The actor of Praed may choose to emphasize 'vulgar and affected' so as to give his audience a clue that Praed has merely refined the idealism of his youth. A few minutes later this is evident in his exaggerated response to Vivie Warren's account of her student life: 'What a monstrous, wicked, rascally system! I knew it! I felt at once that it meant destroying all that makes womanhood beautiful.' Praed's ideals are 'romance' and 'beauty', which he believes are readily available in Ostend and Brussels (unaware that these are the locations of Mrs Warren's brothels).<sup>2</sup> They are also the ideals of Cuthbertson and Morell, who believe they are realized in the theatre and the home respectively. Cuthbertson is modelled on the critic and anti-Ibsenist Clement Scott, who is himself presented as an arch genteel idealist and rhetorician in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*:

The literary workmanship bears marks of haste and disorder, which, however, only heighten the expression of the passionate horror produced in the writer by seeing *Ghosts* on the stage. He calls on the authorities to cancel the license of the theatre, and declares that he has been exhorted to laugh at honor, to disbelieve in love, to mock at virtue, to distrust friendship, and to deride fidelity.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Philanderer* Cuthbertson's confusion of abstractions and reality is seen as concomitant with his confusion of dramatic illusion and ordinary life. In turn this confusion is the condition of a rhetoric that confuses others:

CRAVEN By the bye, what the dickens did he mean by all that about passing his life amid — what was it? — 'scenes of suffering nobly endured and sacrifice willingly rendered by womanly women and manly men' and a lot more of the same sort?

I suppose he's something in a hospital.

CHARTERIS Hospital! Nonsense! he's a dramatic critic.

<sup>1</sup> *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, standard edition, 3 vols (London, 1932), III, 333; II, 89; III, 144–46.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 275, 277.

<sup>3</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, p. 15.



Morell, 'a Christian Socialist clergyman of the Church of England', not only has a copy of *Fabian Essays* on his bookshelves and lectures at the Fabian Society but also, like all good Fabians, is willing to permeate other societies and institutions, be these the Hoxton Group of Freedom (Communist Anarchists), the Tower Hamlets Radical Club, the English Land Restoration League, the Guild of St Matthew, the Independent Labour Party (Greenwich Branch), or the Social Democratic Federation (Mile End Branch). For all his being 'a practised orator' in the Socialist cause, his left-wing catholicity and his relationship with his capitalist father-in-law show that he has escaped the snares of 'ideal Socialism'. But his idealism is within doors, directly affecting Candida, who (in Marchbanks's somewhat partial view) is consequently 'fed on metaphors, sermons, stale perorations, mere rhetoric'. Domestic crisis give this rhetoric full scope: 'I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your defence, my honesty for your surety, my ability and industry for your livelihood, and my authority and position for your dignity. That is all it becomes a man to offer to a woman.'<sup>1</sup>

The orthodoxy of these idealists is apparent in their confusion of dream-world for real world. Sergius, on the other hand, for all his worship of 'romance' and 'beauty' suffers a confusion of a different order, interpreting his author's dictum 'The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair' in an idiosyncratic way: 'Damnation! Oh, damnation! Mockery! mockery everywhere! everything I think is mocked by everything I do.' Although Shaw describes Sergius as 'an idealist who is made a pessimist by the shattering of his illusions', in 'A Dramatic Realist to his Critics', Sergius is in fact seen vacillating between illusion and disillusion, and (until he is relieved of both) is consequently wholly perplexed as to his identity: 'Which of the six is the real man? that's the question that torments me. One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard. And one, at least, is a coward.' As a result Sergius tries to hypnotize himself with a rhetoric he cannot fully accept, finding a partner in Raina, who, although unaffected by pessimism, looks to rhetorical speech to hold her to her faith:

SERGIOUS Dearest: all my deeds have been yours. You inspired me. I have gone through the war like a knight in a tournament with his lady looking down at him!

RAINA And you have never been absent from my thoughts for a moment. (*Very solemnly*) Sergius: I think we two have found the higher love. When I think of you, I feel that I could never do a base deed, or think an ignoble thought.

SERGIOUS My lady and my saint! (*He clasps her reverently*).

RAINA (*returning his embrace*) My lord and my —

SERGIOUS Sh-sh! Let me be the worshipper, dear. You little know how unworthy even the best man is of a girl's pure passion!<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 163, 517, 518-19, 543, 591.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 455, 506, 427, 424-25.

Evidently Shaw chose the direction he saw Irving refuse; he even created 'studies of modern life and character' by depicting characters intent on the 'rhetorical art of making old-fashioned heroics impressive and even beautiful' and failing. The basic conflict between the realist and the idealist in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* had been transformed into a dramatic realist's war on what in a letter to Ellen Terry was described as 'the dead, stupid, rhetorical, stagey past'.<sup>1</sup> However, Shaw's strictures were aimed less at the rhetorical-heroical, more at its 'old-fashioned' usage. The association of the hero with moral/romantic abstractions was regarded as contradictory, since the latter would impose on the former a mode of conduct intolerant of any operation of individual will. Thus as theatre critic Shaw notes that 'one can play "the heroine" under a hundred different names with entire success. But the individualized heroine is another matter', and complains that 'the British public is incapable of admiring a real great man, and insists on having in his place the foolish image they suppose a great man to be'.<sup>2</sup> And in a letter to Mrs Richard Mansfield he makes plain his own ambitions regarding a heroic Drama:

I want to revive, in a modern way and with modern refinement, the sort of thing that Booth did the last of in America: the projection on the stage of the hero in the big sense of the word. Whoever plays Caesar successfully will pass hors concours at once — get the sort of position Garrick, Kemble and Macready held, and that Irving holds here now without having every quite achieved a heroic impersonation.<sup>3</sup>

As the realist desired the renewal of the idealist as realist, so Shaw as dramatic realist desired a renewal of the rhetorical-heroical, which signified its functioning as an adjunct of realism. Shaw therefore elected to play both Bold Slasher *and* Doctor, putting down the rhetorical-heroical and raising it up. Both operations involved not incantation but everyday speech. In each of the plays considered, idealist rhetoric is juxtaposed with a language available to facts, circumstances, 'practical suggestions and criticisms', much as the Socialist League resolution was juxtaposed with that of the Fabian Society. Thus Vivie shatters a rhetorical question based on the assumption of universal motherhood with a series of matter-of-fact questions and observations:

MRS WARREN (*piteously*) Oh, my darling, how can you be so hard on me? Have

I no rights over you as your mother?

VIVIE Are you my mother?

MRS WARREN (*appalled*) Am I your mother! Oh, Vivie!

VIVIE Then where are our relatives? my father? our family friends? You claim the rights of a mother: the right to call me fool and child; to speak to me as no woman in authority over me at college dare speak to me; to dictate my way of life; and to force on me the acquaintance of a brute whom anyone can see to be the most vicious sort of London man about town. Before I give myself the

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Letters*, I, 655.

<sup>2</sup> *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, I, 128; III, 53.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Letters*, II, 90.

trouble to resist such claims, I may as well find out whether they have any real existence.

Charteris responds in a similar way to Craven's 'have you any proper sense of the fact that you're standing between two fathers?': 'I assure you, my dear Craven, I've said everything that fifty fathers could have said; but it's no use: she won't give me up'. Bluntschli 'prosaically' deflates Raina's invocation of Sergius's military heroism:

RAINA (*her eyes dilating as she raises her clasped hands ecstatically*) Yes, first One! the bravest of the brave!

THE MAN (*prosaically*) Hm! you should see the poor devil pulling at his horse.

RAINA Why should he pull at his horse?

And Candida's response to Morell's uxorious heroics is to demolish his rhetoric with a circumstantial account of the conditions that encouraged its use: You should come with us, Eugene, to see the pictures of the hero of that household. James as a baby! the most wonderful of all babies. James holding his first school prize, won at the ripe age of eight! James as the captain of his eleven! James in his first frock coat! James under all sorts of glorious circumstances! You know how strong he is (I hope he didn't hurt you): how clever he is: how happy. (*With deepening gravity*) Ask James's mother and his three sisters what it cost to save James the trouble of doing anything but be strong and clever and happy. Ask me what it costs to be James's mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one. Ask Prossy and Maria how troublesome the house is even when we have no visitors to help us to slice the onions. Ask the tradesmen who want to worry James and spoil his beautiful sermons who it is that puts them off. Where there is money to give, he gives it: where there is money to refuse, I refuse it. I build a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him, and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it, and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so. (*With sweet irony*) And when he thought I might go away with you, his only anxiety was — what should become of me! And to tempt me to stay he offered me (*leaning forward to stroke his hair caressingly at each phrase*) his strength for my defence! his industry for my livelihood! his dignity for my position! his — (*relenting*) ah, I am mixing up your beautiful cadences and spoiling them, am I not, darling?

This effectively leaves Morell speechless. He can now only extemporize with Candida's words: 'You are my wife, my mother, my sisters: you are the sum of all loving care to me.'<sup>1</sup>

But while Candida's speech brings one rhetoric to a close it regenerates another. Up to this point, Marchbanks appears a thrall to love. His amorism has prompted a renunciation of the world, a wish to withdraw with Candida into a private paradise whose pleasures can only be figured in delicate speech:

a tiny shallop to sail away in, far from the world, where the marble floors are washed by the rain and dried by the sun; where the south wind dusts the beautiful green and purple carpets. Or a chariot! to carry us up into the sky, where the lamps are stars, and don't need to be filled with paraffin oil every day.

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 307, 174, 403, 592–93.

At the same time, Marchbanks also prescribes love as the world's remedy, even though he doubts the cure can be administered: 'All the love in the world is longing to speak; only it dare not, because it is shy! shy! shy! That is the world's tragedy.'<sup>1</sup> In these ways the Shelleyan poet prefigures the Shelley and Wagner of *The Perfect Wagnerite*. There, both *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Ring* are seen to 'lapse into panacea-mongering didacticism by the holding up of Love as the remedy for all evils and the solvent of all social difficulties'.<sup>2</sup> And, as has already been noted, Wagner is seen as subject to renunciatory amorism. But *Candida* is not concerned with the making of a pessimist. Whereas *The Perfect Wagnerite* was to emphasize amorism as a subverter of 'the Will to Live', *Candida* celebrates the will's use and triumph over amorism. Even before *Candida*'s speech Marchbanks has managed to refine his passion for her: 'Then she became an angel; and there was a flaming sword that turned every way, so that I couldnt go in; for I saw that that gate was really the gate of Hell.' But it is not until her speech that he escapes love altogether. Her graphic demonstration of what needing (Morell) and being needed (herself) *really* mean allows him to penetrate 'the secret' of the self-sufficient will. A rhetoric that had hitherto registered a vibrant but unrealized self now has a Damascus to celebrate: 'Out, then, into the night with me!'. From here on it is Marchbanks's rhetoric that overwhelms *Candida*'s circumspect speech. Her incipient advice as to their respective ages is met by an invocation of timelessness:

CANDIDA How old are you, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS As old as the world now. This morning I was eighteen.

And when *Candida* refuses to be checked, she is met with the same repulse:

MARCHBANKS Say the sentences.

CANDIDA When I am thirty, she will be forty-five. When I am sixty, she will be seventy-five.

MARCHBANKS In a hundred years, we shall be the same age. But I have a better secret than that in my heart. Let me go now. The night outside grows impatient.

*Candida* is left with the last word, but it is only an exclamation: 'Ah, James'!<sup>3</sup>

This complex relationship of prosaic and rhetorical speech is repeated in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. The play presents two pessimist idealists (Captain Brassbound and Sir Howard Hallam) in conflict, not with each other as first appears but with Lady Cicely Waynflete. That the main agon concerns Brassbound and Lady Cicely is apparent in the clash of their respective languages. Lady Cicely's matter-of-fact speech is a consequence of her never failing concern to ensure the necessary conditions for creative life: The important thing, Captain Brassbound, is: first, that we should have as few men as possible, because men give such a lot of trouble travelling. And then, they must

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 558, 549.

<sup>2</sup> *Major Critical Essays*, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Plays*, I, 577, 593-94.

have good lungs and not be always catching cold. Above all, their clothes must be of good wearing material. Otherwise I shall be nursing and stitching and mending all the way; and it will be trouble enough, I assure you, to keep them washed and fed without that.

Brassbound's rhetoric on the other hand reflects a preference for abstractions over conditions:

I warn you, in those hills there is a justice that is not the justice of your courts in England. If you have wronged a man, you may meet that man there. If you have wronged a woman, you may meet her son there. The justice of those hills is the justice of vengeance.

It is in the second Act that Lady Cicely begins to break down this rhetoric and the assumptions upon which it is based.

Invocation is challenged by interpretation:

BRASSBOUND But his duty as a brother!

LADY CICELY Are you going to do your duty as a nephew!

BRASSBOUND Dont quibble with me. I am going to do my duty as a son; and you know it.

LADY CICELY But I should have thought that the time for that was in your mother's lifetime, when you could have been kind and forbearing with her. Hurting your uncle wont do her any good, you know.

BRASSBOUND It will teach other scoundrels to respect widows and orphans. Do you forget that there is such a thing as justice?

LADY CICELY (*gaily shaking out the finished coat*) Oh, if you are going to dress yourself in ermine and call yourself Justice, I give you up. You are just your uncle over again; only he gets £5,000 a year for it, and you do it for nothing. (*She holds the coat up to see whether any further repairs are needed*).

BRASSBOUND (*sulkily*) You twist my words very cleverly.

The completeness of Brassbound's rout is apparent in the trial scene in Act III, where Lady Cicely speaks *for* him ('a man should tell his own lies. I'm sorry you had to tell mine for me'). In this sense the relationship of Brassbound and Lady Cicely resembles that of Morell and Candida, except that Brassbound has no one to receive him in defeat. His first impulse is to achieve what is already granted to Morell: 'I want a commander.' But Brassbound is finally to approximate to Marchbanks rather than Morell. By *asking* for help with the force of his will ('he is unconsciously mesmerizing her') Brassbound is revealed to himself in an unsuspected way. He too has discovered the realist's secret, a secret that (in contrast to Candida) Lady Cicely also knows. The plays ends with a celebration of each other's knowledge, with rhetoric restored:

BRASSBOUND (*He kneels and takes her hands*) You can do no more for me now: I have blundered somehow on the secret of command at last (*he kisses her hands*): thanks for that, and for a man's power and purpose restored and righted. And farewell, farewell, farewell.

LADY CICELY (*in a strange ecstasy, holding his hands as he rises*) Oh, farewell. With my heart's deepest feeling, farewell, farewell.

BRASSBOUND With my heart's noblest honor and triumph, farewell. (*He turns and flies*).

LADY CICELY How glorious! How glorious! And what an escape!<sup>1</sup>

In *Candida* and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* the making of a realist involves a salutary demonstration of circumstance, this being necessary for the realization of the will. In this sense only is prosaic speech antipathetic to rhetoric. For those who have achieved realism there is no conflict. The audience does not see Marchbanks and Brassbound after the epiphanies of their conversions, but it does see Lady Cicely as available to both modes; it also sees the hero of *Caesar and Cleopatra* in much the same way. Caesar is as meticulous a planner as Lady Cicely and the Fabians, using a language consistent with long office hours. But he too is aware of the mystery in the machine, able to switch in seconds from a circumspect speech to the 'gay, defiant rhetoric' of Apollodorus:

CAESAR And mind where you jump: I do not want to get your fourteen stone in the small of my back as I come up. (*He runs up the steps and stands on the coping*)

BRITANNUS (*anxiously*) One last word, Caesar. Do not let yourself be seen in the fashionable part of Alexandria until you have changed your clothes.

CAESAR (*calling over the sea*) Ho, Apollodorus: (*he points skyward and quotes the barcarolle*)

The white upon the blue above —

APOLLODORUS (*swimming in the distance*) Is purple on the green below —

CAESAR (*exultantly*) Aha! (*He plunges into the sea*).<sup>2</sup>

As a music critic, Shaw was convinced that nonsensical language could celebrate a musical context that gave it meaning. Thus, in a letter to the librettist Julian Sturgis, he insisted that 'Balderdash *can* express emotion',<sup>3</sup> a notion that he had explored at greater length in an article for *The World*: He (the tone poet) can make Isolde say nothing but 'Tristan, Tristan, Tristan, Tristan, Tristan', and Tristan nothing but 'Isolde, Isolde, Isolde, Isolde, Isolde', to their hearts' content without creating the smallest demand for more definite explanations; and as for the number of times a tenor and soprano can repeat 'Addio, addio, addio', there is no limit to it. There is a great deal of this reduction of speech to mere ejaculation in Wagner. . . . Nay, you may not only reduce the words to pure ejaculation, you may substitute mere roulade vocalization, or even balderdash, for them, provided the music sustains the feeling which is the real subject of the drama, as has been proved by many pages of genuinely dramatic music.<sup>4</sup>

As a mere dramatist, Shaw had to rely on verbal action for the provision of a context that would justify what, in its absence, would appear 'balderdash'. Since his philosophy afforded not only argument but also celebration, Shaw could permit himself the license he refused the Lyceum, but granted Bayreuth.

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Plays*, II, 347, 348, 373, 410, 415, 416, 417.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Plays*, II, 248–49.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Letters*, I, 384.

<sup>4</sup> *Music in London*, standard edition, 3 vols (London, 1932), III, 134.