

Foreword

Bernard Shaw wrote novels? Surely not; wasn't he a playwright? He was indeed, arguably the second greatest playwright in the English language. (He certainly thought so. 'Shakespeare was a taller man than I,' he said, 'but I'm standing on Shakespeare's shoulders.') However, before he decided that the stage was the best medium for his ideas, he wrote five novels, of which *Cashel Byron's Profession* was the fourth, although, as it happened, the first to be published in book form.

Written in 1882-3, it was rejected by major publishers but serialised in a small socialist magazine. Shaw blamed himself – in so far as he ever blamed himself – for trying to accommodate the popular taste. The book even has a Shavian kind of happy ending! Ten years later a revised version achieved some success in the United States. In order to prevent the Americans turning it into a pirated play he quickly wrote a theatrical version himself, but having, he said, no time to construct the proper dialogue, did it into blank verse.

Robert Louis Stevenson expressed enthusiasm for the book, but the mainstream publishers were probably right in thinking that both its form and its theme were too peculiar to have wide appeal. It offers gleams of Shavian wit but Shaw hadn't really learned yet how to be Shavian or how to turn characteristics into living characters. The people in it can hardly be imagined as creatures of flesh and blood: they have been too obviously constructed to match the ideas they propound. It is, however, a fascinating glimpse into the way Shaw's mind was moving.

The quickness of his wits slowed him up. He had too many ideas, held too rigorously. The point is well made by G.K. Chesterton, who imagines the Shavian version of some banal academic or leader-writer's paragraph about religion, the French Revolution and the Puritan attitude to art: "The element of religion, as I explain religion, in the Puritan rebellion (which

you wholly misunderstand), if hostile to art – that is, what I mean by art – may have saved it from some evils (remember my definition of evil) in which the French Revolution – of which I have my own opinion – involved morality, which I will define for you in a minute.”

Chesterton and Shaw made beautifully contrasted opponents, both physically (the one fat, the other lean) and intellectually (Shaw was a socialist, Chesterton a ‘distributist’, Shaw believed in the ‘Life Force’, Chesterton became a Catholic). Their double-act from the same platform drew huge crowds for the gladiatorial performance, but there was no hostility. Chesterton wrote one of the very best and most sympathetic books about Shaw, and Shaw liked Chesterton.

Both were, in their differing styles, great humorists, and both were masters of paradox, though Chesterton argued that Shaw never engaged in paradox at all but merely carried his ideas to their logical conclusion. *Cashel Byron's Profession* rests on a kind of paradox, the idea that a profession despised by orthodox society – in this case pugilism, or prostitution in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, or the arms trade in *Arms and the Man* – may be quite as respectable as professions more generally respected. Shaw, as he explains in his preface to the revised edition, actually disapproved of prize-fighting because of its brutality, but he taught himself to be a competent boxer.

The ideological plot of the book can be quickly summarised. The male protagonist – let's call him (though Shaw would not have done) the hero – represents physical force, executive action, at the purest level: the antagonist – call her the heroine – represents pure intellect, a thought-out attitude to the world. Both are rich and beautiful. Obviously they must meet and mate, they must breed: the science of eugenics, the Life Force, requires it. In the revised edition Shaw adds a little twist. Their children grow up not quite as the rational heroine expected: the boys prove totally unathletic, while the girls dream of Byronic action. Eugenic manipulation is not as simple as it seemed.

Shaw liked playing with ideas, reversing expectations, prodding intellectual complacency, but the grand paradox of Shaw's life was Shaw, for the truth is that he was a fraud. He wanted people to think him, perhaps thought himself, a hard-edged sceptic, a realist, a scornful opponent of anything which might be called romantic or sentimental, a ruthless intellectual pugilist. He enjoyed the image represented by a celebrated photograph of him in old age, brandishing a stick, which he called 'The Chucker-Out'.

But he wasn't like that at all. Far from being sceptical, he could be extremely gullible. As a young man he swallowed Karl Marx almost whole, and, later, when visiting Stalin's Russia, threw his sandwiches out of the train window as it passed from Poland into the Soviet Union, because he knew that nobody went hungry in a communist country. Of course he was not alone in such delusions, nor was his belief in eugenics unusual at the time. The appalling logical consequences both of communism and of eugenics appear completely to have escaped the left-wing intellectuals of the day. Moving from the dreadful to the merely silly, it was hardly realistic that Shaw, in his will, should have left almost everything to a foundation for simplified spelling.

These were aberrations. The personal paradox – more important to us, looking back at him now – went much deeper. The image of The Chucker-Out was a familiar joke, a lifelong persona which he had cultivated and which the public relished. It was amusing precisely because it was untrue. Actually he was courteous and considerate, genial, friendly and fun. Because he took his own arguments seriously, he was never contemptuous of an opposing argument, however absorbed he might be in his own.

Here we approach the heart of the paradox, a thing which he would never have admitted, would indeed furiously have denied, but which, reviewing his work now, as a whole, we can see plain as a shamrock. The shocking truth is that, far from being an epitome of sceptical rationalism, he was an old-fashioned Irish romantic.

The most famous point of argument is about *Pygmalion*. In a long teasing afterword to the play he explains that Eliza would not have married Professor Higgins but would have married Freddie, and how their faltering fortunes would, time and again, need rescuing by Colonel Pickering. But almost everyone except Shaw has always known that this was wrong. After all, in the Greek legend Pygmalion did marry his Galatea, and they lived, as far as we know, happy ever afterwards. In Shaw's version too the arc of the story demands it, the Life Force, one might say, requires it. When Shaw was forced to accept a happy ending for the film, he seems not to have put up much resistance.

Caesar and Cleopatra provides a different kind of example. Superficially the portrait of Caesar as a great man – a wonderful portrait – presents him as a Shavian cynic, but come a little closer. We first see him 'ravished by the mystery of the night', comparing himself to the Sphinx, both being strangers in this world. 'I have found flocks and pastures, men and cities, but no other Caesar, no air native to me, no man kindred to me, none who can do my day's deed, and think my night's thought.' Is that not a rather romantic way to look at a military dictator? But, of course, Shaw's Caesar is far from being an average military dictator. He is humorous. He plays with Cleopatra. The sound of the trumpet, he tells her, 'is Caesar's voice'. The legions salute him with drawn swords as the sanity of Rome cuts through the foetid air of Eastern conspiracy. He tosses ideas around without ever being fettered by them. He is, one might say, a true synthesis of the hero and heroine of *Cashel Byron's Profession*, but with the priggishness left out.

The clearest example of all comes at the end of *Candida*. In the final scene she has to choose between her apparently strong husband, full of worldly confidence, and Eugene, the young poet, who can offer nothing but his love. She chooses her husband whose strength is an illusion and who therefore needs her more, and rejects Eugene, who has a different kind of self-sufficient

strength. So the poet goes desolate into the night, leaving the husband and wife embracing. The stage directions to the play end with one more line: 'But they do not know the secret in the poet's heart.' Is that not romantic? Is that not sentimental? Is it not rather fine?

Cashel Byron's Profession catches this extraordinary writer, this paradoxical human being, on the cusp of his intellectual and professional development; the chrysalis turning into a brilliant butterfly. For anyone interested in words, ideas, jokes even, it must surely be a spectacle worth watching.

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