
Chapter VI

THE ARTIST, THE CENSOR, AND THE PUBLIC

THE LITERATURE of the aesthetes is rich in documents pleading for artistic freedom. In fact, René Wellek has stated that “much of what is considered ‘aestheticism’ in England is simply the defense of the artist against the arrogant moral pretensions of his critics, who forbade the treatment of whole areas of human experience and feelings.”¹

The aesthetes had a model for their declaration of freedom from moral censure in Gautier’s preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*; there Gautier had damned critics for judging literature by the standards of their wives and daughters, who, he notes, could not possibly be so innocent as the critics believe. Swinburne echoed this criticism in “Notes on Poems and Reviews” (1866), particularly objecting to the prudish demands on art imposed out of consideration for “children and girls,” saying that “it would seem indeed as though to publish a book were equivalent to thrusting it with violence into the hands of every mother and nurse in the kingdom as fit and necessary food for female infancy” (*Works*, 16: 363). Henry James in “The Art of Fiction” (1884) attacked the English novel for its diffidence and pointed out that “the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion.”² And George Moore carried the battle to the circulating library in *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals* (1885).

Shaw is in agreement on the question of the artist’s freedom to use forbidden subject matter, to explore new techniques, and to

shun prescribed morality. A remarkable number of Shaw's non-dramatic works deal with the question of artistic freedom—notably, *The Sanity of Art*; various articles for *The Saturday Review*, especially "A Purified Play" (16 February 1895), "The Late Censor" (2 March 1895), and "The Living Pictures" (6 April 1895); an article for the *North American Review*, "The Censorship of the Stage in England" (August, 1899); his statement to the Joint Select Committee on Censorship (1909), published as "The Rejected Statement" in the preface to *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet*; and a speech, "Censorship as a Police Duty" (8 June 1928). Though Shaw's special crusade is against the censorship of stage plays, he also wants ideological freedom for all the arts. The crusade arose partly out of personal anger, for three of his own plays were censored—*Mrs. Warren's Profession* (written 1893–94) for its subject matter; *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* (1909) for blasphemy; and *Press Cuttings* (1909) for personal satire in Balsquith and Mitchener.

But the crusade also arose out of a reaction to the abusive criticism directed not only at the aesthetes but at all artistic innovators, including Ibsen and Ibsenite dramatists. For example, in the first issue of *The Yellow Book* Arthur Waugh attacks both the aesthetes and the naturalists because neither was concerned with the inculcation of morality. He asks that frankness in art be restrained by "the final test of all art, the necessity of the moral idea," and he opposes the directions modern literature has taken. He especially objects to the new school of literature which introduces the "refinements of lust into the domestic chamber," even depicting childbirth and venereal disease,³ which Waugh apparently considers equally abhorrent subjects. Though he is referring specifically to women writers of realistic fiction, his objection also obviously extends to the Ibsen-inspired drama of the late nineteenth century. An 1895 attack by Harry Quilter on Wilde and the aesthetes also attacks naturalism (Arthur Morrison's *Tales of Mean Streets* is his primary target) and the entire "neurotic" school, with its "morbid," "erotic," "repellent," "enervating" subjects.⁴ In another attack on a neurotic and rebellious age, a critic for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* links the aesthete and the socialist, and the decadent and the anarchist, because they all hate

what is sacred to the majority and their attitudes originate in "exaggerated emotionalism." He finds comfort in the fact that most Englishmen are Philistines and will cling "to the old-fashioned ideas of social order and decency"; after calling for a boycott of "immoral" novels, he asks that the "much-abused but most necessary official, the Licensor of Plays, harden his heart and do his duty."⁵ It was such attacks on art that caused Shaw to declare himself "a specialist in immoral and heretical plays"; if it is Harry Quilter's and Arthur Waugh's morality which art is supposed to uphold, then art is not, Shaw insists, and must not be moral.

The Victorian moralist was particularly hostile to the fin-de-siècle aesthetes because, by declaring morality and art separate, the aesthetes challenged his power to criticize or condemn art. Both Swinburne's "Notes on Poems and Reviews" and James's "The Art of Fiction" rest on the assumptions that (1) art is by definition independent of morality; (2) chastity is not the same thing as prudery; and (3) art is not for children and thus should not be limited to what seems suitable to them. Moore introduces further grounds for objection to the moralist's intervention, arguing in *Literature at Nurse* that (1) the censorship is not consistent, for it has not succeeded in removing all smut from the bookshelves; (2) it is in human nature to like dirty stories, and suppression of them leads to greater, not to less, perversion; (3) the romantic novel is more seductive than the naturalistic novel.⁶ These arguments anticipate some of Shaw's objections to censorship: Shaw, too, cites evidence of immoral literature which has been passed by the censor, believes that repression causes perversion and obsession, and maintains that romantic (i.e., sentimental) art idolizes sensuousness.⁷

But Shaw does not base his plea for toleration on psychological and aesthetic grounds; he instead argues that, without artistic freedom, society will stagnate, that the artist must be allowed to undermine existing values before new ones can replace the outmoded ones. He urges this point at length in "The Rejected Statement" to the Joint Select Committee and repeats it often—in a note to *Androcles and the Lion*, where he parallels the Roman persecution of the Christians and all attempts to stifle iconoclasm

(p. 145) ; in the preface to *Saint Joan*, where he says that society requires "a large liberty to shock conventional people, and a well-informed sense of the value of originality, individuality, and eccentricity" (p. 40) ; and in the preface to *On the Rocks*, where Jesus tells Pilate that "without sedition and blasphemy the world would stand still and the Kingdom of God never be a stage nearer" (p. 183).

In a review of Charles E. D. Ward's *A Leader of Men*, a dramatization of the Parnell-Mrs. O'Shea affair, Shaw maintains that Ward was forced by his fear of the censor to abandon the tragic and moral possibilities of the theme. Shaw wanted Ward to dramatize the affair so as to illustrate the urgent need for changing disastrous marriage laws; instead, "the lady and her lover live happily ever after, the husband being slaughtered by Providence like a Chicago pig for their convenience" (*OTN*, 1: 39). Shaw here accuses the censor of discouraging realistic treatment of an important subject and therefore contributing to the prevalent wickedness of the stage; and he later accused him of trying to pervert *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* by insisting "that all the passages which implicated God in the history of Blanco Posnet must be omitted in representation. All the coarseness, the profligacy, the prostitution, the violence, the drinking-bar humor into which the light shines in the play are licensed, but the light itself is extinguished" (Preface, *Blanco Posnet*, p. 425).

In addition to the theoretical reasons for avoiding censorship, Shaw offers a number of practical objections: (1) no one can possibly read all the plays written in England; (2) even if he could, he could not see all the performances of each play, and the effect of lines can be altered by their delivery or the gestures accompanying them; (3) once a play is licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, a local constable is helpless in trying to stop an obscene performance because the play has been sanctioned by an officer of the king; and (4) big business, having invested money in it, will oppose its closing. Another practical objection is that the police cannot "do the work of the Pope," nor can the Lord Chamberlain.⁸ Shaw points out that "the Lord Chamberlain's reader is not selected by examination either in literature or morals," yet "he is the Tsar of the theatres" (*OTN*, 1: 48). For his efforts

in protecting the English from "their assumed love of filth," the censor receives the following epitaph from Shaw: "He was a walking compendium of vulgar insular prejudice, who, after wallowing all his life in the cheapest theatrical sentiment (he was a confirmed playgoer), had at last brought himself to a pitch of incompetence which, outside the circle of those unfortunate persons who have had to try and reason with him personally, can only be measured by reading his evidence before the Commission of 1892, and the various letters of his which are just now finding their way into print" (*OTN*, 1: 49). The censor simply forbids "everything that is not customary," and "nothing is customary except vulgarity."⁹ Consequently, good drama is retarded, and salacious plays are often given licenses.

Shaw offers two solutions to the problem of the production of offensive plays: boycott them, or issue local licenses to the theaters, so that the manager is obliged to keep an orderly house or be closed. The first idea is developed in Shaw's review of "The Living Pictures," an exhibition which brought the wrath of the National Vigilance Association and its secretary, William Alexander Coote, down on the Palace Theatre in 1895. Shaw finds nothing indecent in the "Living Pictures," but he does find something wrong with Coote's sensitivity to them. He explains that "a certain number of people are morbidly sensitive to sexual impressions, and quite insensible to artistic ones"; because these people are abnormally sensitive to the sight of the human body, life offers to them constant temptations to sin. The only solution is not to close the Palace Theatre but to keep such people away from it (*OTN*, 1: 80-86). The other solution to the problem of offensive drama prevents the theater from becoming a bawdy-house by local control of the theater. Because to Shaw the theater is the church, he objects to lawless or obscene behavior in it. He agrees with Coote's demand "that the community suppress indecent exhibitions," but he deplores the "attempt to make nudity or semi-nudity the criterion of indecency"—a point recalling Swinburne's distinction between chastity and prudery. Shaw is very careful to distinguish between law, which must be enforced, and opinion, which must not be forced on others.

The numerous pleas for artistic freedom from Shaw and the

aesthetes suggests the extent of public hostility toward their art. The major reason for this hostility was the increasing distance between the masses and the artist. Morris had found a "sad truth" in the fact that the public knows nothing of art, "that there is no popular art to-day, no art which represents the feelings and aspirations of the people at large."¹⁰ But, whereas Morris hoped to make art a part of everyone's daily life, the fin-de-siècle aesthetes insisted that art has no place in most men's lives. Ruskin and Morris had hated bourgeois commercialism and the degradation of labor; but the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, influenced by the French decadence, hated the vulgar masses of mankind and wished to withdraw from an ugly, materialistic world.

Finally, imitating Whistler's and Pater's aloofness from an aesthetically ignorant public, some fin-de-siècle aesthetes argued that the barrier between the artist and the public was essential to art. George Moore asserted flatly that art which becomes popular is doomed: "Think of the fate of an author who puts forward a new idea tomorrow in a book, in a play, in a poem. The new idea is seized upon, it becomes common property, it is dragged through newspaper articles, magazine articles, through books, it is repeated in clubs, drawing rooms; it is bandied about the corners of streets; in a week it is wearisome, in a month it is an abomination."¹¹ And Symons declared that respectability and popularity ruined Millais, who "deliberately abandoned a career which, with labour, might have made him the greatest painter of his age, in order to become, with ease, the richest and most popular."¹²

Shaw, of course, indicts conventional morality and middle-class respectability as decisively as Moore, Symons, or Beardsley did. His early work, Shaw says, shows "the revolt of the Life Force against ready-made morality in the nineteenth century" (Preface, *IK*, p. xix), and his subsequent art fulfills the same aim of exposing and condemning moral pretensions.¹³ Shaw also distrusts the great mass of men, who, in his opinion, have no taste for art and no talent for government. Furthermore, like the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, he considers the genius, including the artist-genius, different in kind from other men; the genius feels more and understands more than the ordinary man. He makes his own laws and behaves according to his own code.

But Shaw and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes react differently to the unsympathetic and aesthetically ignorant public. The aesthetes typically withdrew from public life and in their lives and their art expressed indifference to bourgeois values; as Shaw told Stephen Winsten, "They were afraid of ugliness and they turned to a visionary world where nothing was ugly."¹⁴ On the other hand, Shaw wanted a close rapport between artist and audience, for how else can art alter manners and morals? Whereas Symons and Moore believed that popularity ruins a work of art, Shaw welcomed popularity for his plays, knowing that a preacher has to have a congregation if his sermon is to take effect.

However, when Shaw set about educating the public to his point of view, it was not at the expense of catering to the public demand for entertainment. He insisted that drama exists not to please the public but to edify it. "Even if the public really knew what it likes and what it dislikes—a consummation of wisdom which it is as far from as any child—the true master-dramatist would still give it, not what it likes, but what is good for it" (*OTN*, 1: 267–68). Shaw followed this principle in writing his plays in his own manner and with his own message, in spite of complaints from critics about his dramatic form and radical opinions. Furthermore, he was convinced that even great artists had failed when they refused to follow this principle. He calls Shakespeare's "pot boilers" (*As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*) a result of the public preference for his "splendid commonplaces" (*A Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*) over his original drama (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*).¹⁵ And he calls the "happy" ending to *Great Expectations* Dicken's violation of the Cromwellian and Shavian rule of "not what they want, but what is good for them" (*OTN*, 1: 94). Shaw thus shares Pater's or James's or Symons's aristocratic hauteur toward the artistically and morally inadequate public, but he prefers reform of the public to withdrawal from it.

Shocking the public is one of the techniques which Shaw found most effective in awakening it. In "Shocking as a Fine Art" Holbrook Jackson divides devotees of the art into two types—individual (Wilde, Beardsley, Symons, Beerbohm) and social (Shaw, Grant Allen); he says that both types arose from "the same demand

for more freedom, more experience, more sensation, more life.”¹⁶ Again, the difference between Shaw and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes in the art of shocking was the crucial one: the aesthetes practiced the art for its own sake; Shaw used it for therapeutic purposes. He says, “It is necessary to shock people violently to make them think seriously about religion.”¹⁷ He did not have to look far for “shocking” material; it was visible all around him. Because of his abnormally “normal” vision, Shaw states, “All I had to do was to open my normal eyes, and with my utmost literary skill put the case exactly as it struck me, or describe the thing exactly as I saw it, to be applauded as the most humorously extravagant paradoxer in London” (Preface, *Plays Unpleasant*, p. vii). As society defines morality, Shaw was a deviate; as Shaw defines it, almost everybody else is.

In summary, we can see points of agreement between Shaw and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes in their antibourgeois and antidemocratic prejudices and in their desire to shock the public. However, unlike the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, Shaw did not withdraw from the people, but sought to effect through his “normal” art a change in society and, ultimately, a change in the nature of humankind. Common enemies such as Harry Quilter, Arthur Waugh, and other upholders of Victorian morality led him and the aesthetes to similar demands for artistic freedom. Shaw’s demands arose from a conviction that, if man is to progress, he must have freedom to reject old systems and formulate new ones. Whereas the aesthetes were objecting to restrictive theories and rules in art and were denying that morality was an issue, Shaw was objecting to labelling art “immoral” and insisting that, if the artist is to express an ever-changing religion, he must be free to offend the public and its censor.