Chapter XIII

THE ARTIST-CREATOR OF LIFE

After The Dark Lady of the Sonnets, Shaw ceased to portray the artist interested in creating a living art form and offered instead the artist who is interested in creating life itself. In Shaw’s theology God is the Life Force, which, operating through its agents, evolves by trial and error toward a higher form of life; and to Shaw God is an artist: “God made the world as an artist and that is why the world must learn from its artists.” Therefore, the highest kind of artist is the one who aspires, like God, to create life.

Henry Higgins was Shaw’s first attempt to depict this kind of artist. Higgins can be seen as a literary artist only by a play on words: i.e., he works with language and is interested in producing beautiful sounds—sounds worthy of “the language of Shakespear and Milton and the Bible” (p. 209); he refers to himself as a “poet” (p. 230), and Eliza calls him “a born preacher” (p. 288). But his art transcends that of the poet-preacher. He is primarily interested in creating life, in changing Eliza, the “squashed cabbage leaf,” into a human being. He does this by first “creating a new speech for her,” and then creating a new soul for her, so that she may evolve from “creature” to human being with divine potentialities. He tells his mother that he has been “watching her lips and teeth and her tongue, not to mention her soul, which is the quaintest of the lot” (p. 256); and he tries to explain to Eliza that recognizing the value of the human soul is more important than having manners: “The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or
good manners or any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manner for all human souls: in short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another” (p. 288). Throughout the experiment Higgins looks on Eliza as a lower form of life, referring to her as a “creature,” an “animal,” an “insect,” a “cat.” He does not consider her human until she defies him; then he warns her that “if you dare to set up your little dog’s tricks of fetching and carrying slippers against my creation of a Duchess Eliza, I’ll slam the door in your silly face” (p. 290). Eliza demonstrates that she is indeed a lower form of life than Higgin's ideal by her snobbery when she plans to cut her old associates, by her vengeful desire to “get a bit of my own back” from all who hurt her, by her slaving for the sake of approval (Higgins calls this trading in affection), and, finally, by her hatred of Higgin’s coldness. Not until she asserts her independence from him does he tell her, “By George, Eliza, I said I’d make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this” (p. 294). He nevertheless continues giving her orders; and he remains, Shaw says in the epilogue to the play, in a godlike relation to her (p. 307). She is, however, transformed by Higgins; both her speech and her soul become more refined under his tutelage.

Like Shaw’s God, Higgins is not infallible; he is sure of himself in working with Eliza’s speech, but he proceeds experimentally on the difficult job, the creation of life (i.e., soul). To Pickering’s objection that Eliza “must understand thoroughly what she’s doing” before she consents to the experiment, Higgins says, “Do any of us understand what we are doing? If we did, would we ever do it?” (p. 224). To Eliza’s accusation that by changing her he made trouble for her, he answers, “Would the world ever have been made if its maker had been afraid of making trouble? Making life means making trouble” (p. 290). Furthermore, he confesses that he too has profited from the experiment, that he has “learnt something from [Eliza’s] idiotic notions” (p. 289).

Though Higgins is a very special kind of artist, his characteristics are those of Shaw’s other fictional artists. In temperament he is like Cyril Scott, Owen Jack, or Madame Szczympliça: extremely petulant, easily angered, and unconscious of his irascible nature. Just as Jack impatiently storms at his pupils and then assumes
that "perhaps you did not perceive my annoyance, and so took
whatever I said too seriously," so Higgins protests to Eliza, after
he has lost his temper twice in rapid succession and is about to lose
it again: "You have caused me to lose my temper: a thing that has
hardly ever happened to me before" (Pygmalion, p. 271). Hig­
gins's feuding with Mrs. Pearce recalls Jack's abuse of Mrs. Simp­
son, the landlady who looks after him, criticizes his manners, and
is consequently the recipient of violent abuse.

Jack is in fact an early version of Professor Higgins, especially
in his taking a pupil for tutoring in elocution. His "very exacting"
method of instruction anticipates that of Higgins: Madge "often
could hardly restrain her tears when he emphasized her defects by
angrily mimicking them, which was the most unpleasant, but not
the least effective, part of his system of teaching. He was particular,
even in his cheerful moods, and all but violent in his angry ones;
but he was indefatigable, and spared himself no trouble in forcing
her to persevere in overcoming the slovenly habits of colloquial
speech. The further she progressed, the less she could satisfy him"
(p. 101). As she progresses, Jack gives her no "word of encour­
agement or approval" (p. 102). Higgins also bullies, yells, mimics,
demands perfection, and offers no praise for his student's accom­
plishments. Jack is considered antisocial because of his petulance,
arrogance, and frankness; Higgins is a social failure for the same
reasons, e.g., his mother asks him not to attend her at-home, for
"you offend all my friends: they stop coming whenever they meet
you" (p. 245). Yet both men are ladies' men. The girls whom
Jack teaches idolize him, and Madge Brailsford falls in love with
him; Mary Sutherland hesitates when he proposes marriage not
because she finds him unattractive but because she has never con­sidered marrying him and believes that she cannot endure the strain
of marriage with a genius. Higgins is also attractive to women, in
spite of his efforts to discourage them. Mrs. Pearce tells Pickering,
"Theres more ways than one of turning a girl's head; and nobody
can do it better than Mr. Higgins" (p. 220); Eliza says the same
thing to Higgins in the final scene: "You can twist the heart in a
girl as easy as some could twist her arm to hurt her" (p. 289). But
both Jack and Higgins are "confirmed old bachelors"—Jack after
Mary's rejection of him and Higgins from childhood.
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The reason for Higgins's bachelorhood, Shaw says, is that Higgins's mother provided with her Pre-Raphaelite beauty an ideal of excellence which cannot be reached by other women. Like Candida, Mrs. Higgins looks on Higgins and Pickering as "two children" (p. 275); she calls her son a "good boy" (p. 246) or a "silly boy" (p. 254), and instructs, humors, and scolds him as she would a child. In Mrs. Pearce, Higgins has a Candida-like housekeeper and business manager; therefore, from Eliza he wants only "good fellowship" (p. 289). Thus Higgins, according to Shaw, has the best of womankind; he retains the ideal of woman, as Octavius does, by remaining single; he receives the babying that Candida lavishes on Morell from his mother and Mrs. Pearce; and he remains free of marriage ties, redirecting his sexual energies into intellectual and aesthetic passion. Emotionally, Higgins is closer to the Shavian superman of Back to Methuselah than to the previous Shavian artists, for he has rejected the life of the senses for the life of the mind and warns Eliza,

If you cant stand the coldness of my sort of life, and the strain of it, go back to the gutter. Work til youre more a brute than a human being; and then cuddle and squabble and drink til you fall asleep. Oh, it's a fine life, the life of the gutter. It's real: it's warm: it's violent: you can feel it through the thickest skin: you can taste it and smell it without any training or any work. Not like Science and Literature and Classical Music and Philosophy and Art. You find me cold, unfeeling, selfish, dont you? Very well: be off with you to the sort of people you like. Marry some sentimental hog or other with lots of money, and a thick pair of lips to kiss you with and a thick pair of boots to kick you with. If you cant appreciate what youve got, youd better get what you can appreciate. (P. 292)

Though these sentiments look forward to Shaw's Ancients, Higgins's freedom from sexual ties recalls Jack's return to his "holy garret" or Marchbanks's flight into the night. It also recalls Shaw's description of the struggle between Woman and the man of genius, to which Higgins refers when he says that "women upset everything. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and youre driving at another" (p. 228).

Higgins's unscrupulous use of others in his pursuit of linguistic science ("your art," his mother calls it, p. 254) recalls Shaw's con-
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except of the ruthless artist described in *Man and Superman* and dramatized in *The Doctor's Dilemma*. Like Dubedat, Higgins is capable of being charming when he needs something. His technique for "getting round" women is to coax them "as a child coaxes its nurse when it wants to get anything out of her." Mrs. Pearce accuses him of "walking over" people, for "when you get what you call interested in people's accents, you never think or care what may happen to them or you" (p. 225). Eliza also accuses him of walking—rather "running"—over people:

LIZA. I wont be passed over.

HIGGINS. Then get out of my way; for I wont stop for you. You talk about me as if I were a motor bus.

LIZA. So you are a motor bus: all bounce and go, and no consideration for anyone. (P. 288)

Higgins originally decides to experiment with Eliza because she "doesn't belong to anybody—is no use to anybody but me" (p. 222). And in act 3 he clearly looks on his mother's guests as bearable only as part of his experiment; he says to the Hills, "We want two or three people. You'll do" (p. 248). Higgins's calloused attitude (like Dubedat's cynical use of others) offends everyone, especially Eliza, who tells him, "You've no feeling heart in you" (p. 223). However, he does "care for life, for humanity," and he cares for Eliza because she is "a part of it" (p. 289).

In *Pygmalion* the artist is interested not in painting pictures but in transforming people, in changing flower girls into duchesses, in trading their animality for spiritual independence. In *As Far As Thought Can Reach*, part 5 of *Back to Methuselah*, Higgins has evolved into "a square-fingered youth [named Pygmalion] with his face laid out in horizontal blocks, and a perpetual smile of eager benevolent interest in everything the smile of a simpleton, and the eager confidence of a fanatical scientist" (p. 220). Pygmalion is a "soulless creature! A scientist! A laboratory person" (p. 220) to the youthful worshippers of love and beauty. He does not consider himself an artist and scorns artists because they lack intellect. He is, however, introduced by the master sculptor Martellus as "an artist who has surpassed both you [Arjillax] and me".
further than we have surpassed all our competitors” (p. 219). Like Higgins, Pygmalion is not interested in art but in life itself and, in the play, creates a man and woman. Pygmalion has discovered how to change lifeless substance into living consciousness, but he cannot equal nature; thus his “masterpieces of art” are inferior forms of life—that is, they are “prehistoric” humans of the kind found in the twentieth century. They are “of noble appearance, beautifully modelled and splendidly attired,” but they are vain, pompous, unthinking, passionate, jealous, lying, and violent. After the woman kills Pygmalion, she and the man cringe from judgment, accuse each other, and finally die in cowardly despair. Their tragedy amuses the Children who have observed it, but the Ancients look on Pygmalion’s masterpieces as “loathsome dolls,” “abominations,” and “laboratory refuse” (pp. 233, 236).

In *As Far As Thought Can Reach* Pygmalion is a child, or else he would not have interest even in the art of creating living dolls. The Ancients will have nothing to do with works of art nor with any other games of childhood—“this dancing and singing and mating” (p. 201). They do not attend the festivals of the arts, and they avoid the Children, who are children because of their interest in art and love, their boredom with philosophy and science, and their horror at the idea of an eternity of contemplation. In other words, the Ancients and the Children are dramatizations of the blessed and the damned described in act 3 of *Man and Superman*. The Ancients have grown out of the desire to play with dolls, even with dolls with “the final perfection of resemblance to life.” They have learned that the only valuable use of man’s creative energy is to “alter the shape of his own soul,” and for this work they do not need art; the Children use art to perceive their souls, but the Ancients “have a direct sense of life” (p. 242). Their only “dolls” are their bodies, which they are striving to shed so that they may become vortices of pure thought.

The Children of *As Far As Thought Can Reach* have evolved farther than most twentieth-century men; they look on the humans created by Pygmalion with detachment and curiosity, then with horror and disgust, and finally with amusement. Their aim is to “enjoy life,” to cultivate and refine the senses and feelings by art and love. In the play Ecrasia represents the aesthete, and Acis is
the lover. Ecrasia demands that art depict beauty alone, and she equates beauty with prettiness. Therefore, she protests when Arjillax sculpts realistic busts of the Ancients instead of "ideally beautiful nymphs and youths" (p. 215). She believes that art is greater than the artist, that physical beauty is "of supreme importance," and that art, unlike real life, brings happiness (p. 242). Acis is scornful of art, believing that he has "the direct impulse of life" instead of the make-believe approach to life that art offers. He says, "Love is a simple thing and a deep thing: it is an act of life and not an illusion. Art is an illusion" (p. 247). Strephon is another believer in love, who asks Pygmalion, "Why did you not make a woman you could love?" (p. 227). Strephon is heartbroken because The Maiden whom he loves has matured, i.e., she has grown out of the childish "arts and sports and pleasures" and is becoming more like the Ancients.

The transitional stage of life represented by The Maiden is, in Shaw's evolutionary scheme, equivalent to that of Don Juan in *Man and Superman*, or of Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*; her lover applies the same terms to her that others apply to Juan and Higgins: she is "losing all heart, all feeling" and aspires to a "cold and uncomfortable" life (pp. 203–4). She admits that she once lost her heart to Strephon, but "now I seem to have lost it altogether: bigger things are taking possession of me" (p. 204); she would be bored spending her hundreds or thousands of years of life in dancing, singing, or lovemaking. When Strephon, echoing Eliza Doolittle, accuses The Maiden of not caring for him, her answer is like that of Higgins: "Nonsense! I care for you much more seriously than before; though perhaps not so much for you in particular. I mean I care more for everybody" (p. 205). However, unlike Higgins, The Maiden has lost all interest in human contact. Higgins is eager to have Eliza back for the sake of "good fellowship" as long as she understands that neither is bound to, nor dependent on, the other; The Maiden is less patient and less attached to Strephon: "I do not dislike you; but you bore me when you cannot understand; and I think I shall be happier by myself in the future" (p. 205).

The artists Arjillax and Martellus are also in the transitional stage between childhood and maturity. Arjillax considers a sculp-
tor godlike in his revelation of spirit through form and his natural and inevitable creativity. Echoing Shaw’s theory in the prefaces to *Plays Pleasant* and *Three Plays for Puritans*, he says that the artist provides a glimpse of the next stage of evolution and that he must take care to produce models worthy of emulation, since life imitates art: “The statue comes to life always. The statues of today are the men and women of the next incubation. Let no man dare to create in art a thing that he would not have exist in life” (p. 247). As a result of this theory, Arjillax has given up sculpting beautiful figures and now sculpts busts of the Ancients. Martellus, the master sculptor, has also given up modeling “images of loveliness”; but he has progressed farther than Arjillax and given up modelling statues of the Ancients as well, for he has come to believe that “anything alive is better than anything that is only pretending to be alive” (p. 218). Martellus introduces Pygmalion, who has succeeded in producing life.

*As Far As Thought Can Reach* depicts humanity in all stages of evolution from twentieth-century humanity to humans of an age as far as thought can reach. The twentieth-century humans created by Pygmalion are not worth saving; they are merely a dangerous amusement for the Children and bits of debris to the Ancients. The Children are far more advanced on the Shavian evolutionary scale: they are born in late adolescence and spend only four years in “babyish gambols.” In the transitional stage between childhood and maturity are The Maiden, who has developed a social conscience and lost all sensual interests, and the artists, who are themselves at various levels. Arjillax has given up art devoted to beauty alone; Martellus has given up art for life; and Pygmalion has developed the art of creating life. Yet to the Ancients, who devote their energies to the shaping and creating of self, all these are children. On this evolutionary scale Shaw would probably place himself, the iconographer of a living religion and the portrayer of the wisdom of the Ancients, at the stage of Arjillax. Arjillax notably espouses Shavian theories of art, including a preference for realistic rather than pretty studies, a belief in the artist’s godlike powers to reveal spirit in form, a desire to provide artistic models worthy of imitation, and a desire to forecast the next stage of evolution. Clearly Shaw had passed the stage of admiring “pretty-pretty
confectionery," and he just as clearly had not reached the stage of Martellus, who has smashed all his statues and given up art.

The kinds of artists represented in *Back to Methuselah* demonstrate that, during Shaw's long career, there was very little change in his concept of the artist. In general, all his portraits of artists are of the types appearing in embryonic form in *Immaturity*, Shaw's first novel. Hawkshaw (aesthete and lover) and Cyril Scott (genuine artist) reappear in *Back to Methuselah* as the Children and Arjillax, respectively. The major development in these two types is that the rascality (unscrupulousness) of Hawkshaw eventually becomes a trait of the true artist and that, after Scott, none of Shaw's artists marries for love, and most of them do not marry at all.

The aesthete in Shaw's fiction and drama believes that art has a high moral purpose, but, because he has conventional opinions about art and life, his concept of morality is limited to what is socially acceptable. He is courteous, chivalric, and often eager to fight for the sake of honor; he worships love and idolizes women; and he is a duffer in art. Examples of this type of artist are Sholto Douglas, Adrian Herbert, Chichester Erskine, Praed, and Octavius. Marchbanks and Apjohn before their final recognitions and Apollo­dorus also have many of these characteristics. The Children in *As Far As Thought Can Reach*, especially Ecrasia and Acis combined, are of this type.

The genuine artist in Shaw's work rejects talk of the high moral purpose of art and devotes himself instead to perfection of his craft. He is not, however, only a craftsman but, at his best, a truth-teller as well. He is alienated from society because of his Bohemian appearance, his rude manners, his straightforward speech, his shocking opinions, his sensitivity, or his rascally behavior. He will sacrifice others as ruthlessly as he will sacrifice himself to his art. Examples of this type are Cyril Scott, Susanna Conolly, Nelly McQuinch, Owen Jack, Madame Szczypnića, Madge Brailsford, Dubedat, Shakespear, and Henry Higgins.

A third type of artist depicted by Shaw is the artist-creator of life, who rejects the artifact for life itself. Examples of this type of artist include all the creative geniuses who express the Life Force in their lives and make an art of their profession; Caesar, with his
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Arts of war and of government, is an obvious example. This type of artist is suggested also in Immaturity, where, in spite of his youth, Smith is Harriet's instructor in language and the arts, and in Love among the Artists, where Jack, not content with having taught Madge to speak, tries to transform her from a sham to a real woman by awakening her to the art of truth telling. Shaw's first full study of such an artist is Higgins, who anticipates Martellus and Pygmalion in Back to Methuselah.

Shaw's aesthetes are almost the reverse of the actual aesthete; in fact, in that their faith is usually placed in something other than art, they cannot properly be called aesthetes at all. They are men of sentiment, men of "heart." On the other hand, Shaw's real artists are very much like the actual aesthete: they place their art above their own and others' welfare; though they do not talk about its being all-sustaining, they find that it drains all their passion and energy; they are outcasts from society; and they are temperamental and sensitive, often to the point of hypersensitivity.

As one would expect, Shaw's genuine artists are not identical to the fin-de-siècle aesthetes. For instance, they never consider alienation from society essential to their artistic integrity. Owen Jack, Madame Szczymplicia, and Dubedat are willing to make money from their art; all the artists, even the "unsocial socialist," are personally charming and indeed very "social." They, like their creator, would not agree with Moore's, Symons's, or James's contention that popularity ruins a work. They are, however, realistic enough to believe that art seldom achieves popularity. Another point of difference is that the aesthetes' sensitivity tends to be toward the sensuous and the Shavian artists' toward the emotional or spiritual; for example, Marchbanks's sensitivity is for intuiting and interpreting the feelings of others, and his aesthetic squeamishness is mainly caused by coarseness and brutality in others, not by offenses to his senses. Another difference is that Shaw's artists try to avoid posing unless, as Lady Geraldine says, the forthright expression of common sense is itself a pose. At any rate, Owen Jack opposes sham in art; and Candida forces Marchbanks to abandon all his attitudes.

The critical point of difference is that, whereas both the moral and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes place their faith and aspirations in
art, Shaw's artists evolve toward a rejection of art and an acceptance of a contemplative, ascetic state. The She-Ancient in *Back to Methuselah* was once an aesthete-artist, and her progress illustrates the evolution of the Shavian artist:

Stage 1 (sensuous beauty): "When I was a child, Ecrasia, I, too, was an artist, like your sculptor friends there, striving to create perfection in things outside myself. I made statues: I painted pictures: I tried to worship them.

Stage 2 (realistic, "unpleasant" art): "I, like Arjillax, found out that my statues of bodily beauty were no longer even beautiful to me; and I pressed on and made statues and pictures of men and women of genius, like those in the old fable of Michael Angelo. Like Martellus, I smashed them when I saw that there was no life in them: that they were so dead that they would not even dissolve as a dead body does.

Stage 3 (life-creation: "It was to myself I turned as to the final reality. Here, and here alone, I could shape and create. For five more years I made myself into all sorts of fantastic monsters.

Stage 4 (creative mind, the utopia not yet achieved): "And suddenly it came into my mind that this monstrous machinery of heads and limbs was no more me than my statues had been me, and that it was only an automation that I had enslaved. . The day will come when there will be no people, only thought." (Pp. 243-45)

According to Shaw, all true artists evolve in this manner. Thus he maintains that Ruskin and Morris changed from artists to social critics to prophets and saints (see pp. 4, 7).

Shaw's contemplative heaven finds its nearest parallels in the literature of the aesthetes in Pater's "Sebastian van Storck" (in *Imaginary Portraits*) and Wilde's "The Critic as Artist." In "Sebastian van Storck" the ideal of the tabula rasa leads the hero to reject love, riches, and power for a contemplative life. But Sebastian is an entirely different kind of person from Shaw's She-Ancient; Sebastian demands from art "visionary escapes"; he is attracted to Catholicism because of "its unfailing drift towards the concrete" and because of its rich tradition; he has a strong death-wish; and he isolates himself from worldly concerns to hasten "the restoration of equilibrium, the calm surface of the absolute, untroubled mind."
Shaw's Ancient, on the other hand, desires greater creative activity and a greater consciousness of life instead of escape and rest; in contrast to Sebastian's search for the tabula rasa, she seeks to become intensely vital mind. Wilde's contemplative man is a dreamer, an artist, and stands in contrast to the active man, not to the sensuous man. Shaw's contemplative man, the Ancient, is a vitalist, a mental "man of action," struggling with reality and escaping from art and all sensuous appeal.

The aesthetes' nearest parallels to Shaw's contemplative ideal emphasize very different values; the aesthete's usual ideal—the creation of sensuous beauty—is even farther removed from that of Shaw's. Morris's heaven in News from Nowhere suggests the ideal of the moral aesthetes: it consists of clean, wholesome, creatively active lives in gorgeous surroundings; Symons's ideal, influenced by Pater's The Renaissance, suggests that the fin-de-siècle aesthetes' approximation of heaven consists of intense awareness of life's fleeting moments, apprehended by the senses. Neither of these utopian states approaches Shaw's. Thus, though Shaw's late nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists are indebted to, and sometimes modelled on, his aesthetic contemporaries, in their final form (represented by the She-Ancient) the Shavian artists will have evolved to a state not only different from, but unacceptable to, the aesthetes.

One way to illustrate the crucial difference between Shaw and the aesthetes is to compare Shaw's As Far As Thought Can Reach to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), since the two roughly contemporary works have so many motifs in common as to suggest actual indebtedness. Both works cope with the problem of growing old and dying. And both begin with a picture of the world of youth and sensuality. Yeats devotes the first stanza of his poem to the young, fertile, but "dying generations"; Shaw's play begins as an Ancient unconsciously intrudes into the youthful world and says, in effect, that this "is no country for old men" ("Sailing to Byzantium," 1. 1) : "I did not know there was a nursery here, or I should not have turned my face in this direction. It would be painful to me to go back to your babyish gambols: in fact I could not do it if I tried. My children: be content to let us ancients go our ways and enjoy ourselves in our fashion" (As Far As Thought
Can Reach, p. 200). Shaw’s Children, like Yeats’s “young / In one another’s arms” (11. 1–2), are “caught in that sensual music” (“Sailing to Byzantium,” 1. 7), which Shaw’s Ancient describes as “dancing and singing and mating” or “arts and sports and pleasures.” In Shaw’s depiction of the Children’s world, lovemaking, a birth, and death (Pygmalion’s and his two twentieth-century humans’) parallel Yeats’s characterization of the young world: “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” (1. 6). The Children are horrified at the Ancients’ failure to “enjoy life”; they do not like to associate with the Ancients, and they dislike Arjillax’s art depicting them; in Yeats’s words, they “neglect / Monuments [in Shaw’s play, both the Ancients and the busts of Ancients] of un­aging intellect” (1. 8).

Shaw’s play and Yeats’s poem also have similar portraits of the old man. Yeats’s “aged man”—“a paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick” (11. 9–10)—could describe Shaw’s Ancients, with their facial furrows, their baldness, and sexlessness; like Yeats’s old man, who will sing of the magnificence of his soul (11. 10–14) “and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress” (11. 11–12), the Ancients spend their lives in ecstatic contemplation of the soul and in spiritual creativity.

In the third stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats’s prayer to the holy sages also expresses the aspirations of Shaw’s Ancients:

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. (11. 21–24)

In Shaw’s play, one of the signs of change from childhood to maturity is the loss of heart, the cooling toward the joys of childhood (i.e., of all of human life as twentieth-century man knows it). The Ancients have already lost one part of their humanity; and they hope to lose the last vestige of the “dying animal” and to be gathered “into eternity”:

THE HE-ANCIENT. . . . Whilst we are tied to this tyrannous body we are subject to its death, and our destiny is not achieved.

THE NEWLY BORN. What is your destiny?
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THE HE-ANCIENT. To be immortal.

THE SHE-ANCIENT. None of us now believe that all this machinery of flesh and blood is necessary. It dies.

THE HE-ANCIENT. It imprisons us on this petty planet and forbids us to range through the stars.

THE SHE-ANCIENT. The body was the slave of the vortex; but the slave has become the master; and we must free ourselves from that tyranny. (Pp. 245-48)

Thus Shaw and the aesthete (here, Yeats) agree that the summer world of youth and love is a "dying" world, and both aspire to transcend it by casting away the body and attending to the soul. Where they differ is on the question of how one should spend eternity, once the transcendent state has been achieved. Shaw's Ancients aspire to become vortices of pure thought; Yeats aspires to achieve immortality through the artifact—"such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make." Yeats's eternity is an "artifice"; Shaw's is contemplation.

A comparison of these two works illustrates once again, then, the essential distinction between the aesthetes and Shaw. The aesthete places his faith in art, in "the holy city of Byzantium"; but Shaw's faith and hope are in life (i.e., mind). Therefore, Shaw's Children are not precisely like Yeats's "dying generations." The Children have almost achieved Yeats's heavenly vision; art is a vital part of their lives; they sing beautifully, dance gracefully, look lovely, and celebrate the arts. But after only four years, they abandon art and all images. In Shaw's utopia Yeats would outgrow his faith in art, as Martellus does, explaining, "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."

The conclusion one draws from this comparison is the same as that to be drawn from an examination of Shaw's portraits of artists from Cyril Scott, "the aesthetic pet," to the Ancients, with their desire to rid themselves of the final image, the body: Shaw owes more to the aesthetes than he acknowledged, and probably more than he was aware of; his faith in the power of art approaches an aesthete's faith; his portraits of unscrupulous, alienated, sensitive,
and dedicated artists draw on characteristics of the aesthete. But, in the final analysis, Shaw's faith is in values other than art: in the life and mind of humanity. His artists are portraits of the best of present mankind, but, in time, he believes, they will have served their purpose of envisioning and interpreting the new religion, and, perhaps by 31,920 (as far as thought can reach), they can abandon art altogether.