

## Chapter 13

### *The Vision of Judgement : The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*

"My present business is rather to reveal the importance of killing as a necessary department of political and personal activity..."

Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What* ?

There is not even a tiny ray of hope to break the darkness descending upon Shaw's last plays. The fate of man is sealed. As a doomed animal he is destined to follow the mastodon and the dinosaur. Though the picture painted in Shaw's tracts and essays is more hopeful<sup>1</sup> and man's fallen state is attributed to his circumstances, the unmistakable picture that we have of him in the plays is that of Frankenstein's monster : he is a hideous experimental error of the Life Force, which, after wiping man out, must start with a clean slate.

Superficially *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* is a far cry from such despair : it seems to be a formless and focusless fantasy, an inconsequential exercise in silliness<sup>2</sup>, even the work of "a dignified old monkey throwing coco-nuts at the public in pure devilment".<sup>3</sup> That such remarks could be made about a vision as terrible as the one found in the last part of the *Methuselah* cycle is vindication of Shaw's choice of the form of the extravaganza, for he could not have been unaware that the extreme anti-humanistic stand taken in the play would have been

unbearable to an audience composed entirely of the human species.

The play is essentially as pessimistic as *On the Rocks*, of which it is the logical culmination, and the solution offered — for unlike *On the Rocks* it does offer a solution — is much more terrifying than Old Hipney's praise of dictators.

In this play Shaw stretches the limit of traditional extravaganza. From Expressionism, and from Strindberg, the greatest of the Expressionists, he derived the form — a form that could objectify and give substance to thoughts, dreams, desires and fantasies. A realistic portrayal of the action, about which he is in dead earnest, would make the play look like a Gothic horror story with the scale of horror magnified to the utmost degree by the morbidity of imagination. Only the freewheeling nature of fantasy could liberate the action from an emotive association which is inseparable from it in life or in a life-like presentation of the action. In dispensing with verisimilitude, in introducing characters who are ideas and abstractions, in mixing the profane and the sacred in his treatment of divine personages, and in representing an action which is immediately recognized as impossible in a realistic sense, Shaw is following Strindberg, who said of *A Dream Play* :

Anything can happen, everything is possible and plausible. Time and space do not exist. Upon an insignificant background of real life events the imagination spins, and weaves new patterns : a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities and improvisations...The characters split, double, redouble, evaporate, condense,

fragment, cohere. But one consciousness is superior to them all : that of the dreamer.<sup>4</sup> 3

Shaw owes more than the dramatic technique to Shindberg's play. *A Dream Play* depends for its plot on an ancient Indian fable.<sup>5</sup> Though *The Simpleton* does not go so far, it creates an Indian ambience, and the Indian names of the characters, as we shall shortly see, are significant. Shaw probably borrowed the name Maya from *A Dream Play* rather than directly from an Indian source.<sup>6</sup> Even the mode of execution on the Day of Judgement is almost certainly borrowed from *The Ghost Sonata*.<sup>7</sup>

*Man and Superman*, the first play to reveal Shaw's disillusionment with the human race, was written during the Boer War, *Heartbreak House* was written during the First World War, the pessimism of *Back to Methuselah* was also the fruit of the same war. In *The Simpleton* Shaw attempts to overcome his pessimism in a novel way. To understand that attempt one must understand Shaw's compulsions behind the choice of an exotic setting and his use of oriental characters in the play.

What has passed as the history of the world has largely been the record of the exploits of the acquisitive and power-hungry men produced by the culture of the West. If man has been perverted by circumstances — i.e. if he is not basically evil, as Shaw argues in *Everybody's Political What's What?*<sup>8</sup> — then the alternative and unrealized history must begin with an alternative culture, a different kind of education, and a different set of circumstances. The fact that in his later works the positive characters are women or non-Western men stems not

from an inverted sexism or racism, but from a genuine attempt to separate the basic nature of man from the accretions of a culture that has proved disastrous. The building blocks of the new civilization are people who have been at the receiving end of the culture of domination. The marriage of East and West and Pra's "dream of founding a millennial world culture"<sup>9</sup> has to be seen in this light. *On the Rocks* had ended despairingly, but Shaw was not yet prepared to abandon his dream. *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* is another quest for the consoling belief that all is not lost for the human race.

And yet Shaw can find no hope. Joan and Prola, products of two entirely different cultures, face a startlingly similar fate. As an artist Shaw can evidently not believe that the failure of man is merely the function of the failure of his culture.

Shaw dramatises through an allegory the three-fold Platonic division of the soul. In the *Republic* Plato sees virtue as the function of true knowledge, which is accessible only to the rational part of the soul. Like Shaw Plato saw the ship of the State being driven to the rocks by a deaf and shortsighted captain and ignorant sailors. He had seen Athens kissing the dust under the onslaught of Sparta in 405 B.C. and later he saw Athens under the restored democracy executing, in its terrible ignorance, its noblest citizen, Socrates.<sup>10</sup> In a just society, i.e. in a society not foundering on the rocks, true knowledge must reign over illusion, and this is only possible if the persons in whom the spirited or the appetitive elements dominate voluntarily submit to the rule of the guardians, in whom alone the rational faculty is

predominant.<sup>11</sup>

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In Shaw's play Prola is the worthy servant of the Life Force; she becomes almost indistinguishable from the Lilith of *Back to Methuselah*: her passion for world betterment springs from true knowledge, which enables her to make the aims of the Life Force her own. Maya is the embodiment of illusion.<sup>12</sup> How closely Shaw follows the Platonic schemata can be judged from the fact that Maya, Vashti, Janga and Kanchin, after they vanish, are called "Love, Pride, Heroism and Empire", qualities that correspond exactly to the appetitive and spirited elements of the soul according to the *Republic*, but the relationship between these elements and the rational element in *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* is exactly the reverse of that which is to be expected in the ideal State of Plato.<sup>13</sup>

In a passage of bitter irony that echoes the fate of Joan (though in the reverse order), Vashti, Maya, Kanchin and Janga seek to make a goddess of Prola, and when she protests, they seek to kill her :

VASHTI Prola is she who decides.

MAYA Prola is she who unites.

VASHTI Prola is she who knows.

MAYA No one can withstand Prola.

PROLA Be quiet, you two. You shall not make an idol of me.

KANCHIN We shall - make you Empress of the Isles.

JANGA Prola the First.

VASHTI Homage, Prola.

KANCHIN Obedience, Prola.

JANGA Absolute rule, Prola.<sup>14</sup>

We are thus reminded that the burning of Joan and her canonization were not two acts but one : the epilogue of *Saint Joan* robbed us of the comfort of catharsis to remind us that those who knelt before the maid to worship her would not hesitate to burn her again if she were to commit the indiscretion of returning to life. Time, place and culture change, but history repeats the story of medieval France in a timeless pacific island. All visionaries are destined to die with the cry : "O God that madest this beautiful world , when will it be ready to receive thy saints ? How long, O Lord, how long ?"

There was a time when Shaw believed that the exceptional man was *avant-garde*, that in his revolt against conventionality he stayed ahead of his time and his ideas were a tow that pulled the sluggish world in his direction. The relation between the advanced person and the conventional one was the relationship between the teacher and the pupil and Shaw's comedy hinged on the conversion of the latter. But in *Man and Superman* he realised for the first time that the lifeline between the advanced person and the average man might have snapped; with the epilogue of *Saint Joan* comes the despairing awareness that there is no necessary connexion between the servant of the Life Force and progress. The last plays show that in the actual world the ideal world is inverted. In Plato's language one can say that the power of illusion triumphs, the appetitive and the spirited elements thwart the reign of rationality and knowledge. At the end of *The Simpleton* Prola can

only hope, whereas Maya can ensure that the hope remains empty.

Thus *The Simpleton* repeats the pattern of *Saint Joan* and *On the Rocks*, but it seeks to go beyond the baffled pessimism of *On the Rocks* with a terrible programme couched in a tone of deceptive frivolity.

Perhaps it is Shaw's bathetic treatment of the Judgement Day theme that has provoked the colourful description of him as a venerable monkey. Nothing is less conducive to awe than the vision of Judgement depicted in the play. The exterminating angel of the Revelation only produces the deflating illusion of a curiosity and a mechanical contraption (an albatross and an aeroplane). Some fun is extracted by the not very original device of bringing about an encounter between the angel and the British Parliament, and making ministers and Members of Parliament resort to Privilege Motions on the tacit assumption that even God and the angels are not immune from laws relating to the contempt of Parliament.

On the whole the charge of frivolity or foolishness shows that Shaw succeeds in his strategy of warding off the audience's emotional revulsion and in disguising the most sinister overtones behind apparently irresponsible jokes. The annihilation of the unfit, instead of striking terror in the hearts of the audience, provides them with the experience of witnessing a conjurer doing a disappearance trick.<sup>15</sup>

This enables Shaw to present a highly emotive issue with the impersonality of a mathematical theorem : dodging past the audience's resistance he presents the extreme solution to bring to heel the recalcitrant human race. His success is a triumph of

style over substance. A serious presentation of the solution would certainly rouse the audience's hostility, for however funnily the thing happens in the play, Shaw is seriously arguing a singularly unfunny case — a case for the liquidation of people he considers unsuitable for life. Thus he can preface *On the Rocks* with the following remarks :

That killing is a necessity is beyond question by any thoughtful person. Unless rabbits and deer and rats and foxes are killed, or "kept down" as we put it, mankind must perish...Killing can be cruelly or kindly done; and the deliberate choice of cruel ways, and their organisation as popular pleasures is sinful, but the sin is in the cruelty and the enjoyment of it not in the killing.<sup>16</sup>

The law that applies to rats and foxes also applies to the man who is a drag on civilization : "The political necessity of killing him is precisely like that for killing the cobra or the tiger : he is so ferocious and unscrupulous that if his neighbours do not kill him he will kill or ruin his neighbours..."<sup>17</sup>

Shaw argues in the preface that every society has to marginalise or eliminate dangerous non-conformists, that every system is armed to prevent its own liquidation. But the all-important point that he does not mention is the fact that the disagreement about killing is not so much on general principles, as on their application. Who is to decide whether a person is unsuitable for life ? Outside a few obvious cases which are not controversial, is it possible to judge a man's fitness for life ?

Human reason cannot objectively determine whether a person is a dangerous pest or a genius, for as Jesus tells Pilate in the preface to *On the Rocks* :

Opinion is a dead thing and impulse a live thing...If it is your will to crucify me, I can find you a dozen reasons for doing so; and your police can supply you with a hundred facts to support the reason. If it is your will to spare me I can find you just as many reasons for that; and my disciples will supply you with more facts than you will have time or patience to listen to. That is why your lawyers can plead as well for one side as another...<sup>18</sup>

Yet neither the knowledge that the subjective will treacherously takes on the disguise of objective reason nor the consideration that in their choice of persons to be liquidated men are liable to be more fallible than God held Shaw back from proposing the final solution. Of course there is a substantial difference between comically liquidating people in a farcical piece and seriously pressing for a programme of butchery, but the difference was not very great in Shaw's case, for it is clear from the introduction to the play that he did not use farce as a substitute for action but to make the programme of the Tcheka, the dreaded Soviet secret police, look reasonable and moral; and he persisted with his preference for such dangerous solutions : "Probably we do not persecute half enough either at home or abroad. Our toleration of idleness and parasitism is indefensible."<sup>19</sup>

He looked forward to the destruction of idlers and parasites, and the list of persons belonging to this class, according to the play, is quite long and includes husbands and fathers, popular leaders of fashion, famous beauties, novel-readers, Parliamentarians and a substantial part of the Cabinet. The import of a fantasy in which divine judgement comes down heavily on the heads of millions is less than funny when we realise that when Hitler and Stalin were playing the parts of the exterminating angels in real life, Shaw was not only unfazed but came out in support of the liquidation programmes.<sup>20</sup> His play is kept strictly within comic bounds through technical devices, but what it stands for is far from comic. In spite of his distaste for the tribal morality Shaw returns in this play to the world of the Old Testament — his God, the Life Force, created the human race to realise a certain ideal, but things have come to such a pass that the aim cannot be realised without destroying a large part, perhaps the majority, of mankind. The world as seen through Shaw's eyes needed another deluge with only the deserving few sheltered in Noah's Ark, and Shaw approved of the deluge that was being let loose by Hitler and Stalin even as the play was being written. The garden needed weeding, and at the end of such weeding a few trees would be left standing amidst the desolation. Shaw's play established a psychic bond between art and history, a bond that bound him together, at that moment of history at least, with the great dictators.

## Chapter 13 : Notes and References

1. For instance, even during this period of unmitigated despair Shaw takes the Duke of Wellington to task for lacking "foresight and faith in the possibility of changing human nature, by improving its circumstances." *Everybody's Political What's What ?*, p. 323.
2. Edmund Wilson says that it is the only play of Shaw's that can be called silly. See Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers*, p. 186.
3. These were the comments of a New York critic as reported by Shaw. See CP VI, p. 745.
4. August Strindberg, *Five Plays*. Translated by Harry G. Carlson, p. 205.
5. Strindberg, of course, does not stick to Indian mythology but freely improvises to create a private myth.
6. Shaw was one of the earliest British admirers of Strindberg, a fact made explicit in the Epistle Dedicatory of *Man and Superman*. He donated the entire sum of the Nobel Prize to finance the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation. The first task of the Foundation was the translation into English four of Strindberg's plays. See St. John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw : His Life, Work and Friends*. p. 505.
7. See note 15.
8. Op. cit.
9. CP VI, p.807 Margery Morgan suggests that the cross-fertilization of cultures in the Unexpected Isles may be related

to the career of Shaw's friend and former fellow-socialist; Annie Besant, who went to India to found the Theosophical Society. Iddy must have been modelled, at least partly, after C.W. Leadbeater, an English curate who left the curacy to join the Society. Jiddu Krishnamurthy, whom the Society projected as the reincarnated Christ, had visited Shaw on board the ship in Bombay in January 1933, a few months before the play was written. See Margery Morgan, *The Shawian Playground*, pp. 293-94.

10. The image of the ship, the implicit metaphor in almost all of Shaw's political plays and the explicit central metaphor in *Heartbreak House* and *On the Rocks*, is borrowed from Plato. See the *Republic*, Translated by B. Jowett, Book VI, 396 b.

11. Plato does not use the word "reason" in the modern sense, Plato's "reason" is not opposed to "passion", but includes the passion of intellect. This is important in grasping Shaw's Platonism, because we have seen that early in his career Shaw eschewed faith in reason, as the term is understood today.

12. Shaw juggles with the various connotations of Maya. In sanskrit "Maya" means phenomenon or illusion. According to the Vedanta, the diversity of the world is an illusion; once the veil of illusion is removed, the distinction between the Self and the Absolute vanishes. Shaw was probably not unaware of this since Maya says to Iddy : "Vashti and Maya are one : you cannot love me if you do not love Vashti : you cannot die for me without dying for Vashti." CP VI, p. 802.

The non-dualism of the Vedantic philosophy, however, does

not fit into Shaw's scheme, and soon he settles for the other meaning of the word. "Maya" is also "unreal" or "false". Iddy thinks that Maya is a goddess, or an idol. When Maya is annihilated towards the end of the play, the etymology of her name along with her fate assumes a strong Biblical overtone, for the destruction of false gods is a cardinal injunction in Mosaic law.

13. Even in his pessimism Shaw approximates Plato, for whom the gap between the ideal State and possible ones keeps on increasing through the pages of the *Republic*. In book V he is hopeful of its realization in Greece. The hope weakens a little in book VI until in Book IX it exists only in heaven and on earth it can only be found in men's hearts.

14. CP VI, p. B15.

15. The manner in which Maya, Vashti, Kanchin and Janga vanish is so strongly reminiscent of Strindberg that it seems almost certain that Shaw has consciously borrowed the incident from *The Ghost Sonata* in which Iddy says : " I held Maya in my arms. She promised to endure for ever; and suddenly there was nothing in my arms." CP VI, p. 382.

Cf. the following passage from *The Ghost Sonata* :

STUDENT Then I noticed a crack in the wall, and heard the floorboards breaking. I ran forward and snatched up a child who was walking under the wall...The next moment the house collapsed...I was rescued, but in my arms, where I thought I held the child, there was nothing...

August Strindberg, *Five Plays*. Translated by Harry G. Carlson,

pp. 271-72.

16. CP VI, pp. 574-75.

17. Ibid., p. 576.

18. Ibid., pp. 618-19.

19. *Everybody's Political What's What*?, p. 151.

20. The subject is discussed in the next chapter.