

Chapter 12

From Mother's Womb to Egg-Shell : Back to Methuselah

" Not in Utopia — Subterranean fields —
Or some secreted Island, Heaven Knows where
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us — the place where, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all ! "

Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

" Give us back, oh give us back
Our bodies before we die "

D.H. Lawrence, *Cry of the Masses*

Shaw's views have often been at variance with those of the mainstream, but the divergence has never been so pronounced as in *Back to Methuselah*. The revulsion that the play generates is largely dependent on the belief that the Ancients embody Shaw's ideal. Thus Chesterton says that Shaw is wedded to "the notion of a world governed by ghostly Tertiaries, of bloodless Struldbrugs who kill people for purely sociological considerations."¹ In other words *Back to Methuselah* is Shaw's *Brave New World* written with the opposite value premise : Huxley's hell is Shaw's paradise. Shaw himself compared the work with the masterpieces of Dante, Michael Angelo and Bunyan and in the postscript of the play, written in 1944 , claimed that "Back to Methuselah is a world classic or it is nothing."²

When he called the play a world classic, Shaw did not pretend that its artistic merit equalled that of *The Divine*

Comedy; what he maintained was that it was, like the Italian's poem, a cosmic comedy, and succeeded in articulating, through a new religious idiom, the possibility of man's salvation. According to him, world classics

try to solve, or at least to formulate, riddles of creation. In them the Life Force is struggling towards its goal of godhead by incarnating itself in creatures with knowledge and power enough to control nature and circumstances.³

Thus Shaw himself appears to endorse the belief of his critics that the Ancients in Part V are godly creatures and almost as superior to us as we are to the amoeba. Yet if that is the thesis of the play then the critics are entirely justified in pointing out that Shaw's paradise is the product of a cowardly flight from human emotions.⁴ The unconvincingness of the Ancients' claim that one moment of the ecstasy of their lives would strike the infants—who in their mental make-up are almost identical with a normal human being of our times—dead has been exposed by Chesterton :" It consists in first inventing 'an unknown figure, about which nobody can even imagine anything...and then saying arbitrarily that he will not need something which everybody needs very much indeed."⁵

Shaw has often stood in the way of the proper appreciation of his plays and nowhere has he been a greater stumbling block than in *Back to Methuselah*. A word must

first be said about the axe that Shaw had to grind while making his pronouncements on the play. It is true that he often enjoyed the perversity with which he unsettled his critics, but the seriousness of the preface and the postscript of *Back to Methuselah* shows that Shaw was not being impish. The writer of the preface sincerely believed the play to be a world classic because he wholeheartedly wished to believe so. During the war he had written *Heartbreak House*, the nihilism of which had left no room for hope: the meaning of that play was so painful to Shaw that he consistently refused to recognize it, avoiding all questions by simply asserting that he was merely the author and could not be expected to know the meaning of the play. But this was an uncharacteristic reply because Shaw generally strained every nerve to discover optimism in his own work. The wasteland created by the war had parched every soul, including his own, yet it was not something he could bear to contemplate.

Shaw's search for hope began with his assault on Darwinism. He blamed Darwinism for the prevailing moral imbecility and naked animalism. Whereas religion proclaimed fellowship in which we are all equal and members of one another...Darwinism proclaimed that our true relation is that of competitors and combatants in a struggle for mere survival and that every act of pity or loyalty ... is a vain and mischievous attempt to lessen the

severity of the struggle.⁶

Shaw found Neo-Darwinism even more villainous than Darwinism because it "produced a European catastrophe of a magnitude so appalling that...it is still far from certain whether our civilization will survive it."⁷ In this context *Back to Methuselah* is Shaw's contribution to the modern Bible and he offers the play "as an alternative to the scrapping of our species as a political failure, and its replacement by a new experiment in creative evolution."⁸

In the play he tries to show how the world can be changed if people can be persuaded to pin their faith on creative evolution. Inspite of his much-publicized disillusion with progress, Shaw was a Victorian in his faith in teleology. The world revealed by Darwin is a world dominated by chance, a world in which God--- by whatever name He is called --- has gone into retirement, a world in which "human improvement can come only through some senseless accident."⁹ This world left Shaw deeply shaken. He sounded pathetic as he remarked that "when its whole significance dawns on you, your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you."¹⁰ Shaw claimed that he had written the play to bring back hope into the world. He had so far been a mere artist, with this play he became a religious prophet as well : "Indeed art has never been great when it was not providing an iconography for a live religion."¹¹

It is obvious that in its bare outlines *Back to*

Methuselah is the vindication of Shaw's religious faith but he himself (in his comments on *Heartbreak House*) drew the readers' attention to the autonomy of his imagination. His religious conversion did not succeed in completely subordinating his dramatic genius. The antagonism between the hidden roots of his poetic life and his lucid philosophic conviction is the most remarkable feature of the dramatist. At places— as in the last speech of Lilith — where he succeeds in pressing his art into the service of his philosophical aim the play becomes unconvincing and mawkish, but except at such places it is not at all conducive to the Shavian interpretation we find in the preface.

Shaw's Bible begins in the Garden of Eden and ends in 31,920 A.D. This vast stretch of time is divided into five parts. The leitmotif, which runs through all the parts, is the conflict between two kinds of imagination—an imagination that sees a thing as it really is and an imagination that shares the quality of cheap drama and can grasp only the distortion of the realistic imagination. In Part I the Serpent and Eve possess the genuine article and Cain the distortion (Cain's case, however, as we shall see, is problematic). Thus the Serpent says: "You imagine what you desire ; you will what you imagine ; and at last you create what you will."¹² (The inherent idealism and the faith in the primacy of idea and its domination of matter is, needless to

say, deeply influenced by the *Republic* of Plato.) Cain, on the other hand , has another kind of imagination. Being diseased and distorted,it can only be destructive :

I have imagined a glorious poem of many men, of more men than there are leaves on a thousand trees. I will divide them into two great hosts. One of them I will lead; and the other will be led by the man I fear most and desire to fight and kill most. Think of that ! all(sic) those multitudes of men fighting , fighting , killing, killing ! The four rivers running with blood ! The shouts of triumph ! the(sic) howls of rage ! the curses of despair ! the(sic) shrieks of torment ! That will be life indeed : life lived to the very marrow : burning, overwhelming life. Every man who has not seen it, heard it, felt it, risked it, will feel a humbled fool in the presence of the man who has.¹³

The cycle explores the contrast between the two imaginations, the creative imagination allied to life, and the destructive imagination allied to death . In Part II, the Barnabas brothers take the place of Eve and the Serpent; Barge and Lubin step into Cain's shoes and talk of politics and government, elections and stunts without realizing for a moment that their hands are red with the blood of thousands of men. The same theme, appearing briefly in part III in the encounter between the Archbishop and Mrs. Lutestrong on the

one hand and the Accountant General on the other, returns in a big way in Part IV in the meeting between the Emperor of Turania and the Oracle; when it becomes a modified reenactment of the cave scene described in the *Republic* of Plato. But though Shaw follows Plato at many places—in his conception of reality as the materialization of prior idea, in the separation between idea and matter, in the conflict between the appetitive and the rational faculties—he makes a significant departure. For Plato all visible forms of creation are a reflection of a transcendental Idea; the original Idea existing as immutable Form being the author of all creation. Shaw, on the other hand, provides us with a metaphysics of evil. In *Back to Methuselah* the transcendental Idea—the Evolutionary Appetite—is not all powerful. Lilith's imagination, the imagination of the Serpent and that of Eve follow the Platonic paradigm, but Cain's imagination is not Platonic, it is not a weak reflection of the divine Idea; his imagination has sovereignty of its own, like Lilith he can will what he imagines and create what he wills, but he wills conflict, death and destruction. His imagination differs from the Serpent's as antimatter differs from matter. He does not fail to see a thing as it really is, for he accurately foresees the consequences of his imagination, but he sets himself up as a rival of Creative Evolution. Shavian theology in this respect resembles Gnosticism, Manichaeism

and Zoroastrianism. Just as Ahur Mazda is not the author of Ahriman, nor the controller of the latter's destiny (or as in Gnosticism, God is not the creator of Satan, nor therefore, the author of evil) so the two imaginations as conceived by Shaw are not cognate in nature.

As Shaw is not propounding a rigorous philosophic system, he shuffles his terms : we are not told how, if the Life Force is not the author of Cain's imagination and if the power of the Life Force is not unlimited, the supersession of Cain can be a foregone conclusion.¹⁴ In Shaw's mind Cain and Napoleon are identical, yet actually they are similar only in what they do, not in what they are, for unlike Cain, the Emperor of Turania is not a potent author of evil, he is plainly incapable of facing naked truth, and his life is a melodrama because he can only perceive reality when it is perverted in a mummery and presented melodramatically.

Margery Morgan¹⁵ notes the close resemblance between Plato's cave and the Oracle's temple but omits a fundamental difference. In Plato's cave reality is perceived dimly through a shadow, it is like a faded photograph. In Shaw's play Napoleon sees a thing precisely as it is not, he sees the perversion of reality. The difference between the two is the difference between a weak-visioned man and one seeing hallucinations. Shaw is much more pessimistic than Plato, for in his play the difference of degree has been changed into a difference of kind. Considering the fact that knowledge is

virtue, Plato's scale is graded along different degrees of virtue, Shaw's binary scale has merely two points; virtue and vice. The encounter of Napoleon with the oracle encapsulates the history of man on this planet, and Shaw's unambiguous verdict is that man is no more fit for survival than Napoleon.

The process sketched out in the play seeks to trace the development of old Adam into the Perfect Adam. As the compass moves from myth to history the tone shifts from the Biblically grave to the satirical. The paradox of *Back to Methuselah* is that in the most religious of Shaw's works the nature of the satire produces the impression³ that the caricature, instead of gripping the crisis of civilization, is merely flirting with it in the manner of farce. Shaw undoubtedly tries to show their criminal dereliction of duty, but Burge and Lubin are so ridiculous that it is extremely difficult to relate them to historical figures; consequently it is equally difficult to accept them as authors, or part authors, of such a terrible tragedy as the First World War. Shaw's art finds its most trying test in this section, for he tests the limits of the power of burlesque. The study of Burge and Lubin is made in the same mode as the study of Ramsden and Broadbent, but the style here is the means to a different end, it is the vehicle of a deep pessimism that descended on Shaw during the War, an attitude that permeated the entire atmosphere of *Heartbreak*.

House, the play that preceded *Back to Methuselah*.

There can be little doubt that Shaw intended the audience of "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" (only once was the entire cycle presented together, on all other occasions the impact of each part of the cycle on the audience was that of a separate and complete play) to experience something analogous to what they feel while reading *The Waste Land* of Eliot — the promise, or the possibility, of deliverance contrasted with the curse that has blighted the world. To serve Shaw's purpose Burge and Lubin must also justify the despair of the Elderly Gentleman, whose death is virtually self-immolation brought about by the horror that Burge and Lubin, reincarnated as Burge-Lubin, inspire. In *Back to Methuselah* Shaw attempts to seize upon Ramsdenism and blow it up until the laughter of the audience hardens into intense moral revulsion. To do so the satire of the play must touch humanity profoundly, not jig around it in circles.

One is not sure whether Shaw succeeds, for neither the enormity of the catastrophe nor the full measure of the statesmen's responsibility is depicted as Shaw works indirectly, assuming the contemporary audience's knowledge of recent history. The audience witness the smugness of the two men, their unscrupulous jockeying for power, with each playing dirty games behind the other's back, complete unawareness that there is blood on their hands, and their

refusal to learn anything from the disaster. This must have added salt to the raw wounds of the audience, most of whom still remembered vividly how Europe had become a huge slaughter-house in the recent past, and must have been troubled by the memory of a son, a husband or a brother sacrificed to the callous political machinations of Burge and Lubin (whether Lloyd George and Asquith were actually like Burge and Lubin is not important, the first condition of appreciating "The Gospel of the Brothers Bannabas" is the suspension of personal bias and looking at the world through the Shawian eyepiece. That such suspension is often not possible is an unavoidable risk of an artistic mode that has to depend heavily on the burlesque of contemporary themes). The antics of Burge and Lubin seem macabre when they are measured against a norm that each member of the audience has in his mind. A serious limitation of the play is that an audience removed in time and space from the incidents burlesqued in the second part of the cycle can hardly relate it to a shattering experience that can justify the supersession of the human race. The experience is too slight for such a spiritual convulsion, and consequently Shaw's drastic remedy seems far from unavoidable.

Shaw wants his audience to believe that as a world classic, the cycle traces the path of man's upward evolution, and thus points to the similarity in scope and aim between *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*.¹⁶ Part

III ("The Thing Happens") attempts to show the movement from one state of humanity to another, but in Part IV Shaw introduces a sea change : instead of showing the possibility of human evolution, he virtually drops man and announces a new creature which, though it has developed from man, is growing into a new species altogether. This species calls man "shortliver" and itself "longliver". Unlike dogmatic Christians, Shaw does not believe in the special theory of creation ; so the difference between the Guardians and men at this twilight Zone does not seem greater than the one between the *Homo Erectus* and the ape it was destined to supersede, but the common ancestry should not obscure the fact that the Guardians or longlivers are the early specimens of a distinctly non-human race, a distinction hinted at by Conrad Barnabas :

CONRAD Well, some authorities hold that the human race is a failure, and that a new form of life, better adapted to high civilization, will supersede us as we have superseded the ape and the elephant.

BURGE The Superman : eh ?

CONRED No, some being quite different from us.

LUBIN Is that altogether desirable ?

FRANKLYN I fear so... You and I are not God's last word : God can still create. If you cannot do his work
He will produce some being who can.¹⁷

Had the implication of this passage not been generally overlooked, it would have proved fruitful in removing certain misunderstandings. When Shaw shows his wise beings to be three centuries old he does something he does not admit in the preface : he creates a form of life which, inspite of his professed aim, is instinctively recognized by the audience as non-human. No logical extremism about the power of the human will can bend the audience's faith enough to make it accept the fact that the tertiaries are men, for the audience instinctively feels their strangeness , and their unnaturalness.

As an artist Shaw has to take into account the human impulse of the audience, without that commonality of feeling he cannot transmit his experience to the audience, since there can be no sharing of experience when the sharer refuses to accept that experience. That Shaw was keenly aware of the problem is clear from the words of the Elderly Gentleman :

I think that a man who is sane as long as he looks at the world through his own eyes is very likely to become a dangerous madman if he takes to looking at the world through telescopes and microscopes. Even when he is telling fairy stories about giants and dwarfs, the giants had better not be too big nor the dwarfs too small and too malicious.¹⁸

The Elderly Gentleman avoided the fate of a madman by insisting on looking at the world through his own, i.e. human, eyes though he had to pay the highest price for it. Had Shaw himself looked at the world through the eyes of the giants— the Ancients— *Back to Methuselah* would have been a dehumanized piece of science fiction, of which we have no dearth in the age of cheap faith in the divinity of technology. The true artist, even when his faith in man is shaken and despair stares him in the face, cannot forsake humanity, and is entirely dependent on it even for an experience that reveals its serious limitations . Thus "The Thing Happens" ostensibly shows the possibility of man's transformation, but actually portrays the gradual distancing of some of the characters from humanity . In Part IV the longlivers have carried the process still further, they are convinced that they are a different race from the shortlivers and stand in the same relation to them as man stands vis-a-vis the mastodon and the ape.

We receive a shock when Zoo threatens to kill the Elderly Gentleman for disturbing her mental poise. Our shocked moral sense soon realizes that Zoo is not making a moral or an immoral decision, she is treating man as a pest, a creature living outside the moral consideration of the longlivers. It is not the presence of evil in the Elderly Gentleman that tempts Zoo to take such a step, it is his power to vex her. It is a purely utilitarian decision like a

person's decision to kill a wasp because it stings. The following is not a conversation between two members of the same species, however differently constituted from each other, but between two beings who could just as well have belonged to two different planets :

THE ELDERLY GENTLEMAN Am I to infer that you deny my right to live because I allowed myself——perhaps injudiciously— to give you a slight scolding ?

ZOO Is it worth living for so short a time ? Are you any good to yourself ?

THE ELDERLY GENTLEMAN [Stupent] well, upon my soul !

ZOO It is such a very little soul. You only encourage the sin of pride in us, and keep us looking down at you instead of up to something higher than ourselves.¹⁹

This is probably what a normal girl would say to a sandfly in one of the fables if the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* were to write in the manner of Aesop. The race to which Iddy Toodles belongs is "incapable of being helped by us",²⁰ she submits: "We who live three hundred years can be of no use to you who live less than a hundred." She adds that the destiny of her race "is not to advise and govern you, but to supplant and supersede you. In that faith I now declare myself Colonizer and Exterminator."²¹

To avoid serious misunderstanding and concomitant misjudgment about the play, it is important to grasp that

though Zoo has not yet completely developed into a non-human being, she realizes that it is her destiny to be something entirely different from Joseph Popham Bolge Bluebin and when that destiny is realized Iddy Toodles must be exterminated along with the Envoy — the sheep must go along with the goat. As Zoo says: "what is the use of prolonging the agony ? You would perish slowly in our presence, no matter what we did to preserve you."²²

This distancing has gone much further in "As Far As thought Can Reach". The division between matter and spirit is absolute, and in seeking to live as pure spirits the Ancients have completely disowned their human inheritance. A horrified Strephon observes that the Ancients never touch one another because of their abhorrence of the human body. They have even ceased to be mammals: the breasts of the female of the species are flat and without milk. Though the words "man" and "woman" have not gone out of currency, the meaning of these terms certainly has. Our method of reproduction is referred to as pre-historic by Pygmalion, our ingestion of food as "horrible prehistoric methods of feeding", meat and grains and vegetables become "all sorts of unnatural and hideous foods"²³, human excretion becomes as abhorrent as in *Gulliver's Travels*. The race has become oviparous. Their direct sense of life is so intolerant of all symbolic forms that the supreme masterpieces of art are equated with rag dolls .

Shaw seems to be in agreement with his critics that the fifth part of the cycle is the Shawian Utopia. It has been construed as Shaw's "Ode to Joy" which takes the reader "through the Valley of shadow to a Pisgah view beyond".²⁴ To St. John Ervine, who refused to be convinced, Shaw wrote :

Do you seriously think that you enjoyed that very clever letter in *The Times* the other day so little that you cannot conceive the Ancients living in a permanent ecstasy of the sort of enjoyment raised to powers of which we have no experience ? I can understand an Englishman being depressed by the Ancients, because the religion of the Englishman today, as the reviews of Methuselah show, is simply phallism, but you ought to know better.²⁵

Yet Shaw the artist could possibly believe neither in his own rhetoric nor in the boast of the Ancient :" Infant: one moment of the ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead "²⁶ because like his audience Shaw lived on one side of the divide, the Ancients on the other. No common ground of experience and sympathy could exist between Shaw and the Ancients, and without this common ground all rhetoric sounds hollow.

It is useful in this connection to contrast the Ancients with Don Juan, the Shawian superman in *Man and Superman*. Juan reminded Anna that progress could be founded only on

Nature :

DON JUAN Nature, my dear lady, is what you call immoral. I blush for it, but I cannot help it. Nature is a pander, Time a wrecker, and Death a murderer. I have always preferred to stand up to those facts and build institutions on their recognition. ²⁷

We are also reminded of the Devil's warning against the pursuit of the superman to whom "men and women are a mere species... outside the moral world."²⁸ It is impossible not to recall the fact that while portraying Julius Caesar, who was for him the greatest man ever born, Shaw stressed those aspects of Caesar's character with which the audience could sympathize because he knew that as an artist "I can only imitate humanity as I know it."²⁹

The man who knew that in "the first syllable of recorded time" we could find "Newton and Bushmen unable to count eleven, all alive and contemporaneous"³⁰ could not have seriously believed that much before we reach time's last syllable, the superman will in some respects resemble the fanatic anchorite fond of torturing the flesh, and in other respects will be like the common bird; for the Ancients in *Back to Methuselah* have chosen the egg shell instead of the mother's womb as their primeval resting place. It is difficult to believe that the pitiable creatures that are nearly deaf, dumb and blind—the Ancients are bored by

music and sculpture and have almost forgotten to talk—and are afraid to live lest life should interfere with their contemplation of the Absolute are Shaw's ideal beings. And though Shaw suggested to Ervine that the difference between an Ancient and a shortliver was the difference between Einstein and Reggie de Veulie carried a little further,³¹ Einstein, who could live on Mozart and marvel at Gandhi, would have shuddered at the suggestion that he was a model of those desiccated creatures who have emptied their hearts of brotherhood and their breasts of the milk of human kindness.

All the talk about *Back to Methuselah* being a world classic is Shaw's red herring. As self-criticism the play is ruthless, for the Shavian impulse to run away from the fever of human emotions has come in for some savage treatment. Shaw's dream of the superman has ended in the nightmare of the anti-man, and yet Shaw shares the anti-man's perception of man, who is now symbolised by the automata manufactured by Pygmalion, who says that his dolls have all the reflexes and can respond to every stimulus. They can make love because their love is such a reflex. The male figure sees himself as Ozymandias, king of kings; the female sees herself as Cleopatra-Semiramis. With their reflexes they love and bite and posture tragically yet they are mischievous and deadly. The Life Force's experiment with man is like Pygmalion's with the automata. The automata behave

like Frankenstein's monster and kill Pygmalion. As the analogue of these creatures, mankind, which stands in the same relationship to the Life Force as the dolls to Pygmalion, is explicitly recognised by Shaw for the first time as evil. The following dialogue starts as parody but reveals the full measure of Shaw's existential despair :

THE MALE FIGURE Do you blame us for our human nature ?

THE FEMALE FIGURE We are flesh and blood and not angels.

THE MALE FIGURE Have you no hearts ?

ARJILLAX They are mad as well as mischievous May we not destroy them ?

STREPHON We abhor them.

THE NEWLY BORN We loathe them.

ECRASIA They are noisome.³²

The history of Cain, Napoleon , Burge and Burge-Lubin — the history of human society until the twentieth century — is epitomized in the two automata. Yet Shaw finds no consolation in the creatures that supersede them. He uses the microscope and the telescope, they reveal one monstrous shape after another. But in order to be convincing Shaw's art must provide a normal image against which these distortions are measured, a screen where these random and broken images can be integrated. It is then that we realize that what holds the cycle together and keeps Shaw's

pessimism rooted to humanity is the fourth part, "The Tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman". It is this part which shows that the author of *Back to Methuselah* is the same man who once wrote : " The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superhuman...has fallen off, and the demand now is for heroes in whom we can recognize our own humanity ; and who... are heroic in the true human fashion ".³³ In the fourth part it is evident that Shaw knew as well as anyone else did that a Yahoo cannot write a book in which the Houyhnhnm is the hero.

The last part of the cycle cannot be understood without a proper understanding of "The Tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman." The fourth part explains why, inspite of Shaw's adulatory comments on the Ancients, the latter are so plainly repulsive. While a part of Shaw wanted to escape the human condition and find solace in pure abstractions, the artist in him rebelled against such a tendency. While the philosopher wanted to create a utopia in "As Far As Thought Can Reach", the artist, revolted by the cowardly flight from human emotions, subverted the philosopher's aim by creating a dystopia. Written at a time when *Heartbreak House* was being composed, *Back to Methuselah* was as much a reaction to the former as its development. In the last act of *Heartbreak House* Hector prophesied that either a new creation would come to supplant man or the heavens would fall and wipe mankind out. In *Back to Methuselah* the

distinction between the two possibilities has narrowed down : a new race has supplanted man and heaven has chosen the longlivers to wipe mankind out.

The play would have been much less shocking had the Ancients really been supermen, for in that case the inherent optimism would gloss over Shaw's moral horror at unregenerate man. Instead Shaw follows a strategy not very different from Swift's. Had Swift really believed that the horse is by nature's design superior to man, then *Gulliver's Travels* would have induced in his readers a mild religious exaltation instead of existential horror. Swift's tale is gripping because the Houyhnhnm represents the simple human principles that the Yahoo has forsaken. Similarly, in Shaw's play it is the incongruity between the destiny of the Ancients to replace men and their true nature which is so disturbing. In "The Tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman" the encounter between Iddy Toodles and Zoo replicates the one between Higgins and Eliza. Man's flawed and organic nature is posited against the diabolic efficiency of a completely mind-dominated creature. It also resembles the quarrel between Keeagan and Doyle in *John Bull's other Island*. Like the two earlier plays the present one moves towards the conclusion that efficiency and victory are always granted to the spiritually stunted.

There is nothing nobler in the whole cycle than the words of the Elderly Gentleman in the face of certain

extermination : "Humanly I pity you. Intellectually I despise you."³⁴ As we realize how richly the longlivers, who are now mere hyphens between the human and the non-human forms of life, deserve both, in a flash it dawns on us that the only point of view available to the author and his audience is the human point of view.

This part follows the paradigm of Greek tragedy. The Guardians play the part of the Greek Gods (even the visit to the Delphic oracle is parodied), the huge asymmetry of power between the longlivers and the shortlivers virtually keeps the former beyond the pale of human judgement. The Elderly Gentleman challenges the superiority of the longlivers as Prometheus challenges the basis of authority of the tyrannical Zeus, but it is man (the shortliver) who is called upon to justify his existence and it is he who, like the titan, occupies the foreground of our attention— we are told that the conflict between the two scales of value will lead to the annihilation of the human race. Iddy Toodles, like Prometheus, must pay for the impingement of the principle of the longlivers. What is important here is that the best of the race must pay for the sins of others. The Envoy, like his predecessor, goes back to his country to lie about the oracle and the bloodthirsty emperor of Turania gets away with a few genuflexions : it is the Elderly Gentleman who dies. His death is the result of his free choice, it is an end he chooses in an attempt to uphold

his integrity. With a rude shock the Eldery Gentleman learns that all these years he has been living among Yahoos. In contrast the supplanting race suddenly appears Godlike to him, yet his last action calls for a brief explanation. Unlike Gulliver he does not consider himself a Yahoo or beg the Houyhnhnms to keep him as their servant ; he has not yet abandoned the idea that man is a living soul, the temple of the Holy Ghost. His death becomes a sacredotal rite to purify the temple that the Envoy and his party have defiled. He thus takes upon himself the responsibility of proving that man is more than incinerable hydrocarbon. Constantly reminded by his tormentor that death reduces his very brief life to a few meaningless syllables he replies what an old and blind Oedipus waiting for his end would have replied to the powerful and immortal gods, had they, in a comparable act of peevishness, stepped out of their Olympian heights to pester him :

I accept my threescore and ten years. If they are filled with usefulness, with justice, with mercy, with good-will : if they are the life-time of a soul that never loses its honor and a brain that never loses its eagerness, they are enough for me, because these things are infinite and eternal, and can make ten of my years as long as thirty of yours.³⁵

That is all that a man can hope for. His hours on earth are

a brief spell of infirm glory. He cannot last for ever like a god or a stone, and his richest triumphs — his justice, his mercy, his good-will——go to his grave with him. But during their all-too-brief reign these qualities enable him to pity, as the Elderly Gentleman pities, a god or a stone or even a vortex.

Among the things satirized in the play must surely be included Shaw's own endless optimism. Writing during the war with so much devastation behind him and the possibility of the ice age ahead, he must have smiled wryly at a lecture he had delivered just a few years ago in which he had said: "By higher and higher organization man must become superman and super-superman and so on." In the same speech he continued :

There need be no end. There is no reason why the process should ever stop, since it has proceeded so far. But it must achieve on its infinite way the production of some being, some person if you like, who will be strong and wise, with a mind capable of comprehending the whole universe and with powers capable of executing its entire will —— in other words, an omnipotent and benevolent God. 36

What could be a more telling evidence of the souring of that dream than the fact that the "gods" compete with the men in noxiousness ?

Whatever may be said of the preface, the play is not the work of a timid sentimentalist. The truth is that in the ultimate analysis Shaw finds the human condition absurd in the existential sense, since man fails to play the role of the hero in the magnificent cosmic comedy stretching over eons, but as a human being and artist Shaw cannot pin his faith on the beings who are going to lord it over in the post-human universe. The play may have begun as a quest for hope but the hope remains elusive to the end; the fact that the play ends with a dreariness that can be recognized by the audience as death-in-life apparently tends to justify the conclusion that Shaw's despair is bottomless. Yet the absurd situation can be saved from despair by investing it with human as opposed to teleological significance. The only kind of action that goes beyond despair depends on man's keen awareness of his finiteness and the relative vastness of the cosmic forces, and his knowledge that the triumph of the former over the latter can only be symbolic. *Back to Methuselah* contains a glimmer of hope, for it is witness to the artist's faith that in an indifferent universe man can rescue his fate from absurd inconsequentiality and himself from despair through suffering. The alternative to despair is the freedom to choose the tragic.³⁷

1. G.K Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, p.286.
2. CP V , p.703.
3. CP V , p.692.
4. Maurice Valency dismisses the play as "an illustrated lecture on Creative Evolution." Valency, *The Cart and the Trumpet*, p.354. He sees the Ancients as Shaw's ideal beings. Ibid., p.358. A.M.Gibbs is in broad agreement with him. Gibbs , *The Art and Mind of Shaw*, p.214. Lawrence Langner says, " I feel that G.B.S. may have overreached himself by placing too much faith in the power of the mind and too little in the power of human intuition and emotion." Lawrence Langner, *G.B.S and the Lunatic*, p.33. For similar response see T.F. Evans (ed.), *Shaw : the Critical Heritage*, pp. 259-273.
5. Chesterton , op. cit., p. 290. Chesterton aptly comments that "the philosopher is not trying to get rid of the troubles of men, he is trying to get rid of men because they are the troubles of the philosopher." Ibid.
6. CP V, pp. 307-308.
7. Ibid., p. 260.
8. Ibid., p. 269.
9. Ibid., p. 267.
10. Ibid., p. 294.
11. Ibid., p. 333.

12. Ibid., p. 348.

13. Ibid., p. 363. Although Shaw evidently sees Cain as the prototype of Napoleon, Burge and Lubin, he is significantly different from them and cannot be easily fitted into the Platonic scheme. See *infra*.

14. It is possible to extricate Shaw from the difficulty by arguing that Cain is not the sovereign author of evil, he himself is the mistake of his author, the Life Force. That does not seem to me a satisfactory explanation because Shaw's theory of the Life Force compels him to assume that evil is the result of accident or folly. Thus the croup in *The Shewing up of Blinco Posnet* is an accident, the burning of Joan in *Saint Joan* is the result of the stupidity of men who are well-intentioned. Even the Emperor of Turanica's power of mischief is created by his romanticism, which is the inability to understand reality. Cain is fundamentally different, he is a Nietzschean before Nietzsche, but he sees through the consequences of his actions. To say that he is an error of the Life Force is tantamount to pushing the prime term further up instead of facing it.

15. Margey M. Morgan, "Back to Methuselah : The Poet and the city", R.J.Kauffman ed. G.B.Shaw : a Collection of Critical Essays , p. 140.

16. CP V , p. 338.

17. Ibid., p. 430.

18. Ibid., p. 515.

19. Ibid., p. 525.
20. Ibid., p. 526.
21. Ibid., p. 527.
22. Ibid., p. 528.
23. Ibid., p. 597.
24. Louis Crompton, *Shaw the Dramatist*, p 186, p. 190.
25. Letter to St. John Ervine, quoted in St. John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw : His Life, Works and Friends*, p. 491.
26. CP V , p. 567.
27. CP II , p. 677.
28. Ibid., p. 687.
29. Ibid., p. 298.
30. Ibid., p. 297.
31. Op.Cit.
32. CP V , p. 607.
33. CP II, p. 307.
34. CP V , p. 512.
35. Ibid., p. 551.
36. quoted in Stanley Weintraub , *Journey to Heartbreak* p. 294.
37. It is important to distinguish the artist's faith from that of the philosopher. The anti-humanism which Shaw perceives in himself and fights is not absent in the play. That is why it is so uneven artistically. Shaw never succeeded in overcoming his ambivalence and the life of the Ancients is idealised in *Farfetched Fables*. I have tried to

show that although Shaw meant the play to be the keystone of his cosmic comedy, his artistic integrity revolted against his design. In the concluding chapter I shall try to show the other side of *Back to Methuselah*, the side that Shaw found conducive to his intellectual aspirations.