

# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

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**9:2 2023**

*The Country Wife.*

Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>  
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Edizioni ETS  
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa  
[info@edizioniets.com](mailto:info@edizioniets.com)  
[www.edizioniets.com](http://www.edizioniets.com)

Distribuzione  
Messaggerie Libri SPA  
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione  
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL  
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna  
ISBN: 9788-8467-6807-0  
ISBN (pdf): 9788-8467-6806-3  
ISSN 2421-4353

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FRANCESCO MARRONI\* AND ENRICO REGGIANI\*\*

## **A Conversation on *Teatro di George Bernard Shaw*, edited by Francesco Marroni<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract

Enrico Reggiani interviews Francesco Marroni on his latest publication, a meticulous edition of George Bernard Shaw's dramatic work in *Teatro* (Bompiani, 2022).

KEYWORDS: George Bernard Shaw; theatre; translation; Independent Theatre; W.B. Yeats

ER: The most effective way to start our dialogue on Francesco Marroni's Shavian enterprise is by focusing on the project's editorial foundations and scientific features, because they are all highly original, commercially attractive and therefore worthy of admiration. As a matter of fact, if one looks for publishing initiatives of the same kind in twentieth-century Italy, one can find some catalogue numbers, e.g., by Mondadori (cf. the 22 volumes published from 1923 onwards as *Teatro Completo di Giorgio Bernardo Shaw*, and those issued in the 1950s in the *Biblioteca Moderna Mondadori, Sezione Teatro*), UTET (in the series *Scrittori del mondo: I Nobel*, 1968), or Newton Compton's three volume *Teatro* (1974). However, all these publications are limited as regards both the efficacy of the translations and the accuracy of the critical apparatuses.

Needless to say, Marroni's monumental edition is completely immune to these shortcomings, because it provides its readers not only with valuable Italian versions of the plays, but also with very welcome Italian renderings of Shaw's general and specific thoughts on his theatrical pragmatics. This courageous and far-sighted editorial choice reflects perfectly what Shaw himself very often did along the years to explain his aims to his reading and theatrical public, and to get them used to his innovative approach to the theatre (which he intended as literature). How has Bompiani reacted to the unusual profile of your Shavian project?

<sup>1</sup> Milano: Bompiani, 2022. ISBN 9788830104549, pp. 3315

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FM: Thank you for your words of appreciation, Enrico. This project has taken me several years to complete but, thanks to the valuable contribution of the colleagues involved,<sup>1</sup> I was able to see it through to the satisfaction of the editor of the “Classici della Letteratura Europea” series and the publishing house itself. As for the development of my Shavian project, the simplest thing to say is that, in reality, the series director already had in mind the idea of reviving the works of George Bernard Shaw. Evidently, the total absence of such an important author on the Italian publishing scene in recent decades must have seemed patent even to the publishing house itself. Therefore, once I had the editorial director’s approval, I immediately set about bringing together a group of scholars who would be worthy of the task. I must add that my proposal was also justified from a commercial point of view since there have been no translations of Shaw or any monographs or articles written about him in Italy for decades. Thus, the field appeared to be open for a return to the Irish playwright’s work. On the other hand, it must also be said that in the United States Shaw’s popularity has never waned. There have been two important journals dedicated exclusively to his work for decades: *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* and *The Shaw Review*. In contrast to Europe, Shaw is still highly regarded in the United States and continues to be respected in academic circles. It is no coincidence, then, that the greatest scholars of his work are American, starting with Dan H. Laurence, who has edited his works as well as the four volumes of letters, but I could mention many other names as well.

Getting back to my task as editor of the volume, I’d like to add that the series requires a precise format and internal organisation, which I tried to respect by giving a number of detailed indications to the editors of the individual works, all with the parallel text (including the Prefaces). As for the general structure, apart from my introduction, each translated play is accompanied by:

1. an introduction (in several cases long and detailed),
2. a description of the plot act by act,
3. the history of the text,
4. critical perspectives,
5. its fortune on the stage, and
6. bibliographical references.

<sup>1</sup> Below is a list of the translators who have contributed to this project, along with the corresponding works they have translated: Richard Ambrosini (*Arms and the Man*); Raffaella Antinucci (*The Man of Destiny, Pygmalion*), Benedetta Bini (*Mrs Warren’s Profession*), Elisa Bizzotto (*Widowers’ Houses, Caesar and Cleopatra*), Fiorenzo Fantaccini (*Captain Brassbound’s Conversion, John Bull’s Other Island*), Francesco Marroni (*Candida, Man and Superman*), Loredana Salis (*The Philanderer, The Devil’s Disciple*), Enrico Terrinoni (*Saint Joan*).

Work began in late 2018 and was concluded in August 2022, which is quite a considerable length of time for a publication of about 3.300 pages.

ER: Your sketch of the your publishing criteria for Bompiani is very illuminating and useful. Could you give us an analogous overview of the criteria you have followed in the choice of the plays with the related Prefaces, critical commentaries and metatexts? By going through the table of contents of your *Shaw*, one becomes easily aware that,

1. firstly, the first two well-known “phases” (*Plays Unpleasant and Plays Pleasant*) are fully represented and introduced (“springboard-like”) as Shavian milestones;
2. secondly, the *Plays for Puritans* seem to be thought of as an integration to what was available to the Italian reader beforehand; and,
3. thirdly, four great theatrical masterpieces (*Man and Superman; John Bull’s Other Island; Pygmalion; Saint Joan*) synthesise the manifold potentialities of Shaw’s evolution as a playwright. Could you tell us something more, especially about these four choices (and about the plays you have not included), which of course demonstrates a very specific and solid view of Shaw’s evolution?

FM: Well, Enrico, your question touches on one of the points that made me ponder at great length when I was deciding what to include and exclude. Obviously, the editor has to take responsibility in these cases. Having worked extensively on Shaw’s life and canon, I have become convinced that the works of the first phase are the best in revealing his thought and the very essence of his personality as a man of the theatre. Shaw aimed to set himself up as an iconoclast in his life and works. The first goal he set himself as a playwright was to break with the dominant themes of Victorian theatre. The *Unpleasant Plays* of his debut deal with themes that no Victorian author would have ever dreamed of tackling and, in many ways, already suggest the direction of Shaw’s theatre. On the other hand, *Plays Pleasant* are no less polemical, and this, besides shedding light on their literary history, confirms the disruptive tension that inspired their author. It is no coincidence that works like *Widowers’ Houses* and *Mrs Warren’s Profession* had to wait a few years before they were approved by the British censors. Again, the decision to prioritise the plays written up to 1901 corresponds, so to speak, to a choice of ideological reliability and biographical truth in the sense that, as I see it, the essence of his dramaturgical theory is all encompassed in this first phase. In these years, the choice to break with the *pièce bien faite* theorised by Eugène Scribe and to imagine a totally different theatre is countered by a social-political tension that led him to join the Fabian Society in the hope of bringing about social renewal.

In this sense, *Man and Superman*, written between 1901 and 1902 and performed in 1905, can be considered his ideological and theatrical bible in terms of the “new drama”. In the Preface to this long play, Shaw wanted to review the literary tradition that inspired him and, at the same time, explain the innovative spirit underlying *Man and Superman*, which, incidentally, was written at the beginning of the twentieth century. These were years of great cultural excitement and Shaw was in contact with many men of the theatre in his frenzy to establish himself both in the theatrical world and on the British political scene. Hence the great revelation of his encounter with Ibsen’s plays, from which he drew his own conception of the theatre. In fact, his lecture on Ibsen – delivered in July 1890 and published in 1891 under the title *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* – is not so much an analysis of the Norwegian playwright’s individual plays as an initial statement of Shaw’s theatrical theory. Indeed, in those years, he was anxious to impose his new dramaturgical creed. For him, realism was to be pursued above everything else, and, thus, was also to be included in his battle against the hypocrisies and falsehoods of late Victorian society. All of this can be seen in his first phase, which ends, as I said, with *Man and Superman*. In the choice of plays to be translated, I excluded *Heartbreak House*, which is nevertheless considered fundamental by such renowned scholars as Stanley Weintraub (1971, 162-83) and, in our country, Paolo Bertinetti (1992, 44-7). One cannot disagree with Bertinetti that *Heartbreak House* marks a turning point in Shaw’s productions. Still, despite his desire to change direction and renew his method, in my opinion, *Heartbreak House* is an unsuccessful work. Here, more so than in his other plays, he fails to construct characters that are not authorial mouthpieces. His intention was to denounce the lassitude of the ruling classes, the collapse of a culture and, above all, the end of the dream of order that had fired the imagination of the Victorians for decades. Well, Shaw shows us all of this by representing a series of characters who are anything but authentic and who reflect his urge to make speeches and pass judgements. As a matter of fact, David Hare has written that in *Heartbreak House* what you see on the stage are “puppets, not people” (2000, viii). Indeed, after Ibsen, the second most important revelation for Shaw was the theatre of Chekhov which he tries to assimilate in this play after seeing a London performance of *The Cherry Orchard*. In this sense, the subtitle: “A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes” is significant.

On closer examination, at the beginning of the twentieth century Shaw became a passionate advocate of Chekhov’s work. According to the English translator of Chekhov, Julian West, it seems that Shaw, in support of the great Russian playwright, had said: “Every time I see a play by Chekhov, I want to chuck all my own stuff into the fire” (qtd in West 1916, 3). Actually, the author of *The Cherry Orchard* had many admirers in England, including



Arnold Bennett who considered him a master of the short story. However, in spite of this exaggerated praise for Chekhov's art, Shaw was moving in a different direction – every single character always had something to say and did so in the most incisive and eloquent way, whereas in Chekhov's theatre, the protagonists seem to move on the fringes of reality, often lacking certainty and unable to speak their minds in a corrupt and declining society. As a confirmation of the brevity of the period in which he was inspired by "the Russian Manner", after *Heartbreak House* Shaw wrote a cycle of five plays entitled *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch* (1918-1920), where he returns to the concept of Creative Evolution as the only salvation for a mankind doomed to catastrophe. This cycle, with its Preface of over fifty pages, also harks back to *Man and Superman* for its ideas on eugenics as the only possibility of salvation for mankind.

Here I'd like to say that I did not really have any qualms in excluding *Back to Methuselah*. However, I must also admit that to give a more complete representation, I would gladly have included *Heartbreak House* and two important comedies that precede it: *Major Barbara* and *The Doctor's Dilemma*. All these works were reluctantly excluded but unfortunately, as I said, the fact that the length of the anthology was limited, forced me to make drastic choices. Of course, I could not exclude a play as important as *Saint Joan*, which has had a great impact on the history of twentieth-century theatre. Some Italian scholars have also pointed out the absence of *Geneva* (1936), but, in my opinion, this is a minor work. In *Geneva*, which Shaw wrote after abandoning the dream of a world entrusted to natural born leaders, he wanted to portray the end of another dream, that of the "Great Men" (Shaw 1986, 336-7) who would save mankind, offering comic and ludicrous versions of Hitler, Mussolini and Francisco Franco as they try to defend themselves before the International Court of Justice.

ER: I'd like to go back to some meta-Shavian fundamentals that you have just mentioned. It is something that we learn, especially, from the Prefaces (which my theoretical I greatly appreciates and for which we are all very grateful, I am sure).

I may summarise it as follows: the culturological and intertextual genealogy of Shaw's reformist enterprise and stage socialism is both theoretically grounded and, at the same time, not conformistically "constructed" (Shaw 1893, xiii) but, nonetheless, textually effective in the perspective of the theatre of the word. Please, expand on and, if necessary, correct this without time restrictions . . .

FM: Let's go back for a moment to *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. You only have to read the first few pages to realise that Shaw was fighting against all forms

of idealism. For him, ideals functioned as masks, a way of hiding the truth. The “New Drama” was supposed to celebrate a realistic and antirhetorical reading of social phenomena, by “pulling the masks off and looking the spectres in the face” (Shaw 1917, 22). It is no exaggeration to say that all of Shaw’s work is aimed at demolishing idealism in its various declinations. His artistic journey is characterised by the representation of truth, even at the cost of being “unpleasant” as in his early plays. When he talks about realism, his ideological touchstone is John Bunyan. Significantly, he defines himself as a Puritan in the Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*: “I have, I think, always been a Puritan in my attitudes towards Art” (2000, 21). In defining himself as a puritan author, he recognises Bunyan as his model and inspiration. The motivations behind this choice can be summarised in three points.

1. Bunyan had created a literary form that expressed its message with the utmost clarity and, therefore, with the utmost dramatic effectiveness.
2. In Bunyan’s works and, in particular, in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, he had almost exclusively favoured realism and, for this reason, had adopted the language of the people.
3. Finally, the third point concerns the dialogic system that characterises both *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Bunyan’s other works: his characters express their vitality in dialogue that, whether peaceful or conflictual, it is always characterised by truth – a truth that is, however, conveyed neither in the language of angels nor in the language of God. His hero, Christian, speaks the language of everyday life, which is the same as saying the language of real life. It is no accident that F. R. Leavis in 1964 emphasised that “Bunyan the Puritan allegorist was an artist [...] a great name in the history of prose fiction” (1981, 287). And it was precisely on the level of style and tone that, for Shaw, the author who had inherited Bunyan’s legacy was Daniel Defoe. Indeed, on the narrative level, Defoe had fully developed the realistic tones and attitudes of the Puritan preacher. In other words, he set himself a precise goal, just like a religious reformer: “I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinions” (1987, 25), he had written in the Preface to the play *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* (1909).

Thus, clearly, there is a tendency to messianism in the Shavian zeal for reform which is part of a precise line that includes Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris. From Carlyle he borrows the idea that “heroes” will save humanity; the concept of the hero here is to be understood in terms of the broad meaning expressed by Carlyle in the famous lectures he delivered in 1840 and later collected in the volume *On Heroes, and Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Moreover, from another of Carlyle’s works, *Past and Present*, written in 1843, Shaw derives the notion of the “Aristocracy

of Talent” (Carlyle 1960, 26-32) called upon to lead the battle against the plutocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie that have reduced human relations to pure materialism.

As is well known, the essence of Carlyle’s thought was taken up by Ruskin, whom Shaw wanted to celebrate in a lecture given on the occasion of the first centenary of his birth. He entitled the lecture “Ruskin’s Politics”, emphasising the social reformer of his last phase as well as the political valency of the Guild of St George and the letters of *Fors Clavigera*. When praising Ruskin’s thought he called it socialist and in closing the lecture went so far as to say that if there was a party with which Ruskin’s role as prophet could legitimately be associated this would be “the Bolshevik party”.

At this point, as can be read in the transcript of the lecture, the audience burst into loud laughter, ridiculing Shaw’s absurd and improbable conclusions.

Undoubtedly, in Shaw’s formation, the Carlyle-Ruskin line found its natural development in William Morris who, besides representing the aesthetic and anti-technological version of socialism, instilled in him the idea of utopia and the need to imagine perfect worlds in order to improve the present one. As his biographer Michael Holroyd has written, “Shaw’s two gods in matter of art were Ruskin and Morris” (2006, 83). Not only that, but from Morris’s thought Shaw also derived a way of looking at the past without falling into the idolatry of history and its heroes, as Carlyle had done. Ultimately, in the Carlyle-Ruskin-Morris triad he recognised a line of coherent and rigorous opposition to contemporary reality and denounced its blindness to the vulgarity of the bourgeoisie and the consequent decadence of its customs.

This is why I entitled the first section of my introduction to the volume “An Anti-Victorian Victorian” precisely to emphasise the fact that Shaw, who was educated in the middle of the nineteenth century and strongly attached to Victorian culture and literature, defined his social and cultural identity by setting himself in opposition both to the dominant thought of the time and, more generally, to the Victorian frame of mind. In other words, he became the opponent of all forms of cultural and social orthodoxy and conformity.

As far as the genealogy of Shavian dramaturgy is concerned, I have already mentioned Ibsen and Chekhov. Here I’d like to add that, for Shaw, Shakespeare became the unsurpassed model whose masterpieces offered a full and complex representation of the human thanks to “his enormous power over language” (1922, 43). To cope with this inferiority complex, he spent his whole life struggling against Shakespeare whose ideological limitations he would point out whenever he had the opportunity, the first of which would be his inability to offer a philosophical system and, thereby, a well-defined conception of the world. For him, the Bard was only able to portray chaos and human weaknesses in his plays, which is why he condemned Shakespeare’s

scepticism in the face of social phenomenology. From a Shavian point of view, bardolatry had to be fought with every means and he felt that plays such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* expressed an entirely personal pessimism, which was all inscribed in the temperament of the Bard who was unable to consider the whole scope of the world: “Shakespeare’s pessimism is only his wounded humanity” (2004, 29), he writes in the Preface to *Man and Superman*. It’s as if he’d never read Montaigne’s essays and as if he’d never known the great Shakespearean tragedies. In his willful blindness, he didn’t want to recognise the modernity of Shakespeare’s entire canon. But really, on another level, he was all too aware of Shakespeare’s uniqueness and greatness so he tried to compete with him, hoping to become the Shakespeare of his time. In the long course of his life – he lived from 1856 to 1950 – Shaw had his say on a very wide variety of subjects, even of a non-strictly theatrical nature. He lived a very long life and had an extraordinarily complex personality; so it would be reductive and misleading to try to give an unambiguous definition and interpretation of his ideas and his theatre.

ER: Let’s talk about William Archer and his Independent Theatre. On the one hand, I’d like to stress on both the cultural and theatrical relevance of the adjective “Independent” in the denomination of the Independent Theatre, and the need to answer a very basic question about it: “Independent” from what? Archer and Shaw answered “independent from commercial success” and their management of production costs had a direct impact on the centrality of the word in their theatrical conception, writing, and performance.

On the other hand, in his important Preface to *Widowers’ Houses*, William Archer made another substantial contribution towards defining how Shaw’s theatrical logic worked in the context of the Independent Theatre: a theatre considered as *experimental*, *word-oriented*, and *liberal-minded* literature (which would probably horrify any theatre scholar of our days), which avoids censorship nets by performing in a private context, on a private stage, and for private audiences. It is obvious that censorship officials were well aware of what was performed at the Independent Theatre, but they were not entitled and obliged to intervene in that private situation.

FM: I absolutely agree with you. In the late Victorian and Edwardian period, the Independent Theatre had an extraordinary function, not only because it allowed censorship to be bypassed, but also because it was also a space in which a transnational culture unfolded as an unprecedented phenomenon of great importance in defining the New Drama. For those who worked outside the mainstream and were on the side of experimentation, the Independent Theatre, which was the British version of the Théâtre Libre in France and Die Freie Bühne in Germany, was a solution both with regard to the strict

ensorship and the mental anxieties of those theatre managers who hardly ever wanted to abandon the financial certainties of commercial theatre. In 1891, as Ibsen's translator, William Archer warmly welcomed Jack Grein's idea of founding the Independent Theatre Society which, thanks to the subscriptions of its members, was able to offer a theatre free of commercial constraints, just as had already happened on the Continent. Therefore, it was possible to perform those Ibsen plays that had not had the censor's approval; and even when the Norwegian playwright's works entered the commercial theatre circuit, his plays continued to be the strong point of independent theatre. Let's be clear, not only Ibsen but also Shaw and many other playwrights were too daring for London's most well-known theatres.

ER: I cannot help recalling that Archer also informs us that, while writing *Widowers' Houses*, Shaw had Marx's *Capital* in German and an orchestral score of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in front of him, which gives us another surprising glimpse of his innovative and transdisciplinary creative logic. Could you expand a bit on the relationship between Shaw and Wagner (which, as you know very well, is very close to the core of my melopoetic interests)?

FM: I must confess, Enrico, that there is only one way to answer your question, and that is to write a monograph on the subject. If we are talking about Shaw and musicology, it should be remembered that before *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), Shaw wrote a heated defence of Wagner in his essay *The Sanity of Art*, which appeared in 1895. The occasion for this polemical piece was provided by Max Nordau's volume *Degeneration*. Published in German in 1892 under the title *Entartung*, this book outlined a version of art and artists from a perspective that favoured mental illness and various forms of instability, psychic disturbances and moral corruption. Dedicated to Cesare Lombroso, whose pupil and legitimate heir Nordau felt he was, *Degeneration* quickly became a bestseller, one of the most translated and read books of the European and American intelligentsia. According to Nordau, all great men of art are victims of mental problems and perversions that, precisely, find expression in their works. So, for Nordau, one could not understand Tolstoy's work without taking into account his mysticism, just as one could not understand Wagner without taking into account not only his megalomania and his cult of the barbarian ages, but also his incurable persecution complex. Nordau, a physician and sociologist as well as a Jew by culture and education, observes in this regard: "For years Wagner was convinced that the Jews had conspired to prevent the representation of his operas – a delirium inspired by his furious anti-Semitism" (1895, 172).

From a musical point of view, what prevailed in Wagner was the chaos of an unstable mind, full of itself, deeply egocentric and only capable of

imagining a world at the service of his own megalomania.

The attack concerned the exponents of all the arts, including the Impressionists, and it would be impossible to make a complete list here of so many other writers. While the debate over *Degeneration* raged, Shaw initially wished to avoid being involved in it. Because of the preposterous pseudoscience and substantial nonsense underlying the book did not merit his attention. However, anarchist circles were in turmoil because, in his book, Nordau had equated the anarchist with the common criminal. For the leading figures in anarchism, this was intolerable. And so it was that Benjamin Tucker, the editor of the anarchist newspaper *Liberty*, asked Shaw to intervene to silence Nordau's nefariousness. After some hesitation, he was convinced about countering the ideas expressed in *Degeneration*. And he did so by writing *The Sanity of Art* where one can read a reasoned defence of the German musician in the chapter "Wagnerism". Nordau had declared Wagner to be "a madman who was reducing music to chaos, perversely introducing ugly and brutal sounds into a region where beauty and grace had reigned alone" (Shaw 1908, 31). As a "perfect Wagnerite" Shaw replied that the exact opposite was true since Wagner's works were "masterpieces of the form proper to their aim . . . are straight and sensible instance of that natural development of harmony" (32). The Irish playwright wanted to defend the kind of harmony that led to modernity via Mozart. As for the attack launched against Impressionist painting, Shaw had no hesitation in praising its innovativeness and aesthetic value: "The Impressionist movement led to a busy study of atmosphere, conventionally supposed to be invisible" (23). Therefore, the Impressionist painters represented "a movement wholly beneficial and progressive, and in no sense insane or decadent" (24). So, from a culturological angle, Shaw had an extraordinary ability to understand this sense of aesthetic transformation by placing Wagner's musical exploration in the same area and the same sensibility as the Impressionists' pictorial explorations. For this reason, *The Sanity of Art* is perhaps an essay that allows us to understand the main aspects of Shavian aesthetics more than his other writings do.

ER: I'd like you to comment on the acrobatic and contradictory motivation of the 1925 Nobel Prize to Shaw, which an obscure member of the Swedish Academy (Per August Leonard Hallström, 1866-1960) formulated as follows: "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1925 is awarded to George Bernard Shaw for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Both Per Hallström's *Motivation* and his *Award Ceremony Speech* are available here: *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1925*. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2023.

To remind us of both Hallström's granitic inadequacy to his role and the Swedish Academy's institutional and cultural contradictions, I'll also quote a few passages from his Award Ceremony Speech, where, though acknowledging that Shaw's "prefaces have given him the rank of the Voltaire of our time", he *judicially* states that Shaw's "ideas were those of a somewhat abstract logical radicalism"; that "he had to fool people into laughing so they should not hit upon the idea of hanging him"; and that "in this casual manner he came to create what is to some extent a new kind of dramatic art".

FM: It seems to me that the motivation was absolutely antithetical, so I agree with your view of it, Enrico. In its completely misplaced judgement, the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy demonstrated its limitations, if not its deliberate intention not to tell the truth about an uncomfortable and often heretical author like Shaw. As you said, Hallström's words show how inadequate he was as Chairman of the Nobel Committee. Perhaps the only correct thing he said concerned the playwright's consistency over the decades. Because it is a fact that Shaw always remained true to himself and his self-projection as prophet and interpreter of the twentieth century, even if his ideas could often be self-conflicting. The fact remains that in 1925 Shaw was the celebrated author of *Saint Joan* as well as many other essays that carried a programmatic intention to provoke and go against the grain of most contemporary debates. For example, on the eve of the First World War, when everyone was for intervention, he did not hesitate to go against public sentiment and declare his pacifism. Thus, it is difficult to give a definitive portrayal of Shaw and his works. In brief, I believe that no motivation, however broad and well-constructed, can define him. As William York Tindall acutely observed, Shaw's chief aim was "to please, astonish, and displease" (1956, 29).

ER: It goes without saying that, for personal and academic reasons, I am particularly interested in your view of the relationships between George Bernard Shaw and Ireland, and, more specifically, between Shaw and W. B. Yeats, who, though operating on very different premises, were surprisingly awarded the Nobel Prize in the very same years, but with strikingly different motivations.

FM: As evidence of the connection between Shaw and W. B. Yeats, it seems important to recall that the play *John Bull's Other Island* was written at the request of Yeats, who was desperately looking for texts for the 1904 theatre season. In the Preface to the play, Shaw reminds us that Yeats had asked him

for “a patriotic contribution to the repertory of the Irish Literary Theatre” (1984, 7). However, the playwright did not like being constrained by rules and instructions of any kind, so he presented his ideas while carefully avoiding any extolment of Irish patriotism. When he was given the manuscript, Yeats immediately gave his positive opinion on the profound truths contained in the text. But, although it alternates between moments of comedy and moments of intense emotion, *John Bull’s Other Island* is ultimately an attack on the idealistic vision of the neo-Gaelic movement and, at the same time, denounces the many faults of the Irish. Hence also Shaw’s very harsh judgement of the old Ireland, of the generation that had grown up with anti-British resentments and delusions of grandeur. Probably, Yeats, being the informed man that he was, was already prepared to receive an anti-celebratory text, devoid of idealism and passion, so much so that he used to call Shaw “a notorious hater of romance” (1955, 283). After all, although he was quite aware of the atrocities committed by the British rulers, Shaw did not want to give a Manichean representation of the conflict: he was well aware that today’s victims can turn into tomorrow’s executioners. By now, he had no illusions about history or the reliability of the version given by historians. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Shaw had already embraced the doctrine of eugenics, which, as time would prove to him, was also a form of idealism, a utopia of the human race with no relation to reality.

As for the relationship between Yeats and Shaw, it is easy to imagine how much has been written and how almost all scholars, while they note many points of contact, end up by concluding that the two great Irishmen represent two very distant worlds with two very different temperaments. I do not want to go on for too long about this, but I believe that ultimately, their friendship withstood their continual contrasts and mutual tirades and the substantial differences in their respective worldviews. As R. F. Dietrich says, Shaw and Yeats are “two Irishmen divided by a common language” (1995, 65).

ER: It is nonsensical to blame Shaw *a posteriori* for his search for world-models through which he could interpret a historically meaningless reality, even though we are all well aware now that those models were holistic in an unacceptably and unjustifiably totalitarian perspective. He and many other Anglophone intellectuals (Yeats among them) who temporarily showed interest in Mussolini and Fascism’s absurd world-views, found in them a seemingly legitimate response to their communitarian or (more ideologically) communitaristic needs and convictions. Don’t you think that this holds perfectly true for a social preacher and “a natural-born mountebank” (Shaw 1901, xxi, which is the *natural* choice for *your* Shavian monography, which is currently being printed by Casa Editrice Rocco Carabba) whose “Irish mind” possessed – according to Yeats – “an ancient cold, explosive, detonating



impartiality” (1931, 31)?

FM: You are undoubtedly right. It is always easy to pass judgement and censure after events. As I have already mentioned, behind Shaw’s position regarding the “Great Men” was a tradition of thought that from Carlyle onwards he had perfectly and profoundly assimilated. The Irish playwright was a great believer in Mussolini who, in his view, had brought order to a nation that had been living in social and political chaos since the end of the Great War. It is also no coincidence that, in confirmation of his faith in the Duce, on 24 January 1927, Shaw published a letter in the *Daily News* defending Mussolini and his Blackshirts and giving great emphasis to the popular support the dictator enjoyed. On the other hand, it is also true that Shaw always regarded parliamentarianism with a certain scepticism precisely because his political experience as a Fabian socialist had taught him to view those who too easily promised social justice and the arrival of a better world with suspicion. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in one of the maxims in *The Revolutionist’s Handbook*, he bitterly observed: “Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few” (Shaw 2004, 252). Behind these words we shouldn’t imagine a socialist that converted to totalitarianism, but, more simply, a Fabian militant who saw a great truth in Carlyle’s belief in the “aristocracy of talent”. If, in the wake of Yeats, we want to speak of “detonating impartiality”, we should conclude that this is the consistent impatience of a playwright who, as in the case of his response to Nordau, loved to give his all in the battle of ideas, without the fear of being sectarian or iconoclastic.

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