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Bernard Shaw and “Brave New World”

D. C. Coleman¹

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is a satirical attack on the Utopia of social reformers in which misery and instability have been abolished by a supreme, benevolent state, at the expense of individual freedom of action and thought. Gilbert Highet, commenting hyperbolically in *The Anatomy of Satire* on the contemporary relevance of the novel, estimates that “many an idealistic ‘social engineer’ of the type of Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, after imbibing his glass of warm milk and ingesting his energy tablets, used to go to bed and dream about a similar future world.”² Huxley clearly identifies some of the “social engineers” whose influence he considered most pernicious, in the names of some of the characters. Some, like Lenina, Bernard Marx, Sarojini Engels and Herbert Bakunin, recall the political reformers: others, like Ford, the deity of *Brave New World*, George Edzel, and Joanna Diesel, the inventors and industrialists whose contributions to progress and the pursuit of happiness have added to the mechanisation and standardisation of human life.

Bernard Shaw is singled out for attack in the novel as both an active promoter and a literary prophet of the Brave New World. The principle of sleep-teaching or hypnopaedia, a form of brainwashing in the cradle, is first discovered when one Reuben Rabinovitch memorises in his sleep “a long lecture by that curious old writer . . . George Bernard Shaw who was speaking, according to a well-authenticated tradition, about his own genius.”³ Shaw's part in the discovery of hypnopaedia is a small and unwitting one: but Huxley's implication is clearly that Shaw's political views are part of the foundations of this Brave New World, and that Shaw himself has become part of its folk-lore.

At this point too, Huxley assesses Shaw's literary contribution to the Utopia. In *Brave New World*, Shakespeare, The Bible, and almost all forms of imaginative and philosophical literature have been suppressed by the state. As Mustapha Mond puts it: “We've sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organ instead.”⁴ The state has attached its *imprimatur* to some works, however, and Shaw

¹ Mr. Coleman is working on a graduate degree at Oxford.

² Princeton, 1962, p. 174.

³ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London, 1932) p. 26-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

is “one of the very few whose works have been permitted to come down to us.”⁵ The publication of Shaw in a state where the high art has been sacrificed is scarcely complimentary to the “curious old writer.”

The attack on Shaw is taken up later in the novel when a Dr. Shaw is introduced to advocate state euthanasia for Linda by an overdose of *soma* tablets: “One day the respiratory centre will be paralysed. No more breathing. Finished. And a good thing too.”⁶ The Doctor is undoubtedly intended to be a satirical portrait of the Shaw who advocated state executions in *Back to Methuselah* — “We kill evil children here”⁷ — and was sufficiently undeterred by Huxley to advance it later in the Preface to *On the Rocks*, in *Farfetched Fables* and elsewhere. Dr. Shaw’s last remark seems heavily ironic: “I’m very glad to have had this opportunity to see an example of senility in a human being.”⁸ Senility has been abolished in the Brave New World as an unnecessary misery, and on the literal level there is nothing surprising about Dr. Shaw’s never encountering it. If Dr. Shaw is a Brave New World doctor satirically derived from Bernard Shaw, however, the remark is an ironic comment on the Ancients of the last part of *Back to Methuselah*, “As Far as Thought Can Reach”; in the Shavian Utopia, too, senility in the sense of infirmity has been abolished, and both Utopias therefore have a common salient feature, with a Shaw associated with both. In this way, Huxley points to what he believes is the kinship between Shaw’s Utopia and the Brave New World; both aim at the destruction of man as a human being, and seek to replace him with a monster hatched and conditioned by machine, indoctrinated in the cradle, and without any inclination to be anything other than a cog in the machine of the state.

Yet it must be conceded that the Brave New World itself might almost have evolved from hints in the “Don Juan in Hell” sequence of *Man and Superman*.⁹ The religion of Hell, presided over by a genial Devil, is dedicated to the worship of Love and Beauty; its devotees, like Huxley’s characters no longer subject to age and physical decay, have attained to the changelessness of the figure on Keats’ Grecian Urn: “For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair”. Hell is as devoid of great artists and philosophers as Huxley’s world; Mozart, Rembrandt, and Nietzsche, for example; have all left it for heaven, where they have

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷ Shaw, *Back to Methuselah* (London, 1930) p. 168.

⁸ Huxley, p. 183.

⁹ I am indebted for this suggestion to Professor Stanley Weintraub.

taken their places as “masters of reality”. The outstanding quality of both Hell and Huxley’s world, however, is boredom: in Hell, “There are no social questions . . . no political questions, no religious questions, best of all, perhaps, no sanitary questions. Here you call your appearance beauty, your emotions love, your sentiments heroism, your aspirations virtue, just as you did on earth; but here there are no hard facts to contradict you, no ironic contrast of your needs with your pretensions, no human comedy, nothing but a perpetual romance, a universal melodrama.”¹⁰ In Huxley’s world too, monotony has replaced variety and the human comedy; and there are no social, political, or religious questions, because they have all been solved by the government.

Don Juan, himself a “master of reality,” and thus, like Huxley’s John the Savage, claiming the right to be unhappy, sees the world in danger of becoming uniform through opposing “the device of sterility”, or birth control, to the Force of Life: “Is it not the inevitable end of it all that the human will shall say to the human brain: Invent me a means by which I can have love, beauty, romance, emotion, passion, without their wretched penalties, their expenses, their worries, their trials, their illnesses and agonies and risks of death, their retinue of servants and nurses and doctors and schoolmasters.”¹¹ All this is realized in the Devil’s realm, and in the Brave New World too. In 1903, however, Shaw was an optimist; though man might hanker after the monotonous perfection already realised in Hell, Don Juan is confident that before “the device of sterility” is restored to in earnest, “the reaction will begin. The great central purpose of breeding the race: ay, breeding it to heights now deemed superhuman:”¹² people will become conscious of the possibility of the eugenic production of the Superman, and in abandoning “the device of sterility” will also abandon its logical consequence, Hell or the Brave New World.

Huxley’s attack on Shaw in *Brave New World* must be seen as an attack on the later pessimistic Shaw whose faith in eugenics and even in mankind had become badly shaken long before 1932; in particular, it is against his advocacy of policies that Huxley felt must lead to the intolerable uniformity of the Brave New World, into which, ironically, are incorporated some of the features of the Shavian Hell.

¹⁰ Shaw, *Man and Superman* (London, 1930) pp. 102-103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 123.