

The Puritan

It has been said in the first section that Bernard Shaw draws from his own nation two unquestionable qualities, a kind of intellectual chastity, and the fighting spirit. He is so much of an idealist about his ideals that he can be a ruthless realist in his methods. His soul has (in short) the virginity and the violence of Ireland. But Bernard Shaw is not merely an Irishman; he is not even a typical one. He is a certain separated and peculiar kind of Irishman, which is not easy to describe. Some Nationalist Irishmen have referred to him contemptuously as a "West Briton." But this is really unfair; for whatever Mr. Shaw's mental faults may be, the easy adoption of an unmeaning phrase like "Briton" is certainly not one of them. It would be much nearer the truth to put the thing in the bold and bald terms of the old Irish song, and to call him "The anti-Irish Irishman." But it is only fair to say that the description is far less of a monstrosity than the anti-English Englishman would be; because the Irish are so much stronger in self-criticism. Compared with the constant self-flattery of the English, nearly every Irishman is an anti-Irish Irishman. But here again popular phraseology hits the right word. This fairly educated and fairly wealthy Protestant wedge which is driven into the country at Dublin and elsewhere is a thing not easy superficially to summarise in any term. It cannot be described merely as a minority; for a minority means the part of a nation which is conquered. But this thing means something that conquers, and is not entirely part of a nation. Nor can one even fall back on the phrase of aristocracy. For an aristocracy implies at least some chorus of snobbish enthusiasm; it implies that some at least are willingly led by the leaders, if only towards vulgarity and vice. There is only one word for the minority in Ireland, and that is the word that public phraseology has found; I mean the word "Garrison." The Irish are essentially right when they talk as if all Protestant Unionists lived inside "The Castle." They have all the virtues and limitations of a literal garrison in a fort. That is, they are valiant, consistent, reliable in an obvious public sense; but their curse is that they can only tread the flagstones of the court-yard or the cold rock of the ramparts; they have never so much as set their foot upon their native soil.

We have considered Bernard Shaw as an Irishman. The next step is to consider him as an exile from Ireland living in Ireland; that, some people would say, is a paradox after his own heart. But, indeed, such a complication is not really difficult to expound. The great religion and the great national tradition which have persisted for so many centuries in Ireland have encouraged these clean and cutting elements; but they have

encouraged many other things which serve to balance them. The Irish peasant has these qualities which are somewhat peculiar to Ireland, a strange purity and a strange pugnacity. But the Irish peasant also has qualities which are common to all peasants, and his nation has qualities that are common to all healthy nations. I mean chiefly the things that most of us absorb in childhood; especially the sense of the supernatural and the sense of the natural; the love of the sky with its infinity of vision, and the love of the soil with its strict hedges and solid shapes of ownership. But here comes the paradox of Shaw; the greatest of all his paradoxes and the one of which he is unconscious. These one or two plain truths which quite stupid people learn at the beginning are exactly the one or two truths which Bernard Shaw may not learn even at the end. He is a daring pilgrim who has set out from the grave to find the cradle. He started from points of view which no one else was clever enough to discover, and he is at last discovering points of view which no one else was ever stupid enough to ignore. This absence of the red-hot truisms of boyhood; this sense that he is not rooted in the ancient sagacities of infancy, has, I think, a great deal to do with his position as a member of an alien minority in Ireland. He who has no real country can have no real home. The average autochthonous Irishman is close to patriotism because he is close to the earth; he is close to domesticity because he is close to the earth; he is close to doctrinal theology and elaborate ritual because he is close to the earth. In short, he is close to the heavens because he is close to the earth. But we must not expect any of these elemental and collective virtues in the man of the garrison. He cannot be expected to exhibit the virtues of a people, but only (as Ibsen would say) of an enemy of the people. Mr. Shaw has no living traditions, no schoolboy tricks, no college customs, to link him with other men. Nothing about him can be supposed to refer to a family feud or to a family joke. He does not drink toasts; he does not keep anniversaries; musical as he is I doubt if he would consent to sing. All this has something in it of a tree with its roots in the air. The best way to shorten winter is to prolong Christmas; and the only way to enjoy the sun of April is to be an April Fool. When people asked Bernard Shaw to attend the Stratford Tercentenary, he wrote back with characteristic contempt: "I do not keep my own birthday, and I cannot see why I should keep Shakespeare's." I think that if Mr. Shaw had always kept his own birthday he would be better able to understand Shakespeare's birthday--and Shakespeare's poetry.

In conjecturally referring this negative side of the man, his lack of the smaller charities of our common childhood, to his birth in the dominant Irish sect, I do not write without historic memory or reference to other cases. That minority of Protestant exiles which mainly represented Ireland to England during the eighteenth century did contain some specimens of the

Irish lounge and even of the Irish blackguard; Sheridan and even Goldsmith suggest the type. Even in their irresponsibility these figures had a touch of Irish tartness and realism; but the type has been too much insisted on to the exclusion of others equally national and interesting. To one of these it is worth while to draw attention. At intervals during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there has appeared a peculiar kind of Irishman. He is so unlike the English image of Ireland that the English have actually fallen back on the pretence that he was not Irish at all. The type is commonly Protestant; and sometimes seems to be almost anti-national in its acrid instinct for judging itself. Its nationalism only appears when it flings itself with even bitterer pleasure into judging the foreigner or the invader. The first and greatest of such figures was Swift. Thackeray simply denied that Swift was an Irishman, because he was not a stage Irishman. He was not (in the English novelist's opinion) winning and agreeable enough to be Irish. The truth is that Swift was much too harsh and disagreeable to be English. There is a great deal of Jonathan Swift in Bernard Shaw. Shaw is like Swift, for instance, in combining extravagant fancy with a curious sort of coldness. But he is most like Swift in that very quality which Thackeray said was impossible in an Irishman, benevolent bullying, a pity touched with contempt, and a habit of knocking men down for their own good. Characters in novels are often described as so amiable that they hate to be thanked. It is not an amiable quality, and it is an extremely rare one; but Swift possessed it. When Swift was buried the Dublin poor came in crowds and wept by the grave of the broadest and most free-handed of their benefactors. Swift deserved the public tribute; but he might have writhed and kicked in his grave at the thought of receiving it. There is in G. B. S. something of the same inhumane humanity. Irish history has offered a third instance of this particular type of educated and Protestant Irishman, sincere, unsympathetic, aggressive, alone. I mean Parnell; and with him also a bewildered England tried the desperate dodge of saying that he was not Irish at all. As if any thinkable sensible snobbish law-abiding Englishman would ever have defied all the drawing-rooms by disdaining the House of Commons! Despite the difference between taciturnity and a torrent of fluency there is much in common also between Shaw and Parnell; something in common even in the figures of the two men, in the bony bearded faces with their almost Satanic self-possession. It will not do to pretend that none of these three men belong to their own nation; but it is true that they belonged to one special, though recurring, type of that nation. And they all three have this peculiar mark, that while Nationalists in their various ways they all give to the more genial English one common impression; I mean the impression that they do not so much love Ireland as hate England.

I will not dogmatise upon the difficult question as to whether there is any religious significance in the fact that these three rather ruthless Irishmen were Protestant Irishmen. I incline to think myself that the Catholic Church has added charity and gentleness to the virtues of a people which would otherwise have been too keen and contemptuous, too aristocratic. But however this may be, there can surely be no question that Bernard Shaw's Protestant education in a Catholic country has made a great deal of difference to his mind. It has affected it in two ways, the first negative and the second positive. It has affected him by cutting him off (as we have said) from the fields and fountains of his real home and history; by making him an Orangeman. And it has affected him by the particular colour of the particular religion which he received; by making him a Puritan.

In one of his numerous prefaces he says, "I have always been on the side of the Puritans in the matter of Art"; and a closer study will, I think, reveal that he is on the side of the Puritans in almost everything. Puritanism was not a mere code of cruel regulations, though some of its regulations were more cruel than any that have disgraced Europe. Nor was Puritanism a mere nightmare, an evil shadow of eastern gloom and fatalism, though this element did enter it, and was as it were the symptom and punishment of its essential error. Something much nobler (even if almost equally mistaken) was the original energy in the Puritan creed. And it must be defined with a little more delicacy if we are really to understand the attitude of G. B. S., who is the greatest of the modern Puritans and perhaps the last.

I should roughly define the first spirit in Puritanism thus. It was a refusal to contemplate God or goodness with anything lighter or milder than the most fierce concentration of the intellect. A Puritan meant originally a man whose mind had no holidays. To use his own favourite phrase, he would let no living thing come between him and his God; an attitude which involved eternal torture for him and a cruel contempt for all the living things. It was better to worship in a barn than in a cathedral for the specific and specified reason that the cathedral was beautiful. Physical beauty was a false and sensual symbol coming in between the intellect and the object of its intellectual worship. The human brain ought to be at every instant a consuming fire which burns through all conventional images until they were as transparent as glass.

This is the essential Puritan idea, that God can only be praised by direct contemplation of Him. You must praise God only with your brain; it is wicked to praise Him with your passions or your physical habits or your gesture or instinct of beauty. Therefore it is wicked to worship by singing or dancing or drinking sacramental wines or building beautiful churches or

saying prayers when you are half asleep. We must not worship by dancing, drinking, building or singing; we can only worship by thinking. Our heads can praise God, but never our hands and feet. That is the true and original impulse of the Puritans. There is a great deal to be said for it, and a great deal was said for it in Great Britain steadily for two hundred years. It has gradually decayed in England and Scotland, not because of the advance of modern thought (which means nothing), but because of the slow revival of the mediæval energy and character in the two peoples. The English were always hearty and humane, and they have made up their minds to be hearty and humane in spite of the Puritans. The result is that Dickens and W. W. Jacobs have picked up the tradition of Chaucer and Robin Hood. The Scotch were always romantic, and they have made up their minds to be romantic in spite of the Puritans. The result is that Scott and Stevenson have picked up the tradition of Bruce, Blind Harry and the vagabond Scottish kings. England has become English again; Scotland has become Scottish again, in spite of the splendid incubus, the noble nightmare of Calvin. There is only one place in the British Islands where one may naturally expect to find still surviving in its fulness the fierce detachment of the true Puritan. That place is the Protestant part of Ireland. The Orange Calvinists can be disturbed by no national resurrection, for they have no nation. In them, if in any people, will be found the rectangular consistency of the Calvinist. The Irish Protestant rioters are at least immeasurably finer fellows than any of their brethren in England. They have the two enormous superiorities: first, that the Irish Protestant rioters really believe in Protestant theology; and second, that the Irish Protestant rioters do really riot. Among these people, if anywhere, should be found the cult of theological clarity combined with barbarous external simplicity. Among these people Bernard Shaw was born.

There is at least one outstanding fact about the man we are studying; Bernard Shaw is never frivolous. He never gives his opinions a holiday; he is never irresponsible even for an instant. He has no nonsensical second self which he can get into as one gets into a dressing-gown; that ridiculous disguise which is yet more real than the real person. That collapse and humorous confession of futility was much of the force in Charles Lamb and in Stevenson. There is nothing of this in Shaw; his wit is never a weakness; therefore it is never a sense of humour. For wit is always connected with the idea that truth is close and clear. Humour, on the other hand, is always connected with the idea that truth is tricky and mystical and easily mistaken. What Charles Lamb said of the Scotchman is far truer of this type of Puritan Irishman; he does not see things suddenly in a new light; all his brilliancy is a blindingly rapid calculation and deduction. Bernard Shaw never said an indefensible thing; that is, he never said a thing that he was not prepared brilliantly to defend. He never breaks out into that cry beyond

reason and conviction, that cry of Lamb when he cried, "We would indict our dreams!" or of Stevenson, "Shall we never shed blood?" In short he is not a humorist, but a great wit, almost as great as Voltaire. Humour is akin to agnosticism, which is only the negative side of mysticism. But pure wit is akin to Puritanism; to the perfect and painful consciousness of the final fact in the universe. Very briefly, the man who sees the consistency in things is a wit--and a Calvinist. The man who sees the inconsistency in things is a humorist--and a Catholic. However this may be, Bernard Shaw exhibits all that is purest in the Puritan; the desire to see truth face to face even if it slay us, the high impatience with irrelevant sentiment or obstructive symbol; the constant effort to keep the soul at its highest pressure and speed. His instincts upon all social customs and questions are Puritan. His favourite author is Bunyan.

But along with what was inspiring and direct in Puritanism Bernard Shaw has inherited also some of the things that were cumbersome and traditional. If ever Shaw exhibits a prejudice it is always a Puritan prejudice. For Puritanism has not been able to sustain through three centuries that native ecstasy of the direct contemplation of truth; indeed it was the whole mistake of Puritanism to imagine for a moment that it could. One cannot be serious for three hundred years. In institutions built so as to endure for ages you must have relaxation, symbolic relativity and healthy routine. In eternal temples you must have frivolity. You must "be at ease in Zion" unless you are only paying it a flying visit.

By the middle of the nineteenth century this old austerity and actuality in the Puritan vision had fallen away into two principal lower forms. The first is a sort of idealistic garrulity upon which Bernard Shaw has made fierce and on the whole fruitful war. Perpetual talk about righteousness and unselfishness, about things that should elevate and things which cannot but degrade, about social purity and true Christian manhood, all poured out with fatal fluency and with very little reference to the real facts of anybody's soul or salary--into this weak and lukewarm torrent has melted down much of that mountainous ice which sparkled in the seventeenth century, bleak indeed, but blazing. The hardest thing of the seventeenth century bids fair to be the softest thing of the twentieth.

Of all this sentimental and deliquescent Puritanism Bernard Shaw has always been the antagonist; and the only respect in which it has soiled him was that he believed for only too long that such sloppy idealism was the whole idealism of Christendom and so used "idealist" itself as a term of reproach. But there were other and negative effects of Puritanism which he did not escape so completely. I cannot think that he has wholly escaped that

element in Puritanism which may fairly bear the title of the taboo. For it is a singular fact that although extreme Protestantism is dying in elaborate and over-refined civilisation, yet it is the barbaric patches of it that live longest and die last. Of the creed of John Knox the modern Protestant has abandoned the civilised part and retained only the savage part. He has given up that great and systematic philosophy of Calvinism which had much in common with modern science and strongly resembles ordinary and recurrent determinism. But he has retained the accidental veto upon cards or comic plays, which Knox only valued as mere proof of his people's concentration on their theology. All the awful but sublime affirmations of Puritan theology are gone. Only savage negations remain; such as that by which in Scotland on every seventh day the creed of fear lays his finger on all hearts and makes an evil silence in the streets.

By the middle of the nineteenth century when Shaw was born this dim and barbaric element in Puritanism, being all that remained of it, had added another taboo to its philosophy of taboos; there had grown up a mystical horror of those fermented drinks which are part of the food of civilised mankind. Doubtless many persons take an extreme line on this matter solely because of some calculation of social harm; many, but not all and not even most. Many people think that paper money is a mistake and does much harm. But they do not shudder or snigger when they see a cheque-book. They do not whisper with unsavoury slyness that such and such a man was "seen" going into a bank. I am quite convinced that the English aristocracy is the curse of England, but I have not noticed either in myself or others any disposition to ostracise a man simply for accepting a peerage, as the modern Puritans would certainly ostracise him (from any of their positions of trust) for accepting a drink. The sentiment is certainly very largely a mystical one, like the sentiment about the seventh day. Like the Sabbath, it is defended with sociological reasons; but those reasons can be simply and sharply tested. If a Puritan tells you that all humanity should rest once a week, you have only to propose that they should rest on Wednesday. And if a Puritan tells you that he does not object to beer but to the tragedies of excess in beer, simply propose to him that in prisons and workhouses (where the amount can be absolutely regulated) the inmates should have three glasses of beer a day. The Puritan cannot call that excess; but he will find something to call it. For it is not the excess he objects to, but the beer. It is a transcendental taboo, and it is one of the two or three positive and painful prejudices with which Bernard Shaw began. A similar severity of outlook ran through all his earlier attitude towards the drama; especially towards the lighter or looser drama. His Puritan teachers could not prevent him from taking up theatricals, but they made him take theatricals seriously. All his plays were indeed "plays for Puritans." All his

criticisms quiver with a refined and almost tortured contempt for the indulgencies of ballet and burlesque, for the tights and the double entente. He can endure lawlessness but not levity. He is not repelled by the divorces and the adulteries as he is by the "splits." And he has always been foremost among the fierce modern critics who ask indignantly, "Why do you object to a thing full of sincere philosophy like *The Wild Duck* while you tolerate a mere dirty joke like *The Spring Chicken*?" I do not think he has ever understood what seems to me the very sensible answer of the man in the street, "I laugh at the dirty joke of *The Spring Chicken* because it is a joke. I criticise the philosophy of *The Wild Duck* because it is a philosophy."

Shaw does not do justice to the democratic ease and sanity on this subject; but indeed, whatever else he is, he is not democratic. As an Irishman he is an aristocrat, as a Calvinist he is a soul apart; he drew the breath of his nostrils from a land of fallen principalities and proud gentility, and the breath of his spirit from a creed which made a wall of crystal around the elect. The two forces between them produced this potent and slender figure, swift, scornful, dainty and full of dry magnanimity; and it only needed the last touch of oligarchic mastery to be given by the overwhelming oligarchic atmosphere of our present age. Such was the Puritan Irishman who stepped out into the world. Into what kind of world did he step?