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Shaw and Rousseau: No Paradox

by Jacques Barzun[1]

In an essay written twelve years ago and twice reprinted since, I compared Shaw to Rousseau, having in mind their characters, convictions, and influence. To this comparison, which was fully meant though casually introduced, no one objected until Mr. Archibald Henderson, in reviewing *Shaw: A Critical Survey* (in the May 1954 *Shaw Bulletin*), pounced on the remark as a flagrant howler or paradox marring an otherwise adorable piece. What did I mean by it? Everybody knows that it's the other Frenchman, Voltaire, that Shaw ought to be compared with. Mr. Henderson concluded that I was a careless critic—no critic at all—irritating, anyhow—why didn't I explain myself when I thus flouted a belief universally held?

Not even Mr. Henderson's eminence in the Shavian world and the gratitude we all owe him for his single-minded curiosity and energy would induce me to explain what I consider an obvious point which he has obvious means of verifying. He doubtless remembers the incident of Shaw's review of the Cecil Chesterton-Hilaire Belloc volume on *The Servile State*. Shaw said it was Spencer's thesis about freedom and government all over again. "You can't have read our book!" cried Chesterbelloc. "You are wrong," replied Shaw with the smile of heroic truthfulness, "It's Herbert Spencer I haven't read!" Now I am sure Mr. Henderson has read Shaw and can apply the moral of the anecdote.

But the Editor of the *Shaw Bulletin*, in drawing my attention last summer to Mr. Henderson's strictures, assured me that he and several other readers had been puzzled by my "startling comparison"; and since presumably they are busy people who are not obliged, like a professional critic, to be omnivorous and omniscient, I willingly set down a few of the reasons why Rousseau and Shaw form a parallel.

No one will suppose that such a parallel implies an identity of lives or even the similarity of views found among disciples and descendants. Rousseau will not turn out in my account to have been a prophet of Fabian socialism, any more than in the comparison of Shaw to Voltaire it turns out that Shaw lived as resident philosopher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm the Second. What an historical comparison affords is a kind of proportion among circumstances necessarily different. In the

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example under review it will be useful to take the Shaw-Voltaire comparison as standard. It is accepted, indeed canonized by Mr. Henderson's recent thunderbolt against my heresy, and I contend that if this standard parallel is instructive, my heretical one is even more so.

The first and fundamental likeness between Rousseau and Shaw is that both men used their literary talents to set forth complex and positive systems of social reform based on a religious view of life. They wanted society and man made new by a new system embodying a new vision. Neither advocated instant revolution or a bloodbath at anytime, but both wanted the present society wholly uprooted in favor of a better one based on the utmost equality practicable. Both men devoted their lives to devising and picturing for their contemporaries the beliefs, manners, and management of public and private life in the society they desired.

If we contrast this with Voltaire's outlook and performance we readily see where the closer kinship lies. Voltaire was a sharp critic of the established order, tireless and courageous in the defense of intellectual and civil rights. But he was on the whole pleased with his age and its tastes. Had the government under which he lived been more businesslike, less church-ridden, better able to maintain prosperity, he would have been content to perpetuate all distinctions of class and income for the benefit of the enlightened minority which he deemed alone capable of civilization. The last thing he wanted was a resurgence of faith, however defined. And except for occasional forays into social economics (*e.g., The Man with Forty Shillings*) his writings ridiculed abuses rather than laid down the axioms of radical change.

Like Shaw, on the contrary, Rousseau progressed from a moral suspicion that all was not well with the status quo to a complete undermining of the so-called foundations of society. Shaw tells us that Proudhon's definition, "Property is theft," is the only perfect truism on the subject. But before Proudhon, Rousseau had made the same discovery and written his *Essay on Inequality* around it. Both Shaw and Rousseau see in Equality the only tolerable principle because it puts an end to the conflicts of vanity and greed and permits the development of the individual powers.

In the *Social Contract* (which must be read and not summed up in one sentence misquoted from near the beginning), Rousseau advances part way toward the system which would enshrine equality—part way because the book is uncompleted and must be supplemented with three other works, two of which consist of practical advice to existing governments. What bears on our present purpose is that, like Shaw, Rousseau seeks to combine democratic rule with innate governmental talent (in Rousseau the "lawgiver"; in Shaw the products of anthropometric examination) and to reconcile individual freedom with social control.

At the end of the *Social Contract*, we find that men must be "forced to be free" (Everyman shuns freedom, says Shaw, because it entails responsibility), and they are compelled at least to respect the state religion. For these reasons, again like Shaw, Rousseau has been called a theorist of totalitarianism who did not believe his own earlier praise of freedom. The difficulty cannot be discussed here. What is clear is

that Shaw is no less convinced than Rousseau that government is impossible without a religion to insure unity of action through common beliefs about morality and the goal of life. This religion is non-theological, or at any rate non-metaphysical. It springs from the religious sentiment which seeks and recognizes the divine wherever it appears in man and nature. Religion is therefore compatible with the march of science, and what it requires in place of ritual is the devotion of self to other than self-centered ends; the practice, that is, of intelligent altruism. The ground of this conduct is the belief that God (in Shaw, the Life Force) pervades our being and cannot work out His purpose except through us. Truth, Goodness, Beauty are our doing—hence our duty. In a very exact sense, Rousseau and Shaw are pragmatists. (Doubters will kindly read William James before raising their voices in protest.)

We are by this time pretty far from Voltaire's bland Deism, verbally and morally conventional:

> **Logomachos.** The trouble one has with these blockheads! Let us go one step at a time. What is God?
> **Dondinac.** My sovereign, my judge, my father.
> **Logomachos.** That isn't what I'm asking you. What is His Nature?
> **Dondinac.** To be powerful and good.
> **Logomachos.** But is He corporeal or spiritual?
> **Dondinac.** How should I know? . . . Will it help me to be a better husband, father, master, citizen?[2]

No, Voltaire was not looking to the New Man; he had, it is well-known, no special views on education, whereas in the domain of child-rearing Rousseau effected the greatest reform of modern times by substituting the notion of natural development for that of discipline—a discipline designed to enforce adult manners and punish the outcropping of original sin. On this point Shaw is Rousseau's follower, like the rest of the civilized world. His *Sham Education* is a small collection of pieces, but as proof we need hardly more than the maxim: "The vilest abortionist is he who attempts to mould a child's character," together with the repeated remark that the child and the philosopher should not occupy the same room, because children have rights and the philosopher needs quiet.

So much for the common purposes and propositions uniting our two revolutionists on God, man, and society. The likeness thus far would be enough to warrant the "startling comparison" I made in my essay. But I had been struck long before by a more intimate resemblance. What is startling in it for the conventional critic is that Shaw, the ultra modern and outwardly ruthless intellectual, should be linked with Rousseau, whom the critic confidently regards as a sentimental primitivist. Indeed, all that the conventional critic can tell you about Rousseau is "Back to Nature" (a slogan not found in Rousseau's work) and "Noble savage," a phrase out of Dryden, an English poet who died twelve years before Rousseau was born.

The use of Nature as a criterion for judging institutions is of course

[2]From **The Philosophical Dictionary** (1764) art. God.

no monopoly of Rousseau's. It is a tradition of western thought, and as such it may be said to disclose in its adherents a type of mind, if not a temperament. Shaw and Rousseau are of that type; only, the signs of it in Shaw are by the conventional critic called puritanism. Let us call it in both Shaw and Rousseau: love of simplicity. This love is a passion which explains much of their work, and which turns many minds against them.

For Shaw's advocacy of equal incomes appalls not only those who desire distinctions and luxury and power, but also the more modest who abhor drabness and frugality in daily life: they see themselves having to wear Shaw's Norfolk jacket and woolen stockings. They remember his saying that long after he was well-to-do he could walk down Bond Street without so much as a wish to buy anything. They conjure up the arduous life he led, working for long hours at a pace which—he said it himself—would cause a rebellion among navvies. Shaw's "cultivated" critics would sum up his conception of life by saying: "No joy, no glamour, the gospel of work." This austerity is enough to make them deny him the title of artist; and since he is no Philistine, he must be a Puritan.

Similarly, Rousseau alienated the whole clan of Encyclopedists by selling his fine linen shirts. The act symbolized his refusal to be a parasite, even if this meant living meanly, copying music for hire, and sending his children to the foundling asylum. Thereafter, Rousseau's criticism of manners is a relentless exposure of the aristocratic elegancies that Voltaire so much enjoyed, coupled with a rationale of what became everybody's domestic behavior, the bourgeois simplicity and sanity to which we owe such institutions as living by families without hangers-on, wearing loose clothes and our own hair, taking vacations in the country, and valuing physical sports above gaming, drinking, and philandering.

For further details, see *The New Heloise*. You will find there that Rousseau's recommendations differ from Shaw's vegetarianism, anti-alcoholism, and skepticism about drugs, whether dispensed by doctors or by hostesses. But the impulse and motive are the same. Both Rousseau and Shaw prize self-reliance with some fierceness and want to see it in others as in themselves. Whether this impatience has to do with their both having had ineffectual fathers and a laborious start in life, I leave to others to judge. But clearly it offends their esthetic as well as their moral sense to observe man dependent, a slave to luxury, entertainment, sensuality, or even to so much as the need for afternoon tea.

And yet these two are also great defenders of the passions. Their heroes in history are the men of genius and daring, whose actions they explain as the superior use of reason serving the ends of passionate life. The position is complex and cannot be restated here. Its unfamiliarity even after each of these master expositors has set it forth can be measured by the fact that both have been blamed for dangerous irrationalism (akin to carrying firecrackers carelessly into a drawing room) while they were simultaneously ridiculed for bloodless intellectualism (Shaw) and mindless sentimentality (Rousseau). The muddle here is in the critics' heads.

It is worth noting that in one of his relatively few references to Rousseau, Shaw expresses agreement with him on the character of sexual experience, thereby giving a novel but just interpretation of an important point in the *Confessions*. But there are at least two other large subjects on which our heavenly twins concur. One of these is music, about which Rousseau is almost as amusing and certainly as vigorous and well-informed as Shaw. In this department I again leave the candid explorer to discover how far each writer understood the music drama they both desiderated, the one before the fact, the other after. I shall, however, save the reader the trouble of looking through Voltaire's complete works for any remarks comparable in bulk or depth on the musical art: they are not to be found, and it appears likely that the man who said that the Opera was chiefly sought as a social rendezvous was as near tone deaf as makes no difference.

The other art about which we find Shaw and Rousseau in fundamental agreement is—but I must in charity warn Mr. Henderson that before reading on he should ask B. B. to stimulate the phagocytes—that other art is: the theatre. Accustomed as the conventional critic is to draw inferences without regard to what his author plainly says, he is probably shocked by the reminder that Shaw was no blithe playgoer and lover of footlights. "Why, he wrote forty plays and reviewed a thousand!" Yes, but Shaw was a thinker, not a fan or a subscriber. He regarded the theatre as a dangerous institution and the art of acting as perpetually verging on immorality, blasphemy, and black magic. This, which he was quite logical in believing, he repeatedly wrote. It happens also to be what Rousseau said in his *Lettre a D'Alembert sur les Spectacles*. On this subject, both Shaw and Rousseau follow Plato. The immoral, blasphemous thing about acting consists in giving up one's character and feelings to simulate others that are moreover false; and the dangerous thing about plays is that they are irresistibly attractive and influential. The spectators will also simulate the feelings and actions presented to them, and through their altered conduct life will be marked by the irresponsible poet's touch.

Rousseau and Shaw were accordingly worried about the future of a society in which the stage fables were frivolous or sinister. And Shaw's own work for the stage had to be moral and educational and intellectual to an unheard of degree—sermons, as his opponents said, forgetting that he had said it first.

This use of drama to propagate ideas reminds us of Voltaire, despite his mundane view of the stage and his anger against Rousseau for taking fables so seriously. None the less, as the leading playwright of his age, and an intellectual one at that, Voltaire in this regard displaces Rousseau as Shaw's counterpart in the eighteenth century. That fact and the popularity that both dramatists won by scattering the small change of their wit, and also their pamphleteering, prompt and courageous, in defense of the persecuted, fully justify the standard comparison between Voltaire and Shaw. It stands on its three feet like the tripod of fame itself; yet it should not obscure the broader comparison between Shaw and Rousseau, with which I have not quite done.

For it would be a mistake to stop at the bare writing of intellectual plays without further consideration of Shaw and Rousseau as artists.

Unlike Voltaire, who was a perfecter, they were remolders of their native idiom; and, working from opposite starting points, they produced results occasionally similar. Rousseau renovated French prose by fashioning, in place of Voltaire's sprightly sentences, longer, warmer, more complex and evocative utterances. Rousseau can reason as closely as Voltaire, but he can also make us see. The set pieces of rhetoric here and there in his works are not his characteristic tone and should not deceive us, any more than Voltaire's reputation as a wit should make us think that Rousseau had none. He has on the contrary an excellent vein of satire and another of humor, sometimes hidden under irony but more often simply comic—as in his description of the Paris Opera (1760),[3] which for pace and exaggeration one might think taken from *Music in London.*

Having brought my tandem pair, after much serious doctrine, to consort with the comic spirit, I may be allowed to clinch their resemblance by showing them in a final, rather comic pose familiar to them both: I mean as faddists. The word and the fact, I hasten to say, do not establish our superiority; it merely adds a feature to theirs. Their vision, their courage, their thoroughness made them adopt or promote anti-conventional ways which, for all they knew, belonged with the rest to the new social order. Rousseau's new musical notation was as hopeful as Shaw's reformed alphabet. But when thinking of the comedy of fads, we may prefer to call up before the mind's eye the double image of Shaw walking down the Strand in a silvery woolen garment made by Dr. Jaeger and of Rousseau in his "Armenian" dress and hat, chosen for the same sensible reason—warmth and free motion outside the conventional bands and ties and buckles worn in Voltaire's day or ours.

I have done with the "startling comparison." But a postscriptal thought occurs to me, which I note down in self-defense: let no one infer that because I have made much of Rousseau and set limits to Voltaire's claims *in this special connection,* I am therefore Voltaire's depreciator. I am much too interested in variety, past and present, to depreciate anything so good as Voltaire. Ultimate preferences need not always be thrust on one's readers, and when not stated are seldom safely inferred from comments or comparisons having a critical or defining purpose. Taking these expressed judgments for what they are is in fact part of the same common sense as discarding the conventional notions which make the truth appear startling.

[3]Translated in my **Pleasures of Music** (New York, 1951), pp. 201-3.