PART III

THE AESTHETE AND THE SHAVIAN ARTIST
Chapter IX

THE NATURE OF THE AESTHETE-ARTIST

JUST AS A COMPARISON of the art theories of the aesthetes and Shaw emphasizes an aspect of Shaw which until recent years had been neglected—the idea of Shaw as artist rather than as philosopher or social critic—a comparison of the image of the artist in the works of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes and Shaw similarly emphasizes the importance Shaw gives to the artist's role. The fact that Shaw expects the artist to prophesy and interpret the next stage of creative evolution would suggest a great difference between the amoral, hypersensitive aesthete-artist and the Shavian artist; nevertheless, Shaw's portraits of artists of whom he approves—Marchbanks, Apollodorus, or, with qualifications, Dubedat—contain some characteristics of the aesthete-artist. Conversely, the artists of whom Shaw disapproves—Hawkshaw in Immaturity, Adrian Herbert in Love among the Artists, or Octavius in Man and Superman—are failures primarily because they are dilettantes, not because they are aesthetes.

In characterizing the aesthete-artist, a distinction must first be made between the artist who wishes to make an art of a highly conscious, aware, and intense life (Pater's Marius and Wilde's Dorian Gray are obvious examples) and an artist in the usual sense, a man dedicated to creating art forms. Aesthete, as I define the term, may refer to either kind of artist, by aesthete-artist I mean the latter kind. Examples of the aesthete-artist in late nineteenth-century fiction are Apuleius and Flavian in Marius the
BERNARD SHAW AND THE AESTHETES

Epicurean; the young man in George Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*; the novelists and painters in Henry James’s “artist” stories; Anton in Dowson’s “Souvenirs of an Egoist”; Dick Lightmark and Oswyn in Arthur Moore’s and Ernest Dowson’s *A Comedy of Masks* (1893); and the speaker of Symons’s “A Prelude to Life.” In these portraits as well as in the fin-de-siècle aesthetes’ critical commentary, the artist is an alien to society and either rebels against it or withdraws from it. Believing that personal morality has nothing to do with artistic excellence, he is not of necessity virtuous and may possibly be evil. He is sensitive to ugliness, often to the point of hypersensitivity. Because he consciously tries to salvage out of shapeless and meaningless life an artistic form, he usually acts a role or poses, as a means of asserting the power of artifice over nature. Above all, as a creator of what may be the real thing, he asserts his superiority to society and demands freedom from its restrictions.

In *Confessions of a Young Man* George Moore defends the concept of the alienated artist: “In the past the artist has always been an outcast; it is only latterly he has become domesticated, and judging by results, it is clear that if Bohemianism is not a necessity it is at least an adjuvant. For if long locks and general dissoluteness were not an aid and a way to pure thought, why have they been so long his characteristics?”\(^1\) The idea of the artist as Bohemian is not, of course, one which originated at the end of the nineteenth century; the sense of alienation of the fin-de-siècle aesthete is part of the same impulse that created the Byronic hero, with his scorn for, and withdrawal from, society, or Murger’s Bohemian artists in *La Vie de Bohème* (1845). But the romantic sense of isolation was so pronounced for the fin-de-siècle aesthete-artist that he sometimes felt, as Moore suggests, that alienation is a prerequisite for artistic productivity.

In reaction to an artistically ignorant, indifferent, and hostile society, the aesthete-artist either rebelled or withdrew. Artistic rebellion received sanction from both the moral and fin-de-siècle aesthetes; it is at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and is possibly the major motivation of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes. More than one critic considers revolt against the materialism of Victorian England the primary character of the fin-de-siècle period;
for example, A. J. Farmer (*Le Mouvement esthétique et “décadent” en Angleterre*) says that Pater’s aestheticism, Moore’s naturalism, Wilde’s decadence, and Symons’s impressionism are all united in their ideal of emancipation from the out-of-date dogmas of Victorianism. Even the lives of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes dramatized their rebellion. Wilde’s costume of the 1880s advertized not only his devotion to beauty but also his rebellion against convention; it is to this rebellious impulse that Ford Madox Ford refers when he says, “When Oscar Wilde wandered down Bond Street in a mediaeval costume, bearing in his hand a flower, he was doing something not merely ridiculous. It was militant.”

The alternative to active rebellion against an artistically illiterate public was withdrawal from it. The prototype of such withdrawal is Huysmans’s decadent hero, Des Esseintes, who completely withdraws from the sordid vulgarity of ordinary life. Pater’s heroes—Winckelmann, Marius, Sebastian van Storck, for example—are also characteristically detached spectators of, rather than participants in, life, in accord with Pater’s belief that the aesthetic life demands freedom from involvement. Max Beerbohm satirized this freedom when he said that he came to Oxford as an undergraduate, like Marius to Rome, aspiring to “unswitch myself from my surroundings, to guard my soul from contact with the unlovely things that compassed it about.”

Just as the fin-de-siècle aesthetes saw the artist as separate from society, so also they considered his work separate from his personal life. They agreed with Baudelaire’s contention that whether or not a poet has a pure and “correcte” life may be of concern to his confessor or the courts—but not to his art. Swinburne made such a separation of morality and art when he said that the priest and the poet have always been enemies and that “what is called the artistic faculty [is not] by any means the same thing as a general capacity for doing good work.” Whistler objected to a critic’s praise of “a colourless old gentlemen of the academy,” who, though virtuous, “as the painter of poor pictures is damned for ever.” Wilde even defended an infamous poisoner on aesthetic grounds: “The fact of a man being a poisioner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art.” In Dowson’s and Moore’s *A Comedy of Masks*, the painter Oswyn exemplifies this
BERNARD SHAW AND THE AESTHETES

theory: an advocate of art for art's sake, Oswyn is personally disreputable but artistically sound: "His life might be disgraceful, indescribable: his art lay apart from it; and when he took up a brush an enthusiasm, a devotion to art, almost religious, steadied his hand."  

The artist whose work is not to be judged by moral standards was often considered not amoral but evil. Pater contributes to the image of the artist tinged with corruption in his portrait of Flavian in Marius the Epicurean: he "believed only in himself, in the brilliant, and mainly sensuous gifts, he had, or meant to acquire"; he embodies "the spirit of unbelief"; and he seems to Marius "an epitome of the whole pagan world, the depth of its corruption, and its perfection of form."  

George Moore sees himself as a pagan artist, converted by Gautier to a worship of the flesh. And Wilde's New Hedonism is derived directly from Pater; Dorian Gray, with his youthful beauty and corruption of soul, is the literary descendant of Pater's Flavian, Denys, or Apollo in Picardy.

Sometimes the sensuousness of the aesthete-artist amounts to a hypersensitivity, such as that parodied in The New Republic, where Mr. Rose confesses that when he goes into the vulgar city he often takes "a scrap of some artistic crétonne with me in my pocket as a kind of aesthetic smelling salts."  The artist in Symons's "A Prelude to Life" is almost equally sensitive, admitting that the thought of dirtying his hands or his clothes or of cleaning his boots disgusted him. Such delicacy is also a characteristic of numerous fictional artists in living, such as Moore's protagonist of "The Lovers of Orelay," whose amorous adventure is almost ruined because of ugly quarters and unaesthetic nightclothes; or John Norton in Moore's A Mere Accident, whose hatred of Thornby Place focuses on Mrs. Norton's note to the servants concerning the use of soda on the woodwork; or Dorian Gray, whose love for Sibyl Vane fades because of her bad acting. The idea of the unashamedly sensuous and possibly hypersensitive artist derives, again, from the image of the decadent, especially Huysmans's Des Esseintes, who is pained by a maid's wringing out wet clothes, who is agonized "to hear a piece of stuff torn in two, to rub his fingers over a lump of chalk, to stroke the surface of watered silk," and
who is finally forced for his health’s sake to return to Paris and mediocrity as an antidote to his life of sensual refinement.

Another fact of the aesthete-artist’s character derived from the decadence is his aversion to nature and preference for artifice, symbolized in satire by Hichens’s green carnation and symbolized in the works of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes by the city, cosmetics, and bought love. Symons’s “Word on Behalf of Patchouli” is a major critical expression of the revolt from nature; in this essay Symons defends his personal preference for the artificial, asking the critics, “Well, why not Patchouli? Is there any ‘reason in nature’ why we should write exclusively about the natural blush, if the delicately acquired blush of rouge has any attraction for us?” This preference for artificiality accounts for the aesthetes’ defense of self-conscious, deliberate creation over instinctive, “natural” creativity and their belief in the superiority of art to nature. They conceived of the artist as not an observer and copier of nature but as a manipulator and hence the master of nature—an artificer. Some, like Whistler, preferred to use a living lily as a model, and some, like Symons, preferred an artificial one. But they agreed that the artistically gilded lily, whether the model was living or fake, is better, because it is more beautiful, than the one in the garden.

On the personal level, the preference for the artistic over the natural was often expressed in a tendency to pose, to act a role. Again The Green Carnation helps to define by its exaggeration: Reggie believes that “everything is a pose nowadays, especially genius.” The book satirizes the attitudinizing of Wilde, for whom, Symons says, “Human life has always been something acted on the stage; a comedy in which he may also disdainfully take part, as in a carnival, under any mask.” Even when Wilde seems most serious, when he is discussing the nature of art, he protects himself from the possible charge of sincerely advocating a position, of advancing a thesis, by casting the essay in the form of a dialogue, assuming personae, or by parodying his own position. For example, “The Decay of Lying” is a paper prepared for the Retrospective Review, published by the Tired Hedonists Club, and read by Vivian and Cyril (the names of Wilde’s children); “The Critic as Artist” is a dialogue between Gilbert and Ernest, who are
amusing parodies of aesthetes, employing eccentric and extravagant speech. The statement “give [a man] a mask, and he will tell you the truth” enables one to interpret Vivian’s or Gilbert’s—or even Wilde’s—views, but there is always a question of how much credence to give to a persona, especially one who insists “that lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.”

Worthy of note in connection with the mask motif is the fact that other aesthetes, Symons and Yeats, have books entitled *Dramatis Personae*. Furthermore, Beardsley’s drawings often portray masked figures, and Dowson’s *A Comedy of Masks* finds value in the masks of indifference or amused detachment in that they enable one to live in an otherwise unbearable world. The use of personae or the mask to achieve artistic detachment is a characteristic of the artist central not only to Wilde’s theory but to Yeats’s theory as well. Yeats says that “one constantly notices in very active natures a tendency to pose, or if the pose has become a second self a preoccupation with the effect they are producing”; the artist, he maintains, must imagine himself a second self, which is his link “with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy.”

The aesthete’s posing might vary in purpose from the affectation and attitudinizing parodied in *Patience* to the occultism of Yeats, but it was, in fact, a way of dramatizing the primacy of art over life, and of the artist over all other men. According to the fin-de-siècle aesthetes’ theory, the artist-artificer’s creativity makes him superior to society, for he deals with the permanent in existence and provides the perfection of form to fill the moments in a life in constant flux.