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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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ROBERTA MULLINI*

Francesco Marroni. *George Bernard Shaw. Commediografo e saltimbanco*¹

Abstract

This review summarises and comments on Francesco Marroni's volume *George Bernard Shaw. Commediografo e saltimbanco* (2023), analysing it chapter by chapter on the basis of the author's vast knowledge of the Irish dramatist and thinker, especially of the multiple writings accompanying his major works, which constitute a rarely studied territory. In the book, Marroni regards his object with a disenchanted gaze, which allows him to speak of G.B.S. objectively, that is, also underlining Shaw's flaws and errors, especially those concerning the dramatist's political choices. In the end, Marroni stresses the impossibility to define G.B.S. with just one epithet, given the multi-faceted personality of an author who lived so long, changing his mind on various occasions, but always striving to convince his readers and audience of the righteousness of his own positions.

KEYWORDS: George Bernard Shaw; John Bunyan; Thomas Carlyle; Charles Dickens; Henrik Ibsen; Max Nordau; John Osborne

Near the end of the interview published in this journal, which Francesco Marroni gave to Enrico Reggiani about the monumental volume *Teatro di George Bernard Shaw* he edited in 2022, the interviewer hints at Marroni's "Shavian monography, which is currently being printed" (Marroni and Reggiani 2023, 216): less than a year after the nearly complete anthology of Shaw's plays, this "monography" was published (September 2023). What is peculiar in *George Bernard Shaw. Commediografo e saltimbanco* (George Bernard Shaw: Playwright and Mountebank)² is that, in spite of its subtitle, Shavian plays, although being of course mentioned (how could one speak and write about George Bernard Shaw without quoting his most famous and problematic plays?), remain in the background of an all-round portrait of the Irish author, seen in all his facets as a theatre and music critic, a novelist (albeit abortive), a painting expert, a polemicist, "the prophet and the puritan" (Palmer 1915, 80), the preacher and the playwright . . .

¹ Lanciano: Carabba, 2023. ISBN 9788863447156, pp. 215

² All translations from Italian are mine.

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In his life-long research activity on the Victorian Age, during which he has devoted articles, volumes, and translations to many Victorian authors, Marroni had already faced the 'enigma' G.B.S. in some contributions which he has now enlarged and put together with fresh material,³ thus producing a brilliant work able to offer the reader a guide towards understanding the production (and the multi-faceted attitudes) of the Irish author. What strikes the reader is not only the vastity of Marroni's reading distilled in his book, but also his capacity to present and discuss some of Shaw's debatable and questionable stances (for example Shaw's sympathy towards Nazism and Fascism), well distancing himself from Shavian choices. When, in the "Epistle Dedicatory" to *Man and Superman* Shaw connects John Bunyan to Nietzsche, the author writes that "mi pare una forzatura l'associazione del nome di Bunyan con quello di Nietzsche" (104; to me the association of Bunyan's name to Nietzsche's seems like a forcing); soon afterwards he accuses Shaw of "una palese distorsione interpretativa" (a clear interpretative distortion), and later of "una rilettura tendenziosa del *Pilgrim's Progress*" (106; a biased reinterpretation of *Pilgrim's Progress*). These short quotes suffice to show Marroni's disenchanted reading of his subject, which he admires and discusses via many aspects of Shavian thought and works, without ever being blinded by the fascination of the playwright's prose.

The volume develops along six chapters (plus a Conclusion), which focus on Shaw's literary and philosophical sympathies, from his Fabian engagements that also led him to get to know Henrik Ibsen's drama and from which both *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) and his own deeper and deeper involvement in theatre and drama derived (Chapter 1, "L'uomo di genio, la 'sanità' dell'arte e la modernità: Shaw contro Nordau"; The man of genius, the 'sanity' of art and modernity: Shaw against Nordau, 9-60).

Chapter 2, "Genealogie vittoriane: Dickens, Carlyle e l'invenzione del Superuomo" (Victorian genealogies: Dickens, Carlyle and the invention of the Superman, 61-87), is devoted to Shaw's self-education as a prose writer, based mainly on Charles Dickens's novels and social engagement, although the future playwright was well aware of the fact that the Victorian novelist had not been able "superare il limite di una totale assenza di progettualità riformistica" (71; to overcome the limit of a complete lack of reformistic planning), as Marroni notes. In the same chapter Marroni studies Thomas Carlyle's influence on Shaw, especially because of Carlyle's 'prophetic'

³ Shaw coined the acronym G.B.S. in the "Preface" to *Three Plays for Puritans* to distinguish between himself as "the journalist" and "Bernard Shaw, the author" (1967a, 25). This is also the preface in which Shaw clearly defines himself as a "mountebank", or rather, a "natural-born mountebank" (23), and where he overtly counterpoises his drama to Shakespeare's, in the famous/notorious section "Better than Shakespeare" (29-39).

writing against social degradation and his pre-socialist attitudes concerning labourers' industrial exploitation, which – for the playwright – anticipated Fabianism (75). But Carlyle is also examined as a powerful inspiration for Shaw's concept of the Superman: deriving the idea of an "aristocracy of talent" from Carlyle's *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Shaw conceived his Superman as "un essere di raro ingegno che è sempre in anticipo sui tempi" (Marroni 2023, 76; a figure with a rare ingenuity who is always ahead of their time), a manifestation of the Life Force ready to appear in history in order to change things towards positive transformations (Saint Joan, in the homonymous play, is an example of the Life Force, although rejected by her own milieu, and by future generations as well, as the "Epilogue" to the play shows).

The essential relationship between the Irish playwright and John Bunyan, whom Shaw considers better than Shakespeare so as to write in 1896: "All that you miss in Shakespeare you find in Bunyan" (qtd 96), is examined in Chapter 3, "Shaw, John Bunyan and the vision of the 'just men made perfect'" (89-118; Shaw, John Bunyan e la visione dei 'just men made perfect'). Marroni states that

nella sua carriera di commediografo e critico, Shaw, con straordinaria regolarità, userà il dualismo tra Shakespeare e Bunyan come una sorta di messinscena delle sue oscillazioni tra il relativismo filosofico e morale del primo e le certezze religiose del secondo. (96)

[in his career as a playwright and critic, with an extraordinary regularity Shaw uses the opposition of Shakespeare to Bunyan as a sort of staging of his own fluctuations between the former's philosophical and moral relativism, and the latter's religious certainties.]

Chapter 4 deals with Shaw's interpretation and celebration of Rembrandt's realistic painting, while Chapter 5 develops the analysis of the novel *An Unsocial Socialist* (written in 1883, rejected by many publishers and finally serialized in 1884 in the journal *To-Day: Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism*; Shaw 1887), containing the extolment of photography when compared to painting because of the former's "objectivity" (for these two chapters see below).

The last chapter ("La demolizione shaviana dei modelli: intorno a una lettera di Orwell", 173-96; the Shavian demolition of models: about a letter by Orwell) deals with the implications of a letter written by George Orwell in 1933 with "un unico obiettivo: distruggere l'immagine di George Bernard Shaw" (173; an only purpose: to destroy the image of George Bernard Shaw). It is a chapter that revisits Shaw's dislike for Shakespeare and, especially, the former's construction of Ibsen as a socialist and anti-idealistic writer. All

this despite young Orwell's appreciation of the Irish dramatist, of that Shaw who, to him, had been a strong source of inspiration. In this way, Orwell's iconoclasm is paralleled to Shaw's. This conclusive chapter also collects some twentieth-century negative reactions to Shaw's drama and thought as well, in particular John Osborne's, who perhaps did not like his own plays to be considered parallel to Shaw's "comedy of ideas" (202-3).

In the "Introduzione" (Introduction) to his volume, Marroni underlines Shaw's performing nature, not only when the dramatist called himself "a natural mountebank", but also every time he spoke in public or wrote something provocative and paradoxical:

Per Shaw la messinscena della provocazione era il modo migliore per stimolare il pensiero degli spettatori. Per ottenere gli effetti desiderati spesso ricorreva all'arte del paradosso e dell'esagerazione che, a seconda dei casi, trasformava in interminabili sermoni di cui soltanto lui stesso conosceva i tortuosi itinerari ideologici. (6)

[For Shaw the staging of provocation was the best way to arouse an audience's thought. In order to obtain the desired effects, he often resorted to the art of paradox and to exaggeration that, depending on the case, he transformed into endless sermons whose ideological meanderings were known only to him.]

Marroni's volume succeeds in highlighting Shaw's formation through a well-acted performance which progressively arose from a variety of intertextual influences he inherited in the first half of his life from his Victorian contemporaries, and which were ready to be engrafted on, and embedded in, the changing cultural situations he found himself in later. His polemical stances as a Fabian orator, or as a writer of "plays of ideas" (and especially of the long prefaces to them), were the hallmarks of a career that Marroni tries to explore by visiting the "extraordinary territories" (7) many Shavian critics have overlooked. Mainly to the study of these nearly unexplored Shavian production Marroni devotes his present research.

It is not a coincidence that the volume starts with a chapter devoted to Shaw's attack to Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892, but translated into English in 1895 and reprinted three years later: Nordau 1898), which its author dedicates to Cesare Lombroso, calling him "Dear and honoured Master" and writing that

[t]he notion of degeneracy . . . developed with so much genius by yourself, has in your hands already shown itself extremely fertile in the most direct directions . . . But there is a vast and important domain into which neither you nor your disciples have hitherto borne the torch of your method – the domain of art and literature. Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. (Nordau 1898, vi)

Nordau's vision of contemporary art and artists as "degenerate" was rebutted harshly by Shaw in a long and articulated "letter to the editor" for the journal *Liberty* published in July 1895 and later, but only in 1908, as a separate publication. The title itself – *The Sanity of Art* – is a total reversal of Nordau's position. In the long preface added to the text published in 1895, Shaw explains how it happened that the editor of *Liberty* had asked him to write about Nordau's work and also explains his approval of the new edition of his own text because he recognizes that "it is still readable and likely to be helpful to those who are confused by the eternal strife between the artist-philosophers and the Philistines" (Shaw 1908, 13-14). In the latter category are included both Nordau and his supporters, while the former includes, among others, such artists as Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner, and the Impressionist painters (to whom Shaw devotes specific sections of his pamphlet, defending all of them from Nordau's accusations). In his fight against conventionalism Shaw, who by 1895 had already composed the "unpleasant" plays *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, and written his personal defence (and interpretation) of Ibsen's plays in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, does not refrain from criticizing Nordau's words about modern art, but he also attacks, as Marroni notes, Nordau's Jewishness (Shaw calls Nordau "one of those remarkable cosmopolitan Jews who go forth against modern civilization as David went against the Philistines"; 1908, 7). According to Marroni, Shaw's antisemitism "era lo stesso che aveva alimentato la fantasia di molti vittoriani, non escluso il suo amato Dickens" (59; was the same that had fed many Victorians' fantasy, including his beloved Dickens's). I would add that in 1895 (and in 1908 as well) Shaw had not shown Nazi sympathies yet, not only because that would have been historically ahead of the times, but also because his very construction of the Superman was based on the idea of the "men of genius" and on Carlyle's already mentioned "aristocracy of talent", not only on the Nietzschean philosophy of the *Übermensch*.

Another at least partly overlooked Shavian production that to many readers may be relatively unknown is the dramatist's appreciation and knowledge of the visual arts. To this topic Marroni devotes two chapters, as already said, that is, Chapters 4 and 5, where he deals with Shaw's admiration for Rembrandt's art and with his extolment of photography as a new art, comparable – if not superior in some respects – to painting itself.

In his Chapter 4, "Lezione di anatomia: Shaw, Rembrandt e il volto delle cose" (119-51; The anatomy lesson: Shaw, Rembrandt and the face of things), Marroni analyses Shaw's relationship with the Dutch painter after looking for the role of painting in George Eliot's and Thomas Hardy's novels, two writers who had found in Rembrandt inspiration for the rendering of some of their characters (122-7). Shaw mentions the Dutch painter in some of his plays: as a genius with "a programme of aesthetic revolution" in *Man*

and *Superman* (129), as a ‘god’ of the artistic faith of Louis Dubedat in *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, who, some moments before dying in Act VI, “utters his creed” as the Stage Direction reads:

I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez, and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of color; the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting, and the message of Art that has made these hands blessed. Amen. Amen. (1906; Shaw 1977, 174)

As early as 1893, when he wrote *The Philanderer* (later to be included among the *Plays Unpleasant*), a “framed photograph of Rembrandt’s *School of Anatomy*” is presented, in the Stage Direction introducing Act 3 of this play, as hanging on a wall of Dr Paramore’s reception room (Shaw 1980, 162). The painter’s name is mentioned twice later as that of a scenic object (a photograph of Rembrandt’s picture) looked at by Charteris, the protagonist of the play. Marroni wonders whether that name and the photograph have a deeper function than that of offering a target to Charteris’s gaze (133). What Marroni writes towards the end of this chapter, after discussing the presence of Rembrandt in other authors and other times than Shaw’s, is worth noting:

. . . non mi pare esagerato affermare che il commediografo intesse un dialogismo con Rembrandt fondato proprio sulle mani dell’artista-anatomista che, sollevando la ‘pelle’ del tessuto socioculturale di una nazione, scopre a beneficio di tutti le verità nascoste che, invece, nessuno vorrebbe vedere, tanto meno i fautori dell’ortodossia ideologica e del conformismo borghese. (149)

[. . . I do not think it is an exaggeration to affirm that the playwright weaves a dialogic process with Rembrandt based on the hands of the artist-anatomist who, by raising the ‘skin’ of the socio-cultural texture of a nation, discovers to everybody the hidden truths that, instead, nobody would like to see, let alone the supporters of ideological orthodoxy and of bourgeois conformity.]

As for Shaw’s interest for photography, Marroni finds relevant traces of it in *An Unsocial Socialist*, the novel written in 1883 but finally published in 1884, as already mentioned. In it Trefusis, the protagonist, praises photography by saying: “The only art that interests me is photography” (Shaw 1887, 11). Like in the other chapters of his work where he examines some of Shaw’s almost unknown (or forgotten) writings, in “L’arte fotografica come paradosso” (the art of photography as a paradox; Chapter 5, 153-72) Marroni also peruses Shaw’s enormous ‘paratext’ which accompanies the playwright’s more famous production. In this case, Marroni enlarges his research to what Shaw wrote about photography outside drama, in particular to an article published in the journal *The Amateur Photographer* in 1902 and reprinted in 1906 (Shaw 1906). In spite of the many paradoxes one can read in Shaw’s article (e.g.

the extolment of photography compared to painting, also when the Irish dramatist speaks of famous painters – Velasquez is a case – thus in a way contrasting his own opinion about them; see his praise of Rembrandt’s art, for example), according to Marroni Shaw’s strong support of photography had a positive effect on British society, because “fece sì che, contro le resistenze di ampi settori della cultura vittoriana e tardovittoriana, alla nuova modalità di rappresentazione fossero riconosciuti il valore estetico e la funzione sociale attribuiti a un’opera d’arte” (157; it caused the aesthetic value and the social function attributed to artworks to be credited to the new modality of representation, despite the opposition of wide sectors of Victorian and late Victorian culture).

Arriving at the end of Marroni’s volume the reader fundamentally agrees with its writer, that is, that the Irish dramatist’s attitudes remained those of a Victorian, no longer acceptable after the many changes occurred in twentieth-century Western society (and the Second World War). He was “un vittoriano antivittoriano”, as Marroni calls him in the “Introduction” to the volume of Shaw’s *Teatro* (2022, ix; an anti-Victorian Victorian): a paradoxical writer, an unorthodox (rather, anti-orthodox) thinker, a controversial and polemical ‘preacher’, in the end a “mountebank” as the playwright defined himself. All of these, but none of these alone. The idea one gets of George Bernard Shaw from Francesco Marroni’s rich book is that of a man who lived the first half of his long life in a century the culture of which he wanted to change deeply, and the other half in quite a different century the challenges of which he could not always fight (nor understand) because of the Victorian legacy that accompanied him to the end. To understand this man, and his extensive and often ignored production that to many a spectator of his plays might remain unknown, Marroni’s book is certainly a very valid and helpful compass.

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