When assessing Shaw's place in the aesthetic movement, one must determine which of the meanings of art for art's sake he had in mind when he wrote that "'for art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence." And, in order to do this, one needs to examine Shaw's attitudes toward art and morality, which are summarized in the following statement from *The Sanity of Art*:

The claim of art to our respect must stand or fall with the validity of its pretension to cultivate and refine our senses and faculties until seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting become highly conscious and critical acts with us, protesting vehemently against ugliness, noise, discordant speech, frowzy clothing, and re-breathed air, and taking keen interest and pleasure in beauty, in music, and in nature, besides making us insist, as necessary for comfort and decency, on clean, wholesome, handsome fabrics to wear, and utensils of fine material and elegant workmanship to handle. Further, art should refine our sense of character and conduct, of justice and sympathy, greatly heightening our self-knowledge, self-control, precision of action, and considerateness, and making us intolerant of baseness, cruelty, injustice, and intellectual superficiality and vulgarity. The worthy artist or craftsman is he who serves the physical and moral senses by feeding them with pictures, musical compositions, pleasant houses and gardens, good clothes and fine implements, poems, fictions, essays, and dramas which call the heightened senses and ennobled faculties into pleasurable activity. The great artist is he who goes a step beyond the demand, and, by supplying works of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been
perceived, succeeds after a brief struggle with its strangeness, in adding this fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race. (Essays, pp. 315-16)

The influence of Ruskin and especially of Morris is evident in the statement that art makes us so sensitive to ugliness that we insist on a more beautiful world. The idea at first seems consistent also with Pater’s idea of art as a means of enlarging our aesthetic faculties, or of Crackanthorpe’s reference to artistic morality “in the wider and truer sense of the word.” However, Shaw’s vision is social; that of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes is personal. Shaw, like Ruskin and Morris, wants beautiful lives for everyone; the fin-de-siècle aesthetes recoil from ugliness and try to create more beautiful lives for themselves and, at most, for others like them. It is the difference between Shaw’s plans for slum clearance and Whistler’s designs for the peacock room.

Shaw’s second statement of the aim of art (“Further, art should refine ”) parallels, interestingly, Pater’s distinction in “Style” between good and great art. Shaw’s “worthy artist,” however, does not parallel Pater’s “good” artist, who succeeds in fusing form and content into an artistic whole; Shaw’s “worthy artist” proceeds on the level of Pater’s “great” artist, serving both “the physical and moral senses.” And Shaw’s “great artist” has a purpose higher than any conceived of by Pater or, for that matter, by anyone: he is to create “works of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been perceived.” For an amplification of this idea one turns again to the preface to Plays Pleasant, where the artist’s function is defined as expression of a vision of a world not yet evolved.

In comparing this with other statements by Shaw about artists who serve a “moral” end, we must note that, like the aesthetes, Shaw uses the word moral in at least two senses: (1) “in the wider and truer sense of the word,” i.e., tending to the refinement of man’s senses or the elevation of his soul through contact with art; (2) in the limited sense of the word, i.e., acceptable to society’s standards. Whenever Shaw uses moral in the second sense, he always insists, as do the aesthetes, that art is not moral. Because “every step of progress means a duty repudiated, and a scripture torn up,” what the world terms “sin” and “immorality” is therefore not only justifiable but necessary. Thus Shaw defends Ibsen’s “immoral” ten-
dencies, and calls himself "a specialist in immoral and heretical plays," defining immoral as "whatever is contrary to established manners and customs" and asserting that "an immoral act or doctrine is not necessarily a sinful one: on the contrary, every advance in thought and conduct is by definition immoral until it has converted the majority."1 The Devil's Disciple (Dick Dudgeon, John Tanner, Andrew Undershaft) is a characteristic Shavian hero, and the plays also abound with characters (Candida, Lady Cicely, Joan) who follow their wills without regard to conventional notions of sin. Shaw even praises Swinburne and Wilde, two aesthetes whose work he generally disliked, for their roles as devil's advocates. In "Giving the Devil His Due" he approves of the rebellious attitude toward conventional virtue in Swinburne's book on Blake; similarly, he approves of Wilde as a critic "of morals and manners."2

Shaw acted as devil's advocate in his attack on Max Nordau's Degeneration (1893), which held that virtually every post-romantic art movement in Europe originated in perversion and mental disease. Shaw's essay, originally entitled A Degenerate's View of Nordau (1895), reveals the extent of his kinship to the decadent aspects of fin-de-siècle aestheticism. His major objection is to Nordau's thesis that opposition to customary morality is a malady, a form of mental and physical degeneracy. Shaw regards such opposition as healthy and sane: for example, the impressionist movement, because it substituted "a natural, observant, real style for a conventional, taken-for-granted, ideal one," was "wholly beneficial and progressive, and in no sense insane or decadent"; and Ibsen grasped the fact that abstract rules of conduct are often in conflict with, and inferior to, human passion, which "is the steam in the engine of all religious and moral systems" (SA, pp. 291–94, 301–4). Once again Shaw argues that laws and customs, because they are always out of date, must be defined by the thinkers and artists and ultimately replaced by better laws and customs, which will also eventually be out of date and need replacing.

Shaw points out that the great artist's defiance of convention may lead to imitators who "bring out really silly and vicious stuff, which the reviewers are afraid to expose, lest it, too, should turn out to be the correct thing" (p. 312), and he agrees that these imi-
tations need condemnation; but he does not look on these as diseased or decadent, as Nordau does, but as "absurd" (p. 300), "silly" (p. 312), or at worst, "abnormal" (p. 293), or "vicious" (p. 312). Nordau and Shaw both think that some impressionist painters produce "abnormal" pictures. But Nordau attributes this "abnormality" to "nystagmus, or trembling of the eyeball," a disease peculiar to psychological degeneracy, or to a "partly insensitive" retina, peculiar to hysteria; characteristically, he assumes that the artist is by nature mentally ill. On the other hand, Shaw uses his "normal" vision as a standard from which to judge the relatively bad vision of some impressionists, "who produce abnormal pictures because they saw abnormally" (SA, p. 293).

Shaw protests about the extent of Nordau's attack: "He is so utterly mad on the subject of degeneration that he finds the symptoms of it in the loftiest geniuses as plainly as in the lowest jailbirds" (p. 325). Shaw particularly objects to Nordau's equation of Ruskin, Morris, the Pre-Raphaelites, Wagner, and Ibsen, whom Shaw defends, with Verlaine, Mallarmé, Gautier, Baudelaire, Wilde, and Zola, to mention only a few of those attacked by Nordau, whom Shaw is presumably not inclined to defend. Nordau occasionally-offends Shaw personally, as when he says that, "like hypochondriacs and 'hémoroïdaires,' the German hysterical subject is anxiously concerned about his precious health. His crazes hinge on the exhalations of his skin and the functions of his stomach. He becomes a fanatic for Jaeger vests, and for the groats which vegetarians grind for themselves"; or when he says that Ibsen's defenders perversely "discover in his pieces world-pictures of the greatest truth, the happiest poetic use of scientific methods, clearness and incisiveness of ideas, a fiercely revolutionary desire for freedom, and a modernity pregnant with the future." Such comments seem deliberately aimed at Shaw, who wore Jaeger woolens, ate no meat, and praised Ibsen's ideas. Shaw was almost bound to answer these and the attacks on his artistic favorites.

Ironically, Shaw could have agreed with Nordau's moral bias; but he disagreed with his definition of morality. In fact, Shaw's attitude toward decadent art is closer to the Philistine position than to the aesthete's. In "On Going to Church" he deplores the demand for "nightmarish art and literature" produced by "that terrible
dream-glamour in which the ugly, the grotesque, the wicked, the morbid begin to fascinate and obsess instead of disgusting.”

Clearly Shaw would agree with Symons that the decadent movement in literature was unhealthy, but he would never, as Symons does, approve of the unhealthiness. Significantly, Shaw changed the title of his answer to Nordau from *A Degenerate's View of Nordau* to *The Sanity of Art*, thus shifting the emphasis to an intrinsic normality, sanity, and health of art and offering not simply a negation of convention but an affirmation of faith in art and society.

Not only did Shaw reject the decadent’s glorification of the abnormal but also he rejected the reasons offered by some fin-de-siècle aesthetes as justification for “immorality” in art. Though their iconoclasm, like Shaw’s, is a protest against bourgeois hypocrisy, pettiness, and materialism, it is usually defended on aesthetic grounds. For example, when Pater approves of the “antinomian” quality in the story of “Aucassin and Nicolette,” he is approving not so much of the rebellion against Christian values as of the “search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, their care for beauty, their worship of the body” which led some artists of the medieval Renaissance (Pater’s term) to that rebellion (* Works*, 1:24). Or when Wilde presents an argument in defense of sin as “an essential element of progress,” the idea is identical to Shaw’s, except that Wilde offers an aesthetic justification: without sin, he says, “the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless.”

Another difference between Shaw and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes on the question of art and morality is that Shaw would never, as did Pater, Whistler, Wilde, Symons, Beardsley, and Moore, admit that questions of art and morality are separate; Shaw requires that art be immoral, not amoral. Shaw would agree with one-half of Symons’s defense of *London Nights* (1896) against charges of immorality: the idea that “the principles of morality fluctuate with the spiritual ebb and flow of the ages”; but he would not accept Symons’s conclusion that art, being eternal, therefore has no necessary connection with morality.

Confusingly, the “specialist in immoral and heretical plays” also characterizes himself as a moral and religious playwright. Shaw
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is very explicit about the didactic and propagandistic purpose of art. He is reported to have said to a Shelley Society meeting in 1887, apropos of a paper on *The Revolt of Islam*, “a poem ought to be didactic, and ought to be in the nature of a political treatise.” In the 1893 preface to the edition of *Widowers’ Houses* published by Henry and Company, he describes the play as “a propagandist play—a didactic play—a play with a purpose,” an “expression of my sense of moral and intellectual perversity rather than of my sense of beauty” (p. xviii). The didactic impulse is often emphasized by the subtitles of his plays: “An Original Didactic Realistic Play,” “A Sermon,” “A Pamphlet,” etc. And in the preface to *Pygmalion* he boasts of the success of the play in spite of “the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that great art can never be anything else” (p. 198).

But Shaw never looks on art simply as a sermon or a pamphlet or a tract. Poetry is not a political treatise; it is “in the nature of a political treatise” (italics added), “the most artistic way of teaching those things which a poet ought to teach.” When Shaw told Stephen Winsten that Shelley’s poetry made a radical of him (Shaw), he was referring to the aesthetic as well as the propagandistic qualities of the poetry: “Shelley made his ideas sing” and thus could convert “by the sheer logic of his poetry.” Shaw always claims for his own drama an artistic as well as educative quality. *Widowers’ Houses* is not only “a propagandist play” but “a technically good practicable stage play” which should be judged not “as a pamphlet in dialogue, but as in intention a work of art.” Shaw warns his critics not to consider the play a mere Fabian tract just because it demonstrates a knowledge of modern economics: “Any person who would like to see the difference between an essay on rent and *Widowers’ Houses* can buy *Fabian Essays.*” Shaw returns to this point in a letter to the biographer O’Bolger when he asks, “Would anyone but a buffleheaded idiot of a university professor, half crazy with correcting examination papers, infer that all my plays were written as economic essays, and not as plays of life, character, and human destiny like those of Shakespear or Euripides?” (*Sketches*, p. 89) Thus, some subtitles notwithstanding, he
does not look on his plays as simply sermons, pamphlets, tracts, but plays which are actable, stageable, and readable as art.

A key to his definition of didactic art is in his distinction between philosophy and didacticism in *The Perfect Wagnerite* (pp. 218-19), where he complains that with *Die Götterdämmerung* the Ring "ceases to be philosophic, and becomes didactic." *Didactic* in this context refers to the offering of a panacea instead of "a dramatic symbol of the world as Wagner observed it"; both Wagner and Shelley "lapse into panacea-mongering didacticism by the holding up of Love as the remedy for all evils and the solvent of all social difficulties." Though this use of *didactic* is unfortunate for those who would have Shaw always consistent, it is helpful in understanding his other comments on didacticism in art. When Shaw demands didactic art, he is clearly not referring to "panacea-mongering" but to a presentation of the world as an artist perceives it; and, because Shaw denies that great art can be produced without a philosophic conviction, didactic art is necessarily a dramatization of a philosophy, or, again, the creation of "an iconography of a live religion."

That the iconography must be interesting enough to reach an audience is self-evident. One of Shaw's leading educational theories, discussed at length in the preface to *Misalliance*, is that a person does not learn what he does not want to learn. And one should note that the statement immediately preceding Shaw's denial of art for art's sake in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman* is: "No doubt I must recognize, as even the Ancient Mariner did, that I must tell my story entertainingly if I am to hold the wedding guest spellbound." At times he suggests that the sheer vitality of the message keeps the audience spellbound: "The dramatist knows that as long as he is teaching and saving his audience, he is as sure of their strained attention as a dentist is, or the Angel of the Annunciation" (*Quintessence*, p. 145). At other times he describes art as a sugar-coated pill; the use of stock comic devices and characters, he explains to J. E. Vedrenne in 1907, is "the jam that has carried the propaganda pill down." At still other times he looks on art as requiring neither the platform spell-binder's appeal nor the sugar-coating. In "The Religion of the Pianoforte" (1894), the preface to *Misalliance* (1910), and "The Aesthetic Man" (in
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Everybody's Political What's What, 1944) he regards art as a teacher by indirection; the educational function of art is fulfilled whether or not the didactic intention is there: refinement of the senses leads to refinement of the feelings, which in turn eventually leads to refinement of the mind and then, ironically, to a rejection of art because it appeals to a lower faculty. In connection with this theory, which is very close to Pater’s ascetic aestheticism, he argues that we must “deliberately reverse our Puritan traditions and aim at becoming a nation of skilled voluptuaries,” because “high feeling” leads to “high thinking,” and this leads to “plain living”;¹⁴ Shaw’s examples of artists who have fulfilled this purpose are Shelley and Wagner, whose art expresses the sensory-emotional-intellectual levels and who personally practiced “plain living” (i.e., vegetarianism, teetotalism, and political radicalism). In the preface to Misalliance (pp. 87-100) he says that “fine art is the only teacher except torture” and that providing an aesthetic education for a child is the most effective way of guiding him to a religion. This is not to say that art itself is the religion; children must be protected from idolatry of artists and art connoisseurs. But the child needs to be allowed “unfettered access to a whole body of Fine Art,” and, if he has not been subjected to boring books, lectures, and sermons, and if his mind has been kept free from secular and conventionally religious indoctrination, he will find his artistic “level” and “demand art everywhere as a condition attainable by cultivating the body, mind and heart.” The aesthetic education proposed here duplicates Shaw’s account of his own education;¹⁵ and, though he never suggests that constant exposure to good music, painting, and literature will make Shaws of everyone, he does say that it will make sensitive and possibly socially conscious or religious beings of everyone.

Shaw’s concept of the social, indeed sacred, purpose of art seems to be contradicted in his occasional disparagement of art. But, as with the term moral, so too art has several distinct meanings in Shaw’s work. Usually art refers to Shavian art, an art like that of Wagner or Ibsen, which is not only coherent, organic, meaningful but also by definition philosophic. But art also is used as Wilde uses it in “The Decay of Lying,” as a synonym for romancing, an escape from life. For example, in Shaw’s next-to-last article as
drama critic of The Saturday Review, he describes his recent aesthetized state, in which he was able to achieve an "artistic and sentimental" character: "For the first time in my life I tasted the bliss of having no morals to restrain me from lying, and no sense of reality to restrain me from romancing. I overflowed with what people call 'heart.' I acted and lied in the most touchingly sympathetic fashion." He concludes that, as a result, "artistically, I was an immense success: morally, I simply had no existence." Now he understands how he "can come to life as an artist and a man of feeling—as everything that I have been reproached so bitterly for not being": the secret is in "a bag of ether" (OTN, 3: 381-83).

The amoral art referred to here is that which is detached from everyday affairs, the kind that Wilde describes in "The Decay of Lying" as not drawn from life, not useful, more probable and better than nature in that it is true to an imaginative vision. Shaw's comparison of nonrealistic art to an etherized state suggests precisely his objections to such an amoral art: no matter how pleasant the artist's dreamworld may be, he can neither reach nor alter the real world; he is inactive and, what is worse, sick, or he would not require the anesthetic.

Shaw's concept of the "artistic and sentimental" etherized state is identical to the concept of art described in act 3 of Man and Superman, where "the romantic man" equals "the Artist," whose milieu is hell—the fashionable, unthinking, pleasure-seeking state. Don Juan acknowledges the debt he owes the artist, who "taught me to hear better, to see better, and to feel more deeply" (p. 111), but Juan rejects him because of his worship of love. This artist is the believer in art for art's sake, the "bellettrist" berated in the Epistle Dedicatory. The artist philosopher is of another kind altogether; the "bellettrist" is damned, but the artist-philosopher, like Rembrandt, Mozart, and Nietzsche, may become one of "the masters of reality" in Heaven. As Martin Ellehauge explains in The Position of Bernard Shaw in European Drama and Philosophy, Shaw conceives of three stages of art: (1) art as "plastic and voluptuous beauty," an immature and degenerate stage; (2) art as an expression of "the beauty of intense life," the "intense life" being to Shaw the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, the reverse of the Continental concept of the "life of the senses"; (3) art as the
creation of life itself, this stage involving a rejection of the creation of lifeless art (pp. 41–42). This is the stage dramatized in part 5 of *Back to Methuselah*. The master sculptor Martellus has smashed his statues and advises Arjillax to smash his also

because you cannot give them life. . . Anything alive is better than anything that is only pretending to be alive. [To Arjillax] Your disillusion with your works of beauty is only the beginning of your disillusion with images of all sorts. As your hand became more skilful and your chisel cut deeper, you strove to get nearer and nearer to truth and reality, discarding the fleeting fleshly lure, and making images of the mind that fascinates to the end. But how can so noble an inspiration be satisfied with any image, even an image of the truth? In the end the intellectual conscience that tore you away from the fleeting in art to the eternal must tear you away from art altogether, because art is false and life alone is true. (Pp. 218–19)

This passage has been called Shaw’s “death sentence for art.” But it does not condemn art in the present. The advice is uttered in a future time “as far as thought can reach,” in the year 31,920.

Ellehauge says that Shaw considers himself at the stage of artistic evolution, where “one makes art serve life, and is part of a movement tending towards the total supersession of art by life.” Though Ellehauge refers specifically to *Back to Methuselah*, his outline applies also to Shaw’s earlier comments on art. The artist damned in *Man and Superman* is in the first stage; the artist-philosopher is in the second. The third stage is reached by “the masters of reality” who in their eons of contemplation, Juan says, are to help “Life in its struggle upward” (*M&S*, p. 101). When Shaw disparages art, he is usually referring to art in the first stage; only when he projects himself “as far as thought can reach” does he condemn a higher art (stage two).

Shaw then differs from the fin-de-siècle aesthetes most emphatically, and crucially, on the question of art and morality; for Shaw art must serve an ultimately moral—i.e., religious—purpose. But when *moral* refers to conventional morality, he argues that art is not moral; however, he never admits that art is separate from morality (conventional or otherwise), but maintains rather that it is in opposition to conventional morality. In his concept of what constitutes didactic art, Shaw approaches, though he does not em-
brace, the idea of the detachment of art from morality (the freedom of art from overt sermonizing). His didacticism is not the oversimplifications and preachments associated with propaganda; he rejects the didacticism which offers panaceas and insists that the truthful representation of the artist's observed world will reach the emotions, then the intellect, and, hopefully, the spirit of man. For Shaw art is never an end in itself; in fact, once it has served its educative purpose, it should become unnecessary. But, until the Life Force reaches a utopian, or heavenly, stage, it is aided by the art that acts, on the lowest level, to refine the senses and, on the highest level, to refine the mind and soul.