TOO TRUE TO BE GOOD: BERNARD SHAW BETWEEN TWO WORLD WARS

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Bernard Shaw completed *Too True to be Good* in 1931 when he was in his mid seventies. It belongs to the group of plays written between 1929 and 1939 that discuss (in the Shavian sense) political and economic issues in the aftermath of the First World War and at the same time reflect the impending threats of the Second. Shaw emphatically disclosed his anxiety in all these plays.[1] *Too True to be Good* is especially a confusing play which ends in an aura of enigma very unlike the usual Shavian ending. This defect comes not only from a lack of careful manipulation of dramatic technique but also from a troubled mind which for an instant unconsciously loosened its grip over doubts deep down. The style and structure reveal only too well this confusion. However, this phenomenon should be interpreted as Shaw's significant hesitation. Here Shaw is suspended in mid-air for a moment to reflect on the paths he has trodden and at the same time to question the ways he should take in the future. The play presents a private and yet universal quest written in a form which Shaw called "A Political Extravaganza."[2]

Although Shaw denies biographical identity to Aubrey, the monologue by this destitute character at the end of the play be trays the author's more than melancholy tone. "I am ignorant: I have lost my nerve and am intimidated: all I know is that I must find a way of life,

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[1] *The Apple Cart* (1929), *Too True to be Good* (1931), *Village Wooing* (1933), *On the Rocks* (1933), *The Six of Calais* (1933), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934), *The Millionairess* (1935–6), *Geneva* (1938), and *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939).

[2] Subtitle of *Too True to be Good.*

for myself and all of us, or we shall surely perish."[1] Here, Shaw's usual polemical overtone is submerged by the undertone of uncertainty. But Aubrey is not ready to give way to utter dejection yet, so he will bide his time. "And meanwhile my gift has possession of me: I must preach and preach and preach no matter whether I have nothing to say— " (p. 111.).

This murmur that seems to resound from out the vaults of one's depth was repeated much later in a manner similar in idea and shape by the foremost avant-garde of our contemporary artists, Samuel Beckett. Of the painter Bram van Velde, Beckett said, " The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint."[2] Man's nature has shown that in him there has always been a tension between a desire to build an intelligible picture of reality and on the other hand a desire to question the validity of it. Our civilization reflects this, and in a given historical period either one of these predominates.[3] In the twentieth century, there is a prevailing feeling that ages of questioning the universe and human life have failed to give a valid answer and that man has been left even more a stranger in an unintelligible world. The modern artist feels, more than those of any other period, that all the past efforts to depict reality have been futile. However, he also feels his obligation to express himself, and being sincere to himself he can only try to " shape " a reality which to him only seems unintelligible. " To be an artist," Beckett continues, " is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion . . . ."[4] This is

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[1] Bernard Shaw, " Too True to be Good: A Political Extravaganza " (1931), Vol. 31 of *The Works of Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable Co Ltd, 1934), p. 111. Henceforth all quotations from " Too True to be Good " are from this edition, and the reference will appear in the text.

[2] *Bram van Velde* (New York: Knoedler Galleries, 1962), exhibition catalogue, p. 22. Originally in slightly different wording in " Three Dialogues ", *Transition forty-nine*, No. 5 by Samuel Beckett and George Duthuit (1949).

[3] Eugene Webb, *The Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), pp. 13–25.

[4] *Bram van Velde*, p. 22.

as much as to say that the willingness to risk failure can be equated with total dedication.

To quote Beckett is not to compare Shaw in general with him, but to indicate that the period in which Shaw wrote *Too True to be Good* was a period when he was experiencing " failure " and that this brought him very near to the consciousness of the modern artists. As Stephen Spender pointed out, the strategy of the modern artists is to suffer the modern world to work on them, forging their sensibilities[1] and although Shaw was fundamentally opposed to this attitude, he allowed himself to align with them in this play. Therefore, that the " shape " of Aubrey's monologue is identical to that of Beckett's statement seems not to be just a mere coincidence.

It is generally pointed out that Shaw has regressed in his dramatic skill in *Too True to be Good.* Even before he began writing for the stage, he expressed his conviction that a playwright should find a method with which he may rightly reflect the times and issues of his period. Thus, for himself, he arrived at the idea of the " discussion " play in reference to Ibsen's work.[2] In this method of his, the characters are to attain light through discussion, in the form of clash of opinions and of " talking it out ". To this, Shaw added theatricality through his sense of histrionicity and entertainment, with such devices as wit, satire and hyperbole. His basic method being thus set, he would " shape " each of his plays according to its theme and tone, and his themes never failed to be projected with lucidity. *Too True to be Good* was based upon this method but it turned out to be an unusually confusing play. However, may we not also say that the very loss of control of technique is a manifestation of giving " shape " to the loss of faith in his ideas, the loss of self-confidence, even though momentary?

When this play had its premier in England on 6 August, 1932, at the

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[1] Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 72.

[2] Bernard Shaw, " The Technical Novelty in Ibsen's Plays ", *The Quintessence of Ibsenism,* 3rd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962 4th printing), pp. 171–84.

Festival Theatre, Malvern,[1] the reviews condemened it unanimously as being defective in structure and being only a feeble reiteration of the 'old themes'. One prominent commentator on Shaw's plays, Desmond MacCarthy, said, "I can't tell you what the play . . . is about" because "there was no focus."[2] Another critic, Charles Morgan, said it was a "leaky farce" which treated a vital question "irrelevantly".[3] G. K. Chesterton once said that "Shaw's bleak and heartless extravagance of statement . . . makes the author really unconvincing . . . ."[4] This comment is especially true of this play.

We may list a number of technical defects but the real problem seems to lie in the clash of different tones which destroys the unity of the work. There is the one of the adamantine idealist opposed by the tone of the disillusioned realist. Then, as if to conceal the embarrassment of the confusion of the clash, another tone, the tone of joviality and of the bizarre pervades the whole play. The latter tone works to make light of the seriousness of the characters' plights; consequently the effect of ambiguity.

Shaw's commitment to establish a paradise in this world through betterment of social conditions impelled him to work out a dramatic structure which agrees with the archetypal pattern that celebrates renewal after purging forces that hindered the renewal. His point of departure was to place man struggling in a limbo of social injustice and apathy. By making man 'discuss' his condition in limbo, he designed that man should arrive at a stage where he would desire progress by following the Will of the Life Force. This pattern shaped the basic dialectic of

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[1] The play was first produced by the Theatre Guild at the National Theatre, Boston, on 29 February 1932; then in New York by the same company in April; then in Warsaw in Polish on 4 June. At Malvern it was produced by Barry Jackson and his Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Then played by the same company in London at the New Theatre in September, 1932, for 47 performances.

[2] Desmond MacCarthy, *Shaw: The Plays* (Devon, David & Charles, 1973 [First published by MacGibbon & Kee, 1951]), p. 190.

[3] Charles Morgan, "104. Charles Morgan, unsigned notice, *The Times*, 8 August 1932," *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, ed. T. F. Evans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 327–8.

[4] *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, Introduction, p. 14.

his plays. Dervin analyses this dialectic thus: "The action proceeds from 1) illusion (acceptance of conventional ideas) to 2) exposure and loss of them, to 3) a new element that is in touch with the real world and in the service of life."[1] Shaw never regressed nor was disloyal to this pattern. He also intended this pattern to form *Too True to be Good.* But his intention did not quite hit the mark because at that time a negative force was working more strongly. It is a play that clearly reveals how Shaw painfully sensed the changes of world conditions. He could not maintain the boldness and cogency with which he usually delivered his beliefs in his plays.

It is generally believed that Shaw was immune to any changes, any eruptions. He had given an impression of himself to the public as a man incorrigible, having no ears to listen, having no heart to understand human sufferings that arose from upheavals of world crisis. One strong opponent, A. B. Walkley, said of Shaw in 1919, "After the war Mr. Shaw comes to us unchanged .... He has learnt nothing and forgotten nothing."[2] It is true that Shaw had kept up his high spirits during the times of war, indicating the wrongs he saw coaxing the world to correct those wrongs, but this he did in his prefaces and pamphlets. In those plays written between 1929 and 1939, it seems that at times the consciousness of the artist worked against the consciousness as a pamphleteer. They are strangely negative, indicating clearly that Shaw has not "learnt nothing."

Shaw said humbly, "When I was young as you [Sixth Form listeners] the world seemed to me to be unchangeable .... Now the world changes faster than I can change my mind to keep pace with it."[3] The First World War came to him as a shock and though he said to the

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[1] Daniel Dervin, *Bernard Shaw: A Psychological Study* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975), p. 120.

[2] A. B. Walkey, "72. Unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 October, 1919, 924, 529", *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, p. 239.

[3] Bernard Shaw, "Talk for Sixth Forms—Modern Education (ii)", text of a B.B.C. broadcast given by Bernard Shaw on 11th June, 1937. Allan Chappelow, *Shaw—"The Chucker-Out": A Biographical Exposition and Critique* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969), p. 38.

public "I told you so," it was himself that seemed to have been most deeply affected. At that time Shaw discharged his anxieties in *Heartbreak House* (1916). This play is turbulent yet its thesis is intelligent and lucid. The group of plays in question, coming after a long period of silence, were more mellowed, enigmatic and wistful because of a pervading tone of uncertainty. The passage that expresses what Shaw saw around him at that time reveals the extent of his concern.

> The central error of the time was an impatient disposition to flout all theory, and consequently all principle .... It produced an extravagant reaction against any sort of rule .... It was anarchic, myopic, and defiant of every plea for a constructive policy. It was pleasant to see bright young things having a good time; but it was not pleasant to see how very soon they ceased to be either bright or young .... The dull old things in the political world were just as disastrous .... A war like that of 1914–18 ... brought the bloody part of the business crash into the civilians' bedrooms .... The shock to common morals was enormously greater and more general. So was the strain on the nerves .... What the bright young things after the war tried to do, and what their wretched survivors are still trying to do, is to get the reaction without the terror, to go on eating cocaine and drinking cocktails as if they had only a few hours' expectation of life instead of forty years.[1]

The accelerating increase of the infirmities of the years between the wars had not allowed Shaw to relax in the recesses of the countryside at Ayot St Lawrence. He was obliged to voice his dismay at "failure all round".[2] Even Socialism seemed as dubious as Capitalism. Democracy was no better than Dictatorship. The rich were just as destitute as the poor.[3] Being sceptical toward the two ends of the spectrum left Shaw stranded.

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[1] Bernard Shaw, *An Autobiography 1898–1950: The Playwright Years* (London: Max Reinhard, 1970), selected by Stanley Weintraub, pp. 205–6. Selected from *What I Really Wrote*, pp. 405–6; and "To True to be Good", *Malvern Festival Book*, 1932 (reprinted in *Shaw on Theatre*, pp. 215–6).

[2] Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Too True to be Good*, p. 20.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 3–26.

His essentially relativist method worked negatively in *Too True to be Good* and yet he would never submit to that negative force. Thus the equilibrium of the idealist and the disillusioned in Shaw did not allow the dialectic process of action[1] to complete itself. Hence the clash of two contradictory tones, which is reflected not between the characters but within a character. In addition, each character is endowed with the quality of the farceur who is expected to have warded off the effect of uncertainty but instead increased it.

The young lady Mopsy is invalided in " one of the best bedrooms in the best suburban villas in one of the richest cities in England " (p. 27.). She suffers from overcare by her mother and her doctors. Two burglars, Sweetie, an ex-chambermaid, and Aubrey, an ex-army chaplain, try to rob her jewels but the three end up making a contract to run off together. Mopsy has bought her freedom with her jewels and a ransom for herself. She enjoys the advantages of a vagabond life in a far off land, revelling in the " miracles of the universe: the delicious dawns, the lovely sunsets, the changing winds . . . " (p. 71.). But she gravitates to the opposite equally. She feels that she will go " stark raving mad " because in the universe there is " so much more that is oppressingly astronomical and endless and inconceivable and impossible " (p. 72.). As a result, she says of her condition, " The truth is, I am free; I am healthy; I am happy; and I am utterly miserable " (p. 72.). She makes up her mind to found a sisterhood. This decision is abrupt and unconvincing. She has probably taken the hard way to contemplate life. Shaw has neglected to point out in his usual argumentative way why she has made this decision.

Sweetie, the ex-chambermaid turned burglar, appears in act two disguised as a Countess. Her dreams of wealth and social status have come true. She soon realizes that such possessions only bring boredom and apathy, that her real interest lies in satisfying her " lower center " and and acitve life of constant change. She spots a Sergeant to her taste and goes off with him not for a spree but for a settled life of marriage. She contradicts herself.

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[1] Daniel Dervin, p. 120. Refer to p. 6 of this paper.

The Sergeant betrays our notion of the " braggart captian " type for he turns out to be a man of the " higher center " and is found in deep thought in a grotto. He is lamenting over the shifting of values, very much in the tone of Lewis Caroll's Mock Turtle. He weighs the Bible on one hand and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*[1] on the other, saying that the World War has suddenly brought " these old stories home quite real " (p. 84.), so that man is deprived of his beliefs. " What must we do to be saved? " he repeats. Since his Officer, Colonel Tallboys, is busy painting and will do nothing to prevent the world from destruction, he must find a solution himself.

When Sweetie approaches him, he suddenly sees a solution to his problem in a union of the " higher center " and the " lower center ". He goes off with her. The Sergeant's erratic solution and Sweetie's aberrant attitude result in making light not only of Shaw's old theme of eugenics but also of the Sergeant's concern about the general loss of faith in religion and morals.

Loss of faith is manifested in quite a contrary situation by the occupant of another grotto. This is the Elder, the atheist hermit and the father of Aubrey. He delivers a most devastating account of the loss of his faith. He once believed in Newton's Determinism. Then he was converted to Einstein's doctrine of relativity, which eventually brought him to an impasse. He now has nothing to believe in. What was " calculable is now incalculable " (p. 88.). All natural phenomena seem to be " caricatures of some freakish demon artist " (p. 88.). Man might be saved if he is able to find " a solid footing of dogma . . . but no sooner [does he] agree to that than [he finds] that the only trustworthy dogma is that there is no dogma " (p. 88.). The Elder laments that there is no hope of salvation " from a headlong fall into a bottomless abyss . . . down, down, down " (p. 88.). His tormented soul cries out the Bunyanesque cry, " What must I do to be saved? " He knows

[1] Shaw valued Bunyan, saying that he " offered life, strength, resolution to the terror of drunken nightmare," in an article for *The Saturday Review*, 2 January, 1897. Reprinted in Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw's Writings on the Plays of Shakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (London, 1962), p. 869.

very well that his cry will only resound through the very hollows of his inner self. He sits in his grotto nursing his self-inflicted wounds. This account of his own state is powerful because it is direct and dignified. However, without warning Shaw tags on a bizarre remark at the end of his speech, producing an anti-climactic effect. " My wife," he says suddenly, " has died cursing me. I do not know how to live without her: we were happy together for forty years " (p. 88.). He too is a freakish clown after all. This illogic, strangely enough, is the way in which Ionesco's characters speak in *The Bald Soprano*, a play written much later. The sudden fall from high mimesis to low shatters the Elder's dignity, making him the butt of laughter.

In addition, his solution to his plight is the most unconvincing. He decides to go back to England to save it from being deserted, a subject suddenly brought up toward the end of the play. Thus his powerful negative speech remains in our ears as a mere echo while his existence evaporates into enigma.

Mopsy's mother, deprived of her faith in a life of propriety, exclaims, " How am I to behave in a world that's just the opposite of everything I was told about it? " We see in her, and in the Elder, a generation pitted out to suit their age and now outdated and lost. As Aubrey says, they are destitute because " the iron lightening of war has burnt great rents in the angelic veils . . . of beautiful impossible idealisms " (p. 110.). In a letter to Beatrice Webb, Shaw writes, " Why have we lived so long? "[1] Happy the dead. The mother, refusing to acknowledge Mopsy as her daughter, follows her, contradicting herself by saying that mothers and daughters must not stick together.

These characters are prevented from accomplishing the dialectic of action. The quality of the bizarre in these characters made Charles Morgan say, "A few notes in a wilderness of fantastic irrelevance will not forge it [theme] . . . . If he has questions and not merely a sage's cloak thrown over the motley of a buffoon, let him ask them straightly."[2] Whatever the attack, we should remember that Shaw knew that

[1] Letter to Beatrice Webb from Shaw, 1939. Cited in Archibold Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), p. 869.
[2] *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, p. 328.

"the motley of a buffoon" matches a "sage's cloak", that wisdom and melancholy are a part of the clown, for Shaw himself had played at it all his life. However, he was not used to playing the "modern" clown whose motley is dishevelled and torn and through whose rip his melancholy could be seen.

The most destitute and the most enigmatic character is Aubrey, the ex-army chaplain, turned Sweetie's lover, turned thief, and turned preacher. He too has flitted from one situation to another and is ready to make a new turn. But he does not go off to another place like the others. Where he is, does not matter to him. He sees the absurdity of the others going off in search of an acceptable world. So he remains unmoving, searching within his inner self and waiting for a revelation. He it is who fully acknowledges "failure all round" but who will keep on trying to find a way.

Aubrey is the artist in Shaw. The public Shaw is forever an adamantine figure never wishing to admit his "failure". Shaw's biographer, Archibold Henderson, supports Shaw the public man. He groups this play among all others as another of Shaw's expressions of unfailing belief in the progress of humanity within the design of Creative Evolution. Henderson fortifies this opinion of his by pointing to Shaw's own words in the Preface to *Too True to be Good*: "I have not recanted, renounced, abandoned nor demolished anything whatever."[1] However, the Preface will not help a stage performance. Aubrey-Shaw is in a grotto surrounded by "impenetrable fog" (p. 112.), and not "towering aloft on the Mount of Prophecy" preaching "the redemptive gospel of courage, of steadfastness, of will of life"[2] as Henderson says. He continues, "Shaw, who never hoped because he never despaired, and always celebrated the forces of life as against the forces of death, once again summons the race to the arduous pilgrimage in search of a new faith and a new religion."[3] By nature, Shaw knew

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[1] Quoted by Archibold Henderson, p. 633. From Preface to *Too True to be Good* (Malvern Festival Play Book, 1932.).

[2] Archibold Henderson, p. 633.

[3] *Ibid.*

what it was like to " despair " and therefore to " hope ".

Desmond MacCarthy's comment on *Heartbreak House* shows that he understood the existence of the artist behind the public Shaw. " His high spirits are a wonderful gift," he says, " but they master and distract him, and they have seriously damaged this fine play."[1] Robert Brustein's opinion of Shaw is also to that effect. He hesitates to call Shaw " a full-fledged rebel artist " because although Shaw is " one of the dedicated rebel artists of the modern period, he is also a revolutionary journalist " who " agitates for political, moral and religious reform, always providing tracts and pamphlets, talking whenever possible to elaborate the issue more discursively." Since " the literary rebel is double-minded and the reforming journalist is single-minded, Shaw's two functions are not really compatible." Usually, " the reformist propaganda is often more noisy than his [Shaw's] dramatic art."[2] On *Too True to be Good* Brustein says:

> Shaw's determination to keep his mask firmly fixed over his anguished features can be clearly observed in his remarks about *Too True to be Good.* In all other respects a pleasant light comedy, this work is intermittently suffused with the author's almost nihilistic bitterness on the subjects of the cruelty and madness of World War I, the futility of the Geneva negotiations, the aimlessness of the young, and the spiritual dislocation caused by Einstein's universe. And the . . . sermon of . . . Aubrey is a moving confession of messianic bankruptcy . . . . Shaw can look for a moment into the bottomless pit, but it is not long before he is whistling up his spirits again . . . as a refuge . . . from the tragic impasse of modern existence.[3]

Aubrey's confession is certainly a " moving " one of " messianic bankruptcy ", but in the end, his resolutions to preach on in the grotto is no " whistling up " of his spirits. In Aubrey, Shaw's reformist's pro-

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[1] Desmond MacCarthy, " 78. Desmond MacCarthy, from a notice, *New Statesman*, 29 October 1921, vol. XVIII, 446, 103," *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, p. 258.

[2] Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 183.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5.

paganda gives way to the artist's tacit understanding of the " tragic impasse " of the modern man's condition. This attitude of Shaw as artist is what " shapes " Aubrey's confession.

No matter what Shaw may say in his Preface and stage directions, in the play it is how he feels about what he is talking about that decides how he says it. His attitude becomes the abiding force that directs his work in process into a " shape ". Therefore, the " shape " tells the tale of the creator's mind. The " shape " is then the product of the artist's condition in a particular time and place and the same " shape " cannot be produced twice. Of the artist as Proteus, Northrop Frye says:

> The possession of originality cannot make an artist unconventional; it drives him further into convention, obeying the law of the art itself, which seeks contantly to reshape itself from its own depths, and which works through its geniuses for metamorphosis . . . .[1]

In the other characters, we see Shaw the " revolutionary journalist " still struggling to get the upper hand; therefore all the enigma. However, although Shaw says in the stage direction, that he prefers the " women of action ", in Aubrey the artist Shaw steps forward and admists his " failure ". Aubrey, listening to the echoes of his own voice in the fog without an audience is the most impressive figure, a figure more significant to us today than when he was created. Of the West End production in 1965, Professor Worth says:

> This vivid stage picture—the compulsive talker speaking out to a void—came over as a comical and oddly touching image. It had a life of its own, a theatrical force that related ironically and rather sadly to the intellectual force of the ideas the preacher was developing.[2]

Aubrey is the only character who is aware that nothing can be done;

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[1] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973 [Third Princeton Paperback edition]), p. 132.

[2] Katharine J. Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: G. Bells & Sons, 1973), pp. 102–3.

he can neither hope nor despair. To him, the others " dispersing quietly to do very ordinary things " seem " falling endlessly and hopelessly through a void in which they can find no footing " (p. 109.). All of them are stripped naked to their souls by " the iron lightening of war," therefore " absurd." The aged have lost direction being stripped of their belief. The young do not hesitate to expose their own nakedness; and when their elders try to cover themselves with the rags they are left with, the young mercilessly tear them away. Aubrey is stranded for he " stand[s] midway between youth and age like a man who has missed his train: too late for the last and too early for the next " (p. 110.).

Like the other characters, Aubrey has tried this and that. He has rejected his father, the atheist, to become an army chaplain. He could not stay so for long because he could not tell the dying soldiers that they were headed for heaven when he knew very well that they weren't. He met Sweetie in an asylum and ran off with her but could not bear her obsession with her " lower center ". He then challenged Capitalism by becoming a theif for " what a thief stole steal thou from the thief."[1] But while burglaring, he realized that " honesty is the best policy " (p. 41.) and " discussed " the situation with Mopsy. Disguised as the Countess's brother he now realizes that his companions are heading for a " life too keen ", " a blast of death ". He cannot side with the " negative-mongers " who have " outgrown " all that society had. He shrinks from the fact that " the fatal word NOT has been miraculously inserted into all our creeds .... " (p. 111.). However, on the other hand, he cannot side with " the soldiers, the men of action, the fighters, strong in the old uncompromising affirmation which give them status, duties, certainly of consequence " because " their way is straight and sure, but it is the way of death " (p. 111.). He is burning his candle at both ends, therefore destitute. He is left with only the gift to preach but he must find a way of life first, and this he cannot do.

He admits that he is the " new Ecclesiastes . . . without a Bible,

[1] Bernard Shaw, " Fabian Essays Forty Years Later—What They Overlooked " Preface to the 1931 Reprint, Vol. 30 of *The Works of Bernard Shaw*, p. 316.

without a creed" (p. 110.). He cannot fall into utter despair like his father, but he cannot embrace "the new nakedness" as the young are capable of doing. He says "What amI to do? What am I?" (p. 110.). He is aware that the only place he is able to occupy is the void of the inner self. Aubrey is stuck in the "muck" like the Beckettian characters. As Kafka has demonstrated, the real nature of the human condition today is that of existing in a world where we can nowhere find authority for our actions, our beliefs, even our perceptions.[1]

In 1915, Shaw wrote to Beatrice Webb, "Today, the vanquished will be ruined. So will the victor. And there is no certainty . . . that there will be victory."[2] In the early 1920's Shaw, while waiting for the world's spiritual rehabilitation, uttered impatiently "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"[3] Then in the thirties, when hoping and waiting became desperate, he said "What am I to do?" Colin Wilson calls this period Shaw's period of "pessimism . . . of boredom and despair"[4] but an interesting one.

> Shaw was an anachronism in this world, the 'jazz-age' that was permeated by a Tchekovian feeling of despair and futility. He did not understand the world of . . . Joyce's *Work in Progress*; he was incapable of grasping this poetry of spiritual bankruptcy . . . . But in *Too True to be Good* he made an attempt to catch the mood of this Waste Land generation.[5]

Eric Bentley words a similar opinion more temperately. According to him Shaw "was no longer naive enough to think that anyone knows the truth by simple common sense and emancipation from current fallacies." He continues:

> In the end then, Shaw's mind is *not* 'violated by ideas'. Shaw not only

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[1] Kafka discussed in Gabriel Josipovici, *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977), p. 110.

[2] Letter to Beatrice Webb, 1915. Quoted by Archibold Henderson. p. 374.

[3] Bernard Shaw, "*Saint Joan*" (1923), Vol. 17 of *The Works of Bernard Shaw*, p. 167.

[4] Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 273.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 267.

> preaches feeling as a philosopher of 'irrationalism', he objectifies feeling as an artist. And one of the deepest feelings he objectifies is a sense of the failure of those very 'ideas' which are commonly supposed to be the whole Shaw.[1]

Therefore, Bentley concludes that though *Too True to be Good* was written in the "dotage of his old age" and though it lacks the "galvanic energy" and "the tough dialectic" of his better plays, it is not a failure for it is a "fantastic chronicle of the interim between the two world wars."[2]

Now that Aubrey has rejected everything and is stranded, he might as well remain so and abide his time. Nietzsche noted that "man would rather have the void for his purpose than be devoid of purposes."[3] Meanwhile he must preach even though he has "nothing to say", "no matter how late the hour and how short the day" (p. 111.). "The utmost I or any other playwright can do," said Shaw during those years, "is to extract comedy and tragedy from the existing situation and wait to see what will become of it."[4] Aubrey has previously mentioned that he, instead of being active, would much prefer to be "eternally contemplating [his] own middle," so that he "could be happy as a Buddha in a temple" (p. 64.). The contemplative figure looking down on his navel is a metaphorical posture of an examining self. Although Shaw from his early days talked about a house of con-

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[1] Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1960 [First printed in 1947 by New Directions]), p. xvii.

[2] Eric Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), p. 120. Bentley continues to say that the form to which Saw gave the name of Political Extravaganza was most suited to giving expression to what he felt during those years because it was definite, free, fantastic and realistic enough to give the effect of uproariousness and seriousness. Shaw was "most at ease" in this form.

[3] Quoted by Gabriel Josipovici, p. 116.

[4] Bernard Shaw, *An Autobiography 1898-1950: The Playwright Years*, p. 210. Selected from Program note printed in the program of the first London production of *Geneva*; reprinted in *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York 1963), V, 649-50.

templation for " refreshment ",[1] Aubrey's contemplation has little hope for " refreshment." In his case, it is a " dubious consolation "[2] if there is any. Colin Wilson says that the plays of this period have " an odd closed-in quality " which makes them " different from *Candida* or *Man and Superman;* it is a product of a mind turned in on itself."[3]

When Shaw pointed out that Aubrey is " the most hopeless sort of scoundrel . . . whose scoundrelism consists in the absence of conscience,"[4] he meant that this character was coward enough to hide behind his gift for preaching to escape the responsibility of a proper citizen of the world, and he also meant to warn " the world against mere fluency . . . . "[5] Shaw's explanation of this character's function can be acknowledged as another of his polemics but through the " shape " of the monologue the author's anxiety appears. So Aubrey's opaque confession, opaque because it is surrounded by " impenetrable fog " (p. 112.), implies Shaw's accepting and perpetuating the " failure " of the artist.

Although *Too True to be Good* is a lesser play, it should be considered as one of value in that, as Wilson says, " it is the only attempt, apart from *Heartbreak House,* to come to grips with the new world that had replaced the Victorian era,"[6] and in doing so it brought into the foreground the artist in touch with the times.

Even the other plays of the same period were not as turbulent, enigmatic and tragi-comic as this play, for in them the " revolutionary

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[1] Archibold Henderson, p. 663. Even in 1896, Shaw was thinking of a " public house " in which " to seek refreshment and recreation " because " no nation, working at the strain we face, can live clearly without " such a house. Later in the 1930's he called this house " the Chamber of Contemplation ", inspired by his Chinese friend, Sir Robert Ho Tung.

[2] Barbara Hardy, " The Dubious Consolation in Beckett's Fiction: Art, Love and Nature ", *Beckett The Shape Changer: A Symposium,* ed. Katharine J. Worth (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 105.

[3] Colin Wilson, p. 264.

[4] Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Too True to be Good,* p. 3.

[5] Bernard Shaw, *An Autobiography 1898–1950,* p. 207. Selected from " The Simple Truth of the Matter ", Malvern Festival Book, 1935; reprinted in *Shaw on Theatre,* p. 241.

[6] Colin Wilson, p. 267.

journalist" showed a firmer hand. As for Shaw's last group of plays,[1] they were written as a "final gesture"[2] repeating and reaffirming everything he had propagated from *Widower's Houses* to *Back to Methuselah.* In the broad context of his whole corpus, *Too True to be Good* was a significant hesitation.

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[1] *Bouyant Billions* (1947) to *Why She Would Not* (1950).

[2] Colin Wilson, p. 272.