

# The Creed of an Aesthete

MR. BERNARD SHAW is an admirable writer and a wit; he is one of the dozen living Englishmen whose prose is perfectly respectable; to compare him with Swift though unkind is not absurd; but he is not an artist, much less an aesthete. The difference between an artist and an aesthete is, I suppose, the difference between one who can create and one who can appreciate beauty: most artists are aesthetes as well—but not all. However, the difference does not concern me here because I am going to deal exclusively with appreciation, and, confining myself to the term “aesthete”—under which may be ranged most artists—modestly draw attention to the fact that there are in the world quite a number of people to whom it may be applied, though apparently Mr. Shaw is unaware of their existence.

Mr. Shaw is a didactic; and one of the differences between didactics and aesthetes is that, whereas the latter rejoice in the knowledge that it takes all sorts to make a world, didactics are unable to believe that there are people who, without malice or stupidity, are fundamentally different from themselves. Thus Mr. Shaw, one of the cleverest men alive, comes out, on the fortieth page of his new book *Back to Methuselah*, with a statement so astonishingly false that I read it through four times before I would accept its obvious import. After stating quite fairly, so far as I can judge, the Darwinian theory of Natural Selection and Survival—a theory as to the validity of which I have no opinion, not being deep in science—Mr. Shaw rejects it on the ground that it makes nonsense of “Beauty, Intelligence, Honour” etc. “When its whole significance dawns on you,” says he, “your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you”: and he is quite sure that “this hideous fatalism,” as he calls it, will never be accepted by people who care for Beauty, Truth, Love, Honour, etc., etc., because, by depriving these things of their divine origin and purpose, it deprives them of their value. If Life be a mere purposeless accident, the finest things in it must appear to everyone worthless. That is what Mr. Shaw thinks, and the sooner he knows that it is not so the better. Whatever he may feel, the people who really care for beauty do not care for it because it comes from God or leads to anything. They care for it in itself; what is more, that is how they care for all the fine things in life.

The advantage of being an aesthete is that one is able to appreciate the significance of all that

comes to one through the senses: one feels things as ends instead of worrying about them as means. And this intrinsic significance of external reality is so intensely moving and so various that it completely satisfies those who can apprehend it. Mr. Shaw may be right and the neo-Darwinians wrong; life may be Heaven-sent and Heaven-directed towards some inconceivably glorious future: but, whether this be so or not, always life will be worth living by those who find in it things which make them feel to the limit of their capacity. Whatever its origin, beauty exists and so does the sensibility which reacts to it. A rose is a development of a briar which is a development of God-knows-what—and, incidentally, it grows out of manure; its beauties of form and color and smell appeal to a sense in me which may have grown out of primal lusts and appetites; but when I contemplate a rose I am not enjoying a chapter of natural history and I am using my sense of beauty and not my palate. Odd as it must seem to Mr. Shaw, I at this moment, am enjoying a yellow rose, my contemporary; and though men of science assure me that both the rose and the I of this moment are the products of all preceding moments, our disgraceful past no more destroys my present pleasure than does my conviction that before long both the rose and I must perish.

Whatever is precious and beautiful in life is precious and beautiful irrespective of beginning and end. I have no patience with the snobbery that is forever deploring or denying our disreputable ancestry in a fortuitous concourse of atoms, or with the sentimentality that cannot do without a happy ending. Not long ago, one of that nasty brood of pseudo-scientists who nestle like woodlice in the decaying doctrine of Freud, produced a theory with an unprintable name from which it seemed to follow that our romantic and passionate feelings were merely developments of a disgusting habit which, if really common amongst German children, is probably the symptom of some mental disorder induced by under-feeding. Would you believe it, the sentimentalists who happened to come across this theory were up in arms against it, not on account of its manifest improbability, but because, if true, it would make nonsense of their emotions? As if every amorous experience, from the grandest passion to the flutteringest flirtation, were not a real and complete thing as distinct from its origins as a glass of champagne is distinct from the chalk hills of the Tardenois. Long

before the neo-Freudians came pestering us with their ill-founded generalisations, men of science had demonstrated the probability that all that is most rare and complex in our spiritual make-up can be traced back to the most elementary animal desires. What difference does that make? The pleasure I take in listening to the music of Mozart may, possibly, be derived from the anticipatory orgasms of a cave-dweller listening to the bird he hopes to catch and eat. Mozart is not a pigeon on that account, neither are my feelings esurient. The antecedents of Mozart's music and of my feelings have nothing to do with the present value of either. And though it should be proved up to the hilt that the world in which we live was created by a fluke and by a fluke will be destroyed, that would detract nothing from its aesthetic significance.

The great good fortune of aesthetes is their capacity for seeing things as ends whereby alone is one able to taste this significance. To Mr. Shaw their capacity for enjoying life seems childish, and aesthetes, I fancy, will accept the epithet as complimentary and not inexact. Certainly children have a direct sense of things; and that is why gutter-snipes playing on a dust-heap appear to people like Mr. Shaw unreasonably and irritatingly happy. Certainly about the happiness of those who appreciate the beauty, romance and fun of life there is a tipsy light-heartedness which reminds me of the irresponsible gaiety of schoolboys. These are merry because they have something to be merry about—the fullness of life and the glory thereof: whereas those unfortunate people who can never feel things in themselves but only can take an interest in their causes and effects are naturally worried, seeing that of ultimate causes and effects we can really know nothing at all. We can comprehend—embrace, that means—only the present; the rest is shadowy and unsure: wherefore, I am sorry to say, those who cannot live in the moment but must worry about the past and future are obliged to “make up”. My grandmother did it: she made up a nice old gentleman with a long white beard who caused all, directed all, and would in the end make us all happy. Mr. Shaw does not like him, and has made up instead a, to my taste, less attractive figure, called “The Life-Force”, of whom he knows precisely as much as old Mrs. Bell did of Jehovah. When Mr. Shaw's “grown-ups” are asked what they want, they reply, “Immortality”; and when Mr. Shaw, who has ruled out as “childish” Love and Art, is asked how they will spend their immortality, he replies “in thought”; and when we pull a wry face at the prospect of endless and unmitigated

cogitation, he sternly gives us to understand that we shall like it when we get there: my grandmother did the same when we, sceptical brats, protested that we should weary of playing on harps and casting our golden crowns upon the glassy sea.

It is only natural, I suppose, that those who cannot find happiness in the present because they want the power of appreciation should clamor for immortality,—need I say that it is not for personal immortality but for the immortality of the race, the endless continuity of life, that Mr. Shaw clamors? Yet it seems to me that even this betrays a lack of courage. If we can enjoy our individual lives, knowing them finite, surely it should not be impossible to face the fact of universal death. Men of science, whom of course Mr. Shaw cannot allow himself to trust, assure us that Life, as we understand it, can exist only in conditions which have not always existed and will not exist always; that Man is doomed as inevitably as Everyman. It may be so. Meanwhile I am finishing this article and I have finished Back to Methuselah. The sun is blazing into the square, but into my cool room it comes pleasantly filtered through blinds. It is lunch time; and after lunch I shall light a pipe and sit reading, not Mr. Shaw's admirable treatise, but the penultimate volume of Proust—an artist if ever there was one. I shall dine with a charming companion and go to the ballet where they give Petrousha, *Sacre du Printemps*, and *Carnaval*: Lopokova will dance. Later to a gay supper, with a dozen delightful people in a house full of beautiful objects: if Arthur Rubinstein is in good humor surely he will play the piano. And so home under stars, smoking a cheroot in the warm stillness of the sleeping streets and squares, sauntering up all the long loneliness of Piccadilly, and only at the beginning of ugly Shaftesbury Avenue picking up a “taxi-cab”. The fruit and flowers go rumbling into Covent Garden. It is dawn almost. “And tomorrow we die”? So be it.

CLIVE BELL.

### Code

If ever I sit quite still, quite still  
As if I were wax and dumb;  
Know I am calling with all my will  
And if you are wise, you'll come.

But if I should take one step your way  
And beckon with eyes or hand  
Neglect me still to my chosen day.  
Now *that* you may understand.

ANNA WICKHAM.