ONE OF SHAW'S most persistent ideas is that he is a realistic dramatist, taking "all my dramatic material either from real life at first hand, or from authentic documents." Shaw's realism was, on one level, as we have seen, a part of the Pre-Raphaelite return to nature—a rejection of academic rules and an insistence that the artist record accurately what he sees. But on another level it was as removed from the everyday, familiar world as the work of the most detached fin-de-siècle aesthete.

On occasion the fin-de-siècle aesthetes also appealed to a realistic standard like that of the Pre-Raphaelites. For example, Whistler asked his critics to judge his paintings by observing reality rather than other paintings; he argued that, if the critics of his color and tone would look at the people rather than at the other paintings in the gallery, they would see "how 'quiet' in colour [the people] are! how 'grey'! how 'low in tone.'" And Aubrey Beardsley affirmed the realism of his first cover for The Yellow Book—a drawing of a lady playing the piano, with an open field as background—by appealing to the historical fact that Gluck played the piano and composed several works in a field, with a bottle of champagne at each side; "I tremble to think," Beardsley observes, "what critics would say had I introduced those bottles of champagne." Shaw offers the same appeal to extraordinary but actual events in defending Arms and the Man from what critics took to be the improbable nature of Bluntschli's behavior. After citing
numerous documents verifying the terror, caution, and hunger of brave men in battle, Shaw says, "I have stuck to the routine of war, as described by real warriors, and avoided such farcical [real] incidents as Sir William Gordon defending his battery by throwing stones, or General Porter's story of the two generals who, though brave and capable men, always got sick under fire."

But unlike Shaw—and Whistler and Beardsley in the instances cited—the fin-de-siècle aesthetes usually avoided applying the term realism to their work because of its associations with either representationalism or naturalism, to which they objected on the grounds that both catered to vulgar tastes and eschewed style. For example, Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" attacks "realistic" (i.e., naturalistic and representational) art because it is uninteresting, improbable, and vulgar; Zola, Wilde says, tells truthfully what he sees but is wrong artistically because he is dull; and Charles Reade, after creating one beautiful book, began "raging and roaring over the abuses of contemporary life like a common pamphleteer or a sensational journalist." Although Shaw (or, for that matter, Wilde) was capable of "raging and roaring" over contemporary abuses, his concept of realistic art is more like that of Wilde than that of Zola. Shaw denied that he had "ever been what you call a representationist or realist. I was always in the classic tradition, recognizing that stage characters must be endowed by the author with a conscious self-knowledge and power of expression, and a freedom from inhibitions, which in real life would make them monsters of genius. It is the power to do this that differentiates me (or Shakespear) from a gramophone and a camera." More often than not, Shaw's realism refers to more than perception of the familiar world. In The Quintessence of Ibsenism he warns that his realism is not to be associated with that of Zola and De Maupassant, but with that of Plato. His realism is not simply accurate reproduction of empirical reality, but an attempt to represent the essence behind the illusory sensible world—to use Shaw's terminology, "to realize the future possibilities by tearing the mask and the thing masked asunder." The mask to Shaw is idealism, a much confused term because people use it to describe both (1) illusion and (2) the attempt to destroy illusion. Shaw uses idealism in the first sense and gives the name realism to the second. Unlike the
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idealistic (or romanticist, a term Shaw also contrasts with "realist"), the Shivian realist, combining a utopian and practical imagination, has "the power to imagine things as they are without actually sensing them."

To Shaw the realist illuminates the reality existing behind the shadows of the apparent world—the reality not visible to most people. Thus he considered Rodin a realistic sculptor because he was able to see behind the mask of reputation and sculpt the "real" man. With "accurate vision" and "incorruptible veracity," Rodin created busts "of real men, not of the reputations of celebrated persons" (Portraits, pp. 227-31). This Platonic view is compatible with Wilde's concept of the liar-artist, who does not attempt to copy nature but creates an imaginary world, an "untrue" and "unreal" world superior to the ordinary one. The primary difference is in the terminology, not the idea: the "real" vision of the artist Shaw describes is similar to the "unreal" vision of Wilde's artist.

In fact, Wilde's attack on realism and his insistence that art deal with the unreal and the unfamiliar implies not so much a need for abandoning realism as for redefining what is real. The background for such an extension of the province of art was provided by Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, who believed that the artist must be true to his own observation of nature; Ruskin had introduced a relativistic note when he said that the art produced will be as various as the artists' visions. And Pater's philosophy had clearly placed reality in the mind of the individual artist, whose own sensations and reactions are the materials of art. Such an individualistic, subjective world constitutes "reality" for the fin-de-siècle aesthetes: it is implicit in Wilde’s assertion in "The Decay of Lying" that art does not copy, but creates life; it is the basis for James's "fine central intelligence"; it is the basis for Symons's praise of the French symbolists for being able to suggest by symbol the reality of the spiritual world, apprehended only mystically; and it is the basis of Yeats's defense of "personal utterance," the lyric impulse, over propagandistic or "realistic" (i.e., journalistic, propagandistic) art.

So too Shaw's theory calls for an artist who is interested primarily in creating a world which represents his inner vision. When
the musician-hero of *Love among the Artists* explains that "there is an art which is inspired by a passion for beauty, but only in men who can never associate beauty with a lie" (p. 330), the hero, who speaks for Shaw, is not so far from the position of Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" as one might at first assume. To Shaw the artist is a truth teller, but the nature of that truth and the reality it describes involves a rejection of much that ordinary people see, so that to them it seems to be a distortion, an exaggeration, a lie. Shaw believes that literary people and dramatic critics are especially conditioned to conventional ideas of reality: "Hence Captain Bluntschli, who thinks of a battlefield as a very busy and very dangerous place, is incredible to the critic who thinks of it only as a theatre in which to enjoy the luxurious excitements of patriotism, victory, and bloodshed without risk or retribution."7

Of course, Shaw's art is indeed a lie in that, being art and not life, it involves a reshaping of experiential reality. Shaw readily admits, with Whistler and Wilde, that the artist must create, not copy, life: "Holding a mirror up to nature is not a correct definition of a playwright's art. A mirror reflects what is before it. Hold it up to any street at noonday and it shews a crowd of people and vehicles and tells you nothing about them. A photograph of them has no meaning. The playwright must interpret the passing show by parables."8 He also differentiates between accurate portrait-painting and fictional characterization. In a review of his novels, he concedes that the heroine of *Caskel Byron's Profession* "is super-human all through" and "that her inside is full of wheels and springs"; but he says that fiction does not require "flesh and blood": "The business of a novelist is largely to provide working models of improved types of humanity."9 Although he often used living models for numerous characters in his work—e.g., Cecil Lawson (Cyril Scott), Sidney Webb (Bluntschli), Jenny Patterson (Julia Craven), William Morris (Apollodorus), Ellen Terry (Lady Cicely), Edward Aveling (Dubedat)—he freely altered his models. Thus when Mrs. Patrick Campbell objected to Orinthia in *The Apple Cart*, he wrote: "Orinthia is not a portrait: she is a study for which you sat as a model in bits only. I am an artist and as such utterly unscrupulous when I find my model."10 And, when he used historical figures—Burgoyne, Caesar,
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Joan—he says that, though he followed historical reality, of necessity he altered it to conform to the limitations of stage representation. In Saint Joan he departed from history "to condense into three and a half hours a series of events which in their historical happening were spread over four times as many months" and "to make its figures more intelligible to themselves than they would be in real life"; therefore, Cauchon, Lemaître, and Warwick are represented as saying "the things they actually would have said if they had known what they were really doing" (Preface, Joan, pp. 47, 51).

Shaw's alteration of real people to "improved types of humanity" suggests an agreement with Wilde's contention that art is better than life. In "The Decay of Lying" Wilde argues that art is, because of its perfection of form, more interesting than life, and even more probable: "It is style that makes us believe a thing—nothing but style." Shaw suggests that art is more interesting than life when, in the preface to In Good King Charles' Golden Days, he says, "When we turn from the sordid facts of Charles' reign, and from his Solomonic polygamy, to what might have happened to him but did not the situation becomes interesting and fresh" (p. 153).

At times Shaw even maintains as Wilde does that "life imitates art far more than Art imitates life." In a much parodied overstatement Wilde says that, when the liar-artist returns to a society now vulgarized and bored by facts and truth tellers, he will be welcomed by Art, and life will "try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which he talks." As proof, Wilde points to the "aesthetic" lady in a salon trying to look like a lady in Rossetti's art or to the recent change in climate, the "wonderful brown fogs" and "lovely silver mists," a direct result of impressionist painting. So, too, Shaw says, "I have noticed that when a certain type of feature appears in painting and is admired as beautiful, it presently becomes common in nature; so that the Beatrices and Francescas in the picture galleries of one generation come to life as the parlor-maids and waitresses of the next" (Preface, Three Plays, p. xix). He says that his aristocrats in Cashel Byron's Profession are more priggish than real ones because, when he wrote the novel, he had not yet discovered
that “what he supposed to be the real world does not exist, and that men and women are made by their own fancies in the image of the imaginary creatures in his youthful fictions, only much stupider” (p. v). Unlike Wilde, Shaw usually finds most attempts to emulate art reprehensible because the art people choose to imitate is unreal, i.e., idealistic, romantic. He attacks the tendency to found institutions on “fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct” (Preface, *Plays Pleasant*, p. xvi) and condemns the literary men and drama critics who base their ideas on “stage morality and stage human nature” and thus become “idiotti- cally confident of the reality of [their] own unreal knowledge.”12 The trouble is that fictional behavior and attitudes are unworthy of imitation: romantic literature causes man to be needlessly jealous, bellicose, vindictive, superstitious. As proof of this Shaw observes, “Ten years of cheap reading have changed the English from the most stolid nation in Europe to the most theatrical and hysterical.” Therefore he would purge England of all romantic art and substitute a realistic art, depicting “real life,” which is inconsistent, unjust, and “unthinkable,” but also “credible, stimulating, suggestive, various, free from creeds and systems—in short, it is real.”13

Shaw’s final position is that reality does not have to be opposed to art; reality may reside in art, as in the work of Shaw, Ibsen, or Wagner. In a statement clearly asserting the reality of art, Shaw says, “I turned a person, now an M. P., into something real by incorporating him as a character in *The Doctor’s Dilemma*. No person is real until he has been transmitted into a work of art.”14 On another occasion Shaw said that the greatest art is a form of self-realization in which the artist himself becomes “completely real.” Using the actor Coquelin as his example, Shaw says that the great actor needs roles that reveal a part of his nature to us, and “his best part will be that which shews all sides of him and realizes him wholly to us and to himself. In it he becomes for the first time completely real: he has achieved the aspiration of the hero of Ibsen’s fantastic play and become himself at last. This is not acting: it is the final escape from acting, the ineffable release from the conventional mask which must be resumed as the artist passes behind the wing, washes off the paint, and goes down
into the false lights and simulated interests and passions of the street.”

This reality is the kind of truth to which Shaw’s musician-hero who “can never associate beauty with a lie” refers: it is a truth which goes beyond the world of appearance and beyond even the artistic world in which technical mastery enables the artist to produce the illusion of reality. The actress in *Love among the Artists*, Madge Brailsford, has mastered her craft so well that she appears completely natural on the stage; but, as someone observes, she is “stagey in private,” and, even when she is most serious, when she is confessing her love for Owen Jack, she is merely acting a role, looking at Jack “with an expression of earnest sympathy which had cost her much study to perfect” (p. 322). Her private staginess brings on the lecture by Jack on the difference between an art inspired by truth and an art inspired by sham:

*We are not a pair, you and I. I know how to respect myself: do you learn to know yourself. We two are artists, as you are aware. Well, there is an art that is inspired by nothing but a passion for shamming; and that is yours, so far. There is an art which is inspired by a passion for beauty, but only in men who can never associate beauty with a lie. That is my art. Master that and you will be able to make true love. At present you only know how to make scenes, which is too common an accomplishment to interest me. You see you have not quite finished your lessons yet. Goodbye.* (P. 330)

Shaw would, then, have the artist penetrate to the inner truth behind not only the lie of romantic art but also the lie of everyday life. Although, like the Pre-Raphaelites, he says that he bases his art on observed phenomena and although he claims to deal with the familiar, not the unusual or artificial, he aspires to a realism that captures the essence rather than the sensation of occurrences, that deals with the spirit, rather than the material elements of life, that portrays the inner being rather than the facade. His realism is therefore not that of the naturalist; nor does it depict the conventional world and its values. It is the reshaped, motivated, articulated reality which may be more interesting, and certainly is more meaningful, than life. Like Wilde, Shaw maintains that life imitates art; his regret is that the art imitated is too often a shabby one. Shaw’s art offers to supply a reality worthy of imitation.