PART I

SHAW AND THE MORAL AESTHETES
ERNARD SHAW can easily be seen as akin to the moral aesthetes and as part of the “art for the sake of social betterment” movement. This “moral” and, in general, early phase of the aesthetic movement traces its immediate origins to John Ruskin, whose theories furnished a foundation for Pre-Raphaelite beliefs, including those of the artist-socialist, William Morris. Shaw regarded both Ruskin and Morris as poet-prophets with “a great power of seeing through vulgar illusions, and a capacity for a higher morality than has yet been established in any civilized community” (Preface, Androcles, p. 31). Though he praised their social consciousness over their efforts on behalf of art, much of his theory of art is based on the ideas of Ruskin and Morris.

In the preface to *Major Barbara* Shaw calls Ruskin and Morris “aristocrats with a developed sense of life,” who “have enormous social appetites and very fastidious personal ones,” and who demand a social change for aesthetic reasons.

They are not content with handsome houses: they want handsome cities. They are not content with bediamonded wives and blooming daughters: they complain because the charwoman is badly dressed, because the laundress smells of gin, because the sempstress is anemic, because every man they meet is not a friend and every woman not a romance. They turn up their noses at their neighbor’s drains, and are made ill by the architecture of their neighbor’s houses. Trade patterns made to suit vulgar people do not please them (and they can
get nothing else): they cannot sleep nor sit at ease upon "slaughtered" cabinet makers' furniture. The very air is not good enough for them: there is too much factory smoke in it. They even demand abstract conditions: justice, honor, a noble moral atmosphere, a mystic nexus to replace the cash nexus. Finally they declare that to rob and pill by the hands of the policeman, the bailiff, and the soldier, and to underpay them meanly for doing it, is not a good life, but rather fatal to all possibility of even a tolerable one. (Pp. 213-14)

Significantly, the complaints and demands which Shaw attributes to Ruskin and Morris are also those Shaw himself made. He advocated dress reform, temperance, and improved sanitation; he called for economic and religious reform which would in turn lead to more beautiful houses and cities; he even found "the very air not good enough" and spoke out against air pollution at the Annual Meeting of the Coal Smoke Abatement Society in 1911.¹

Shaw's most extensive commentary on Ruskin occurs in "Ruskin's Politics" (1919). In this speech Shaw finds Ruskin's progress from artist to social critic to prophet illustrated in the portraits at the Ruskin Centenary Exhibition of the Royal Academy. In the early portraits of Ruskin, Shaw sees a resemblance to Mozart; later he detects a likeness to social critics (his examples are John Stuart Mill and Grant Allen); finally he sees a resemblance to "God as depicted in Blake's Book of Job." Ruskin began, Shaw says, "as an artist with an interest in art—exactly as I did myself, by the way—[and] was inevitably driven back to economics, and to the conviction that your art would never come right whilst your economics were wrong." He concludes that Ruskin's politics were a kind of antidemocratic communism and that Ruskin can therefore be described as the prophet of Bolshevism.²

Although Shaw does not discuss it, he also agreed with numerous of Ruskin's aesthetic theories. Probably the single most important idea about art that Shaw shared with Ruskin was the conviction that "if a great thing can be done at all, it can be done easily... If a man can compose at all, he can compose at once, or rather he must compose in spite of himself."³ One of Shaw's earliest and cleverest expressions of this idea occurs in his novel Cashel Byron's Profession (1882) when Cashel, a prizefighter, delivers a long extemporaneous speech correcting Herr Abendgasse's paper on "The
True in Art.” Cashel, who thoroughly understands the art of fighting, contends that “a man that understands one art understands every art”; and he offers this advice to all artists:

Striving and struggling is the worst way you could set about doing anything. It gives a man a bad style, and weakens him. It shews that he dont believe in himself much. . . Now, nothing can be what you might call artistically done, if it’s done with an effort. If a thing cant be done light and easy, steady and certain, let it not be done at all. . . In all professions any work that shews signs of labor, straining, yearning . . or effort of any kind, is work beyond the man’s strength that does it, and therefore not well done.” (Pp. 91-92)

As an example, Cashel points to the poor fighting stance of a figure in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, who clearly “doesnt know how to fight because he’s all strain and stretch; because he isnt at his ease; because he carries the weight of his body as foolishly as one of the ladies here would carry a hod of bricks; because he isnt safe, steady, and light on his pins, as he would be if he could forget himself for a minute and leave his body to find its proper balance of its own accord” (p. 93). Cashel’s criticism here echoes Ruskin’s complaint that the Pre-Raphaelites were “working too hard” at their art and thus producing an overwrought effect. That Shaw was in accord with Ruskin’s and Cashel’s theory that great art is effortless can be demonstrated by the frequent occurrence of the idea in Shaw’s essays and speeches. He characteristically maintains that “fine art of any sort is either easy or impossible.” To a group of school children he explained, “To me there is nothing in writing a play: anyone can write one if he has the necessary natural turn for it; and if he hasnt he cant: that is all there is to it.” And Stephen Winsten records Shaw’s saying that “I only like to do things that I find easy, like writing plays. William Morris was like that.”

Shaw was also in sympathy with Ruskin’s theory that art has an ethical basis. In the 1883 preface to Modern Painters Ruskin wrote that “beautiful things are useful to men because they are beautiful, and for the sake of their beauty only.” However, his defense of beauty for its own sake is to separate art from commercialism, not from morality, which for Ruskin was the end of art. In
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Modern Painters he distinguished between “Aesthesis,” beauty appealing to the senses alone, and “Theoria,” beauty concerned with “the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty”; he denied “that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral.” He also believed that great art arises out of an ethical nature, that nobility of subject is the first requisite for artistic greatness, and that only a noble soul can produce great art, for an artist’s faults of character show in his work. Shaw did not, as we shall see in later chapters, agree with the details of Ruskin’s art theories; for example, he accepted the primarily sensual nature of fine art and believed that an unscrupulous man such as Louis Dubedat or the Shakespeare of The Dark Lady of the Sonnets could produce art. But, like Ruskin, he was convinced that art should produce a moral effect, which to Shaw sometimes meant social reform and sometimes religious faith.

Ruskin’s greatest influence on Shaw was exerted indirectly, through William Morris. A follower of Ruskin, Morris lamented the disappearance of art in a materialistic, exploitative, and ugly age, and turned to social reform as the necessary first step to artistic health. Just as Ruskin came to believe “that your art would never come right whilst your economics were wrong,” Morris came to believe that only a revolution abolishing social classes and giving all “a fair share of the good and evil of life” could provide a healthy atmosphere in which art could thrive. The aesthetic utopia depicted in his News from Nowhere (1890) began, significantly, with revolution and economic reform. With such reform Morris hoped to mend the present “fatal schism between art and daily life,” so that all men could become artists, with creative, fruitful work and pleasant leisure. Although he distinguished between intellectual arts, such as paintings and sculpture, which are of no material use and which “address themselves wholly to the mind of man,” and decorative and ornamental arts—such as pottery-making, glasswork, weaving, and printing—which have a material use in one’s daily life, he insisted that “in all times when the Arts were in a healthy condition there was an intimate connexion between these two kinds of art.”

Predictably, Shaw respected Morris’s socialism more than his aestheticism. Shaw’s final estimate of Morris is clear in a 1934
letter to The New Statesman and Nation. To H. G. Wells’s de-
scription of Morris as “a poet and decorator” Shaw answered,
“That is not the significance of William Morris to us; there are
plenty of poets and decorators about. Morris’s significant specialty
was his freely expressed opinion that idle capitalists are ‘damned
thieves.’ And the word damned was more than mere decoration.”
Shaw especially took to heart Morris’s statement that “no man is
good enough to be another man’s master”; he quotes it in his
repudiation of imperialistic rule in the preface to John Bull’s Other
Island (p. 63) and refers to it in a speech “Property or Slavery?”
(1913), in which he calls Morris “the greatest man who came for­
ward in the nineteenth century to champion Socialism.”
Review­
ing J. W. Mackail’s biography of Morris (1899), Shaw finds fault
with Mackail for emphasizing Morris’s artistic over his socialistic
side, for seeing Morris “too much from the Burne-Jones point of
view” and not enough in terms of Morris’s socialistic “street corner
exploits” (Portraits, pp. 208–9). For example, Mackail says that
translating the Odyssey turned Morris away from revolutionary
socialism, but Shaw says that witnessing the battle of Trafalgar
Square in 1887 did it. Shaw consistently maintained that Morris’s
socialism provided mental stimulation not offered by his artistic
endeavors. In William Morris As I Knew Him (1936) Shaw ex­
plains that Morris’s art was effortless: “The knowledge that he
could go on writing lovely lines for ever as the idle single of an
empty day must have finally changed that exultant phrase to a
self-criticism.” Even the sagas offered no challenge: “All this was
literature, romance, art for art’s sake, done with a natural facility
that cost him nothing.” Socialism, on the other hand, exercised his
mind and changed “the idle singer” to a “prophet and a saint” (pp.
47–52). Thus in Morris, Shaw found another living example of
the poet-prophet—one influenced by Ruskin and akin in purpose
to Shaw himself.

Nevertheless, Shaw respected Morris’s artistic endeavors and
praised them in his art criticism. In a review of an arts and crafts
exhibit of 1888 he says that Morris’s illuminated manuscript pages
show “what Mr. Morris can do with his valuable time in his serious
moments, when he is not diverting himself with wall-decoration,
epic story-telling, revolutionary journalism and oratory, fishing and
other frivolities of genius." In this review Shaw approves of the arts and crafts movement and deplores "the silly British pictures, the vicious foreign pictures, signboards all of them of the wasted talent and perverted ambition of men who might have been passably useful as architects, engineers, potters, cabinetmakers, smiths, or bookbinders."13 In "William Morris as Actor and Dramatist" (OTN, 2:209-13) he praises Morris's musical ear, the modernity of his tastes in furnishings and book designs, and his "prose word-weaving"; he says that "Morris would have written for the stage if there had been any stage that a poet and artist could write for" and that he had, in fact, written a play which was a highly entertaining "topical extravaganza" for the Socialist League. Morris figures in a conjecture by Shaw about "What Socialism Will Be Like": Morris and Company is used as an example of the expensive hobby a great man could pursue in a socialistic state. Shaw argues that, after every man is prosperous enough "to buy good bread and good clothes," a rich man could, as Morris did in a nonsocialistic state, spend "his superfluity of income on something no government could do."14

Morris's efforts to make creative artists or artisans of all people make up a part of Shaw's own social vision. For example, in his defense of an aesthetic education in the preface to Misalliance (1910), where he maintains that "we all grow up stupid and mad to just the extent to which we have not been artistically educated," Shaw presents a Morrisian argument for an art-conscious world (pp. 86 ff.). Because we are so accustomed to boredom and ugliness, he says, we suspect that fine art is somehow lascivious; as a result we are ignorant of art, and "all the wholesome conditions which art imposes on appetite are waived: instead of cultivated men and women restrained by a thousand delicacies, repelled by ugliness, chilled by vulgarity, horrified by coarseness, deeply and sweetly moved by the graces that art has revealed to them and nursed in them, we get indiscriminate rapacity in pursuit of pleasure and a parade of the grossest stimulations in catering for it." The present hope for art lies in the fact that modern technology—producing the pianola, photography, book printing, and the phonograph—puts "a vast body of art now within the reach of everybody." Implicit in this argument is Morris's contention that, until
art becomes a way of life for everyone, society will suffer. It is no accident that in this essay Shaw uses Morris’s definition of art—“the expression of pleasure in work” (p. 100).

A similar argument appears in Shaw’s last completed novel, *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), where the protagonist, Sidney Trefusis, envisions aesthetic as well as economic reform. Trefusis hopes for a future in which art is no longer a luxury, available only to the rich, but is instead a part of every man’s daily life.

Photography perfected in its recently discovered power of reproducing color as well as form! Historical pictures replaced by photographs of *tableaux vivants* formed and arranged by trained actors and artists, and used chiefly for the instruction of children! Nine-tenths of painting as we understand it at present extinguished by the competition of these photographs, and the remaining tenth only holding its own against them by dint of extraordinary excellence! Our mistuned and unplayable organs and pianofortes replaced by harmonious instruments, as manageable as barrel organs! Works of fiction superseded by interesting company and conversation, and made obsolete by the human mind outgrowing the childishness that delights in the tales told by grown-up children such as novelists and their like! An end to the silly confusion, under the one name of Art, of the tomfoolery and make-believe of our play hours with the higher methods of teaching men to know themselves! Every artist an amateur, and a consequent return to the healthy old disposition to look on every man who makes art a means of money-making as a vagabond not to be entertained as an equal by honest men! (Pp. 160–61)

Trefusis is sometimes taken to be Shaw’s anti-artist, but this speech does not come from a man who hates art, but from one who refuses to enjoy an art which caters to the values of a corrupt society. Nor does Trefusis hate artists: one of his best friends is the Pre-Raphaelite and socialist, Donovan Brown, whose character is probably drawn from that of William Morris.

The artist Donovan Brown is referred to not only in *An Unsocial Socialist* but also in Shaw’s first novel, *Immaturity* (1879), where the aesthete Hawkshaw argues with the young clerk Smith about the merits of Browne’s art. (Browne loses the final e in his name in the later novel.) Hawkshaw says that Browne’s pictures “overflow” with “the intense devotion of the Byzantine painters”; Smith disagrees:
On the contrary . . . they don't contain one scrap of it. Angelico and Filippo Lippi and the rest of them painted as if they were sent on earth to glorify God. Mr Donovan Browne paints as if he were self-dedicated to the task of painting beautiful pictures, or, in other words, of ennobling his fellow-creatures; and if we were not tired of the part of his genius which belongs to our own age, and blind to that which belongs to the infinite epoch of the highest art, we should draw a triumphant contrast instead of an apologetic comparison between him and an admirable but obsolete school which owed its concentration to mental narrowness. (Immaturity, p. 270)

That Browne is, as Morris was, a “Pre-Raphaelite” painter is obvious from Hawkshaw’s reference to Browne’s medieval intensity and from Smith’s reference to the “apologetic comparison” drawn between Browne and medieval artists. The reference to Browne’s desire to ennoble mankind rather than to glorify God might also apply to Morris. The identification of Browne with Morris becomes less conjectural in An Unsocial Socialist, where we learn that Donovan Brown has become a socialist, as had Morris and Shaw between the writing of Immaturity and An Unsocial Socialist. Brown is, in fact, the author of the socialist petition Trefusis is circulating for signatures. Trefusis explains that he and Brown became friends in an economic dispute over the value of a painting, and that “subsequently [Brown] fell into my views” (p. 215).

Shaw later created a dramatic portrait of Morris in the character of Apollodorus in Caesar and Cleopatra. Though Apollodorus was clearly not designed in every detail as a faithful portrait of Morris, there are nevertheless unmistakable allusions to Morris. Like Morris, Apollodorus (the names rhyme) is a “patrician,” a “carpet merchant,” and a shop-keeper whose shop (i.e., Morris and Company) is “a temple of the arts.” Apollodorus is, as Morris was in his early career, a self-confessed aesthete; his “motto is Art for Art’s sake,” which he calls “a universal password.” Apollodorus is not only a devotee of art but also a devotee of Cleopatra, singing of the pangs of love and serving his lady with knightly gallantry, just as Morris dedicated himself to Jane Burden (Mrs. Morris), who came to represent in Morris’s and Rossetti’s art another type of female beauty. Among Apollodorus’s attributes are some characteristics of the man of action. He is an excellent swordsman, though his
valor is in defense of Cleopatra’s honor and thus in Shaw’s view equal to inglorious brawling. But he is bold, strong, and quick to forget a quarrel (C&C, p. 143). He is also generous, “overpowering” the porters by his liberal tip (p. 147). His dive into the sea at the end of act 3 inspires even Caesar’s admiration. And, after the murder of Pothinus, he deserts Cleopatra and pledges his “heart and life” to Caesar (p. 184). Apollodorus’s skill with the sword, the daring example of his plunge into the sea, and his friendship with Caesar are no doubt a tribute to Shaw’s good friend and fellow socialist, Morris, the former “idle singer of an empty day” turned revolutionary socialist, a man of action. Therefore, though Apollodorus represents the idolater of art and love attacked in the preface to Three Plays for Puritans, he does not receive the savage treatment Shaw threatens in that preface.18

Morris, and Ruskin before him, were for Shaw not only living examples of poet-prophets but also formulators of a theory of Pre-Raphaelite art. Neither Ruskin nor Morris was a member of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; but both were associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Ruskin as sponsor and perhaps original inspiration of it,19 and Morris as one of the perpetuators of it in the 1870s and 1880s. And both were “Pre-Raphaelite” in that they were convinced that the last period of ethical health and artistic productivity was the Middle Ages. In “The Nature of Gothic” Ruskin outlines three stages of architectural ornament: (1) “Servile” (Greek, Ninevite, and Egyptian), where the workman was a slave executing his master’s orders; (2) “Constitutional” (medieval), where each workman expressed the individuality of his soul while admitting his imperfection and testifying to “God’s greater glory”; and (3) “Revolutionary” (Renaissance), where each man admitted of no greater power than his own personality and the resulting loss of faith led to his enslavement to false political, economic, and aesthetic ideals.20 Morris traces similar periods of art in an 1882 lecture, “Architecture and History”; he describes (1) the classical period, in which a slave society produced simple original art; (2) the feudal period, in which a genuine craftsmanship grew out of the guild system, and the artist “worked for no master save the public, made his wares from beginning to end him-
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self, and sold them himself to a man who was going to use them"; and (3) the modern period, an era of religious, social, and artistic decline beginning with the Tudors.21

Both Ruskin and Morris demand an end to the degrading, machine-like existence brought about by capitalism and the factory system. Ruskin speaks of the corruption and perversion arising from the "degradation of the operative into a machine": "It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure. It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men." By encouraging a workman to express his uniqueness and thus accepting his human imperfection, society loses the "engine-turned precision" of modern buildings, furniture, and dress, but it gains a genuine art, arising out of reverence for human life.22 Morris similarly argues that "England has of late been too much busied with the counting-house and not enough with the workshop," that the "greed of unfair gain" has replaced art with "luxury and show." But whereas Ruskin pleads for a return to medieval ideals of "noble reverence" and noblesse oblige, Morris wants a society which has no poverty, no masters and servants, and no unrewarding division of labor—a society which provides men pleasurable work.23

Shaw essentially agrees with the Ruskin-Morris analysis of medieval and modern life. In "William Morris as Actor and Dinosaurist" (OTN, 2: 210) he says that the thirteenth century was "the most advanced point" in art and that the nineteenth was "the most backward one"; and his essay "On Going to Church," in the first issue of Arthur Symons's The Savoy (1896), is heavily indebted to the medievalism of Ruskin and Morris. At the beginning of this essay, Shaw rejects art "produced by the teapot, the bottle, or the hypodermic syringe" and recommends, instead of such stimulants, going to church for the rest and recreation artistic productivity requires. But only a beautiful church offers aesthetic stimulation, and most modern churches are ugly—conventional, barren monuments to commerce. Shaw prefers medieval churches which were sanctuaries "shielded by God's presence from pride and glory and
all the other burdens of life.” Like Ruskin and Morris, Shaw sees the Renaissance as the beginning of a decline in art. With capitalism and religious scepticism came a loss of artistic power, so that today “under modern commercial conditions, it is impossible to get from the labour in the building-trade that artistic quality in the actual masonry which makes a good mediaeval building independent of applied ornament.” One can find, however, evidence of a reawakening of religion and art in certain village churches built in modern times by the faithful, and in the stained glass of Morris and Burne-Jones, who show that “the decay of religious art from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth was not caused by any atrophy of the artistic faculty, but was an eclipse of religion by science and commerce.”

This essay, linking medieval art and a living religion, suggests Shaw’s major debt to Ruskin and Morris and at the same time points up the major difference between them. To Shaw the religious impulse was crucial; to Ruskin and Morris, art was both the reason for, and the result of, social or moral change. After the revolutionary restructuring of society, Morris envisions healthy, beautiful men and women; gorgeous landscapes; attractive buildings and furnishings; and generous, hearty good-fellowship. Notably, Shaw’s utopia is not one of sensuous beauty but of contemplation, where art is abandoned with the toys of childhood.