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# Shavian Self-Fashioning: Authorized Biography and Shaw's Superman

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Shavian Self-Fashioning: Authorized Biography and Shaw's Superman

Cort H. Kirksey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Shavian Self-Fashioning: Authorized Biography and Shaw's Superman

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George Bernard Shaw exercised an above-average level of authorial control, which even extended to his relationship with his biographers. Shaw crafts a persona, with the help of his “authorized” biographer Archibald Henderson, which displays a process of evolutionary development and progress along the lines of the Shavian philosophy of the Life Force and the Superman. In essence, Shaw is casting himself as a prototype for the Superman through the autobiographical manipulation of his biographers and aesthetic modes of self-fashioning.

Keywords: Shaw, Autobiography, biography, self-fashioning, Superman, Life Force

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The problem for the biographer [of Shaw] was that he had been saddled, both for better and for worse, with the autobiographer as collaborator. (Weintraub xv)

People keep asking me why I do not write my own biography. I reply that I am not at all interesting biographically. . . . (qtd. in Weintraub 1)

### Introduction

In contrast to Oscar Wilde's phrase, "I live in fear of not being misunderstood," there is evidence that George Bernard Shaw felt exactly the opposite. In fact, Shaw would be a medalist in a contest among those authors concerned with being read the right way. His feelings were probably closer to Nietzsche's when the latter wrote in his preface to *Ecce Homo*, "*Listen! for I am such and such a person. For Heaven's sake do not confound me with anyone else*" (Nietzsche 1). Few playwrights have prefaces as long or longer than their plays, very few have stage directions and scene descriptions that go on for pages, not a great many have tried to sell their plays as books the same way a novelist would, and most authors do not have the kind of relationship with their biographers that would allow them to significantly rewrite portions of their own biography without question or re-revision by the biographer. Shaw sometimes handpicked actresses and actors to star in his plays and often visited the theatre during rehearsal, even frequently trying to direct the actors himself. Everything that Shaw ever produced was invested with well-above-average authorial control.

Through these various explanatory media, Shaw attempts to control the interpretation and understanding of the various philosophies and doctrines he espoused at any given moment. An additional difficulty to this guarding of his public identity was the fact that Shaw's ideas were always a work in progress, though this is certainly not a phenomenon unique to himself. James Olney writes, "phenomenologists and existentialists have joined hands with depth psychologists

in stressing an idea of a self that defines itself from moment to moment amid the buzz and confusion of the external world and as a security against that outside whirl” (23-24). Shaw, it could be argued, is always writing and revising in such autobiographical modes, defending the constructed “self” against the misinterpretation of others, who have the audacity to take their own part in the meaning-making of Shaw’s textual identity. Throughout his long career Shaw’s textual self remains inaccessible and, due to never-ending revisions and repeated self-re-interpretation, resists even the illusion of graspability, to an even greater degree than most authors.

At least by 1903, and perhaps sooner, Shaw had a distinct reason for the consistent re-definition of everything Shavian. In 1903 he wrote *Man and Superman*, constructing and focusing his philosophy of the Life Force and the Superman, which philosophy requires the ability to streamline and sometimes abandon philosophies and mores that may have been useful at one time, but become obsolete in the progression towards a higher form of life. *Man and Superman* is primarily concerned with, though couched in the amusing text of a play, the creative evolution of mankind which is headed toward the next step in its progress, namely, the Superman. Archibald Henderson writes (with Shaw’s apparent approbation), “Evolution, or the Life Force, may very well not stop at Man: it may go on to the Superman, the Super-Superman, the Angel, the Archangel, and finally omnipotent God” (581). Shaw himself writes, in a letter to Count Leo Tolstoy, “To me God does not yet exist; but there is a creative force [the Life Force] constantly struggling to evolve an executive organ of godlike knowledge and power: that is, to achieve omnipotence and omniscience; and every man and woman born is a fresh attempt to achieve this object” (qtd. in Henderson 589). If nothing else, Shaw has to be, by virtue of being born, an attempt of the Life Force at creating the Superman, making him a prototype for the

Superman. I use the word “prototype” here to mean the very best and latest model in the progression towards the end-product—a working model that is functional but does not satisfy the creator. It is important to note that Shaw appears to take the work of this “creative force” more seriously than most. However, Shaw clearly does not cast himself as the Superman; there is no indication in Shaw’s work that the Superman has arrived. Rather, a play like *Man and Superman* addresses current man heading in the direction of the superman. For Shaw, this cannot be a blind endeavor, and this potential progress will not happen on its own. Whereas natural selection, in Darwinian evolution, might be seen as a totally subconscious work of nature, Shaw’s creative evolution requires a powerful will, or as Archibald Henderson puts it, we need to be open to constant revision: “Shaw has repeatedly warned us that we shall be scrapped for some new attempt if we persist in our present inadequacy” (*Man of the Century* 581). Shaw refused to settle for anything that was no longer useful, no matter how stringently his past textual selves may have championed it. Shaw crafts his persona, with the help of Archibald Henderson, to appear in the process of evolutionary development and progress along the lines of the Shavian philosophy of the Life Force and the Superman. Shaw casts himself as a prototype for the Superman through the autobiographical manipulation of his biographer and aesthetic modes of self-fashioning.

### Struggle with Autobiography

One of the motivations for writing an autobiography is to achieve some sort of an immortal endurance and to singularize your “self.” Putting self-writing in the form of a book creates a *doppelganger* to stand in for the author who can never actually be present for the reader, nor the writer for that matter (Sturrock 25). Shaw’s presence is stronger in his published works, especially in his plays, than it is for most authors. An audience might be able to see a



Shaw play and have wildly varying readings of which opinions presented in it were the author's, but dramatically disparate readings become much more difficult if you read the published versions from cover to cover. Shaw's prefaces are often longer than the plays themselves and they extensively contextualize the situations in which they were written, laying out the competing philosophies and social problems to which the play is responding. His prefaces make it abundantly clear where the author stands in relation to the whole. It seems a little strange, then, that an author so completely bent on clarifying his ideas would not write an actual autobiography. John Sturrock, an autobiographical theorist, writes about the usual reason for the writing of a book: "The autobiographer's wish is to single himself out by the writing of a book, to construct in prose an attractive identity for himself. . . . The autobiographer, in quest of a shelf life, memorialized himself in the form of a book" (25). Though the impulse described here seems consistent with Shaw's various explanations, instead of writing an autobiography in the form of a book, he wrote autobiographically in prefaces, letters, essays, various types of criticism, a few autobiographical sketches toward the end of his life, and even through a few of the characters of his plays. As Shaw told Arthur Bingham Walkley, "to propitiate you, let me explain myself. You will retort that I never do anything else: it is your favorite jibe at me that what I call drama is nothing but explanation" (*George Bernard Shaw's Plays* 68). Still, the explanation serves to clarify his "self," specifically so that contemporary society and posterity can get it right. It is fitting that Shaw's fragmented outpourings of directly autobiographical writings would be spread out over decades in so many textual places—fitting for a persona that was all about scope, wide reading, and endless talk. Consequently, in 1969 (nearly twenty years after Shaw's death), Stanley Weintraub compiled many of Shaw's autobiographical writings from various sources, and called it *Shaw: An Autobiography*. It is over 300 pages long.

One of the reasons that Shaw chose specifically not to write an “official” autobiography may have been to have greater custody over an evolving and often misunderstood self-image. Sturrock writes, “The autobiographer . . . is, by virtue of his calling, a conspiracy theorist, and it matters not whether the machinations of which he sees himself as the center be those of fate and favorable to him, as with Nietzsche, or those of society and unfavorable, as with Rousseau, whose conviction of his own uniqueness is underwritten by his anxiety to rescue his self-image from the custody of others” (27). If the need is to control the persona, would it not be logical to write the autobiography as a definitive proclamation of self that would resist the claims of others? That would certainly be the aim, but having something so seemingly definitive can actually make the problems of misinterpretation worse. The post-structuralists and others have made clear that language is slippery enough to make understanding of authorial intent impossible. There will always be “misunderstanding,” to the point that every reading is really a misreading. Most of Shaw’s contemporary readers, however, were likely thinking in a more Enlightenment-based way, where an autobiography contained the Truth about an author. Having one volume, or even many volumes, in one autobiography is severely limiting as it creates a stronger illusion that the life has been effectively embodied in that one work. Shaw may have feared that some of his readers would think that they could grasp the real Shaw, trapped as he would be in between the covers of the book. Having autobiographical statements spread out as Shaw’s were, they more effectively eluded the grasping readers and gave him more latitude in re-explaining himself later. By not writing an autobiography, Shaw deferred closure, creating, in effect, a self/life that is an open text and a protean form. Someone seeking the Superman would have to endure, continue to change, and push to the very end.

In characteristic Shavian fashion, however, he does offer reasons for not writing a proper autobiography, though they certainly cannot be trusted to be complete answers to the question. After writing a few of his self-sketches Shaw writes, “The autobiographer is the dog returning to his vomit” (qtd. in Weintraub vii). Surely, in this metaphor there is the sense that writing autobiographical material is in some way disgusting, self-serving, and that it deals with material that only the creator would comfortably consume. This somewhat self-effacing metaphor also suggests a compulsion on the part of the autobiographer, who should be rebuffed by his disgust, but is compelled to revisit that which could be called his own. Shaw also told Frank Harris, a competing Shaw biographer, “I find I can’t go over my autobiographical stuff again, not only from lack of time, but from loathing” (qtd. in Weintraub vii). Shaw’s protests illustrating the revulsion he feels that he should have towards autobiography does not stop him from doing exactly what he is railing against. Despite what he tells Frank Harris, Shaw will go over the “autobiographical stuff” again and again till the end of his long life. In the preface to his self-sketches he goes as far as to say, “All autobiographies are lies” (qtd. in Weintraub vii). Shaw seems to anticipate the current notion that autobiography is not the Truth about an author, but a constructed fiction illuminating one’s own singularity and painting grand pictures of the self that are not strictly accurate. He continues with, “I do not mean unconscious, unintentional lies: I mean deliberate lies. No man is bad enough to tell the truth about himself during his lifetime, involving, as it must, the truth about his family and his friends and colleagues. And no man is good enough to tell the truth to posterity in a document which he suppresses until there is nobody left alive to contradict him” (qtd. in Weintraub vii). Though there is exaggeration in this statement, as in most Shavian statements, Shaw did outlive most of his contemporaries, living the better part of a century, but never came forth with a proper autobiography. He found his way

around this by writing a biography with the help of Archibald Henderson. Henderson offered yet another piece of information that may help explain Shaw's hesitancy to write an autobiography: "Mr. Shaw had an unconquerable aversion from the word 'official,' which now carries a sort of stigma, suggesting prepossession, slanting bias in favor of the biographee" (qtd. in Wadsworth 342). Though Shaw did finally choose Henderson as his "authorized" biographer, it appears that Shaw was greatly ambivalent about the power of a biography or autobiography to inspire readers, given its pitfalls of misinterpretation. At any rate, the choice to write the "official" statements through Henderson seems to have been an attempt to decrease subjectivity, at least from the point of view of the reader. To be sure, he was writing in a time period that prized objectivity greatly, though it may not have been as aware of its illusion as later "postmodern" periods would be.

In writing autobiographical sketches, prefaces, and so on, especially as he writes through other's voices (like Henderson's), Shaw plays multiple roles. These multiple roles increase the openness of his textual self, further deferring closure and expanding his persona. With the disparate and often contradictory statements about himself and his philosophies, in an almost uncountable number of places, it is clear that even the notion of an "ultimate Shaw" is not accessible. No one's true "self" is graspable, even if it does exist, as all human means of analysis, language or otherwise, are inadequate. Shaw takes this to an above-average level, however, by constructing, at times, a mysterious and almost metaphysical persona. He had a scientific rigor, yet he dreamed of fantastic possibilities in everything he did. He was a playwright, a music critic, a theatrical critic, a philosopher, a novelist, and a political activist involved in almost every major aspect of the life of his times. The roles he played were ever-expanding with every new subject of interest, every new hobby, and every new character that he

would write in his plays. As a man seeking to bring about the Superman he had to be, or appear to be, anything and everything. He would have been an “Everyman” if not for the iconoclastic aspect of his multiplicity. This complicated multiplicity is amplified by the fact that he makes hyperbolic and humorous claims, to the point where, like Oscar Wilde, it is so often difficult to know exactly when to take him at his word. Despite the multiple roles, many of which are paradoxical, Shaw’s machinations are more than just light-minded play. There is method behind the madness. Ever present is the tension between great levity and the grave seriousness that is at its heart.

An account given by Henderson of the writing of Shaw’s biography for the first time, in the Preface to *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*, illustrates the expansive way Shaw had of looking at things. This is also an example of the creative evolutionary impulse in Shaw, a lens through which he saw not only his own work, but projected onto others, including Henderson:

In characteristic style, Mr. Shaw once gave the following fantastic account of the evolution of the present work. A young American professor, Shaw explained, wished to write a book about him. Originally, he thought of beginning his task by writing an article for a daily newspaper. But so rapidly did the material grow that he soon saw the necessity of expanding the newspaper article into a long essay for a monthly review. When the essay was completed, in view of the mass of material in his hands, it appeared totally inadequate to express what he really wished to say about Bernard Shaw. It then occurred to him to write a short book entitled “G.B.S.” Alas! This plan had also to be relinquished, for it was now manifest that in no such small compass was it possible to do justice to his subject.

At last he hit upon the brilliant scheme of his final adoption: he would write a history of modern thought in twenty volumes. After considering the forerunners of his hero in the first nineteen volumes, he would devote the twentieth solely to the treatment of George Bernard Shaw. (v)

This anecdote could serve as a model of the infinitely persistent way Shaw approached his ideas, constantly revising and ever expanding. He magnifies his own singularity here, and the openness of his textual self. Shaw, though steeped enough in modern thought to see mankind in the throes of a generally linear progress, sought to open up ideas of the infinite to the world, or at least a linearity that is so long and expansive that for all intents and purposes to present mankind it is infinite. This expansive view is especially strong in *Man and Superman* and plays that came afterwards. He began to cast his speculative gaze far into the future, even projecting that the secret of longevity would be discovered, or perhaps rediscovered, so that it would not be long before the average age of a human was 300 years (*Man of the Century* 867). In *Back to Methuselah*, for example, the scope of Shaw's imaginings stretches from about 4,000 B.C. to 31,920 A.D, where on the latter end people are living for centuries and eventually foresee an even more distant future where humanity will cease to need bodies and each person will become simply a vortex of energy and thought. Even with the unwieldy, endless mass of thought that he produced he could still be jealous of the amount of control he had, creating a dichotomy that requires patience in any biographer of Shaw: "Indeed, you can force my hand to some extent, for any story that you start will pursue me to all eternity; and if there is to be a biography, it is worth my while to make it as accurate as possible" (*His Life and Works* vi).

### Revisionary Impulse

In his attempt to control the reception of his ideas as well as his attempts to progress and evolve Shaw was a consummate revisionist. Shaw seems to struggle with the fact that self-writings make an interpretable version of the self. Shaw is writing before the days of Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, and the post-structuralist philosophies that made clear that the text “has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author” (Olney 22). People naturally read Shaw through their own personal paradigms rather than his own. He fought the misunderstanding that is inherent in language, not only the misunderstanding of concepts, philosophies, or ideas, taken in various directions by his readers, but the misunderstanding of his own textual self, or persona. In the midst of the battle against the misinterpretation of others, he sought to advance and evolve his own understanding. Endless revision was his greatest weapon in this battle, but it could never do more than bring his audience closer to an ultimately unapproachable identity, and bring him a little closer to his ideal of the Superman. Shaw’s revision of everything is definitive, but temporarily so, thereby leaving his self/life endlessly open. The revision served the author in that it “half discovers, half creates” the various characters he would play for the public (Olney 11).

There are many clear examples of Shaw’s revisionist impulse in his relationship with Archibald Henderson. In a letter to Henderson in June 1904, Shaw was responding to the former’s requests for more of Shaw’s works, particularly his criticisms, and Shaw seems to make a suggestion that Henderson not waste time on these old writings to get a sense of who he is at the time of the letter: “Total, over a million words, most of them about matters long since stone dead, and many of them become absolutely unintelligible now that they can no longer be read with the context of the events of the week in which they appeared” (*Man of the Century* xvii).

This loathing for some things past and ready for scrapping in 1904 even included some of his artistic work, and at least one play: “*Widower’s Houses* is out of print, thank Heaven, in the original edition; but the preface and appendices were probably better reading than the text of the play in its original foolishness. I do not know where a copy is to be had” (*Man of the Century* xviii). Characterizing his novels, he says, “They are very green things, very carefully written.” All of this apparent “modesty” that denigrates his former, out-of-date work leads to one very grand point: “It is quite true that the best authority on Shaw is Shaw” (*Man of the Century* xviii). However, it must be remembered that Shaw, as a concept, life, self, or persona was very much subject to change.

Henderson, who often sought to defend his independence as author of Shaw’s biographies in the prefaces and appendices, did admit that Shaw “revised” the manuscripts. He reports, “Shaw devoted the most meticulous study and analysis, having abundant leisure to revise the proofs during a sea voyage” (qtd. in Wadsworth 343). He does not say that Shaw gave notes or suggestions; it says that Shaw “revised,” revealing that the kind of relationship they had was something closer to a student receiving corrections on his work rather than a biographer seeking information from his subject. It does seem incongruous that Henderson would admit so openly to this revision when he seeks so often to defend his independence: “No claim is made or implied that Shaw endorses this biography as expressing his own views of himself. . . . Behind the scenes of this book will be discovered no master ventriloquist, no sinister Svengali manipulating the puppet-opinions with invisible wires of influence. Such a role would be antipodal to Shaw’s character and abhorrent to my sense of the dignity of biography” (qtd. in Wadsworth 343). At any rate, these admissions to Shaw’s revisions not only comment on the type of control that Shaw had over his biographies but they also comment on Shaw’s readiness to revise anything,



even himself. He was willing to scrap his ideas once they were obsolete, but most of the previous mentions were about years-old ideas that Shaw had moved on from; however, Henderson points out that he was even re-revising his current material: “Sheets, manuscript or proof, once revised by him, copies of which were inadvertently sent him a second time for revision, were always revised by him a second time! . . . he could never resist the temptation to revise” (343). Henderson gives as reason for this that Shaw was “extremely jealous for his reputation,” though it is also further evidence that he never considered his ideas finished or so sacred that they resisted revision (*Man of the Century* xxix). Again, this willingness to kill his darlings suggests quite clearly that he did not, despite so many wildly egotistical statements, pretend to be anything grander than a prototype or precursor to the Superman.

#### Autho-biography

Archibald Henderson was a mathematics professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and almost 21 years Shaw’s junior. After attending a performance of one of Shaw’s plays he began to read everything Shavian he could get his hands on. Henderson writes in the preface to *Man of the Century*, “After months of reading Shaw recreatively, as my mathematical researches required all my working hours, I came, without premeditation of the consequences, to the momentous decision to propose myself to Shaw as his biographer” (xv). In Henderson, Shaw had found an important ally, and more importantly a devoted convert: “You know, Henderson, my plays, with some exceptions, deal with the subject of conversion. I should write a play about you, because you are my most convinced convert” (qtd. in *Man of the Century* xv). Shaw could have scarcely chosen a more suitable biographer with whom to co-write something closer to an autobiography. Henderson did read some of Shaw’s plays and criticism before beginning his correspondence with Shaw, but the majority of information came from the author himself,

completely colored by his opinion of his own work. Henderson's was not a day when all of Shaw's published materials were easily attainable; Shaw told Henderson what to look for and to a great degree shaped the way in which Henderson would read it by the explanations that he gave of what things meant and even how they should be read. When it came to the writing of the biography, Henderson "relied heavily upon him [Shaw] for the details of his background and career" (xviii). Though there was a dispute between biographer and subject in the first biography (*George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*) in regards to some "implications of certain statements in the biography, which he said had escaped his eye while the manuscript was in his possession" it appears that Shaw approved of it (xxvii). This approval must be seen in the context of the level of control Shaw exerted on everything, and the fact that the dispute came about from some small thing that had "escaped his eye." As Sarah Wadsworth has clearly shown, any infelicities of implication would be avoided for the second Henderson biography, *George Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, as Shaw's extensive revisions to the manuscript were obediently copied by Henderson (347). The last biography, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*, was written mostly after Shaw's death, which gave Henderson a degree of greater autonomy, but still demonstrates the influence of more than four decades of Shaw's heavy-handed control.

Shaw's domination of his own biographies led to a remarkable side affect: in Henderson's attempts at autonomy he wrote his own story into the narrative, to the point that the three books become the autobiographies of both men. In the half-century that Henderson acts as Shaw's authorized biographer it would have been easy for Henderson's textual self to be swallowed whole. Instead, Henderson makes the biographies to a large extent his own life's work as well. The long prefaces to the biographies are autobiographical sketches of Henderson's

relationship with Shaw and other luminaries, such as Mark Twain and Einstein. There may have been some design on Shaw's part in allowing an obscure mathematics professor to be his biographer. Shaw would always be the expert in subjects that fall within the realm of the humanities: social theory, drama, fiction, and perhaps even economics, which Shaw dedicated years to studying. However, Henderson is quick to point out the ways he was able to "teach" Shaw about scientific matters, such as being the first person who could explain to Shaw (so that he could actually understand) Einstein's theory of relativity, but for all of the topics that constituted the main points of the biography, Shaw would have been the master (*Man of the Century* 662). However, Henderson cannot help but remind us that his relationship with Shaw was the source of his power to write with authority about Shaw. He was the "authorized" biographer and we, the readers, are meant to not forget that. Henderson often speaks in first person about meetings he had with Shaw, quoting things that Shaw said in conversation with him, and referring to their personal, but not so private, correspondence. Henderson even reacted against, and offered bits of criticism about, the other biographies of Shaw written during his lifetime, such as Frank Harris's unauthorized biography (*Man of the Century* xxix-xxx).

Throughout the biographies, especially *Man of the Century*, Henderson seeks to build up his own singularity and eminence for the annals of history in addition to doing this for Shaw. He seems to want to be classed as one of the great men of the century as well because of his association with Shaw, Einstein, and others: "Close association, personal and professional, with two of the greatest geniuses of the age, Einstein and Shaw, emerges in retrospect as the most significant feature of a long and eventful life" (*Man of the Century* 764). Henderson, of course, pressed for interviews with every important figure in Shaw's life who was still alive. He talks about his personal interviews with Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Mark Twain, and various other

luminaries. He makes it very clear that he is in and amongst the movers and the shakers of his day, and that he classes himself as one of them. The entire preface of *Man of the Century* is a framing of Henderson's story, his relationship to Shaw, and his vital role in bringing forth one of the most valuable chronicles of the century. From the first page of the preface, Henderson makes this book his own memoir as well as a biography: "When, on February 24, 1903, I descended to eight o'clock breakfast at the Harcourt . . . little did I dream that I was on the threshold of the greatest intellectual venture and spiritual adventure of my life" (xiii). Henderson is very much fighting for the presence of his own textual identity to be part of the grander narrative of the century about which he is writing. He writes a part and creates a role for himself to play in the larger scheme of things, which gives at least the illusion of greater control than he had. Even after Shaw is dead, and he is writing the third biography, he is limited by and to a great extent still controlled by the ghost of Shaw that had already been haunting him for decades. He still used, in majority, the information that had already gone into the previous two biographies, over which Shaw had greater authority.

#### Aesthetic Self-Fashioning

Shaw's aesthetic is constantly being revised during the course of these biographies; it is a malleable protean form, and therefore impossible to truly pin down, though Henderson does the best he can. Oscar Wilde, Shaw's fellow Dubliner and lover of paradoxes, said that to "become a work of art is the object of living" (qtd. in Kingston 1). In this case Shaw seems to agree with him. In terms of his aesthetic sensibilities, Shaw plays the role of the sculptor, acting as his own Pygmalion. He shapes and forms his ideas according to his own latest developments, whatever they were at the time. His creative evolutionary philosophy gives his development the illusion of progress and linearity, but what was the potential of Shaw's aesthetics? Could his aesthetics

change his surroundings and society? Society is what Shaw wishes to change; the Superman is meant for the betterment all of mankind. Hans Rudolf Vaget addresses this potential of aesthetics to directly affect society in his study of Hitler's self-fashioning, using models that could be applied to Shaw. Vaget makes the argument that Hitler fashioned his self after the aesthetics of Wagner, and the consequences were obviously real and disastrous when those aesthetics were put into practice. Being a man of influence, Shaw's aesthetics must have had far-reaching effects as well, even if they did not directly affect the lives of millions in the devastating way that Hitler's did. Shaw's aesthetics gave way to social-fashioning, not just self-fashioning, and were aimed at the philosophical impregnation of mankind, with a more humane way of caring for and uplifting the whole. For the most part, his philosophy was aimed at production and mental process rather than consumption and some stable ideal whose procrusteanism would require the amputation of the undesirable other, as Hitler's philosophy did. As Shaw did not have the power of a dictator, it was through his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, that he would attempt to affect change in the minds of his audience. The lure of the Superman undergirds these philosophies; they always show the possibility for more and greater progress and development. The Shavian Superman, though greater than himself, was sired by his textual self and received a spiritual/theoretical creation during Shaw's lifetime, as an ideal that would have to wait for physical embodiment. The theoretical creation naturally came through all of Shaw's writings, including Henderson's biographies.

Shaw seems to have grown tired of the slowness of Fabian gradualism and of his struggles to affect real change in the realization of Supermen through language. After decades of espousing reform through socialism and slogging through red tape, he understandably began to be frustrated with the apparent lack of progress: "For fortyeight years I have been addressing

speeches to the Fabian Society and to other assemblies in this country...So far as I can make out, those speeches have not produced any effect whatever...I have come to see at last that one of the most important things to be done in this country is to make public speaking a criminal offense” (qtd. in Holroyd *The Lure of Fantasy* 112). Though an obvious exaggeration, many Shavian scholars have come to see this as the reason Shaw began to sympathize later in life with brutal dictators, who at least had the power to get things done. Shaw made clear decade after decade that he was a man of words rather than a man of action, and it was becoming apparent that he might not live to see socialism and communism take their rightful place in ameliorating the plight of mankind. To be clear, the anti-Semitic part of Hitler’s agenda was ridiculous to Shaw: “Anti-Semite propaganda has no logical connexion with Fascism. . . . [It] is the hatred of the lazy, ignorant, fat-headed Gentile for the pertinacious Jew who, schooled by adversity to use his brains to the utmost, outdoes him in business” (qtd. in Holroyd 113). Shaw pointed out to Beatrice Webb that what he admired about Hitler was that he had “the *personality* to change the world” and that social progress also “depended on great leadership” (113). This was a departure for Shaw that was not lost on Webb. She and her husband, Sidney, were two of his closest friends; for the better part of their lives, they were founding members of the Fabian Society and they knew each other’s politics well. She remarked,

As a young social reformer, he hated cruelty and oppression and pleaded for freedom. . . . Today he idealizes the dictator, whether he be a Mussolini, a Hitler or a Stalin. . . . And yet G.B.S. publicly proclaims that he is a Communist. . . . What he really admires in Soviet Communism is the *forceful* activities of the Communist Party. He feels that this party has a powerful collective personality

that imposes itself willy-nilly on the multitude of nonentities, thereby lifting the whole body of the people to a higher level of health and happiness. (114)

Despite his countenancing some of the things that are unquestionably seen today as atrocities, such as the killing of those who didn't conform to the will of powerful dictators seeking social reform, his ultimate goal, the lifting of humanity to a higher plane, never changed. He never abandoned his philosophical angle, nor did he ever stop talking to the public, though he may have suggested that it was futile to continue talking. He continued to pursue creative evolution through philosophical means by refining the aspects of the theoretically-created Superman.

Self-fashioning can be traced by looking for what the "self" considers to be the ultimate authority, or the thing that a person or group of people compare themselves to and follow, usually unquestionably. Judging the ultimate authority could be seen as a first step in self-fashioning. Hans Vaget writes, "For example, Hitler's identity formation displays that characteristic initial step of submitting to an absolute authority. In Elizabethan England, God, as revealed in Scripture, represented that authority. In Hitler's case, that authority was Wagner" (98). The attempt to answer this question for Shaw gets at the very heart of his life philosophy—the particularly Shavian versions of creative evolution and the Superman. The question of ultimate authority often comes down to major influences as Vaget argues the Wagnerian influence upon Hitler. So many of Shaw's ideas are his own unique versions, at least in name, of other great thinkers. Is Ibsen, or Marx, or Nietzsche, or Darwin the authority for Shaw, as certainly many of his philosophies have a common genealogy with those of these men? Or, ironically (as I compare Shaw's fashioning with Hitler's), could it be Wagner? Shaw did write *The Perfect Wagnerite* in praise and defense of the composer's talent and force, after years of panegyric in Wagner's honor in the various pieces of musical criticism he wrote on the subject.

Yet it is difficult to think of any of these giants as an absolute authority for Shaw. If the study of Shaw's biographies carried on here has done anything, it has confirmed Henderson's argument that the only ultimate authority for Shaw is Shaw, or perhaps more specifically his individual will. The argument for Nietzsche being his ultimate authority has some validation here in that many of his ideas on the force and authority of the human will are at least consistent with, if not originating from, the former's "will to power."

However, if we look at Shaw as being his own ultimate authority it clarifies and unifies a good deal of his entire philosophy. In an unlikely way, Shaw's ultimate authority could also be seen as the same as that of the Elizabethans, mentioned in Vaget's article: namely, God. The great difference is in the way that Shaw saw God. As Shaw wrote to Tolstoy in 1910, "To me God does not yet exist; but there is a creative force constantly struggling to evolve an executive organ of godlike knowledge and power: that is, to achieve omnipotence and omniscience; and every man and woman born is a fresh attempt to achieve this object" (qtd. in *Man of the Century* 589). Shaw cannot conceive, in a world of pain and suffering, of an omnipotent God: "To my mind, unless we conceive God as engaged in a continual struggle to surpass himself—as striving at every birth to make a better man than before—we are conceiving nothing better than an omnipotent snob" (589-90).

For Shaw, God at present is just another name for the Life Force, which is the main distinguisher between Shaw's creative evolution and traditional Darwinian evolution. His main complaint about Darwin was that pure natural selection made the will, in effect, meaningless and obsolete. Shaw didn't believe that things could just happen without any concerted efforts in some direction. For him it was only when we failed in our efforts to progress that we would become obsolete and get "scrapped" by the Life Force. For Shaw, then, "the Life Force is God in



the act of creating Himself” (*Man of the Century* 581). If the Life Force creates and spurs on its equal then Shaw is, in a literal sense, his own God. Shaw-as-God is a role that he plays subtly, but he leaves the trail for others inspired by the Life Force (fathers and mothers of Supermen and Gods) to follow. Shaw even said that Christ was a failed attempt by the Life Force, but an attempt, nonetheless, at the Superman. It could also be argued, though it amounts to the same source, that Shaw’s prevailing authority after 1903, when he wrote *Man and Superman*, is the Superman, specifically the Shavian Superman. Such an ultimate authority would be his own not-yet-realized creation. With such a theoretical authority there is little wonder that Shaw can never stop writing—his identity is tied up with a thing that will not arrive in his lifetime. He must create his self over and over again—there is no end so long as he can write. As Roland Barthes ends his autobiography, “One writes with one’s desire, and I am not through desiring” (188). The future self that Shaw wishes to achieve can only be realized through language, and he pursues this lure of self in multiple media.

The aspect of self-fashioning converse to the Ultimate Authority is the “threatening other,” or what you define yourself against. Vaget writes, “According to Greenblatt, ‘most instances of self-fashioning’ require that someone is perceived and defined as ‘alien, strange, or hostile.’ That ‘threatening Other’ must be ‘discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed’” (98). Shaw’s life was as full of causes to be attacked as causes to be supported. One of Shaw’s temporary authorities was Karl Marx, and specifically his book, *Das Kapital*: “the decisive and sundering event: that which on his seventieth birthday he declared had ‘made a man of him,’ was the reading of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* in Deville’s French translation” (*Man of the Century* 106). From at least this point on, Shaw had a threatening other to fight, which he would vilify and set himself up in opposition to for the rest of his life:

capitalism. If we are looking at Shaw's conversion to socialism through the aesthetic lens, then it was a tool for getting rid of what was ugly in the world. Shaw's aesthetic sensibility abhorred above all else poverty, the hideous miscarriage of Capitalism: "Shaw has repeatedly declared that money is the most important thing in the world, that it controls morality, and that poverty is not a misfortune, but the worst of all crimes" (*Man of the Century* 584).

A second Other that Shaw seems to distance himself from and define himself in contrast to would be his father. At least publically, Shaw never said much good of his father. There was a strong disenchantment, even from childhood. Whenever Shaw does talk about his father it is usually in connection with his drunkenness and ineptitude. One such anecdote from Shaw's childhood had to do with George Carr Shaw pretending to throw his son into a canal (and consequently almost doing just that). This incident proved to be a turning point as the young Shaw came to a "monstrous suspicion," says Holroyd. "On arriving home he went to his mother and whispered his awful discovery, 'Mama: I think Papa's drunk.' This was too much for Bessie who retorted in disgust, 'When is he ever anything else?' Recalling this incident many years later, G.B.S. wrote Ellen Terry: 'I have never believed in anything since: then the scoffer began.'" (Holroyd *Search for Love* 15). Bernard Shaw on the other hand, who consequently disliked his first given name of "George" after his father, was a teetotaler, and obviously determined to avoid ineptitude. He was determined enough, despite the lack of a university education, to spend years in the British Museum Reading Room filling his mind with a tremendous scope of studies. He also attended countless meetings, debates, etc. He was a vegetarian, and was just about everything that someone in "good society" was not. Henderson reports that he "created a sensation in the Shelley Society at its first general meeting" when he said, "Like Shelly, I am a Socialist, and Atheist, and a Vegetarian" (qtd. in *Man of the Century*

151). He was the consummate iconoclast with one great exception: everything he did was for the same reasons given by those who slavishly followed Victorian social mores: the welfare and betterment of humanity. But in order to get people to listen he had to say things they didn't like.

If Shaw truly does fashion himself as a prototype for the Superman, he must in some way see himself as a type, a third person, or even an Other. Robert Folkenflick speaks of this kind of third person moment in terms of autobiography: "what I have in mind, at least initially, is the moment in autobiography in which the subject perceives himself, or less frequently herself, as another self, a frequent though not inevitable feature of the genre" (215). This concept of looking at yourself from a distance as another character, so to speak, was exactly the type of autobiography that Shaw engaged in, through his biographers. Henderson was not the only one of Shaw's biographers to get more than just informational help from his subject. Hesketh Pearson was another author to take on the arduous and humbling task of writing a biography on Shaw, who was given revisions and critiques as though Shaw was the editor/author rather than the subject: "Shaw spent months rewriting and adding to Hesketh Pearson's biography, first making penciled corrections and interpolations Pearson could rewrite and rub out, and red-inked comments meant for background rather than for publication . . ." (Weintraub xiv). If it was not enough to force his overwhelming personality on Pearson and insist upon making these improvements in exchange for the permission to allow Pearson to write the book in the first place, he also made it clear that Pearson was the one getting the favor: "Turning over the last installment he assured Pearson that he could have written three plays in the time that it took him to revise and emend the information based on the so-called authorities Pearson had consulted" (xiv). Be it through Henderson, Pearson, or whomever, Shaw was constantly writing about himself in the third person, attempting to step outside of himself in an unbiased way. He gave

the same consideration to himself as he did to the characters in his plays. There is evidence to suggest that he was building up this third person “character” or persona with the public very much in mind: “Pearson came up with the suggestion that all the Shavian additions and revisions to be shown in the text between square brackets or by indentation in the usual manner. ‘Not on your life, Hesketh!’ Shaw exploded. ‘What I have written I have written in your character, not in my own’” (xiv). Not only is he trying to see himself in third person, but also through someone else’s eyes as well, with the audacious confidence of being able to appropriate another author’s voice and personality, without concerted study but with enough verisimilitude to make it believable. Shaw went on to say to Pearson, “As an autobiographer I would have written quite differently. There are things that you may properly say which would come less gracefully from me” (qtd. in Weintraub xv). Shaw had to have witnesses. It was not enough for Shaw to make hundreds of egotistical statements, there had to be others willing to testify to his greatness, people who saw and understood his life, and what that life is doing in the grander picture of humanity. By writing what he wanted through others he had plausible deniability and the illusion of objectivity as well as the opportunity to play yet more roles.

### Conclusion

If every new great thinker and the birth of every child is a fresh attempt by the Life Force to create the Superman, then to claim that Shaw is a prototype for the Superman is almost too obvious to bother arguing about. It is clear by his more humble statements that Shaw had not arrived at the state of Superman in his own estimation, which was also clear from the fact that his talk about this next stage in development was always in the future tense. In *Man and Superman* Donna Anna cries out, referring to the Superman, “Not yet created! Then my work is not yet done. [*Crossing herself devoutly*] I believe in the Life to Come. [*Crying to the universe*] A

father—a father for the Superman!” (Shaw 175). The strong implication is that Donna Anna, and by extension her contemporary counterpart in the play, Ann Whitfield, would become the mother for the Superman by propagating with the father, which in the play would be Jack Tanner. Tanner is perhaps the closest model for Shaw’s own persona of any of his characters. He is the revolutionary thinker who is completely progressive, and shocking in everything he says. His being tied down in marriage is considered “ignominy” by himself; however, the hope that makes up for this “ignominy” is that through this union the Superman may be born, if not in the next generation then sometime soon. If procreative marriage is an inevitable part of the character that Shaw would identify with his own as a possible father for the Superman, then why did Shaw never have children himself? His early philanderings and sexual experiments with Jenny Patterson and others suggest that he had the potency. In fact, Henderson vehemently defends Shaw on this point against the accusation of impotency by rival biographer Frank Harris (*Man of the Century* xxix). This defense comes despite the fact that it was no private secret that Shaw’s marriage to Charlotte Payne Townsend was, by all reports, to be a sexless “business partnership,” yet Henderson persists in the defense against the charge of impotency: “Shaw himself acknowledged that he kept himself under rigid control, in the matter of physical contact, for fear of being overborne, against his will, by his susceptibility to feminine charm and sex appeal” (820). For all of Shaw’s study of eugenics and preaching of the need to produce the Superman, he deliberately kept himself from what should have been seen, in light of his persona, as a major contribution to the future. There is, however, the testimony of Henderson that Charlotte was old enough to wish to avoid having children, “Children to this union were implacably barred, Charlotte dreading, and Shaw accepting the fear-complex, lest, for a woman at her age, childbearing be too dangerous.” Charlotte was 42 when they married (820). This

question of what exactly prevented Shaw from reproducing and consummating this aspect of his persona, as a virile father for the Superman, is unanswerable, but perhaps it presumes too much about the importance of biology to George Bernard Shaw. Shaw's type of evolution happened in the mind, and though the perpetuation of the species at present is dependant upon the sexual act, the evolutionary impulse carried from one generation to another was not. The intellectual drives of Creative Evolution were more important to be left as a legacy of this powerful, colorful, and self-constructed character. If Shaw converted enough of mankind to his way of thinking, if he persuaded society to put their all into avoiding getting scrapped by their progressive thinking, if he could get them to change, then no matter what happened biologically (as long as his converts reproduced) he would indeed be the father for the Superman.

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