SHAW'S greatest and most complete portrait of an artist is the character that he created for himself, G. B. S. the platform orator, Corno di Bassetto the music critic, Shaw the music critic, the drama critic, the playwright, and, in his personal life, the philanderer, the socialist, the devil's disciple, etc. Interestingly, this complex character is closer to the fin-de-siècle aesthete than any of Shaw's fictional portraits of artists. For example, few of Shaw's fictional artists consciously pose; but he readily acknowledged his ability to act a role, justifying his pose by proposing, like Henry James, that "humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms."¹

Like all men, I play many parts; and none of them is more or less real than another. To one audience I am the occupier of a house in Adelphi Terrace; to another I am "one of those damned Socialists." A discussion in a club of very young ladies as to whether I could be more appropriately described as an old josser or an old geezer ended in the carrying of an amendment in favor of an old bromide. I am also a soul of infinite worth. I am, in short, not only what I can make of myself, which varies greatly from hour to hour and emergency to no-emergency, but what you can see in me. (Portraits, p. 82)

Winsten records Shaw's comment that "one has to dramatize oneself or else remain completely insignificant"; and he notes that Shaw seemed to lose his temper only by premeditation, that every gesture seemed "studied, probably with the help of a mirror."²
SHAW THE ARTIST

Though Shaw was a self-confessed actor, he did not consider his role playing an affectation or an attitude but a "simple natural phenomenon." In his 1917 review of Dixon Scott's *Men of Letters*, Shaw attacks Scott for "taking the method of nature, which is a dramatic method, for a theatrical pose." Every man, Shaw insists, has to assume a number of masks in order to function in society; and to some men the mask is especially essential: "Every man whose business it is to work directly upon other men, whether as artist, politician, advocate, propagandist, organizer, teacher, or what not, must dramatize himself and play his part" (*Portraits*, p. 235). In a speech of 1889 called "Acting, By One Who Does Not Believe In It," Shaw reveals that he does indeed believe in it, even to the extent of suggesting, like Wilde, that a mask enables a man to tell the truth or, like Yeats, that the mask is a link with the permanent in existence. Shaw says that acting is self-realization, not sham, that a great actor, given a great role, can achieve an expression of his total personality which is more real than life itself. As an example, Coquelin calls himself "a sham—that is, an actor," but he "is less an actor than any other comedian on the stage." In him "individuality is concentrated, fixed, gripped in one exceptionally gifted man"; and, if he were given a part that "shews all sides of him and realizes him wholly to us and to himself," he would become "completely real" as he lost "the conventional mask" that man in everyday affairs has to assume. The argument is very similar to that of Yeats: "Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask." The acting of roles, then, Shaw finds inevitable and desirable: inevitable because "all the world's a stage," desirable because a good actor influences others and achieves a realization of self unattainable in ordinary life.

Shaw also found acting a way of coping with an unimaginative world. In the autobiographical preface to *Immaturity* Shaw says that "if the term had been invented then [when he first came to London] I should have been called The Complete Outsider" (p. xlv). He was not, however, an outsider in aesthetic and intellectual matters, so that, with the acquisition of a religion (defined as "a clear comprehension of life in the light of an intelligible theory"), he was able to set "in triumphant operation" his literary and criti-
BERNARD SHAW AND THE AESTHETES

cal abilities. But his religion did not make him any less strange to
the mass of mankind; he was still set apart because of his unique
spiritual vision, symbolized by his clear and exact vision in a dis­
torted and blind world. His estrangement did not result in with­
drawal but in role-playing; Shaw explains,

The mere rawness [of socially insecure youth] which so soon rubs off
was complicated by a deeper strangeness which has made me all my
life a sojourner on this planet rather than a native of it. Whether it
be that I was born mad or a little too sane, my kingdom was not of
this world: I was at home only in the realm of my imagination, and
at my ease only with the mighty dead. Therefore I had to become an
actor, and create for myself a fantastic personality fit and apt for deal­
ing with men, and adaptable to the various parts I had to play as
author, journalist, orator, politician, committee man, man of the world,
and so forth. (Preface, Immaturity, p. xliii)

Like the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, then, Shaw felt alien to Victorian
society and assumed a pose, often a pose like that attributed to
Owen Jack in Love among the Artists—the pose of "outspoken
common sense the most insufferable affectation of all."

Though Shaw considered himself an outsider, he did not think
of himself as a Bohemian. Apropos of the visit of a French journa­
ist who was shocked to find "England's most advanced thinker"
living in a bourgeois household, Shaw said to Stephen Winsten,
"I tried sandals, but they didn't work." Nevertheless, Shaw's dress
expressed a Bohemian impulse. In The Aesthetic Movement in
England Hamilton mentions dress reform as one of the beneficial
effects of the aesthetic movement; he sees the trend toward more
informal and comfortable attire as an extension of Wilde's protest
against Victorian ugliness in men's dress and refers to a book en­
titled Art in Costume, which pleads for "soft, low-crowned hats,
jackets, knee-breeches, and stockings"—a precise description of
Shaw's fin-de-siècle costume. Max Nordau also associates dress
such as Shaw's, specifically Jaeger woolens, with the fin-de-siècle art
movements. Later in life, Shaw dressed more conventionally; or,
rather, the dress which had struck late Victorian society as unusual
became, in the twentieth century, more socially acceptable. How­
ever, Shaw retained certain eccentricities of dress; for example, he
wore socks which, following the Jaeger system, were fitted for the right and left foot and had toes in them; at Ayot-St.-Lawrence, even after Charlotte’s death, he dressed formally for dinner each night; and he was ultrasensitive to white collars against the color of human flesh, and wore grey or colored ones instead.

Shaw did not, however, think of himself as a hypersensitive artist. And he took care to dissociate himself from those whom he considered voluptuaries, i.e., the meat-eaters, wine-bibbers, idolaters of women, and worshippers of art. When Clive Bell wrote “The Creed of an Aesthete,” expressing astonishment at Shaw’s beliefs in *Back to Methuselah* and saying that “the people who really care for beauty do not care for it because it comes from God or leads to anything. They care for it in itself,” Shaw called Bell “a fathead and voluptuary” who does not recognize intellect as a passion superior to sense. Shaw also feuded with G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, who considered Shaw a Puritan ascetic and whom Shaw considered Roman Catholic voluptuaries. In “The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon” Shaw asserts that “cowards drink alcohol to quiet their craving for real stimulants: I avoid it to keep my palate keen for them” (*Portraits*, p. 80). However, Shaw’s teetotallism (applying to coffee, tea, and tobacco as well as to alcohol) and vegetarianism are just as indicative of hypersensitivity as a sybaritic existence is; as Holbrook Jackson notes, Shaw’s personal habits approach the Epicurean ideal of Pater’s Marius. As though in support of this, in “The Chesterbelloc” Shaw defines his addiction to work as a voluptuous indulgence. Though he probably would not have liked the comparison, art, music, and philosophy, as well as work, caused him to “be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy. To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy.” In “On Going to Church” he says that beautiful churches are more than adequate substitutes for the stimulation of drugs and drink; in “The Religion of the Pianoforte” he advocates music as a means of making “a nation of skilled voluptuaries”; and in “The Aesthetic Man” (*Everybody’s Political What’s What*) he traces his education to an aesthetically sensitive childhood. Shaw’s Ancients, who have lost all joy in the senses, in art and in love, are enjoying “real stimulants” in thought. The familiar passage above
from the conclusion to *The Renaissance* could with perfect appropriateness be put into the mouth of one of the Ancients in *Back to Methuselah*; in fact, an Ancient says to the Youth who deprecates the Ancients' "miserable" life, "Infant: one moment of the ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead" (p. 202).

Shaw's hypersensitivity is not to art and philosophy alone. He had other sensitive aesthetic reactions as well, the most striking of which was his reaction to the appearance of the printed page. Shaw attributes his concern for beauty of composition to the influence of Morris, saying that "Morris led me to look at the page of a book as a picture, and a book as an ornament." Shaw supervised the publishing and printing of his books, and he was fastidious in his typographical preferences: his primary demand was for "evenness of the block of colour"; he hated "rivers" in the type and admits that he rewrote in proof lines "so widely spaced as to make a grey band across the page"; and he carefully balanced and justified lines and spaced words. An artist who will rewrite for no other reason than to make the page more attractive is no propagator of ideas alone; obviously, Shaw's concern for beauty extended even to the layout of the printed page. The beauty of his pages, like the beauty of his art, does not reside, of course, in prettiness; both the books and the art in them have an austerity suited to their matter. Shaw's typography uses no ornamentation, no flowers, no devices, no rules.

In addition to his sense of alienation, his conscious pose, and his acute sensitivity—all characteristics of the fin-de-siècle aesthete—Shaw also created for himself the persona of an immoral artist. In *Three Plays for Puritans* he defends diabolonianism in the preface and writes a play in which the devil's disciple is a hero. When he told Winsten that a genius must sell himself to the devil, he was reiterating a theory developed early in his career and held throughout his life, that the genius by definition is dangerous to society because he upsets convention, attacks institutions, and disregards morality. His portrait of himself as artist is like the image of the unscrupulous artist described in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman*. Repudiating the sentimental fiction that he rose to fame by his virtue, he says that he laid

the foundations of my high fortune by the most ruthless disregard of
SHAW THE ARTIST

all the quack duties which lead the peasant lad of fiction to the White House, and harness the real peasant boy to the plough until he is finally swept, as rubbish, into the workhouse. I was an ablebodied and able-minded young man in the strength of my youth; and my family, then heavily embarrassed, needed my help urgently. That I should have chosen to be a burden to them instead was, according to all the conventions of peasant lad fiction, monstrous. Well, without a blush I embraced the monstrosity. I did not throw myself into the struggle for life: I threw my mother into it. I was not a staff to my father's old age: I hung on to his coat tails. Callous as Comus to moral babble, I steadily wrote my five pages a day and made a man of myself (at my mother's expense) instead of a slave. And I protest that I will not suffer James Huneker or any romanticist to pass me off as a peasant boy qualifying for a chapter in Smiles's Self Help, or a good son supporting a helpless mother, instead of a stupendously selfish artist leaning with the full weight of his hungry body on an energetic and capable woman. (Preface, IK, pp. xv-xvi)

St. John Ervine considers this story a self-libel invented by Shaw, whose head "was full of romantic nonsense about ruthless artists who refused to let themselves be diverted from their purpose by conventional opinions on morals or public duty or common humanity." Ervine argues that Shaw worked when other boys would have been in school, that Shaw's support cost his mother less than his sisters', that "his room was there" anyway, that he was working very hard at writing, that his mother was using a bequest of £1300 to Shaw from his grandfather, and that, besides, he was not well cared for. But none of these arguments denies the fact that in his mid-twenties Shaw lived on others while he wrote his five novels. And, if his head "was full of romantic nonsense about ruthless artists," it is the "nonsense" on which the Shavian philosophy is based. From his earliest to his latest work Shaw advocates challenging "conventional opinions on morals or public duty or common humanity."

Shaw, then, chose to dramatize himself as the unscrupulous artist who, as Tanner says, "will [among other things] let . . . his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art" (M&S, p. 23). Furthermore, his marriage, like Dubedat's, was, according to Shaw, the result of a woman's desire to bring order to the life of a man of genius; Shaw says that in 1898, when he married, Charlotte had found him ill and living in clutter and
dirt and had taken on the task of nursing him back to health and ordering his domestic affairs. The protective woman appears often in Shaw's work; she is Mrs. Simpson in *Love among the Artists*, Jennifer Dubedat in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, Mrs. Pearce and Eliza in *Pygmalion*. Candida is the epitome of this type; in the play Shaw has her choose Morell, but in a letter written twenty-five years after the play and twenty-two years after his own marriage, Shaw says that no doubt later "some enterprising woman married [Marchbanks] and made him dress properly and take regular meals." Shaw's marriage was childless and, according to Shaw, unconsummated, because Charlotte was afraid of having children. But *Man and Superman* offers a different reason: the artist "pretends to spare [his wife] the pangs of child-bearing so that he may have for himself the tenderness and fostering that belong of right to her children" (p. 23). Shaw did not fulfill, of course, all the traits of the artist described by Tanner; he was not "a child-robber, a blood-sucker, a hypocrite, and a cheat" (*M&S*, p. 23); but he did portray himself as a man ruthlessly using others for his own purposes.

Like his fictional artists, Shaw was thoroughly professional in his attitude toward his art, emphasizing the importance of an artist's mastery of technique; he insisted that he was "no mere man of genius, but a conscientious workman as well." He looked on art as his work rather than as his mission, and, with Madame Szczyplica, he could have said, "I have the soul commercial within me" (*Love among the Artists*, p. 337). He not only declined to starve in a garret but he took care to keep a prosaic account of his financial affairs. He maintained that an artist should be a businessman and sell his completed work; he told Winsten, "The moment a painting is complete it becomes merchandise." Like Rossetti, James, and Wilde, he found nothing wrong in desiring financial success. He jealously guarded his copyrights and handled financial transactions with shrewd business acumen. An amusing letter of 1896 to the editor of *The Contemporary Review* illustrates his business sense. The editor had paid Shaw too little for his article, "Socialism for Millionaires," which had appeared in the February, 1896, *Contemporary Review*. Shaw begins, "Bless my soul, you will have to pay me a lot more than that unless you will accept the
article as a gratuitous contribution.” He then states his usual rate, asserts that “I really do not care a rap about the money,” but asks nevertheless for £21 rather than £11.\textsuperscript{20} Shaw did not, of course, write for money; he believed that an artist produces art out of an inner necessity, not out of a desire for gain. But he found nothing glamorous in poverty (having been poor) and found much positively evil in it. Accordingly, he practiced what he preached in \textit{Major Barbara} and accumulated wealth, the key to power in a capitalistic society.

It is clear that, although Shaw was not a fin-de-siècle aesthete, nevertheless he had many of the characteristics of one, and his fictional aesthetes are less like the real aesthete than Shaw himself was. Shaw even created some acknowledged examples of art for art’s sake, which I have not discussed in the preceding chapters because none of the examples is a major work, and to establish Shaw’s connection with the aesthetes I preferred to rely on evidence from the major works. However, Shaw’s examples of art for art’s sake need to be noted, along with his defense of them. Most of them appear in \textit{Trifles and Tomfooleries} (published 1926), consisting of six short plays, prefaced by a statement that “all playwrights and all actors tomfool sometimes if they can. The practice needs no apology if it amuses them and their audiences harmlessly. Irresponsible laughter is salutary in small quantities. One throws off these things as Beethoven threw off a few bagatelles, and Mozart a few senseless bravura pieces for friends who were violinists. Besides tomfoolery is as classic as tragedy” (p. 81). Shaw assures the reader that these playlets are not “utterly void of wit and wisdom, or their figures characterless; for this kind of work would be unbearable if it added deficiency to folly.” Some are occasional pieces such as \textit{The Admirable Bashville}, which was written to protect the dramatic rights of \textit{Cashel Byron’s Profession}, and \textit{Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction, or The Fatal Gazogene: A Brief Tragedy for Barns and Booths}, written “at the request of Mr Cyril Maude . . . for the benefit of The Actors’ Orphanage.” A subtitle explains \textit{Press Cuttings: A Topical Sketch Compiled from the Editorial and Correspondence Columns of the Daily Papers during the Women's War in 1909}. Shaw calls \textit{A Glimpse of Reality: A Tragedietta} (1909) “a trifle” (as distinct from a “tomfoolery”), meaning pre-
sumably that it has a serious theme but is not a full and serious treatment of that theme. *The Fascinating Foundling* is subtitled *A Disgrace to the Author; The Music Cure* is called *A Piece of Utter Nonsense*: both are light exercises on the motif of female mastery of the male. Shaw has several admitted “actor’s plays”: *Great Catherine* (1913), written for Gertrude Kingston; *Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress* (1917), written for Lillah McCarthy; and *The Six of Calais* (1934), which puzzles critics, Shaw says, because it “has no moral whatever.” In the preface to *The Six of Calais* Shaw justifies the absence of a moral on the grounds that “a playwright’s direct business is simply to provide the theatre with a play. When I write one with the additional attraction of providing the twentieth century with a up-to-date religion or the like, that luxury is thrown in gratuitously; and the play, simply as a play, is not necessarily either the better or the worse for it” (p. 86). He defines a play as the interpretation of chaotic experience by the author’s rearrangement of that experience into a meaningful form: “All the academic definitions of a play are variations of this basic function.” These statements are not inconsistent with his comments elsewhere deploiring “panacea-mongering” and asserting that the morality of art lies in a truthful representation of a view of life.

In addition to the playlets, Shaw wrote a few short stories with apparently no moral; but, as in the case of the playlets, even his most casual pieces are usually infused with some touches of satire, some typically Shavian ideas and motifs, and unconventional, engaging characters. Two stories worthy of note here because of their absence of Shavian theme and their similitude to the fin-de-siècle “plotless” short story are “The Miraculous Revenge” (in *Time*, March, 1885) a Poe-like study of the macabre from the point of view of a mad young man, and “The Serenade” (in *The Magazine of Music*, November, 1885), apparently written for no other reason than to produce a humorously ironic effect. But Shaw’s more typical short stories discuss an idea or make a social commentary. And the stories and plays which seem designed for no particular purpose, except to create an effect or to entertain and amuse, make up a very small part of the total literary output of Shaw. They are not, however, radical departures from his more ambitious efforts. They are tomfooleries or trifles because they lack the scope and
depth of Shaw's major work; but his major work attests to his role as artist, not as preacher. As he told Winsten, "I am a poet, essentially a poet." His propagandizing in art usually took the form not of preaching but of providing a dramatic metaphor for an aspect of human experience; he was fully aware of the difference between a work of art and a propagandistic tract, and he believed that great work of art endures even when the philosophy it expresses is outdated.

The difficulty in finally assessing Shaw's relationship to the aesthetes is that he took pains to dissociate himself from the "art for art's sake faction" but was closer to it than he admitted, perhaps closer than he realized. Like Whistler, who also denounced aestheticism, Shaw has many of the characteristics of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes; he consciously employs masks as a manner of coping with the world; he feels alienated from the world; he is aesthetically sensitive, at times hypersensitive; he defends immorality and the value of shocking conventional people; and he respects artifice, the craft of art.

His theory of art is the result of a curious ambivalence; he denounced art for art's sake but argued, as an aesthete would, that a work of art exists independent of conventional morality and expresses the artist's individual vision. Art for art's sake he associates with academicism and a decorative impulse arising from following rules of art instead of the writer's inner convictions. The passage repudiating art for art's sake in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman* is really an attack on academic art which arises out of a knowledge of art rather than a vision of man; Shaw denies that style is possible without opinions, but he recognizes the fact that, long after the ideas are dated, "the style remains." His defense of didacticism is really on aesthetic grounds: the artist's convictions produce art; without them, art is impossible; hence he has "contempt for belles lettres, and for amateurs who become the heroes of the fanciers of literary virtuosity" because, having no convictions, they cannot produce great art.

His concept of didactic art is very different from that of, say, Arthur Waugh, the defender of "Reticence in Literature," or of Harry Quilter, the attacker of "The Gospel of Intensity," or of any other defender of Victorian morality. Shaw insists that art is basi-
cally immoral (i.e., iconoclastic) and that its "moral" purpose derives from the artist's integrity in representing his vision. In his attacks on Victorian morality, as well as his attacks on censorship of art, Shaw is clearly allied with the aesthetes, and clearly opposed to the upholders of convention, including the upholders of artistic convention, the rule makers and precedent followers, the copiers of models instead of the forgers of new design.

Shaw shares the fin-de-siècle aesthetes' aristocratic scorn of middle-class values and virtues; and he knows that his "normal" (but unique) vision will by bourgeois standards be judged abnormal, unhealthy, and insane. He also knows that as artist his obligation is not to succumb to the demands of the ordinary man's vision but to find a form to express his own in order to give the ordinary man a glimpse of the future and, hopefully, offer him a model worthy of imitation.

Though his final faith in the power of thought to transcend all sensory appeals, including the sensory appeal of art, keeps him from aestheticism, no aesthete could have placed more emphasis on the place of art in man's life than Shaw did. He believed that the artist's role is "to catch a glint of the unrisen sun," to "shew it to you as a vision in the magic glass of his artwork," or, as the She-Ancient who was once an artist says in Back to Methuselah, to provide a "magic mirror to reflect your invisible dreams in visible pictures." Shaw saw himself in this role, and his plays are a testament to the poet-prophet who created them.