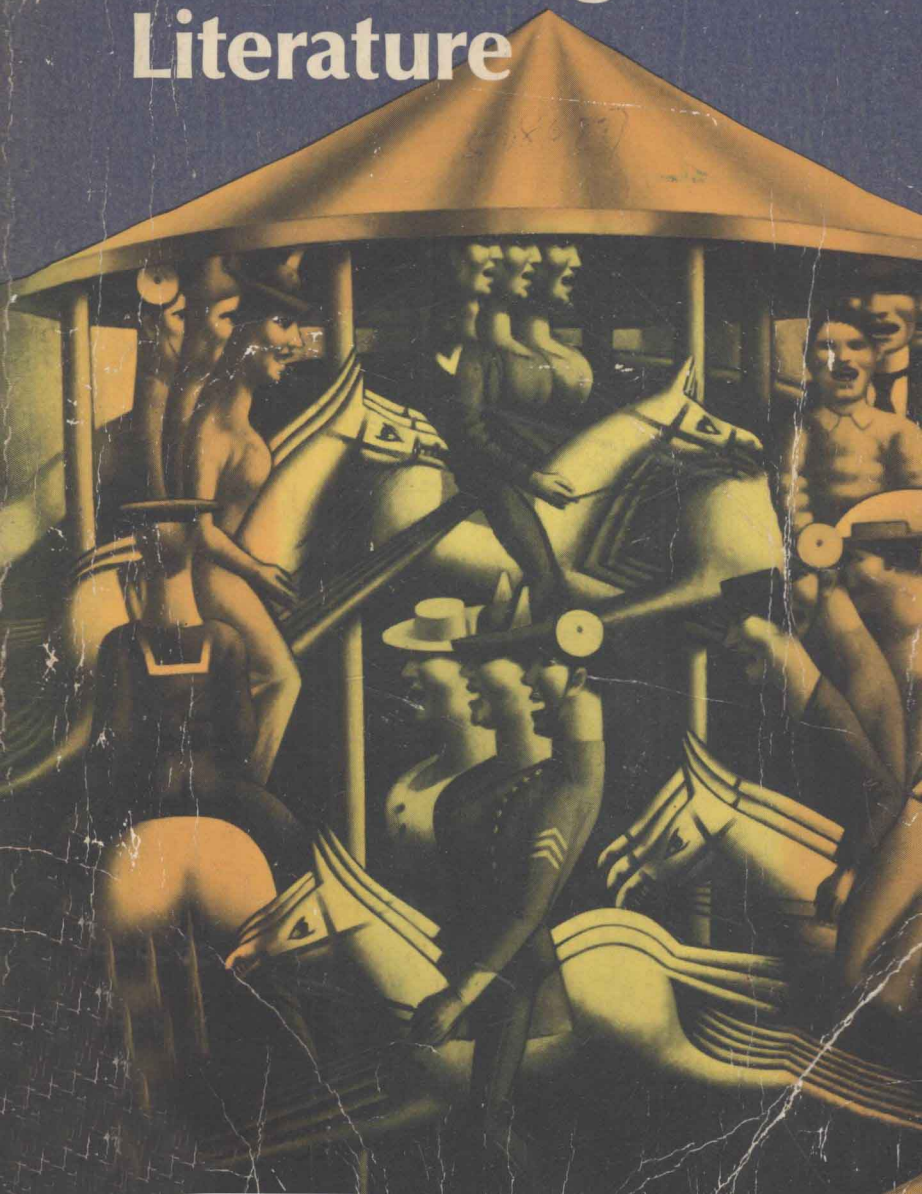




W.W. Robson

Modern English Literature



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Preface

THIS BOOK IS not a comprehensive account of modern English literature. It discusses only a selection of the writers of the period whom I have read and enjoyed. For this selection I take sole responsibility, as I do for the opinions expressed. These, in so concise a book, cannot be supported by evidence. But I have usually mentioned by name the specific works on which I have based them.

I have accepted the common convention that by literature is meant the imaginative exploration of human possibilities; that is, prose fiction, poetry, and plays. But from time to time I have included brief discussions of non-fictional writers, so as to suggest, however sketchily, the general movement of thought in this country. The scope of this book excludes writers outside the British Isles. But Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound are so crucial to the understanding of modern English literature that no book on this period could omit them. And it will be remembered that the first two of these writers lived in England and became British subjects.

Modern writers, by definition, have not stood the 'test of time', that steady scrutiny of many generations, that gradual process of sifting, without which literary history is impossible. But those whose main work was done before 1950 can be seen in some sort of historical perspective, however limited and temporary this may be; and it is on a selection of their work that I have based my most substantial discussions. My brief references in the Epilogue to the work of more recent writers must be regarded only as offering suggestions and pointers, not as representing any widespread critical agreement.

I have tried throughout this book to keep my general standards as broad and humane as possible. No writer should be condemned merely because we dislike his point of view. One of the great pleasures of literature, after all, is to escape from ourselves and see the world through other eyes.

I am grateful to Mr. J. C. Maxwell, to the staff of the Clarendon Press, and to my wife, for their invaluable help with the manuscript.

W.W.R.

Introduction

ONE OF THE masterpieces of European art is *La Grande Jatte*, painted by the French artist Georges Seurat in 1886. The art-critic must explain, if he can, how this picture of people fishing and boating, or sitting quietly with their children, achieves its extraordinary beauty. To the social historian the sunny calm of this scene has another significance. It is a reminder that middle-class life in Western Europe, so uncomfortable at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had reached by its end the greatest comfort that had ever been known, or perhaps ever will be, for real comfort is impossible without abundant domestic service. The new twentieth century seemed to promise to more and more people more and more of this peace and prosperity. The tenor of thought in the age was optimistic, liberal, and progressive. This last word, like its opposite 'reactionary', needs an explanation. What progressives affirm, and what reactionaries deny, is that human improvement—not necessarily perfectibility—is possible; that the only tolerable inequalities among men and women are either those imposed by physical nature, or those which are rationally defensible; and that the instrument for carrying out social and political changes is reason. Until 1914 the number of thinking people who affirmed these convictions, and of unthinking people who took them for granted, was very large. And they seemed to have good grounds for their confidence.

England shared the general European serenity. And there were special reasons why English life was so peaceful. George Lichtheim has pointed out the most important of these. England, the pioneer industrial nation, had its industrial revolution without a political revolution. The class war has remained a metaphor. There is nothing in English history like the June days of 1848, when the working class and the bourgeoisie fought out their quarrel on the streets of Paris. The English socialist tradition has never been revolutionary. The English labour movement grew up in the bosom of the Liberal party. In English history political events have seldom quickened the slow processes of social change. Some thinkers at the beginning of the century wondered whether this

would always be so. G. K. Chesterton in his poem 'The Secret People' surmised that the wrath of the English people might one day surpass 'Russia's wrath' of 1905. It is interesting to place this poem beside Kipling's castigation of the governing class in 'The Islanders'. Both poems read like auguries of a revolution in England. But it has never come.

Real and deep changes, however, did occur in the first decade of the twentieth century. This was the period which George Dangerfield has described as 'the strange death of Liberal England'. The great Liberal party, the party of Gladstone, had emerged from the nineteenth century with its dominant element, the landowning grandees, gradually losing control. But they had transmitted their philosophy of government and their aristocratic Whig outlook to the well-to-do patricians and able professional men who provided the Liberal party, in its last phase of power, with leaders. It was the Haldanes and Asquiths and Greys who were to conduct England into the modern period. But the rank and file of their party were very different. Lower-middle class, Nonconformist, and provincial, they were opposed with almost equal intensity to war and to strong drink. These Radicals, as they were called, produced one great man, Lloyd George. But he was to desert them, to become (in 1916) the ablest Prime Minister of the century, but, in the end, a leader who had lost his following.

Contemporaries may not have anticipated the death of Liberal England. But they did find an extraordinary significance in the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. What men felt at her passing is evoked in the famous last paragraph of Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria*. This feeling was not confined to the educated. Thousands of popular elegies were written to commemorate the departed mother of her people. The accession of her son Edward VII was felt in contrast to be an anticlimax. The stout, florid, sociable king personified for W. B. Yeats 'new commonness upon the throne', and Henry James was not alone in regretting the supersession of 'little mysterious Victoria' by 'dreadful fat vulgar Edward'. James's disciple Max Beerbohm caricatured the King savagely. A flavour of cigar-smoke and baccarat, financiers and race-meetings, pervaded the new reign. Yet King Edward was widely popular, and he had a genuine dignity and attractiveness which Max's caricatures do not convey. And the brief phase of English civilization to which his name has been given has something mellow about it. There is good reason why people nowadays dwell wistfully on the golden afternoon of the Edwardian age.

But this mellowness should not be over-emphasized. There was a darker, harsher side to English life. The grim facts were to be found in sociological studies like those of Mr. and Mrs. Webb. They underlie the efforts of imaginative writers to stimulate the social conscience, like

Kipling in 'The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot', or Shaw in his propaganda plays, or the early work of Galsworthy. Speaking after the advent of a new school of writers which had no use for him, Galsworthy described his own literary period, ending, he thought, about 1910, as characterized by 'a passionate or ironic perception of inequalities and injustice'. A younger novelist, E. M. Forster, wrote an optimistic parable of Edwardian England in *Howards End*. This book, with all its absurdities, is one of the few English novels to make a successful use of deliberate symbolism. And through his symbolism Forster hints at a happy future for England in the emergence of a new ruling class, through the alliance of the traditional liberal culture (the Schlegels) with the new, pushing, business people (the Wilcoxes). But it is notable that the lower-middle classes (the Basts) appear as pathetic victims. Across the golden afternoon there loomed the ominous shadow of the exploited poor.

So progressives could not feel complacent. Much remained to be done. But the modernization of England was proceeding rapidly. That there might be loss as well as gain in this process worried few. It did worry George Sturt (1863-1927), who wrote as 'George Bourne' about that close-knit village life of England which is still not quite extinct. In *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923) George Bourne reminded his readers of what has been lost since the arrival of the motor-car and the techniques of mass-production. But to the Edwardian progressive, this would have seemed mere sentimentality. Urban civilization was 'here to stay'. Urgent problems like the relief of poverty bulked larger than wistfulness about the rural past. And modernization was happening everywhere. Samuel Hynes has remarked that nearly everything we think of as characteristically modern already existed in England by 1914: aircraft, radio telegraphy, cinemas, the sculpture of Epstein, the physics of Rutherford. (To this list Mr. Hynes adds, rather surprisingly, the Labour party.)

Literary culture was being penetrated by the moderns. D. H. Lawrence, Joyce, Pound, Virginia Woolf, Forster were all Edwardian authors. In art, a complacent provincialism still flourished. The Tate Gallery (opened 1897) had made a dreary start. But the first exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings was held in London in 1910. It was in that year, said Mrs. Woolf, that human nature changed. Her friend Roger Fry was the chief English backer of the Post-Impressionists. English culture was being Europeanized. There was Russian opera and ballet. There were Russian novels, particularly those of Dostoevsky, becoming known through the translations of Constance Garnett. The Edwardian censorship still barred any serious treatment of sex or politics or religion, but it was being challenged. Dramatists like Shaw and Granville

Barker fought it. Novelists like Bennett questioned the rigidity of the divorce laws. Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter campaigned for more tolerant attitudes towards sex. The feeling of a new stir in the world was not confined to England. Jacques Rivière, the French critic, wrote in 1913: 'A sharp little wind is being blown suddenly through the darkness and boredom of the dying nineteenth century. Once more it is morning. Everything is beginning again.'

All was not well with Edwardian England. There was still widespread poverty and disease among the people. There were signs of hysteria and violence, as in the movement for Woman Suffrage and the reaction of the authorities to it. The tragic problem of Ireland still smouldered. But the disaster that was finally to demoralize the rational humanists came not from within but from outside. England had begun the century as still a great imperial power, but insecure after the South African War, in which world opinion was against her. As so often, England's rôle was disputed. Some favoured 'splendid isolation'; some Continental alliances. Some still put their faith in imperialism. But it was plain to all that the high confidence of the Victorian age was no more. It is for historians to discuss what brought about England's war with the Germany of Wilhelm II. Its outbreak came as a shattering surprise to most English people: what Lowes Dickinson lamented as 'the international anarchy' had kept the general European peace since 1871. The war's length and cost, material and spiritual, was to be even more shattering. To us it has become a miserable truism that high technological efficiency can accompany barbarism. But to many in 1914 this was a painful novelty. War seemed obsolete. The Great War was a triumph of unreason. To many, it seemed like lightning from the clear sky of rational humanism. But one spacious mind had already responded sensitively to the temper of the age that led to it. The American-Spanish philosopher George Santayana wrote in 1913: 'The world is obviously the sport of cruder powers—vested interests, tribal passions, stock sentiments, and chance majorities. Having no responsibility laid upon it, reason has become irresponsible.'

In literature, as in other things, the Edwardian age was the epilogue of the Victorian age. Meredith and Swinburne died. Yeats had paused in his development. If he had died in 1910 he would not now be regarded as a great poet. Hardy lived on, but wrote no more novels. Henry James, after his failure with the theatre, had entered his curious last phase. The general public ignored him. Compared with James, the most publicized writers of the age—Shaw, Wells, Kipling, Chesterton, Belloc—have something of the journalist about them. Their best work is still alive, but it is dated as James's or Hardy's is not. Galsworthy,

Bennett, and Maugham continued the novel in its post-French and post-Russian phase. They were genuine artists, if not great ones. Conrad is the only great artist in Edwardian fiction.

There was a feeling of optimism in the period, typified by Shaw and Wells, but also by Forster's early novels, with their faith, reminiscent of Meredith's, in the power of nature to restore health and sanity to civilized man. Even the most tragic writer of the age, Thomas Hardy, ended *The Dynasts* on a note of hope. We detect little uneasiness in the characteristic art of the period, in the music of Elgar, the novels of Galsworthy, or the paintings of Orpen. Even satirists like Beerbohm or 'Saki' do not seem radically disturbed. Since the Aesthetic movement had suffered its setback, with the fall of Oscar Wilde, there had been a new practical spirit in the literature of the age. Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, a sequence of poems written after the war, suggests that it had a tinge of vulgar materialism. But even in Aesthetic circles there was a feeling that this was no time for poses and posturing. Yeats conveyed it vividly when he wrote, years later: 'In 1900 everyone got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church; or if they did I have forgotten.' It is doubtful whether Yeats himself ever got down off his stilts. But his words recall the widespread sense, at the beginning of this century, that a new literary period was about to dawn.

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1

The Age of Shaw and Wells

Shaw—Wells—Kipling—Chesterton—Belloc

BERNARD SHAW (1856–1950), like his fellow-Irishmen Wilde and Yeats, believed that ‘processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye’. He had a talent for publicity and showmanship. He enjoyed his rôle as national jester. Yet in his secretary’s reminiscences he seems a shy, colourless man. Readers have been reminded of the great actor after the theatre has closed and the grease-paint is off. The public figure of ‘G.B.S.’ was merely another of his dramatic creations. The real Shaw remains a mystery; only to be fathomed, if at all, in his creative work.

When Shaw left Dublin for London, at the age of twenty, he took up socialist politics. He became an effective public speaker. But he soon realized that his true ambition was to be ‘king in the realm of the English language’. The novels he wrote were slow to find a publisher. But as he wrote them he developed a witty prose style, sharpened by debate. ‘Effectiveness of assertion,’ he said, ‘is the alpha and omega of style.’ ‘My method is to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say, and then to say it with the utmost levity.’

Shaw began as a book-reviewer, art-critic, music-critic—the best music-critic we have ever had. He did not write plays till he was middle-aged. When he was over forty, after a serious illness, he married an Irish lady of good family, advanced views, and private fortune. His plays began to succeed and make money. He gave up his bohemian manner of life. He remained high in the progressive ranks of the Fabian Society. But he now gave less time to public speaking and more to playwriting.

Shaw did not win easy success in the theatre. The English managers were shy of his work. He wanted his plays to be read and discussed. So he wrote long prefaces which have little to do with the plays they introduce, but expatiate on many topics. Like his contemporary J. M. Barrie, he wrote elaborate stage directions, so that his plays could be

read like novels. He enlivened the plays with topicalities. His comedy made Englishmen laugh at themselves. 'An Englishman thinks he is moral when he is only uncomfortable'—this kind of satire wins friends among the satirized. Shaw writes with an air of saying something scandalous and shocking. But this is only a stylistic device. His views were the advanced commonplaces of the time. He preached that the ordering of society should be in the hands of educated, reasonable men. His ideal was ordered progress in a democracy. What hampers this is not evil and selfishness, as moralists thought, but stupidity and inefficiency. The emotional basis of Shaw's progressivism was his hatred of the narrow-minded religious bigotry he had known in his boyhood, just as his austere mode of life, his Jaeger suits, his abstention from strong drink and flesh-meat, were a reaction against the seedy, shabby, *louche* background of his youth. But Shaw professed to be appealing to reason, not emotion. He professed a belief in argument. He used rhetoric; but he cultivated a clear, lucid manner of writing.

Shaw invites his audience to laugh with him at the sentimental absurdities of the conventional theatre. He proclaims that he is showing life as it is. But this is all part of the joke. Shaw's plays are wild romances like Molière's. His characters are familiar theatrical types. His plays abound in traditional tricks of the theatre, absurd or spectacular costumes, uproarious *dénouements*, horse-play. Though he ridiculed Victorian melodramas and 'well-made plays' for their false sentiment, his own plays are full of corny pathos and stagey rhetoric. Often these are used ironically. But sometimes, to our discomfort, they are used straightforwardly.

Shaw's humour always tends towards the farcical. Unlike the authors of classic comedy, he does not combine making fun of people with moral disapproval. As a serious dramatist Shaw was at a disadvantage compared with Molière or Ben Jonson. Living in the twentieth century, he could not take for granted the standards by which conduct is condemned as eccentric. He had to put forward his own standards. This makes the author himself seem another eccentric. Hence the atmosphere of irresponsibility and farce.

But Shaw's master in drama was not primarily a writer of comedy. His chosen medium for enforcing his ideas was the new European theatre of Ibsen. Ibsen's main theme is the tyranny and inhumanity of social convention, which denies to human beings their need to express their unique and peculiar natures. Ibsen's plays fall short of the tragic. Social convention, dramatically speaking, is a poor substitute for Fate. It can be altered; whereas in tragedy the hero is confronted with something unchangeable and ultimate. However, Ibsen's plays, if not tragic, are gloomy. Shaw avoided gloom. Even in his 'unpleasant' or propa-

ganda plays, where he is a didactic dramatist like Ibsen or Brecht or Arthur Miller, farce is always breaking in. The material is like Ibsen's, but Shaw evades its gloomy implications. Shaw's comedy flowers in the 'pleasant' plays. The exposition scene of *Arms and the Man* (1894) is enough to show his skill, with its surprises, its suspense, its touches of fancy. *Arms and the Man* seems to us a light comedy. Yet at the time it was thought shocking because of its unromantic treatment of war and soldiering. Yeats admired and hated it. 'It seemed to me,' he said, 'inorganic, logical straightness, and not the crooked path of life.' Shaw for Yeats was a smiling sewing-machine. The Irish dramatist he backed was J. M. Synge, who was 'by nature unfitted to think a political thought'. Synge was essentially a poet: Shaw was not. This is clear in *Candida* (1894), where the poet Marchbanks belongs in a farce. The play as a whole, though amusing, is serious. *Candida* herself is one of the types in whom Shaw is interested: the self-sufficient character. It is her simple confidence in the power of her own virtue which gives her strength. She anticipates the strong-minded women of Shaw's later plays. Her 'manly' husband turns out to be a grown-up baby, ludicrous and pathetic.

Shaw achieved a better balance between farce and seriousness in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901). Caesar is the first of his portraits of the great man. Shaw adopted Nietzsche's term, the Superman. *Man and Superman* (1903) was the most ambitious play he had yet written. It is still a popular favourite. But the best part of it, the third act, is rarely performed. This is a long dream sequence in which Mendoza, who represents the Devil, presides over a debate in hell. The debt to Mozart is obvious. Shaw had a lifelong interest in opera. He tells us how it taught him to shape his plays into recitatives, arias, duets, trios, ensembles, finales, and bravura pieces to display the technical accomplishments of the executants. But *Man and Superman* has lessons to teach. The play has a voluminous introduction in which Shaw expounds them. Tanner, his spokesman, goes on talking after the play in 'The Revolutionist's Handbook' and 'Maxims for Revolutionaries'. Shaw expounds his belief in God, but a God who is not transcendent. Shaw prefers the phrase 'Life Force'. To serve the purposes of the Life Force, the Superman must be bred by eugenics. Such is Tanner's gospel. But in the play as we normally see it, without dream sequence or preface or handbooks, the honours go not to him but to his captor Ann. This is not in accordance with Shaw's intentions. But popular theatrical instinct may be sounder.

John Bull's Other Island (1907) reveals unexpected aspects of Shaw. He shows that he can enter imaginatively, like Yeats, into the Irishman's feeling for Ireland, the 'endless dreaming'. But what for Yeats

was a mode of insight into a higher reality was for Shaw a horrible temptation, like drugs. Another theme of *John Bull's Other Island* is interesting. For the first time Shaw draws a religious character, Father Keegan. It has been said that though Shaw may be remembered as an artist rather than a prophet, his best-drawn characters are religious people, not artists. From Father Keegan to Saint Joan, religious characters are among his most memorable.

Major Barbara (1905) is also concerned with religion: the attraction of the Salvation Army for the educated, idealistic Barbara. But the main theme of this play is power. The mystique of power is embodied in the entrepreneur, Undershaft. The play's lesson is a grim *Realpolitik*. Shaw, like Carlyle, was fascinated by power. The twentieth century had begun with widespread optimism about progress, democracy, and socialism. Belief in them has foundered because their supporters failed to understand that all require the use of power: and power corrupts. Shaw saw the need for power, but averted his eyes from the corruption. Beatrice Webb, Shaw's old friend and the leading spirit of the Fabian Society, was shocked by *Major Barbara*. Shaw, she said, was 'gambling with ideas and emotions'. The play was 'a dance of devils'. Shaw's appeal to the intellect was by now obviously secondary. His most powerful work came out of latent, unconscious material. His ideological choreography, like his buffoonery and clowning, seems to have been a device to enable him to evade its tragic implications.

Tragic material—jealousy, untimely death, the place of beauty among other values—is evaded in *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906). Critics agree that Dubedat, the amoral painter, is boring and a failure as a character. What we enjoy is the satire on doctors. As usual with Shaw, we like the people satirized. *Getting Married* (1908) and *Misalliance* (1914) bring up the question of Shaw's treatment of sex. D. H. Lawrence condemned it for flippancy and irreverence. Shaw in his younger days was rumoured to be a great pursuer of women. He conducted a long and ardent correspondence with two actresses, Ellen Terry and Mrs. Patrick Campbell. He constantly talks of love and passion, but he cannot convey it. A striking thing in these plays is Shaw's repugnance to the idea of family. His own early background was in some ways like Joyce's, but in one vital respect it was different. The Joyces quarrelled incessantly, but there was a warm feeling among them. There was not among the Shaws.

Shaw's finest comedy, *Pygmalion* (1913), has deep roots in his own psychology. Everyone knows, if only from the musical play *My Fair Lady*, the story of the eccentric phonetician who makes a lady out of a flower-girl. It is the legend of Galatea. But Eliza is the opposite of Galatea, the statue who came to life. She is turned from a living person

into an object—Bergson's definition of comedy. Few scenes in drama are funnier than Eliza's social début as a talking doll. The fourth act of the play is profound. It shows the immorality of using a person as a *means* to anything. The fifth act is a failure. Shaw, the anti-romantic, refused to let Higgins marry Eliza. Popular instinct demands it. But Shaw weakened the structure of his play (there has to be an epilogue to tell us how Eliza married another man) rather than bring them together. The reason may be that *Pygmalion* is full of personal material. The relation between Higgins and Eliza reminds us of the relation between Shaw and Ellen Terry or Mrs. Patrick Campbell, his attempts to manipulate them, to make them dolls.

Heartbreak House (1919) shows more obviously the stresses and conflicts in Shaw. The façade of rational humanism is very thin in this play. Most of it is farce; but its culminating mood is King Lear's 'Off, off you lendings!' The play was planned before the Great War, although the closing incident was suggested to Shaw by a Zeppelin raid near his home in 1915. Its dominant feeling is captured in the recurrent image of England as a drifting ship. What unity it has is provided by the old mad mystic Captain Shotover. Shaw had turned in this play from Ibsen to a greater dramatist, Chekhov. But what is touching in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* is hysterical in Shaw: what is gentle humour in the one is wild farce in the other.

Up to 1914 Shaw's influence had spread over the whole civilized world. But his fame did not come in the way he had hoped. He did not carry conviction as a constructive thinker. Iconoclasm had become an obsession with him. His clowning obscured his serious purposes. A critic called him a mixture of prophet and playboy. It seemed that he could not reconcile the two. After the war he tried to do this in the enormous four-part play *Back to Methuselah* (1921). He took up the idea which histologists were suggesting, that human tissue could be preserved indefinitely. Aldous Huxley uses this idea in *After Many a Summer* (1944). He uses it to arouse horror and disgust. Shaw's purpose is different. He hails the prospect of an endless future for humanity. But, as in most utopias, it is a humanity which has been stripped of everything recognizably human. This is a grisly dream, only made bearable by the rattle of Shaw's levity.

Back to Methuselah seemed to show that spiritually Shaw had not survived the war. But in *Saint Joan* (1924) he wrote the greatest of his plays. For the first time he reconciles his comedy with his serious convictions. Shaw's historical plays—*Saint Joan*, *Caesar* and *Cleopatra*, *Androcles* and *the Lion*—are among his best. He is freed from the lure of the topical. But *Saint Joan* shows little concern for actual history. Warwick and the Bishop of Beauvais interpret medieval problems in a

modern way. All the same, the historical setting, and above all the character of Joan, give dignity to Shaw's theme. The profound question which he raises, in making her the expression of the Life Force, is why Joan failed. Her faith in her voice, means for him the conviction that imagination is the voice of God. Yet the medieval church was an impressive institution, and Shaw makes it seem so. It gives Joan a fair trial. The Inquisitor's long speech is the finest in Shaw. But Shaw's sympathies are with Joan, the inspired individual. For once Shaw has not avoided strong drama. The forces opposed to Joan are impressive, and taken seriously. The play is Shaw's version of Dostoevsky's 'Grand Inquisitor'. Can we afford a saint? Do we want one? Shaw does not give an unambiguous answer.

Saint Joan restored Shaw to critical favour. Critics said that he had given up teasing, and was showing sympathy with the simple and the good. But he had always done so—in *The Devil's Disciple*, in *Candida*, in Father Keegan of *John Bull's Other Island*. What the critics did not notice is that Shaw's admiration for Joan, the inspired individual, was bound up with his admiration for dictators. Shaw's socialist friends were uneasy about this, but they excused it. After all, Shaw admired Stalin as well as Mussolini.

After *Saint Joan* Shaw's powers as a dramatist declined. His later plays are mostly political extravaganzas. Their wit and their powers of exposition are astonishing in a man so old. But Shaw's capacity to stage *debates* had gone. After *The Apple Cart* (1930) what he offers is a monologue, still entertaining, but predictable. Years before, he had said that 'a man is like a phonograph with half-a-dozen records. You soon get tired of them all; and yet you have to sit at table while he reels them off to every new victim.' This was to be his own fate.

It is hard to judge Shaw. In some ways he is too near to us, and in some ways too remote. What is most enjoyable in Shaw is his style. Some people prefer the prefaces to the plays, because there they can sample it without dramatic disguise. The basis of all Shaw's writing is the soapbox. He writes a brisk debater's prose. There is no drivel. Every sentence carries a punch; yet they are flowing and musical. It is the best kind of English prose, in the tradition from Swift to George Orwell.

What is least enjoyable in Shaw is his subordination of the individual to the collective. When Eve in *Back to Methuselah* finds out about generation she says to Adam: 'You may die when I have made a new Adam. Not before. But then, as soon as you like.' This contempt for the individual is pernicious. And it contradicts Shaw's own insights as a dramatist. His best plays, *Pygmalion* and *Saint Joan*, both affirm the priceless value of the individual.

What was Shaw's dramatic achievement? He will live in stage his-

tory. He abolished the 'curtain', the 'aside', the 'one-man play'. All these have come back again: but such is the theatre. He tried to take away the 'star' appeal from drama and replace it by the theatre of ideas. This too has been ephemeral, because few dramatists have any ideas. Shaw carried on a battle with Shakespeare throughout his career. In a late playlet, *Shakes versus Shay*, he lets 'Shakes' have the last word. This seems right. Shaw was the best English dramatist since Shakespeare. But this is not such a compliment as it sounds: English drama since Shakespeare has been a minor art. Great poetic drama, with its charged brevity and imaginative concentration, is the highest achievement of the human mind. *Macbeth*, *Phèdre*, the *Oresteia*, are unsurpassed. Shaw did not surpass them. But he stands high above most of his English predecessors and all his successors. Most dramatists before and after Shaw have been either unliterary or unplayable. Shaw was neither.

The Scottish dramatist J. M. BARRIE (1860–1937) was the only serious rival to the Irish dramatist Shaw. He too had genius, though of a limited and peculiar kind. Barrie came to London and began as a journalist. He made his name with stories of bachelor life in England and village life in Scotland. His first outstanding play is *The Admirable Crichton* (1902). It is a drawing-room comedy with a new twist: the hero is the butler. But it is more than that. In contrasting the life on the island where the characters are shipwrecked with the day-to-day comedy of London life, Barrie is quietly asking social and political questions. Is the set-up on the island, where Crichton the butler dominates as a natural superior, preferable to the set-up in London, where he 'knows his place'? Progressivists would say yes, reactionaries no. The play does not answer. It reveals rather than tells.

Barrie's most powerful work goes deeper. His theme was the wish to remain a child. This theme had personal origins. Barrie seems to have had a relationship with his mother, when he was young, which was similar to D. H. Lawrence's. (Lawrence was interested in Barrie's work, and Barrie admired *Sons and Lovers*.) Out of this material Barrie created *Peter Pan* (1904). The god Pan frequently appears in Edwardian writers, but this is his only successful incarnation. Barrie belongs to a late phase in the tradition going back to Rousseau and *The Prelude* and *David Copperfield*: the discovery of the importance of childhood, the survival of the child in the man. With Barrie's work we may compare *Le Grand Meaulnes* of the French writer Alain-Fournier, the children's classic *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) by Kenneth Grahame (1859–1932), and the songs and stories of A. A. Milne (1882–1956). There are displeasing things in *Peter Pan*, such as the mawkishness about Wendy. But there are also the romance and comedy that children enjoy. And,