Chapter VII

THE FORM AND THE CONTENT OF ART

SHAW DESCRIBED the genius as a man divinely inspired to carry on the work of the Life Force by “building up an intellectual consciousness of [Nature’s] own instinctive purpose” (Epistle Dedicatory, M&S, p. xx). This description applies not only to the man of action but to the artist-genius as well, who, according to the preface to Plays Pleasant (p. viii), reflects the purpose of the Life Force “in the magic glass of his artwork.” It is no surprise, then, to find Shaw referring to himself as a divinely inspired writer: “I am not governed by principles; I am inspired, how or why I cannot explain, because I do not know; but inspiration it must be; for it comes to me without any reference to my own ends or interest.”

His explanation to the Abbess of Stanbrook of how he came to write The Black Girl in Search of God, to which the Abbess strongly objected, is that God commanded him to write it and then to publish it. That this explanation was not facetious is evident in Shaw’s statement to his biographer, Archibald Henderson, that there was “something behind the creation of a play all the time, of which I was not conscious, though it turns out to be the real motive of the whole creation.”

Yet Shaw is closer to the aesthetes’ belief in a carefully wrought art than his theory of divine inspiration and his Ruskin-influenced comments on the ease of artistic productivity would suggest. Though he believed that “the person who writes slowly and with great deliberation does not necessarily write better than one who
writes in great heat,” he also said, “In my plays there is not a word I have not brooded over until it expressed the exact meaning.” An explanation of this apparent contradiction is suggested in one of Shaw’s letters to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, in which he says, “I never have to think of how to say anything in prose; the words come with the thought: I often have to argue a thing carefully to get it right; but when I have found the right thing to say it says itself instantly” (italics added). It would seem that the careful, deliberative stage comes for Shaw in the thinking rather than in the executing stage. One recalls Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s method of composition, which was to lie on the couch before beginning a work until he had thought it through; Rossetti explained that he would mentally “cartoon” the work “beforehand, by a process intensely conscious but patient and silent.” Shaw was speaking of a similar process when, in a journalistic debate with the playwright Terence Rattigan he said, “The difference between his practice and mine is that I reason out every sentence I write to the utmost of my capacity before I commit it to print, whereas he slams down everything that comes into his head without reasoning about it at all.” For Shaw the idea may originate with inspiration and be recorded with ease, but between the conception and the finished work is a conscious and deliberative stage.

Shaw even espouses the fin-de-siècle aesthetes’ conviction that ars est celare artem. Just as Whistler argues that art appears effortless because the artist has labored to remove all evidence of effort, Shaw says that his writing is very difficult because he makes “solid disquisitions on the heaviest subjects, from political economy to classical music, come out as if they were the airiest jeux d’esprit.” This idea receives its most detailed expression in Shaw’s comments on acting. He believed that an actress first has to learn to speak—to avoid voice strain, bad diction, and corrupt vowels; then she must perfect the technique of appearing not to be acting. At first she picks a number of “points” to make smoothly; then she increases the number of points until, if she is great, “she is always making points.” Using the actress Eleanora Duse as an example, Shaw notes that she integrates “the points into a continuous whole, at which stage the actress appears to make no points at all, and to proceed in the most unstudied and ‘natural’ way” (OTN, 1: 147).
Just as Shaw’s insistence on divine inspiration and “natural” composition requires qualification and redefinition of terms, so too his defense of ideas over plot in drama requires careful examination. When Shaw said that he was “a dramatic poet, not a plot-monger,” he made a distinction essential to understanding his attitude toward dramatic form. As Shaw uses it, plot does not mean the arrangement of incidents into a meaningful pattern of cause and effect; it means instead a mechanical formula, like that used in those “clumsy booby traps,” the French well-made plays. Shaw’s dramatic criticism of the 1890s aimed to demolish these plays, which Shaw says lack not only meaningful action, believable characters, and important themes but also skillful construction and effective staging. He condemned their awkward exposition, contrived scenes, and improbable endings and recommended instead a dramatic form which grows out of the interrelationship of character, idea, and incident.

Like Henry James, who conceived of the novel as “a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism,” Shaw uses an organic metaphor to suggest the dramatic form he wishes to see in place of the formula plot. He criticizes the secondhand ideas “dovetailed into a coherent structure instead of developing into one another by any life of their own” in J. Comyns Carr’s King Arthur and the lack of “dramatic soil” for the growth of incidents in Cheer, Boys, Cheer! (OTN, 1: 16, 206). Conversely, he praises Henry Arthur Jones’s plays because they “grow: they are not cut out of bits of paper and stuck together” (OTN, 2: 14). His account of the origin of Widowers’ Houses also illustrates his hostility to mechanical plotting. William Archer was to provide the scenario for Shaw’s dialogue, but Shaw “used up” all of Archer’s plot by the second act and “wanted some more to go on with”; Archer refused to continue the collaboration. According to Shaw, they disagreed about the merits of a well-made play over a play which “will construct itself, like a flowering plant, far more wonderfully than its author can consciously construct it” (Portraits, pp. 21–22).

Though rejecting “plot” as a valid way of constructing drama, Shaw never suggests that dramatic form is unimportant. Instead, he says that one of the purposes of the dramatist is “to shew the
connexion between things that seem apart and unrelated in the haphazard order of events in real life." He distinguishes between gathering information and truth-telling, between making an exact record of events, as newspaper items and photographs do, and making sense of them, as art does.

When a man writes a drama or a book or preaches a sermon or employs any other method of art, what he really does is to take the events of life out of the accidental, irrelevant, chaotic way in which they happen, and to rearrange them in such a way as to reveal their essential and spiritual relations to one another. Leaving out all that is irrelevant, he has to connect the significant facts by chains of reasoning, and also to make, as it were, bridges of feeling between them by a sort of ladder, get the whole thing in a connected form into your head, and give you a spiritual, political, social, or religious consciousness.

Shaw could therefore endorse Whistler's assertion that the artist must "pick, and choose, and group with science" the elements of nature; but, Shaw would add, this selectivity and organization is no end in itself. Such phrases as "to reveal their essential and spiritual relations to one another" or "give you a spiritual, political, social, or religious consciousness" are foreign to Whistler and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes.

A frequent theme of both Shaw and the aesthetes concerning the relationship between artistic form and content is the idea of music as "the type of all the arts." Pater used an analogy between the arts and music to refer to the perfect integration of form and matter; Whistler used it to describe the subordination of subject to form; Wilde and Symons used it to suggest either the mystery at the heart of all art or simply the sonorous effect of poetry; and all used it as a means of emphasizing the importance of form. Similarly, in "The Religion of the Pianoforte," Shaw said, "The greatest of the great among poets, from Aeschylus to Wagner, have been poet-musicians." In "Literature and Art" he wrote that a literary man with a message "becomes a master of rhetoric that affects you like music. It acts on your senses and imagination in some strange way that, although you do not altogether understand the content of it, yet you feel that it is a great ringing message to you, a penetrating message that goes home." Thus, he empha-
sized Shakespeare's ability to create verbal music, and he said that his own plays "are essentially poetic dramas and should be sung." Answering a critic's comment on his kinship to Congreve and Sheridan, he says, "There is more of Il Trovatore and Don Giovanni in my style than of The Mourning Bride and The School for Scandal."  

A comparison of Shaw's and the aesthetes' commentary on music reveals precisely their differences: Shaw demands subject and meaning in music, condemning Mendelssohn, Offenbach, and Italian opera on the basis of this demand and praising Bach, Wagner, Berlioz, Liszt, Beethoven, and Richard Strauss. In *The Sanity of Art* and *The Perfect Wagnerite* he distinguishes between composers of decorative and dramatic music. The former, like Academy painters and writers of well-made plays, follow "laws of pattern designing" or, like exponents of art for art's sake, create "a graceful, symmetrical sound-pattern that exists solely for the sake of its own grace and symmetry" (SA, p. 295). On the other hand, Wagner, freed by Mozart and Beethoven from the necessity of prescribed patterns, is purely dramatic; his ideas are essential and are woven "into a rich musical fabric" (*Wagnerite*, pp. 264–69). Though Shaw clearly prefers dramatic art, he does not condemn all decorative art. The playwright, for example, is free to use "all the rhetorical and lyrical arts of the orator, the preacher, the pleader, and the rhapsodist" (*Quintessence*, p. 146). Moreover, there are two kinds of decorative art: (1) art for its own sake, last exemplified in its pure form in the music of the thirteenth, fourteenth, or fifteenth centuries, much of which "is very beautiful, and hugely superior to the stuff our music publishers turn out today"; and (2) academic art, which failed to recognize the need for new forms when music ceased to be pattern and became poem or story (SA, pp. 295–300). Therefore, when Shaw says that the greatest artists, such as Shakespeare, Shelley, and Mozart, are masters of both decorative and dramatic music, he means that they combined "pure form" and idea. His objections are to academism, the attempt to make laws requiring all art to be decorative.

These objections amount to an insistence that artistic form be suited to the artist's purpose and matter; Wagner found a new form to suit his dramatic purpose, just as Shaw was creating a new form
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of drama to suit his purpose. This form has been called "a static drama of the intelligence" and "slices of life on the stage"; it had, like some of the aesthetes' art, a nonanecdotal quality. Shaw described the new form in this way: "A first-rate play seems nowadays [1906] to have no situation, just as Wagner's music seemed to our grandfathers to have no melody, because it was all melody from beginning to end. The best plays consist of a single situation, lasting several hours." And he instructed an actors' conference on the production of a Shaw play, "Don't be afraid of being static. I am not leading up to a murder but to a thought." A drama which is all situation and which intends to produce thought by discussion involves a redefinition of action and of incident, just as James's fiction required a redefinition of incident or Whistler's painting a redefinition of "subject." Shaw is sympathetic, for example, to Whistler's attempt to force people to look at his painting as artistic form rather than as anecdote. Whistler knew, Shaw says, "that if he left a woman's face discernible the British Philistine would simply look to see whether she was a pretty girl or not, or whether she represented some of his pet characters in fiction, and pass on without having seen any of the qualities of artistic execution which made the drawing valuable" (SA, p. 292). As Whistler obliterated details in order to emphasize line and color in painting, Shaw obliterates "plot" in order to concentrate on the essence of drama, that is, the integration of fable and idea.

Finally, Shaw's well-known statements on the importance of ideas in art, including even music, his praise of Ibsen and Wagner for their philosophy and his criticism of Shakespeare for his lack of it need to be balanced against his comments on the primarily emotional effect of art. In a Saturday Review article Shaw maintains that the appeal to human "instincts and passions" constitutes the most valid claim to immortality that art has. He explains that a play ages in this manner: first, "its manners and fashions will begin to date"; then its reputation may return if its ideas are powerful enough to save it from oblivion; next, its morals will begin to date. "Yet if it deals so powerfully with the instincts and passions of humanity as to survive this also, it will again regain its place, this time as an antique classic, especially if it tells a capital story" (OTN, 2: 167). Here he attributes the permanent value
of a classic play to its universal qualities; later, in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman*, he says that a play's permanence is determined by its style and form. In a remarkable defense of form over idea, he says, "Disprove his [the artist's] assertion after it is made, yet its style remains. Darwin has no more destroyed the style of Job nor of Handel than Martin Luther destroyed the style of Giotto. All the assertions get disproved sooner or later; and so we find the world full of a magnificent debris of artistic fossils, with the matter-of-fact credibility gone clean out of them, but the form still splendid" (p. xxxv). This belief is identical to Wilde's or Symons's or Yeats's faith in the transitory nature of everything but art. However, Shaw goes one step farther in his belief in impermanence and change; he says that eventually the art form itself will lose its appeal when human sensibilities evolve to a higher plane of existence, as they have in Shaw's utopia in part 5 of *Back to Methuselah*.

Shaw's comment on the permanence of style occurs, ironically, in the same passage in which he condemns art for art's sake. In this passage he also dismisses as mechanical any style which is not a direct result of an idea or a conviction.

I know that there are men who, having nothing to say and nothing to write, are nevertheless so in love with oratory and with literature that they delight in repeating as much as they can understand of what others have said or written aforetime. I know that the leisurely tricks which their want of conviction leaves them free to play with the diluted and misapprehended message supply them with a pleasant parlor game which they call style. I can pity their dotage and even sympathize with their fancy. But a true original style is never achieved for its own sake: a man may pay from a shilling to a guinea, according to his means, to see, hear, or read another man's act of genius; but he will not pay with his whole life and soul to become a mere virtuoso in literature, exhibiting an accomplishment which will not even make money for him, like fiddle playing. Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none: he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him. (Pp. xxxiv–xxxv)

Here "style for its own sake" has the same ambiguity as Shaw's description of decorative music: it is, first of all, the imi-
tation of the old masters, the academic art which Shaw and his Pre-Raphaelite brothers condemned; secondly, it is playing with language, "a pleasant parlor game," which Shaw finds abhorrent but which Pater says "satisfies a real instinct in our minds—the fancy so many of us have for an exquisite and curious skill in the use of words."

Shaw's opposition to "style for its own sake" finds expression in his attack on the "insane and hideous rhetoric" of Elizabethan writers (OTN, 1: 130). Whereas Pater finds a "delightful side" to the "dainty language and curious expression" of Love's Labour's Lost, Shaw says that Shakespeare was at his worst when he was influenced by "the miserable rhetoric and silly logical conceits which were the foible of the Elizabethans" (OTN, 1: 203). Shaw parodied Elizabethan language in The Admirable Bashville, a dramatization of his novel Cashel Byron's Profession (T&T, p. 85). This play is, Shaw says, "in the primitive Elizabethan style"; it is a mélange of quotations from Elizabethan plays inserted in a blank verse deliberately overwrought and filled with archaisms—a style that could serve as a burlesque of "that foppery of words, of choice diction" described in Marius the Epicurean, filled with "archaisms and curious felicities, quaint terms and images picked fresh from the early dramatists, and lifelike phrases of some lost poet preserved by an old grammarian, racy morsels of the vernacular and studied prettinesses."

 Appropriately, The Admirable Bashville is one of the few pieces of art for art's sake (i.e., art that "has nothing to assert") in Shaw's canon; he took advantage of a practical necessity—the need to protect Cashel Byron's Profession from dramatic piracies—to create "a literary joke." And, also appropriately, it emphasizes his contempt for playing with language and form and following mechanical rules:

I observed the established laws of stage popularity and probability. I simplified the character of the heroine, and summed up her sweetness in the one sacred word: Love. I gave consistency to the heroism of Cashel. I paid to Morality, in the final scene, the tribute of poetic justice. I restored to Patriotism its usual place on the stage, and gracefully acknowledged The Throne as the fountain of social honor. I paid particular attention to the construction of the play, which will be
found equal in this respect to the best contemporary models. (*T&T*, pp. 85-86)

The play illustrates his theory that, without anything to assert (he was simply protecting his copyright), an artist lacks a style; he follows a formula and creates neither an effective form nor meaningful content.

In place of what he considers an artificial style, Shaw demands in idiomatic, vernacular style. Though he could advise Golding-Bright, the young critic of *Advice to a Young Critic*, “to admit, with absolute respect, the right of every man to his own style,”21 his stylistic preferences are clear. One of his criticisms of his own novel *Immaturity* is that the style has “propriety” and “correctness,” but that it lacks idiom; he adds parenthetically, “Later on I came to seek idiom as being the most highly vitalized form of language” (*Preface, Immaturity*, p. xxxix). In his dramatic criticism he finds fault with plays which substitute “literary” for idiomatic speech, as, for example, the dramatization of Hall Caine’s *The Manxman*, which Shaw says reveals that “the Manx race are without a vernacular, and only communicate with one another by extracts from Cassell’s National Library, the Chandos Classics, and the like” (*OTN*, 1: 251).

Though the aesthetes and Shaw disagree about the effectiveness of a “dainty” or “delicate” style created out of the artist’s sense of play, a style belonging to what Max Beerbohm called “the ‘precious’ school of writers,”22 the aesthetes would agree that a style arising out of the imperfect combination of subject and form is to be condemned. Shaw’s belief that a great stylist must have “something to assert” is perfectly compatible with Pater’s “Style” or his “School of Giorgione,” in which effective style and form are defined as the artistic fusion of matter and form, or with James’s “The Art of Fiction,” where James says that “there is surely no ‘school’—Mr. Besant speaks of a school—which urges that a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat; every school is intimately conscious of that.

... In proportion as the work is successful the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation point contribute directly to the expression.”23 Shaw’s
emphasis on ideas does not divide him and the aesthetes as much as it might at first seem, for Shaw says that "after all, the main thing in determining the artistic quality of a book is not the opinions it propagates, but the fact that the writer has opinions" (Epistle Dedicatory, M&S, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv). This suggestion that ideas are primarily important because they produce "artistic quality" is from an artist's, not a propagandist's, point of view.

Where Shaw and the aesthetes differ is not so much on the theory of style as on personal preferences in style. Whereas Pater, Symons, Wilde, and Yeats prefer the lyric impulse and the perfectly wrought form of jewel-like little masterpieces, Shaw prefers the more expansive style that prose allows. Yeats's hatred of the "very clever young journalists" who, admiring Ibsen, "hated music and style" and the Ibsenite playwrights whose "expression is as common as the newspapers where they first learned to write" is unfair to Shaw. Because Shaw seldom ignored an opportunity to attack art for art's sake, style, and even art itself has often obscured the fact that, like the aesthetes, he is a highly conscious literary artist. As Richard Burton correctly points out in his chapter on Shaw, "The Theatre Craftsman," the unusual form of Shaw's drama should not be mistaken for formlessness: "Right or wrong as to the results, [Shaw] knows the rules of the game, consciously alters or ignores them, chooses to do what he does, and takes the risks."