

## Chapter 11

### *Yeats and His Daughters : Heartbreak House*

"The years to come seemed waste of breath  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life , this death."

Yeats , *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*

Shaw called *Heartbreak House* "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes. " The term 'fantasia' is significant. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Music, a fantasia is

Fantasy or Fancy. Generally a composition in which form is of secondary importance...Such compositions were usually contrapuntal and...often with a common theme... Sweelinck and Bach used the term fantasia...in which the character of the music suggested an improvisational character or the play of free fancy. In the 19th century the term was applied by Schumann, Chopin and others to short mood pieces.<sup>1</sup>

The play has the quality of a fantasy or dream, a quality not very common in Shaw's plays, especially his early ones, which are as neatly crafted as well-made plays. *Heartbreak House* strongly produces the impression that it is

Shaw's *Kubla Khan*, a self-procreating dream that used the dramatist merely as its medium.

The atmosphere itself is conducive to a dream : the play begins in the evening and with every act moves further into the night so that when the third act begins it is " a fine still night, moonless "<sup>2</sup> and the last night train has left. Almost every character is wrapped in his or her dream even when nominally awake. When the play begins Ellie Dunn is dreaming of romance and impossible adventures. The stage direction observes that she is " in a day dream "<sup>3</sup>, Hector Hushabye, the Marcus Darnley of Ellie's romance, snatches at the slightest chance and "falls into a daydream "<sup>4</sup> and like a somnambulist fights an imaginary duel with an adversary who has no existence outside his dream. Ellie says to the Captain: " I like you to dream. You must never be in the real world when we talk together "<sup>5</sup> " Hypnotised by Ellie, Boss Mangan spends a considerable time on the stage in a state of trance, unable to move his limbs. When the last act begins, Ariadne is lying in a hammock, Shotover is asleep on the stage and we learn from Hector that Randall and Mazzini Dunn are already in bed. Captain Shotover is the only person who attempts to fight his dreams and remain awake, but he knows that the battle has been lost :

To be drunk means to have dreams ; to go soft ; to be easily pleased and deceived, to fall into the clutches of women. Drink does that for you when you are young.

And when you are old... the dreams come by themselves... I drink now to keep sober, but the dreams are conquering.<sup>6</sup>

Not only is the atmosphere suggestive of a dream, the play itself has the structure of a fantasy. Captain Shotover's house is described by Ellie as a "house without foundations."<sup>7</sup> The behaviour of the characters would be very inappropriate in a realistic setting : the father does not recognize his daughter and says : "You should grow out of kissing strange men".<sup>8</sup> When she insists on being kissed by Hesioné, Ariadne is asked to come without make-up. Ellie is invited to Shotover's house but finds no one to receive her.

Shaw makes no attempt at verisimilitude. The incongruity between normal behaviour and actual behavior would seem strange and unconvincing, the lack of what Eliot calls objective correlative would seem an artistic failure unless one grasps the fact that the action is presented in the mode of a dream ; not explicitly as in the interlude of *Man and Superman*, but implicitly. Once this is granted, the action ceases to be confusing. For example, though the play is about the war, it seems at first baffling that it does not even once mention it. Indeed the presence of the bomber planes can be inferred by the audience, but to the characters the bombing is either 'the Judgment' or Beethoven's music :

MRS HUSHABYE [ emerging panting from the darkness ]

Who was that running away ? [ She comes to Ellie ] Did you hear the explosions ? And the sound in the sky : it is splendid : it's like an orchestra : it's like Beethoven.

ELLIE By thunder, it i s [ sic ] Beethoven. <sup>9</sup>

The sound of the bomb becomes transmuted in the consciousness of the characters into an orchestra. The Captain treats his house as a ship, behaves like a captain and speaks the language of the navigator. In the play symbols occupy the place of things symbolized. No doubt, a dream itself is a symbolic vision, but the discrepancy between an objective situation and the subjective response points to a dreamwork rather than an ordinary allegory. The possibility that the *dramatis personae* may exist only in the author's dream is hinted by Mazzini Dunn :

I sometimes dream that I am in very distinguished society, and suddenly I have nothing on but my pyjamas ! Sometimes I havent even pyjamas. And I always feel overwhelmed with confusion. But here I dont mind in the least : it is quite natural. <sup>10</sup>

What Mazzini Dunn's words probably mean is that he is now participating in a purer dream than the one he finds in his sleep : in an ideal dream there should be no confusion since the incompatibility between distinguished society and pyjamas belong to mundane reality which, by infiltrating his

dream, disturbs the fantastic possibilities of an uninhibited vision. In *Heartbreak House* the dream is not broken by any such outside influence.

The visionary quality of the play is responsible for an authenticity not always found in Shaw. In very few of his plays did he surrender so completely his proneness to polemics to a vision that 'occurred' to him. Consequently the density and ambiguity of the play is as much a mystery to his strained optimism as to the ordinary reader. Asked to explain the play Shaw replied, " How should I know ? I am only the author. "<sup>11</sup>

Here at last there was a play about which Shaw could claim that it wrote itself, he merely held the pen. It was a " real play " and " real plays...are no more constructed than a carrot is constructed. They grow naturally."<sup>12</sup> Shaw insisted that the play did not contain a word that had been foreseen before being written.<sup>13</sup> The result of such automatic writing was that Shaw wrote a play in which many of the themes of *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *Man and Superman*, *John Bull's Other Island* and *Major Barbara* returned, but for the first time he faced himself without an intellectual dodge. In a sense *Heartbreak House* was the rewriting of the old plays with greater integrity.

The war years were the most fateful years in Shaw's life. The First World War was a European calamity, but to very few people was the magnitude of the disaster as great

as it was to Shaw. Many writers lost their sons—— Shaw had none—— but to them the personal bereavement had the gloss of tragedy : they lost their children in a great patriotic war in which Englishmen were called upon to sacrifice their all for national honour, freedom and civilization. To them it was a war for the defence of the motherland, a war against the Huns, a war for the highest ideals of the human race.

For Shaw it was different. In an unprecedented show of spiritual debauchery millions were killing one another, but the temerity to question the reasonableness of the war was deemed treason. Once the battle-lines were drawn, patriotism took very little time to go over to the side of Xenophobia. Anyone who declined to join the chorus hailing the English effort was shouted down as a traitor. This was one of those moments in history when no misfortune is greater than the misfortune of being a fatherlandless fellow. To Shaw the war was no Judgment Day separating the English sheep from the German goats, it revealed no angels with luminous wings casting away Satan from the shores of Albion. He had foreseen its possibility long ago and attributed it to the abdication of responsibility on all quarters.

Before the war Shaw had proposed a triple alliance between England, France and Germany so that if France attacked Germany, England would combine with Germany to crush France, and if Germany attacked France, England would

combine with France to crush Germany. The Foreign Office, of course, paid no heed to his advice. When history exacted the price of folly and the war broke out and everybody seemed to have lost his head and compounded the stupidity with lies, distortions and hysteric hallelujah to England, Shaw took upon himself the task of setting the record straight. He cooped himself up in a hotel at Torquay and spent two months penning a pamphlet that became famous as *Common Sense About the War*.

This put the fat in the fire. If Shaw had expected to educate the public, he could not have been more disappointed. According to Robert Lynd, from the moment of publication of *Common Sense About the War*, "the war was spoken of and written about as a war between the Allies on the one hand, and, on the other, Germany, Austria, Turkey and Bernard Shaw."<sup>14</sup>

Instead of bringing sobriety, the article sowed dragon's teeth in the minds of men he had valued as friends. R.B. Cunningham Graham declared that through the article Shaw had attacked "his hereditary enemy, England."<sup>15</sup> Arnold Bennet discovered in it "disingenuous, dialectical bravura",<sup>16</sup> Henry James accused Shaw of "deliberately descending into the arena and playing the clown".<sup>17</sup> Henry Arthur Jones denounced Shaw's "mischievous treason" and declared that Shaw "kicked and defamed [Englishmen's] mother when she was on a sickbed."<sup>18</sup>

The indignation was not confined to England . Theodore Roosevelt, in his letter to an English friend, denounced "the unhung traitor Keir Hardie, the blue-rumped ape Bernard Shaw, and the assemblage of clever and venomous but essentially foolish and physically timid creatures".<sup>19</sup> The *New York Sun* editorially reprimanded him for choosing "their days of tribulation for sticking pins into his own people".<sup>20</sup>

For Shaw the war was a preventable horror that had no tragic dignity. He was staggered by its wickedness and its mindlessness. About Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, he wrote to Gilbert Murray :

Will he never realize that he could have stopped the war, probably by a shake of his fist and that he was too nice and cautious to do it? Do the ghosts of the million slain never come to his bed and point to the mangled entrails and Edipusted (sic) eyes and say "Thus didst thou"? I hope not. The only consolation one has in thinking of him is that he will never know.<sup>21</sup>

Shaw's was a lonely voice in the war. And that voice was answered with intense hostility, the strength of which he could not have suspected before the war. He was insulted, reviled, ostracized and called a traitor.<sup>22</sup> And those who had lost their children or their close friends found a strange fulfilment in the war. As the editor of Shaw's

collected letters points out :

For Shaw the shockingly exorbitant toll was intolerable, and as news filtered through of the slaughter of the sons of William Archer, Carlos Blacker, William Maxwell, J.M. Barrie, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Richard Mansfield, Lady Gregory and other close friends and colleagues, he cursed and he wept. There had been little compensation in knowing he had been right...and...had nothing to withdraw.<sup>23</sup>

Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary on 28th July, 1916 : "[Shaw] is really frightened that civilization, as we know it, is going bankrupt and not so sure that he knows how to prevent it, even if the stupid fools and naughty children would take his advice. "<sup>24</sup> There was, of course, little possibility of the naughty children taking his advice when a sedate middle-aged intellectual like Henry Arthur Jones doubted his ancestry and called him a "freakish homunculus, germinated outside lawful procreation"<sup>25</sup> for daring to air his views.

This was the atmosphere in which *Heartbreak House* was written and this is the reality that lies behind the pretty elegance of *Hesione* and *Ariadne*. The meaning of the play cannot be understood unless one keeps in mind the circumstances in which the play was written.<sup>26</sup>

Although Shaw calls *Heartbreak House* a phantasia in the Russian manner on English themes, the similarity with

Chekhov is not very obvious except for the fact that both *Heartbreak House* and Chekhov's plays are constructed like musical pieces. In the Russian's plays the authorial presence is much more subdued; with a tone of nostalgic pity Chekhov sympathises with all his characters even as he knows that they are bootless. *The Cherry Orchard* or *Uncle Vanya* is shot through with a smile tinged with suffering, for the compassion of the author makes no distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. In *Heartbreak House* the author's voice is stentorian, it is the voice of Ecclesiastes and Micah, of Swift, Carlyle and the later Tolstoy. 27

In Shaw's plays love and happiness are the ultimate symbols of corruption, these two things symbolize softness, rottenness and surrender of spiritual activity. They symbolize drift and the soul's decay. We have seen that in *Man and Superman* Octavius and the Devil (in the interlude) are the exponents of these qualities. The Shavian hero's abhorrence of love and happiness is not less strong than his abhorrence of hell, in fact the two become synonymous in *Man and Superman*, in which hell is not the place of eternal torment in the conventional sense, it is the place of eternal torment in the Shavian sense— it is the place of eternal love and eternal happiness. The true hero in his plays resists love; his Caesar is godlike precisely because to him Cleopatra does not mean anything more than her

kitten, his Candida is the Virgin Mother because she gives a lie to the Morrishian formula that love is enough, his Lady Cicely is intensely vital because she has not been corrupted by sexuality, his Joan is a saint because she is androgynous. In the most symbolic of his plays, it is therefore natural that the ultimate corruption should manifest itself in the form of *dolce vita* : in *Heartbreak House* the characters show almost tape-wormish amorousness. In *Man and Superman* the debate between Don Juan and the Devil is brought to an end by Juan when he leaves hell, which he compares to a confectioner's shop, for an austere heaven in which the joy of contemplation replaces the pleasure of fornication.

In the years intervening between the two plays the gloom descending upon Shaw's consciousness thickened considerably and this is evident from the fact that almost all the characters other than the Captain — even the hard-boiled Boss Mangan — are slave-driven by the two sirens, Hesione and Ariadne. When she realises that her projected romance with Marcus Darnley has ended in her chasing a crooked shadow, Ellie suffers a heartbreak. However the guidance of the octogenarian Captain ensures that her broken heart does not impair her sound soul ; in all other cases the soul breaks with the heart. When, as in the case of Ariadne, the heart does not break, serious doubts are raised about the existence of her soul. Ellie's

fate is just one silver lining in a mass of dark clouds, and the ambiguity of the ending almost obliterates the silver lining. The mitigating factor in the overall corruption is so weak that we are reminded of Hector's words: "Decent men are like Daniel in the lion's den : their survival is a miracle, and they do not always survive."<sup>28</sup>

Not unexpectedly the chief occupation of the men and women in *Heartbreak House* is love-making. Hesione, the high priestess of Eros, reminds the men that women have found for them the land of the Lotos Eaters: "Open your eyes : Addy and Ellie look beautiful enough to please the most fastidious man : we live and love and have not a care in the world. We women have managed all that for you."<sup>29</sup>

Only Shotover, whose voice approximates that of the author, knows that the happiness is "accursed happiness", that it is " the sweetness of the fruit that is going rotten."<sup>30</sup> Yet unlike Tennyson's Ulysses he is too weak and too old to resist. He has only memories of "resisting and doing", of standing on the bridge in a typhoon. He has nothing to look forward to and cannot prevent his ship from being driven to the rocks.

The world of *Heartbreak House* is not purgatory, it is hell ; the residents are human only in shape and show close affinity with animals. Reference to hell and comparison with animals form a recurrent motif : Randall is a "poor devil" who "howls" when Ariadne twists his heart, Managan "howls"

when Hesione twists his,<sup>31</sup> Hector believes that the "devil gave him [Shotover] a black witch for a wife ; and these two demon daughters are their mystical progeny."<sup>32</sup> To Randall Ariadne is "a maddening devil,"<sup>33</sup> more hateful than the most hateful animal. Hector says that they are all "useless futile creatures."<sup>34</sup> A desperate Shotover wonders: "Are we to be kept for ever in the mud by these hogs" <sup>35</sup> Hector sees hell in Ariadne's fascination for him<sup>36</sup>, the red light over their door is a sure sign to Hector that Mangan and Randall are hellish creatures<sup>37</sup>, the two sisters are "vampire women, demon women",<sup>38</sup> Hector himself is to his father-in-law "like a damned soul in hell."<sup>39</sup> Mangan's soul lives on pig's food<sup>40</sup>, Ariadne is as strong as a horse<sup>41</sup>, Hector compares himself to Hesione's lap dog<sup>42</sup>, he says he does not wish to be drowned like a rat in a trap,<sup>43</sup> that he has contemplated the killing of human vermin.<sup>44</sup>

In *Man and Superman* hell is inhabited by the sensual man; the commander who burns incense at the altar of love and happiness is attracted to hell even as Juan steps out of the bliss-hawking fleshpots into a heaven that is conducive to his intellectual passion. The hell of *Heartbreak House* is more than a state of mind, it permits no easy exit. Don Juan can move with aplomb from hell to heaven, Captain Shotover must float or sink with his crew.

The play is pervaded by Hecotr's terrifying realization that decent men do not always survive. The hell of *Heartbreak*

*House* is far more terrifying than that of *Man and Superman*, which is founded on brilliant witticism. The hell of *Heartbreak House* radiates intense horror simply because it is the vision of a writer living in the shadow of death — death not only or even primarily of himself but of millions like him, of humanity at large: "We are members of one another," Shaw said in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.<sup>45</sup> When such a man sees the human race as a race of vermin as Gulliver did at the height of his existential horror, the chill that moves down the spine of the audience is an entirely new experience.

In the heartbreak years — the years in which Shaw's play germinated—he learnt the bitter truth about the power of illusions and lies. Lost souls have no use for truth. In *Man and Superman* Juan knows that to live in hell is to be surrounded by lies and illusions. In his private hell a battered Shaw had a taste of intense hatred whenever he attempted to dispel the lies that became a convenient shield of jingoes against the truth of the war. The doomed creatures in Shotover's house similarly batten on illusions. Ellie is drawn not to Hector but to the fictitious Marcus Darnley. The incredible romance of this non-existent character would not impose on a sane child, it imposes on Ellie. She decides to marry Mangan because she thinks Mangan is a captain of industry when he actually lives on commission. Hesione is almost an Aphrodite in the temple of

eroticism and love into which Captain Shotover's house has been transformed, yet her hair comes off at night. That wretched idealist, Mazzini Dunn, who is incapable of bringing his daughter up on a decent budget, thinks he is a soldier of liberty. Captain Shotover, who in his more realistic moments sees himself as a rotting fruit and needs rum to keep his wits together, aspires to what he calls the seventh degree of concentration, a state that will enable him to destroy human vermin like Mangan and Randall :

ELLIE      There seems to be nothing real in the world except my father and Shakespear. Marcus's tigers are false ; Mr. Mangan's millions are false ; there is nothing really strong and true about Hesione but her beautiful black hair ; and Lady Utterwood's is too pretty to be real. The one thing that was left to me was the Captain's seventh degree of concentration ; and that turns out to be -----

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER      Rum.<sup>46</sup>

All the characters are idealists in the sense Shaw used the term in the *Quintessence of Ibsenism*.<sup>47</sup> None of them has the courage or the ability to look reality in the face and orient his or her action according to its demands. They are all enemies, therefore, of the Life Force ; driven by fixed illusions and fantastic ideas they drift along. Yet there is an important difference between the *Quintessence of Ibsenism*

and *Heartbreak House*. In the earlier work the idealists are in a minority, the world is composed primarily of philistines who do not help the evolutionary process but provide it with the much-needed ballast. Their instincts are earthy but healthy, they are well-adjusted to life and do not endanger or threaten it. The men and women who have assembled in *Heartbreak House*, like the people who called the shots during the war years, are dangerous animals precisely because all — or almost all — of them are idealists in the Shavian sense.

There is no saviour figure in *Heartbreak House*. The Captain, who knows that the happiness induced by love is like the euphoria of a drug addict, cannot stem the rot. The rot has got him instead, for he admits: "You can be happy when you are only half alive. I am happier now I am half dead than ever I was in my prime. But there is no blessing in my happiness."<sup>48</sup>

Such impotence in the face of certain doom permeates the atmosphere of the play. Not for a moment is the reader allowed to forget that Europe is on the powder keg and the fuse has been lit. It is against this background that the reader is invited to judge the characters. Randall is the representative of the entire group in having his heart broken to have a change from having his head shampooed.<sup>49</sup>

One is thus provided with a knowledge of the etiology of the disease that affects civilization. It would not matter

if these people were nobodies or atypical freaks, what makes the play frightening is that they are the cream of society. Objecting to Hector's denunciation of them as heartbroken imbeciles, Mazzini Dunn makes an important amendment :

MAZZINI Oh no. Surely...rather a favourable specimen of what is best in our own English culture. You are very charming people, most advanced, unprejudicial, frank, humane, unconventional, democratic, free-thinking and everything that is delightful to thoughtful people.<sup>50</sup>

As Bernard Dukore points out that like Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*. *Heartbreak House* exposes "the social deficiencies of what is best in that society."<sup>51</sup>

That the house in which people live like pigs in clover represents the whole of England, nay, perhaps the whole of civilization, is emphasized by Hector :

HECTOR We sit here talking, and leave everything to Mangan and to chance and to the devil. Think of the powers of destruction that Mangan and his mutual admiration gang wield ! It's madness : it's like giving a torpedo to a badly brought up child to play at earthquakes with.<sup>52</sup>

Here *Heartbreak House* takes up the most important theme of

*John Bull's other Island* and *Major Barbara*. To Broadbent, Undershaft and Magan the world is a machine to grease their bristles",<sup>53</sup> and those who should have led in the fight against them have withdrawn into romance or idealism, into the world of senseless empty talk. What then is to be done? How is the world to be saved?

In *John Bull* and *Major Barbara* Shaw came up with an answer but that answer is no longer serviceable in *Heartbreak House*. He believed or liked to believe—for I think that in both cases there was an evasion resulting from his reluctance to probe his mind deep enough—that Broadbent and Undershaft could be appropriated by Doyle and Cusins. The conclusion was dramatically unsatisfactory in each case as it sought to substitute intellectual dogma—unverified and unverifiable at any given moment of history—for artistic intuition. In *Heartbreak House* Shaw is no longer prepared to prostrate himself before a tailored utopia. Ellie argues with Captain Shotover as Larry Doyle argued with Peter Keegan or Undershaft with Barbara, but her argument is drowned by the moving power of Shotover's conviction: "Riches will damn you ten times deeper. Riches wont save even your body."<sup>54</sup> The Shavian hero can no longer be consoled by facile optimism. Shotover's last words draw our attention to the fact that an alliance with Mangan, far from saving Ellie's soul, cannot hold off even her physical destruction. Not for a moment does Shaw allow the dilution

of his belief that Mangan and company are presiding over the liquidation of the human race. In *Major Barbara* lack of money was almost a sin. In *Heartbreak House* Shaw's hero faces the fact that money "is not made in the light."<sup>55</sup>

Two conflicting points of view — one of the Captain, the other of Hector — compete to gain the upper hand in the play : the first seeks purgation of the world through the extermination of the human vermin, the other insists that no purgation is possible because the human race — at least that part of it which is on view and which is represented by the upper crust — is composed solely of vermin. The Captain pins his hopes on a mysterious power that will enable him to kill people like Mangan:

HECTOR What is the dynamite for ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER To kill fellows like Mangan.

HECTOR No use. They will always be able to buy more dynamite than you.

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER I will make a dynamite that he cannot explode.

HECTOR And you can, eh ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER Yes : When I have attained the seventh degree of concentration.

HECTOR Whats the use of that ? You never do attain it.

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER What then is to be done ? Are we to be kept for ever in the mud by these hogs to whom the

universe is nothing but a machine for greasing their  
bristles and filling their snouts ?

HECTOR Are Mangan's bristles worse than Randall's  
lovelocks ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER We must win powers of life and death  
over them both. I refuse to die until I have invented  
the means.

HECTOR Who are we that we should judge them ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER What are they that they should judge  
us ? Yet they do, unhesitatingly. There is enmity  
between our seed and their seed. They know it and act  
on it, strangling our souls. They believe in  
themselves. When we believe in ourselves we shall kill  
them.<sup>56</sup>

Hector's answer that it is the same seed becomes a paradigm  
of black irony as he later invokes the heavens to destroy  
the entire race. This is the first explicit plea for  
liquidation in any of Shaw's plays. This, as we shall later  
see,<sup>57</sup> is the common thread running through Shaw's later  
plays and pamphlets. Shaw's growing sympathy with dictators  
and his insistence on liquidation as an act analogous to the  
weeding of the garden can be explained, I think, by his  
belief that the liberal atmosphere of *Heartbreak House*,  
spoken of in such glowing terms by Mazzini Dunn, is the  
liberalism that tolerates the spread of rabies but not the  
shooting of a rabid dog.

The gap between the two perceptions, the perception of the Captain and that of Hector, at one stage becomes too narrow to be visible. The divine judgement that falls from the sky in the form of a bomb at the end of the play bears out Hector rather than the Captain. The Captain's seventh degree of concentration and the search for power proves as elusive as his daughters' search for redemption through the primrose path of dalliance. Unable to stop the drift, he admits that his dream was a pipe dream: "the last shot was fired years ago."<sup>5B</sup> This, virtually, is the end of all hopes of purgation :

HECTOR And this ship we are all in ? This soul's prison we call England ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER The captain is in his bunk, drinking bottled ditch-water ; and the crew is gambling in the forecastle. She will strike and sink and split. Do you think the laws of God will be suspended in favour of England because you were born in it ?

HECTOR Well, I dont mean to be drowned like a rat in a trap. I still have the will to live. What am I to do ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER Do ? Nothing simpler. Learn your business as an Englishman.

HECTOR And what may my business as an Englishman be, pray ?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER Navigation. Learn it and live, or leave it and be damned.

ELLIE Quiet, Quiet : youll tire yourself

MAZZINI I thought all that once, Captain ; but I assure you nothing will happen.<sup>59</sup>

Heaven chooses that very moment —— the moment Mazzini Dunn lets the warning go unheeded —— to vent its ire on man. The new element in Shaw's pessimism is seen not in the character of Mazzini Dunn or Mangan, but in that of Hector. The obtuseness of the impossible idealist and the unscrupulousness of the capitalist we have seen in Ramsden, Octavius, Croft and Undershaft, the combination of the two we have seen in Broadbent. But what is unprecedented is the erosion, almost complete, of the will to fight these forces ; the pusillanimous surrender to moneybags and gasbags. Shotover is too old and too weak, but Hector, the winner of many Albert medals, and the possessor of sound moral judgment at the theoretical level, behaves as abjectly as Mazzini Dunn and Randall, and instead of doing something to prevent the catastrophe, he invites, in grand operatic style, the heavens to fall and destroy the futile creatures. Bar Captain Shotover he alone knows that those who have gathered in Heartbreak House do not deserve to live, and yet he allows himself to hang by the petticoat of a wife who has "used [him] up and left [him] nothing but dreams, as some women do" so that he can do nothing "but tell lies to women"<sup>60</sup>

Though only Mangan and the burglar are killed by the bomb, heaven seems to be in agreement with Shotover's prophecy that the next one will get the rest of them, and with Hector when he damns the whole lot : "There is no sense in us. We are useless, dangerous and ought to be abolished"<sup>61</sup>

In his puppet play, *Shakes vs Shav* Shaw claims that *Heartbreak House* is his *King Lear* :

SHAKES Where is thy Hamlet ? Couldst thou write King Lear ?

SHAV Aye, with his daughters all complete. Coulds(Sic) thou  
Have written Heartbreak House ? Behold my Lear.<sup>62</sup>

Yet the similarity between the two plays lies only at the superficial level. *King Lear* is Shakespeare's most terrible vision, yet the play ends with the tragic joy of acceptance. Shaw's play does not end with nature regaining its harmony : it depicts a world in which almost every character turns, like Lot's wife, into a pillar of salt. A play of complete negation, it shows God's dissatisfaction with His own work and vindicates "Heaven's threatening growl of disgust at us useless futile creatures."<sup>63</sup>

In the dark sky Hector reads two possibilities : "Either out of that darkness some new creation will come to supplant us... or the heavens will fall in thunder and destroy us."<sup>64</sup> The play confirms the second possibility and J.I.M Stewart

is justified in remarking that "what lies just beneath the play's surface is despair."<sup>65</sup> It is this despair which makes the play a work of existential horror rather than a tragedy.

It is true that *Heartbreak House* was written when the whole world was sick and Shaw himself was briefly laid up with the attack of the same virus. There is no doubt that the war acted as a catalyst and certain tendencies that lay dormant in Shaw suddenly flared up. Without the war Shaw's vision of the Judgment would probably be less disturbing but it is equally true that the war brought out nothing in Shaw that was not already there. The same war gave to Rupert Brooke's poems that rare combination of patriotism without xenophobia : his poems became a fragrant bouquet of love and sacrifice. Even Wilfred Owen, who was much more like Shaw in feeling that the futility of the bloodbath made a mockery of heroism had as his characteristic tone pity rather than despair. The soldiers who had to kill each other because of the folly of politicians were always human enough to feel the tragedy of their situation, and two soldiers who fought each other could meet in the world of the dead where all hatred was washed away. The most terrible thing about *Heartbreak House*, on the other hand, is not pity at the butchery of millions but despair mixed with the sadistic satisfaction that the race of human vermin is fulfilling heaven's design. Such despair and fury as we find in the

play was also evident in Shaw's reply to Mrs Patrick Campbell who wrote to him of her son's death and remarked that the letter the company Chaplain had sent her was "full of tragic gentleness and praise for my brave son" :

It is no use : I cant be sympathetic : these things simply make me furious. I want to swear. I do swear. Killed just because people are blasted fools. A chaplain , too, to say nice things about it. It is not his business to say nice thing about it, but to shout that "the voice of thy son's blood crieth unto God from the ground."

To hell with your chaplain and his tragic gentleness ! The next shell will perhaps blow him to bits ; and some other chaplain will write such a nice letter to his mother. Such nice letters ! Such nice little notices in papers ,<sup>66</sup>

Shaw's pent-up fury and his remoteness from the spirit of tragic acceptance<sup>67</sup> robs Hector's act of switching on the lights and setting the house ablaze to attract the attention of the bombers of all ambiguity. Hector has prayed to the heavens for the destruction of Heartbreak House, and the blazing light, surely the nearest thing to ritualistic fire under the circumstances, is his votive offering accompanying the prayer. He is not carrying out Captain Shotover's doctrine of living dangerously. Standing on the bridge

Shotover was fighting the storm, fighting the blindness of chance ; he was fighting to save the ship from sinking. Hector is not fighting, nor is he trying to save the ship, he is surrendering to fate and hastening the destruction. Captain Shotover's house, built in the shape of a ship, is the central symbol of the play, and the symbolic meaning of Hector's action should be judged by its potential impact on that symbol. At a more literal level Hector's courage is the courage of the gambler playing Russian roulette, it is in tune with his walking out of a third floor window and getting in through another to test his nerves.

Since *Heartbreak House* is not primarily a study of leisured Europe before the war but a dream that telescopes the etiology as well as the manifestation of civilization's cancer, Hector's courage represents the daring that drew from Shaw's benighted soul curse after frightful curse: "Oh damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, DAMN DAMN !" 68

The stupidity of Ariadne, who almost composes a litany to the virtues of the bamboo and the horse and sees her husband's methods as the only answer to the world's ills could not have induced the unbroken darkness into which Shaw found his soul plunging. The fact that people like Mrs Campbell's son and Hector Hyshabye, people far superior to jingoistic blockheads, surrendered their will to live and found fulfilment in death makes *Heartbreak House* so despairing. Thus though in the *Common Sense About the War*

and in his letter to Gilbert Murray<sup>69</sup> Shaw held Edward Grey and the British foreign policy responsible for the war, in the play he goes far beyond such superficial conclusions and realizes that the human race, the best of the human race, is gripped by death-wish. His sarcasm was tinged with a great deal of sadness when he wrote to Lady Gregory, who had just lost her son in the war :

Only the other day Mrs Patrick Campbell's son... got promoted to the staff and was immediately killed in his dugout by the blast shell from a German battery... Like Robert he was a very good looking man of a refined type, who left the Navy because they are all drunken philistines there and took to art. Like Robert he never seemed able to find any full expression of himself in art or society. Like Robert he seemed to find himself in doing dangerous things. His mother thinks he got all the life he wanted out of the war and nothing else could have given it to him.<sup>70</sup>

Here then, was the clue to Hector's courage, and Shaw's comments on that courage. However, it should be added that neither Lady Gregory, nor Mrs Campbell, inspite of their irreparable loss and great sorrow, despaired as Shaw did. They accepted their suffering with tragic calmness. It was not the pain, but the method of responding to that pain that made the difference and the method was certainly not the

result of the war. This difference was memorably summed up by G.K. Chesterton : "Shaw has never had Piety... The cult of the land, the cult of the dead, the cult of that most living memory by which the dead are alive... the permanence of all that has made us, that is what the Latins meant by Pietas."<sup>71</sup>

.What is intriguing in *Heartbreak House* is that Ellie should join Hector and Hesione in hoping for the return of the bombers. She is one character who seeks life and when she realizes that Mangan cannot give her that life she makes Shotover her spiritual husband. About her Shaw wrote : " I took the greatest care that... she should be in the sharpest contrast to all the heartbreakers."<sup>72</sup> If Hector and Hesione make a travesty of Shotover's art of living dangerously, Ellie acts as a true disciple of her master, for whoever else may have invited the bombers, it was not she ; but in the event of their coming she responds with adequate courage. As the Captain says : "Courage will not save you ; but it will show that your souls are still alive."<sup>73</sup> While Hector has to destroy the world to show that his soul is still alive, Ellie, who has not sought that destruction can evince that possibility with an undaunted soul that is still alive. If that is so, then inspite of rejecting tragedy Shaw succeeds in accommodating one tragic strain in a work that otherwise belongs to a very different genre. Ellie may be expressing a very ambiguous and unexpected feeling of Shaw,

who reacted in much the same way in similar circumstances. In a letter to the Webbs during the war he expressed that strange feeling while narrating the fate of a Zeppelin that had been shot down shortly after flying over Ayot St. Lawrence, where Shaw lived :

A Zeppelin flew over Ayot St. Lawrence with the nicest precision over our house straight along our ridge tiles. It made a magnificent noise the whole time... And not a shot was fired at it... [Shaw says it was subsequently brought down]. I went to see the wreck on my motor bicycle... What is hardly credible but true, is that the sound of the Zepp's engine was so fine, and its voyage through the stars so enchanting, that I positively caught myself hoping next night that there would be another raid.<sup>74</sup>

Did Shaw find himself for a brief while in the company of Robert Gregory and Mrs Campbell's son and discover, like them, a perfect beauty in the great act of daring regardless of the consequences ? Or was Shaw, touching the nadir of negation, giving expression, like Hector, to his repressed death wish ? Whatever the case, it is clear that while composing *Heartbreak House*, in spite of what he thought and wrote about the war, Shaw had more in common with Hector and Ellie than he dared to acknowledge. As the dream of John Tanner lay shattered, Shaw instinctively availed himself of

Hector's choice. If he had to sacrifice the hope of eternal life, he saw no reason why death should not compensate for the loss by being as beautiful and thrilling as possible. Probably the beauty of the bomber plane that Shaw welcomed was more than aesthetic. At a moment when life had let him down he probably felt a moral justice in the Zeppelin, and like Robert Gregory felt — though he could never admit it — a fulfilment in the imminence of beautiful death. In a play in which he had relaxed the internal regimentation that allowed him to pursue nothing but comedy, the close association of beauty with death at last made death a positive goal.

Chapter 11 : Notes and Reference

1. Michael Kennedy, *The oxford Dictionary of Music*, p. 240
2. CP V, p. 158.
3. Ibid., p. 79.
4. Ibid., p. 99.
5. Ibid., p. 148.
6. Ibid., p. 147.
7. Ibid., p. 134.
8. Ibid., p. 67.
9. Ibid., p. 178.
10. Ibid., p. 173.
11. Hesketh Pearson, *George Bernad Shaw : His Life and Personality*, p. 363. Also see CP V, p. 189.
12. Archibald Henderson. *The Table Talk of G.B.S.*, pp.62-63.
13. Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century*, p. 625.
14. Quoted in *Sixteen SelfSketches*, p. 118.
15. Quoted in Stanley Weintraub, *The Journey to Heartbreak : the Crucible Years of Bernard Shaw, 1914-1918*, p. 61.
16. Ibid., p. 62.
17. Ibid., p. 63.
18. Shaw, *Collected Letters* vol. III, p. 320.
19. Weintraub, op.cit., p. 64.
20. Ibid., p. 69.
21. *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 301.
22. Henry Arthur Jones took the initiative to expel Shaw

from the Dramatists' Club. Shaw had to marshal evidence to prove to his erstwhile friends that he was not a traitor. See, for instance, his letter to Jones, *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 322.

23. Dan H. Laurence, editorial comment. *Collected letters*<sup>3</sup> vol III, p. 240.

24. *Beatrice Webb's Diaries*, p. 228.

25. Allan Chappelow, *Shaw : The "Chucker-out"*, p. 349.

26. Though Shaw maintains in the preface that the play was written before the war, the editors of The Bodley Head Edition state that it actually began on 4th March 1916 and ended in May, 1917, i.e. at the height of the war. See CP V, p. 10.

27. Crompton says : "There is more of Carlyle and, indeed, of the old Testament in *Heartbreak house* than in any other of Shaw's plays." Louis Crompton, *Shaw the Dramatist*, p.135. Charles Berst remarks that the aesthetic direction in Shaw is "away from a sad tone poem of nostalgia toward a cacophonous fantasia which forebodes apocalypse." Charles Berst, *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*, p. 223.

28. CP V , p. 101.

29. Ibid., p. 169.

30. Ibid., p. 148.

31. Ibid., p. 174.

32. Ibid., p. 156.

33. Ibid., p. 154.

34. Ibid., p. 159.
35. Ibid., p. 100.
36. Ibid., p. 99.
37. Ibid., p. 101.
38. Ibid., p. 102.
39. Ibid., p. 142.
40. Ibid., p. 143.
41. Ibid., p. 99.
42. Ibid., p. 103.
43. Ibid., p. 177.
44. Ibid., p. 101.
45. *Major Critical Essays*, p. 57.
46. CP V , pp. 165-66.
47. The terms are discussed in the last chapter of this study.
48. CP V , p. 169.
49. Ibid., p. 174.
50. Ibid., p. 173.
51. Bernard Dukore, *Money and Politics in Ibsen Shaw and Brecht*, pp. 82-83. However, I feel that Dukore underestimates Shaw's pessimism in arguing that Shaw's tirade is against capitalism, not against the ingrained deficiency in human nature.
52. CP V , p 175.
53. Ibid., p.100.
54. Ibid., p.145.

55. Ibid., p.105.
56. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
57. On numerous occasions Shaw supported the extermination of unsuitables. For a few samples see chapters 13 and 14.
58. CP V, p. 176.
59. Ibid., p. 177.
60. Ibid., p. 102, P. 103.
61. Ibid., p. 159.
62. Ibid., p. 475.
63. Ibid., p. 159.
64. Ibid.
65. J.I.M Stewart, *Eight Modern Writers* , p. 171.
66. *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 525.
67. Shaw advertised *Heartbreak House* as a comedy. see CP V, p.58.
68. *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 525.
69. Op. cit.
70. *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 527.
71. G.K.Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, p. 269.
72. *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 744.
73. CP V , p. 179.
74. *Collected Letters*, vol. III , pp. 425-26