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Revising Lives: Bernard Shaw and His Biographer

It is sometimes remarked that the meaning of a text is determined as much by the reader as by the author. The point is well made by Michael Holroyd in his recent biography of Bernard Shaw: “Every text belongs to the future and is re-created by the reader, guided by his ‘minder’, the critic”(4). The quote seems an apt statement with which to introduce a re-examination of an earlier biography of G.B.S., Archibald Henderson’s 1932 biography *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*. This work offers unusual possibilities for re-creation by the reader, for it is a text which “belongs to the future” not only in its published form, but also as a set of galley proofs marked up by Shaw himself. Indeed, while illustrating how Shaw created his own text from Henderson’s biography, these marked-up proofs provide the rare opportunity of “re-creating” two distinct versions of the same text: Archibald Henderson’s “authorized” biography of Shaw, and Shaw’s “unauthorized” autobiography of himself. In presenting this extraordinary text, one that appears as both (or neither) biography and autobiography, this article prompts the reader to contemplate the nature of biography and autobiography first from the perspective of its production, and then from the perspective of its reception. As “minder” in this study, I will guide readers through the peculiarities of the work’s composition, revealing a most unusual collaboration between author and subject to demonstrate that when the production of the text is understood, its reception is utterly transformed.

Archibald Henderson, a professor of mathematics at the University of North Carolina and life-long devotee of G.B.S., was Shaw's official biographer during Shaw's lifetime—a position that allowed him privileged access to first-hand information about the playwright, while creating impossible restrictions that prevented him from utilizing this information freely. Over the course of his career as Shaw's biographer, Henderson wrote three full-length biographies of Shaw, which, in spite of a conflict of interest between Shaw as subject and Henderson as biographer, represent an unprecedented degree of cooperation between a biographer and his subject. As a result of this cooperation, when *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* rolled off the press in 1932, it was received with high praise from critics and reviewers who were quick to remark upon the uniqueness of the work. Gerald W. Johnson, a biographer himself, declared it “unquestionably one of the most remarkable biographical facts on record in that it comes close to being a definitive work written while the subject is yet very much alive” (*Archibald Henderson* 13). Holbrook Jackson, literary critic and an earlier biographer of Shaw, explained that “Never before has such a tribute been paid to an author during his own lifetime; and such a work would have been impossible if Mr. Shaw had not set the example of treating himself with posthumous frankness” (*Archibald Henderson* 23). The biographer himself, in a “Salute” at the front of the volume, addressed his subject with the assertion, “At intervals of three or four years, I have interpreted you to the world of to-day and to posterity—more fully, probably, than any one man in literary history has interpreted another” (*Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* xvii); and James Rowland Angell, recognizing the near paradox of an “authorized” critical biography of Bernard Shaw, wrote in a letter to Henderson “[*Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*] has the almost unique distinction of having been submitted to the subject for comment and criticism—and, so far as I know, the wholly unique quality of having under such scrutiny been still written in the light of the author's own judgements and convictions, even though quite at variance with those of the hero on the issues in question” (*Archibald Henderson* 31).

When Henderson began researching his first biography, *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*, Shaw set forth the terms of his authorization of Henderson as his official biographer as follows:

I authorize you, in the only rational sense of the term: I will supply you with abundant information and materials, essential facts you can learn from no one else; undertake to see that you make no errors of fact; and leave you entirely untrammelled regarding opinion and interpretation; and promise to revise your narrative both in manuscript and proof. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxv)

True to his promise, Shaw was extremely generous in supplying Henderson with biographical facts, reminiscences, documentation, and encouragement. In response to a single questionnaire, Shaw returned a "monumental letter of some 12,500 words, 54 typewriter-size gray sheets in his minute handwriting in purple ink, begun at Welwyn, Herts, January 3 and completed January 17, 1905" (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxii). This early contribution of Shaw's not only "revolutionized" Henderson's "thinking on the subject of biography," it also provided a wealth of first-hand narrative that Henderson was able to incorporate directly into his biography. Henderson quoted from Shaw's letters so liberally, in fact, that a working title of his first biography was "Bernard Shaw: Biography and Autobiography." Certainly, Shaw's promise to provide abundant factual information and materials was faithfully kept.

However, Shaw's promise not to interfere in matters of opinion and interpretation was more problematic. By the time Henderson came to write his second biography, *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, Shaw had become rather wary of biographical writings about himself. Not only had he fallen out with Henderson at one point about some statements made in *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*, he also waged an ongoing battle with various unauthorized biographers whose assertions and conjectures he did not condone. His relationships with those writing about him were often rocky; he "specially deprecated" the work of the biographer Frank Harris (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxx) and actually prevented another biographer, Thomas Demetrius O'Bolger, from publishing his Shaw biography. Shaw sometimes responded to the public's eager demands for criticism of G.B.S. and his works by writing it himself: fully acknowledged works of self-criticism (such as "Bernard Shaw on his Novels"), as well as works of Shavian criticism and anecdotage surreptitiously ghost-written by Shaw himself. Michael Holroyd, Shaw's current biographer, has suggested that Shavian biography during Shaw's

lifetime was somewhat restricted by the fact that Shaw, the “ghostwriter of so many previous volumes about himself” (4), was apt to manipulate his biographers, directing them “along what he saw as the path leading to truth at the expense of a few out-of-the-way facts” (30). It is not surprising therefore that some readers of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* were skeptical as to whose authority this “authorized biography” reflected: the biographer’s or his subject’s. In fact, one doubting Thomas went so far as to suggest “that Archibald Henderson was a literary hoax devised by Shaw, a straw man used to enable the Irishman to write voluminously about himself” (*Archibald Henderson: The New Crichton* 43).

No doubt Archibald Henderson anticipated such objections and suspicions regarding the integrity of his biography. By the time he wrote *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, he had worked with Shaw long enough to have learned that “authorship” could be a rather ambiguous designation. Indeed, for Shaw, who acted as his own publisher and usually drew up his own contracts, “authorship” might be reduced to a purely legal term, as Henderson discovered in 1925 with the publication of *Table-Talk with G.B.S.* Although Shaw collaborated with Henderson on this collection of “conversations” between biographer and biographee, and although he shared equally in the royalties of the book, the playwright nevertheless insisted that *Table-Talk with G.B.S.* be attributed solely to Archibald Henderson. The reasons for this are unclear: it is certainly possible that Shaw felt that if the public knew he had a hand in its composition, the book might lose some of the credibility it inspired as an “objective” portrayal of G.B.S. This possibility is supported by a statement Henderson made many years later: “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” (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxv).

In any event, Shaw’s biographer sought to reassure his readers by incorporating into the first Appendix of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* the following defense:

No claim is made or implied that Shaw endorses this biography as expressing his own views of himself. It does carry Shaw’s imprimatur of faith in accuracy of scholarship, incorruptible critical standards and a comprehensiveness of research and outlook beyond that of his would-be

interpreters. Were it otherwise, not this book, but another, would be the only biography authorized by Shaw. 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. (797–8)

Aside from Shaw's tendency to participate in the creation of his own biographies, the statement is quite an odd guarantee of the biography's authenticity. Henderson must have realized that skeptical readers would have no reason to believe his *post scriptum* if they questioned the biography itself—that to satisfy oneself that Shaw did not influence his biographer excessively, one must look beyond the context of the work itself, beyond its reception to its production. The following pages of this essay initiate such an extra-textual investigation into the production of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, an investigation that will reveal, in a way that Henderson's Appendix cannot, whether in fact any “master ventriloquist” or “sinister Svengali” does indeed lurk “behind the scenes” of Shaw's authorized biography.

I. BIOGRAPHER AND SUBJECT

In an early letter to Shaw, Archibald Henderson expressed the necessity of close cooperation between biographer and subject, proposing that “the best authority on Shaw is Shaw.” This simple premise formed the basis of Henderson's approach to his first Shaw biography, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*, which relied heavily upon the biographer's correspondence with Shaw and included many excerpts from Shaw's letters to Henderson. Fourteen years later, however, with the publication of *George Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, Henderson appears to have had reservations about the assertion that “the best authority on Shaw is Shaw.”

It is in the front matter and back matter of his works—the Prefaces, the Appendices, the Salutes—that Archibald Henderson wrote freely, without the “authorization” of his subject. Repeatedly in these author's introductions and appendices, Archibald Henderson contrasts his own faithfulness to recorded fact with Shaw's aversion to documents of all kinds. Henderson was not only an academic, but an historian who states in the Preface to *Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*, “. . . I am irrevoca-

bly committed to documentation for irrefutable fact. If humanly possible, I am never satisfied with anything short of the original document" (xxxii). In contrast, he charges that "Shaw . . . was never historically minded; and having escaped the 'destructive influence of university education,' had an invincible detestation of 'documents' " (xxx)."

While Professor Henderson deplored what he regarded as Shaw's liberties with historical accuracy, Shaw was not entirely satisfied with Henderson's highly academic methodology. The fact that Henderson and Shaw did not always see eye to eye was exposed before the public when the London *Morning Post* became the arena for a showdown between the two in the form of two letters, one by Shaw, the other a rebuttal by Archibald Henderson published shortly after *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* was released. In the first one, "Mr. Bernard Shaw on Himself," Shaw refuted the implications of some statements made in the biography which had apparently escaped his notice while the manuscript was in his hands for review. He then reminded his readers that his biographer was an authority on higher mathematics, which

are based on the discovery, made simultaneously by Newton and Leibnitz, that by proceeding on inconceivable assumptions, provisional approximations, and impossible hypotheses, you can arrive at trustworthy working results. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxvii)

In his rebuttal Henderson retaliated by cautioning his readers,

[Shaw is] a dialectician, which means that, if necessary, the same words can mean to him two different things; whereas I am a mathematician, which means that they can mean only one.

. . . he is a man of many words, and he is unaccustomed to being confronted with them. When he is, his invariable and quite natural impulse is to 'repudiate' them. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxvii-xxix)

The dispute reveals a potentially divisive discrepancy in the ways in which Shaw and Henderson regarded biographical truth. While Henderson objected to Shaw's disregard of documented data, Shaw disapproved of Henderson's tendency to extrapolate beyond the information that had been directly communicated to him.

The disagreement between Shaw and his biographer quickly blew over and did not adversely affect the long-term relationship

between the two. Reflecting on the *Morning Post* controversy years later, Henderson wrote,

Although Shaw deplored the few “slips,” as to fact, in the biography, for which he was responsible through hasty reading of proofs, he said in his published letter: “I think that, as a whole, the book is a most remarkable achievement, and is perhaps as near the facts as it is in the nature of such a work to be”. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxix)

Archibald Henderson’s second Shaw biography, *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, was to provide the opportunity of ensuring that “slips” of fact would be eradicated, and that the new authorized biography of G.B.S. could be brought nearer the “truth” than the 1911 biography had been.

II. PRODUCTION

During the composition of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, Shaw was certainly more vigilant of his biographer’s evolving work than he had been for the original biography. Looking back on the project, Henderson later wrote,

To this book, Shaw devoted the most meticulous study and analysis, having abundant leisure to revise the proofs during a sea voyage. It was incalculably more elaborately documented than *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works*. To publishers of his works, translators, bibliographers, and critics, he invariably referred to this work as the standard source of information about himself. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxx-xxxi)

Shaw proofread and revised the galley proofs of the new biography between January and August 1932. Evidently, he was an inveterate revisionist when it came to writing about himself and his works. According to Henderson,

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! Volatile and capricious, he could never resist the temptation to re-revise: the pen always jumped in his hand whenever he saw any writing about himself. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxix)

Shaw penned his remarks and revisions directly onto the proofs, which were then mailed back to his biographer piecemeal. Along with these clippings from the galley proofs, Shaw enclosed notebook pages on which he had written explanations and justifications of his revisions, as well as delineations of the changes,

specified by paragraph and line number. These materials are now housed in the Manuscript Department of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection.

Shaw's annotations reflect incidental corrections to the text, stylistic revisions and substantive alterations. They also include editorial comments addressed to Archibald Henderson. Shaw alternated between black ink and red pencil to indicate the nature of his annotations. Editorial comments to Henderson were written in red in the margins of the galley. Shaw marked portions of the text that were to be modified by drawing a line through the words or sentences in the proofs which he wished to delete, and writing the replacement text in black ink in the margins. When the proposed rewrites were too lengthy to fit neatly in the margins, Shaw appended additional pages of text, handwritten in pencil, to the galley proofs. The comments and revisions written on notebook paper were written in red, with line and paragraph numbers indicated in Shaw's distinctive shorthand script.

Shaw was a meticulous and exacting editor, attentive to the slightest details of punctuation and spelling. In his own works, Shaw tended to be highly idiosyncratic in his use of such "accidentals" as apostrophes, commas, periods, and even spelling; but in editing his biographer's text, he was careful to efface his presence in the text by eschewing such telltale textual indicators, observing instead standard conventions in spelling and punctuation. Henderson had a few idiosyncratic usages of his own, such as "technic" for "technique" and "Shawian" for "Shavian," which Shaw also brought into conformity with standard practices. Just as he oscillated between his own point of view and Henderson's point of view according to the color of ink he used, Shaw shifted back and forth between his own accidentals and the conventional ones, depending on whether he was speaking for himself to Archibald Henderson or to readers of the biographer through the dummy-narrator that stands in for Archibald Henderson. At one point in his annotations, Shaw commented on this somewhat schizophrenic doubleness, explaining, "I always write Shakespear to save ink. This confuses the comps, as I always quote other people as writing Shakespeare. You, quoting me *viva voce*, would write the e."

When composing sentences to be inserted into the biography, Shaw always adopted the authorial stance of his biographer, referring to himself in the third person, as "Shaw" (see page 352). The

pronoun "I" was used by Shaw to refer to his biographer so that his revisions could be interpolated into the text exactly as he wrote them. In contrast to these revisions penned in black, the comments and instructions in red employ Shaw's own narrative voice. With the constant alternation of ink colors, there was, of course, a risk of confusing the two. In one instance, Shaw crossed out Henderson's explanation of the origin of Cauchon's name in *Saint Joan* ("His Devonshire name is borrowed for the occasion") with black ink, and wrote in the margin, with the same pen, "I have given him a Somerset name which is appropriate when mispronounced." Because the remark was written in black, the color used to code Shaw's rewritten sentences, it was incorporated, verbatim, into the revised text. The error actually appears in the published biography, assimilated into the body of a paragraph written by Henderson. A bewildering statement in the context of Henderson's critique, the error is a rare internal sign of the type of collaboration that produced *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*.

This essay includes transcriptions of two sections of the biography which Shaw revised and commented upon extensively. Although the galley proofs and Shaw's annotations are rendered as faithfully as possible, there are a number of textual difficulties involved in the transcription of these materials. *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* includes an enormous number of footnotes, which, in the interest of legibility and clarity, were not reproduced in the transcriptions. By and large, these footnotes provide details of performances and reviews of Shaw's plays. Although Shaw did emend or enlarge some of the footnotes in the galley proofs, these have not been included in this essay since they add relatively little to the interest of the text while making it nearly impossible to display the text in a comprehensible manner. For the same reason, corrections of typographical and spelling errors which Shaw made are not indicated in the transcriptions; and, since the galleys used a longer line length, the original hyphenation is not preserved here.

The format adopted for the transcriptions of the galley proofs was kept as simple as possible. Text is presented in two columns to resemble the text of the galley proofs with the revisions along the right-hand margin. The left side of each passage shows, in plain type, the text of the galley proofs as Shaw received them from Archibald Henderson. Strikeout type is used to indicate

words and sentences which Shaw deleted by drawing a line through. The right-hand column shows, in italic type, Shaw's revisions. Angled brackets are used to mark off Shaw's rewrites in the right-hand column, and to indicate where they were to be inserted in the left-hand column. Editorial comments written in the margins of the galley proofs or on the attached notebook paper are provided as endnotes.

The portions of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* selected for inclusion in this essay illustrate the interplay between Henderson's authority as biographer and Shaw's authority as subject, in matters of opinion as well as in matters of fact. Both excerpts are to be found in Section VIII of the published biography, "The Dramas." This section of the book is of particular interest, not only because Shaw revised and commented upon it liberally, but because it demonstrates the dynamic between the literary biographer engaged in the act of criticism and the artist engaged in the act of self-criticism. In addition, this critical passage contains a large measure of interpretation and opinion, and is therefore a suitable text with which to examine Archibald Henderson's avowal that "behind the scenes of this book will be discovered no master ventriloquist, no sinister Svengali manipulating the puppet-opinions with invisible wires of influence" (*Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* 798).

The following passage from Chapter XLV, "Philosophical and Religious Plays," illustrates the intertwining of texts in *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*.¹

Major Barbara is ~~<Shaw's presentation, as Socialist, of the contemporary problem of Social determinism. It is true drama:>~~ a study of spiritual conflict between ~~the sheer~~ materialism ~~<of>~~ Undershaft and ~~<the humanitarian Christianity of Barbara. It is an indirect plea for a new kind of religion: the religion of social service and social rehabilitation. If the present practice of the Christian religion is inadequate to relieve the social horrors of poverty, by all means,~~

~~<by no means>~~

~~<impersonated by>~~ *<Salvationist piety impersonated by Barbara. Undershaft professes and shews himself a "confirmed mystic" though he crushes Barbara by the contrast between the miserable charitable ration with which she bribes the poor to pretend that they are "saved" and the high wages and organized*

says Undershaft, scrap the Christian morality and get something better. Here and in many other places, Shaw advises the millionaire, who is a "malefactor of great wealth" who has acquired his swollen fortune by grinding the faces of the poor and allowed his operatives a mere subsistence wage at the margin of poverty and destitution to turn Socialist and, emulating the examples of Capitalists like Carnegie and Rhodes in the educational and other fields, to employ his wealth in improving the conditions of life for the working classes.>

Major Barbara presents in an impressive way the tumult and struggle of the religious consciousness in the individual soul. The stage of the drama is the soul of the Salvation Army devotee. Major Barbara is a lovely and inspiring character. The sanity and sweetness of her nature, the positive divination which leads her to sink self and go straight to the heart of the religious problem, are revelations in the art of character portrayal. But her faith is not strong enough to move mountains: Shaw loads the dice against her, and endows her with but feeble powers of resistance < > to Undershaft's domineering personality and dominating intellectuality < Christianity does not yield so easily as does her disciple, Barbara, to the specious pleas of an unscrupulous materialism. The motivation of

welfare arrangements with which (anticipating Henry Ford, by the way) he saves them solidly from the degradation of poverty. Here we have no stage millionaire, no Sartorius slum landlord>

<. We have a strong man who hates poverty too much to tolerate it in his wage-slaves, and who thoroughly understands that they are his slaves only because they have not the grit and grasp to scrap their obsolete religions and moralities as he scraps the most expensive machine the moment he can get a better one.>

<not so much>

<as to his terrible strokes of a spiritual insight deeper than her own, and the clue he has, through his knowledge of her inveterately patronizing, managing, despotically

~~her conversion to the Undershaft philosophy is unconvincing.—Common sense is not Barbara's strong point. Brief reflection should have convinced her that the Salvation Army accepts Undershaft's and Bodger's "tainted money" without explicit or tacit obligation. But she doubtless saw, as Shaw intends us to see, that the Salvation Army is foredoomed to failure so long as its chief means of support is derived from the very class against which it animadverts.>~~

"great ladyish" mother, to Barbara's readiness to meddle with poor people's souls and peremptorily and fearlessly order their path to heaven.

Undershaft easily humbles her on that point; but in the delightful irrepressibility with which she accepts his challenge and takes him on, on his own ground of saving the well fed, she is still her mother's daughter.>

This passage reveals a subtle yet powerful editorial hand at work. With the addition of a well-placed phrase—e.g. “by no means” and “not so much”—Shaw could completely invert his biographer’s meaning while preserving much of the original verbiage. In this excerpt, Shaw’s revisions transform the text both in substance and in tone. While Henderson’s analysis contains a good deal of admiration, it is also “critical” in the popular sense of the word, objecting to the unscrupulousness of Undershaft and to Barbara’s insufficient common sense. Shaw’s alterations produce a more favorable estimation of *Major Barbara*—and a more sensitive one. Henderson’s simplified account of materialism versus spiritualism in *Major Barbara* is moulded into an insightful précis that reveals something of the depth of the characters and the complexity of the drama. The result: a distinct modification of the biography’s critical position.

In his treatise on literary biography, Leon Edel insists that “biographers must struggle constantly not to be taken over by their subjects, or to fall in love with them” (29). Shaw’s running commentary in the margins of the galley proofs and on the notebook paper attached bears witness to the inevitability of such a struggle. Remarks in which Shaw scolds his biographer for his tendency to romanticize his hero abound. At one point, Shaw discourages Henderson’s tendency to represent him as an early Ibsenite by declaring,

The reference to Ibsen’s plays is absurd: I knew nothing about them or him at the time. You remind me repeatedly of St Matthew, who explains

every action of Christ as intended simply to fulfil a prophecy. You have Butler and Ibsen and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on the brain and have quite forgotten the opening of the preface to *Major Barbara*, in which I trounced the critics for this sort of cackle.

This criticism is typical of the dynamic between Henderson, who delighted in tracing the influences in Shaw's plays, and Shaw, who was easily annoyed by such intellectual acrobatics. When Henderson became caught up in a compare-and-contrast style explication of a play, Shaw invariably crossed it out and substituted his own critique.

In the passage below, which concludes this section of the article, Shaw's editing is much more heavy-handed and his rewrites far lengthier than in the first excerpt. Like the *Major Barbara* passage, this galley exhibits Shaw's disguised accidentals and his posturing as Archibald Henderson. However, in this passage, the text in the two columns seems to emanate from opposing points of view; the two columns diverge from one another for paragraphs at a time, with little integration. Here, Shaw the Editor can be seen at his most cunning. Henderson's unflattering estimation of *Back to Methuselah* is cut from the copy as completely and as tracelessly as his excursion into Lamarckian evolution, to be replaced with a light-hearted, almost whimsical assessment penned by the playwright himself.

In *Back to Methuselah* (1921), Shaw achieved a victory for which his thirty years of play-writing were only a preparation. This play demonstrated to the public that Shaw is a philosopher and social thinker in the cosmic sense, with a wealth of religious feeling and a burning desire for race improvement. To full circle now comes this neo-Swiftian, this twentieth century Butler, not despairing of the future, but supplying humanity with some preliminary chapters for a new bible: a "metabiological Pentateuch." It is the expansion and maturation of the germ idea of Creative Evolution secreted in

the *Dream in Hell of Man and Superman*. This act, *The Revolutionist's Handbook*, and a stream of aphorisms produced an effect, Shaw points out, "so vertiginous, apparently, that nobody noticed the new religion in the center of the intellectual whirlpool."

Shaw's cerebration constitutes an embarrassment of riches. He rides off simultaneously in all directions in his prefaces, which from play to play grow more orbicular and diffuse. His plays often suffer from a plethora of ideas, *Man and Superman*, for example, containing enough to stock half-a-dozen ordinary comedies. This tendency to a sort of feverish, automatic prolixity reaches its climax in *Back to Methuselah* which "rambles concentrically" about the idea of longevity.² In his role of an "iconographer of the religion of his time," Shaw was not content to write a single play: it must be a group of plays in one.

~~Shaw was the pupil and disciple of Samuel Butler, whom he knew slightly and whose writings have profoundly influenced him. The starting point for his reflections was Butler's declaration that Charles Darwin had banished mind from the universe. A Vitalist and a mystic, Shaw rejected numerous other scientific theories in favor of Creative Evolution of the Lamarekian brand. Lamarekian Functional Adaptation exactly fitted his purpose as a counter to, a~~

<Its cosmic theme is the Creative Evolution of the third act of Man and Superman; but Shaw starts a new hare in the Methuselah theme. In the old days when Butler versus Darwin had developed into Shaw versus Neo-Darwinism, he had been struck by a remark of Weismann's to the effect that death was not a fundamental necessity but a device of Natural Selection to preserve the species from crowding itself off the earth, there being no other apparent reason why the elephant should not live as long as the immortal amoeba

substitute for, Darwinian Circumstantial Selection. In the World War he discerned an appalling illustration of the latter's operation. "If the Western powers had selected their Allies in the Lamarekian manner intelligently, purposely and vitally, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, as what Nietzsche called good Europeans, there would have been a League of Nations and no war."³ *Back to Methuselah* is a colossal work in mass, range and depth. It achieves the miracle of telling everything that Bernard Shaw thinks on the subject—perhaps not an unmixed blessing. This play, for all its successive sinuosities and wearing *longuers*, definitely places Shaw among the artist-philosophers and futurist-word painters: Dante, Milton, Goethe, Wagner, Ibsen, Swift. As Wells' *The Outline of History* is a prose word-picture with a Socialist slant, of humanity's past, so *Back to Methuselah* is a mystic's dramatic picture, in the form of a chronicle by aeons, with a Socialist slant, of humanity's entire history, stretching from the Creation as far as thought can reach. Reverting to the legend of the Garden of Eden, Shaw "exploits the eternal interest of the philosopher's stone which enables men to live for ever."²—Here at last Shaw realizes the dream of a lifetime: to write a play for a pit of philosophers. The first and last parts stand out in sharp contrast, as poetic and imaginative

or a man as long as a turtle or a parrot. This suggestion lay barren in Shaw's mind until it coupled up with the world war produced by the boyish immaturity of the diplomats, monarchs, and ministers who wielded the frightful destructive forces they let loose on Europe. Two new Shavian theses appear in the *Pentateuch*. The first is that if longer life is necessary for the preservation of the race men will live longer. The second is that though experience does not bring wisdom enough to counterbalance the recklessness produced by the shortness of our lives, an increase in our expectation of life would at once produce more serious, responsible, farsighted conduct.

In *Methuselah Adam*, almost driven mad by the intolerable prospect of immortality, no sooner learns from the serpent that he and Eve can reproduce themselves than he resolves to die at the end of a thousand years. But before that happens Cain's invention of murder and war has reduced the span of human life to its present brevity. We then jump the centuries and hear Asquith and Lloyd George, who have learnt nothing from the war, discussing their election policies with all their old cleverness, eloquence, and essential levity. Shaw justifies this introduction of living persons, which shocked Walkley, by pointing out that a fictitious instance would not carry conviction: he had to exhibit short-lived statesmanship in a shape which the audience would recognize as a living instance.

The cycle then jumps to a future in which a couple of minor characters in

evocations of very remote past and very remote future serious and provocative, neither in the jocular tone of Mark Twain's *Diaries of Adam and Eve* nor the merely fantastic evocations of Blake, of Bellamy, of Verne. The other three parts are in Shaw's well known conversational manner, debated dramas to elucidate the thesis and to forward the idea action through the give and take of discussion.>

the previous play, a young clergyman and a parlormaid, find themselves living in full vigor for three hundred years and are put to all sorts of shifts to conceal their longevity until they find one another out and realize that there must be others in the same predicament. In the fourth play the long-livers monopolize the British Isles as oracles who are consulted by short-lived States which have not developed beyond our own present stage. Finally, thirty thousand years hence, the race achieves an immortality limited only by the mathematical fact that if they go on long enough they are bound to have a fatal accident sooner or later. To avoid this they aspire to get rid of their bodies and become vortices in pure thought.

There is yet another new Shawian theme which Shaw develops in this final play of the cycle in which two Ancients of fabulous age converse with the children who are born from artificially hatched eggs at the stage which we attain after sixteen years or so, and in four years pass through the immaturity which we struggle with for threescore and ten. Perhaps only a mathematician or an expert in Catholic Thomism can grasp it. At all events the critics missed it completely; for they quite agreed with the baby Ancients that the life of the mature Ancients was a horror of cold passionless comfortless misery, like the life of an extinct star, without the glamor of romance, the ecstasy of love, the beauty of sex. But when one of the ardent juveniles makes this objection to the he-Ancient, addressing him as "you old fish," the

elder replies, "Child: one moment of the ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead." And the nymph who at the end of her four years' nonage is just passing into maturity finds that she no longer needs sleep, and finds pleasure in spending her nights meditating on the properties of numbers.

The thesis is, then, that thought is a passion like any other passion, except that it is a growing necessity of evolving life instead of, like sex passion, a receding one which already produces reactions of disgust and counter passions of chastity. The act of thought, Shaw reminds us, is a pleasurable act without reactions, and we have only to conceive this pleasure as evolving to orgasmic intensity to believe, as Aquinas the Divine Doctor did, that a future of creative thought may be definitely more blissful than the past of merely procreative animal reflexes. As a mathematician, myself, I cannot deny that the thesis is possible, strangely attractive, and certainly dignified. >

In this huge work, Shaw vindicates his claims as thinker and philosopher—that department in which he is “better than Shakespeare.” ~~<Shaw is not>~~ a creative or originitive thinker who devises new cosmic theories < >. ~~He is~~

a new-century integrational thinker, co-ordinating ~~<some of the more advanced ideas into a cosmic scheme. With the fantasy of a mystic and the imagism of the~~

<He makes no claim to be>

<: indeed he denies that such a monster has ever existed. He is a contributive thinker and>

<the pioneer ideas of his time with the main body of advancing thought. The final prospect glimpsed is the redemption of mankind from the>

artist, he integrates these theories, seeks to harmonize them with the aspirations, conscious and subconscious, of the race, and illuminates them with the brilliant lights and gay colors of the theatre. A life long crusade against Romance, exposure of the seductive shams of Art for Art's Sake, rejection of the blandishments of Eros, concealed impatience with humanity's blind absorption in self have gradually paved the way for the new social and racial ideal: to redeem mankind from the bondage of the flesh and to eternalize human aspiration toward the spiritual and the divine. <Opposed to the Darwinian theory of modification of species by natural selection stands the Lamarekian theory of modification of species by design. By wishing, by striving for it, man may perhaps lengthen his life to the span of, say, three hundred years. This is the story of their scientifico-mystic consummation and its consequences.>

That <it> is by no means wholly fantastic and impossibilist is indicated by the noteworthy coincidental circumstance that,

<It is noteworthy, in view of his tolerance of the modern Russian practice of "weeding the garden" by frankly exterminating economic individualists, that he develops a significant feature from The Coming Race, a now neglected novel by Bulwer Lytton, which delighted Shaw in his boyhood. Lytton's subterranean sages have the power of slaying at sight by an electronic emanation called Vril. Shaw's Ancients have the same power of killing. The short lived die of discouragement in their presence, as savage tribes fail and perish before civilized man. One of the crazes of Shotover in Heartbreak House is the discovery of Vril. There is a dangerous side to Shavianism.>

<the tale of the long-livers>

since the appearance of this play, a number of scientists of repute have predicted, on the basis of evolutionary advances in science, the considerable prolongation of human life, widening of the normal span, as one of the indicated eventualities of the future.

The old Shaw has his innings in part II, the *Brothers Barnabas*, with its heavy caricatures of Lloyd George and Balfour, its exposure of the bankruptcy of the party system and the septic opportunism of "blocc" leadership. The climax of the fable comes, contrary to dramatic convention, in the last act—a philosophic dream of scientific poetic conception, memorable in its magic, pictorial evocation. Yet it reveals, in all its aridity and coldness, Shaw's Olympian unconcern for man's personal happiness and individual destiny. The glamor of romance, the ecstasies of love, the beauties of sex—the things which make life endurable, the image and the dream—are foreshortened into the briefest conceivable interval consonant with biological convenience! Shaw at last stands before us, voluntarily exposed, as a new Swift—not, it is true, with a scorn and hatred of the species, but with a frigid contempt for the universal emotions and a deliberate immolation of the individual upon the altar of the supposititious welfare of the race. Shaw writes like some Manichaean deity from the regions of Perpetual Ice, with the

arctic impassibility of a J.B.S. Haldane or a Bertrand Russell, Doréan disregard for individual happiness as compared with the crepuscular beauties of contemplation and the blessings of racial amelioration. "I believe in the Holy Ghost" is the deluding eredal utterance of the prophet of the dehumanized and repellent Superman. The long <passage> presenting the Apocalyptic vision of the spirit of Lilith concerning Adam and Eve, her children, is a poetic epitome of <this strange, forbidding work with its uninviting offer of the chill calm of contemplation in place of the human joy of living:>

<epilogue>

<the whole, and is full of the sense of eternal evolutionary movement which makes every moment in the many thousand year play a passing moment, not to be taken for more than such a comparative trifle is worth.>

III. RECEPTION

After examining the preceding excerpts from the galley proofs of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, one might consider how the reception of the 1932 biography differs from the reception of the galley proofs that preceded its production and now succeed its reception. In nearly every case, the material in the right-hand column was assimilated into the biography exactly as Shaw had specified, with no acknowledgement of the true "author." In the published biography, the words of Shaw and those of Henderson are thus indistinguishable from one another, with the exception of the rare instances in which some internal textual indication gives the author away. Quite clearly, the text presented in the excerpts, while containing virtually the same words in the same order as the corresponding sections of the published work, cannot be read in the same way that the biography's original audience read it; a different text confronts us, one which renders the expostulations of praise uttered by the biography's original audience unconvincing, if not totally irrelevant. But while the transcribed passages nullify some of the adulation that was bestowed upon the biography in 1932, this "new" text is surely even more remarkable, insofar as it sets the scene for a provocative inquiry

into the nature of biography, autobiography, and collaborative life-writing.

One of the most puzzling, yet basic, questions raised by the transcribed passages is the question of genre. Is this dialogic alternation of voices to be considered "biography"? Or, is this layering of narratives something else: a kind of fiction, perhaps? Considering the right-hand column alone, can Shaw's writing about his life and works be regarded as a gesture of self-portraiture, a kind of indirect expression of autobiography? The borderline that separates biography and autobiography becomes essential to the resolution of these questions. If autobiography is merely biography written by its own subject, as is sometimes simplistically assumed, then Shaw's contributions to Henderson's biography certainly might be considered autobiographical. But there is a great deal to suggest that there is more that distinguishes autobiography from biography than the identity of the acknowledged or unacknowledged author. An excursion into the distinguishing features of these two genres elucidates the unique intertwining of texts presented in this article.

It may be recalled that, in composing his biographies of Shaw, Archibald Henderson drew liberally upon the information contained in Shaw's epistolary reminiscences. The fact that the working title he proposed for his first Shavian biography was "Bernard Shaw: Biography and Autobiography" suggests that Henderson conceived of the book as a kind of pastiche of biography and autobiography. Indeed, "Biography and Autobiography" proved to be a suitable description of the work, particularly for the early chapters, in which Henderson provided connective prose in between Shaw's numerous recollections and opinions, many of them gleaned from the prodigious 54-page letter of January 1905. Although the subtitle "Biography and Autobiography" appeared on the first manuscript of the 1911 biography which Henderson mailed to Shaw for approval, it was not used for subsequent versions of the work. It is likely that Shaw rejected the subtitle himself.

Although Henderson had viewed his first manuscript of *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* as a kind of grafting of biography and autobiography, he later sought to unravel these two strands in his *Life of Shaw*. By the time he wrote his second Shaw biography, *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, he had developed a certain amount of unease about autobiographical authority, and

was quick to emphasize the gap between biography, which he considered to be historically sound, and autobiography, which, in Shaw's case, was subject to the fanciful self-mythologizing of G.B.S. In the Introduction to *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, Henderson writes:

By playful wit, delightful effrontery, comical assumption of colossal egoism, [Shaw] achieved his greatest artistic creation: a brilliant mime and dexterous juggler in the dance of life. The *eidolon* of G. B. S., so ingeniously projected by Bernard Shaw, is a false front, a counterfeit image of a real human being. The fame of Bernard Shaw is in no small part the false notoriety of G. B. S.: the publicized vogue of a creature too fantastic to be other than an ingenious work of art. (xxiii)

In contrast to Shaw's whimsical portrayals of himself, Archibald Henderson was careful to present his biographies as objective representations, faithful to historical fact and untainted by such flights of imagination as the "ingenious" persona of G.B.S. In the first appendix of *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, the biographer differentiates between two Shaws: the biographical Shaw and the autobiographical Shaw:

This book is in no sense a diluted extract of the Shavian Shaw. It is *my* Shaw, in the light of the art and science, the philosophy and religion of today. . . . Shaw fondly imagines that he alone is qualified to write a genuinely trustworthy account of his own life. Never was madder illusion! Shaw's autobiography would be one of the world's literary masterpieces, but it would not be true. Clever, ingenious, satirical, absurdly boastful and swankily modest, playfully egotistic and seriously self-exculpatory, artistic and journalistic—yes. But the confessions of this instinctive mountebank would teem with postures, effects, spoofs, huge jokes, climaxes and anticlimaxes, dramatic episodes, melodramatic ideas and sentimental ideals distorting into a delightful artistic caricature the prosaic events, pedestrian realities and quiet tones of life itself. (797)

Archibald Henderson recognized the bias inherent in the autobiographical act; namely, that it is impossible to tell the truth about oneself. His insistence on the dubiousness of a Shaw autobiography is therefore somewhat problematic in light of the extent to which Shaw's own prose found its way into *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet*, a work of putative objectivity.

Identifying the point at which the "real-life Shaw" ends and the "Shavian Shaw" begins appears to be an ongoing concern of Shaw biographers. While Archibald Henderson, as Shaw's authorized biographer, certainly faced unusual obstacles in separating the biographical Shaw from the autobiographical one, Shavian

critics to this day perceive the two "Shaws" as distinct entities. A recent reviewer of a collection of Shaw "Interviews and Recollections" informs readers that, "Shaw was an inveterate mythmaker, especially about himself, and went to great pains to revise constantly the self he projected to the world" (Madden 7); Michael Holroyd employs the narrative device of using separate names, "Shaw" and "G.B.S.," to differentiate between his own protagonist, the subject of the biography, and Shaw's protagonist, the persona Shaw projected to the public.

The inclination to fictionalize oneself is by no means unique to Bernard Shaw. Leon Edel reminds his readers of Lord Byron's pronouncement, "one lies more to one's self than to anyone else" (17); and Philippe Lejeune attests to the impossibility of writing about oneself objectively:

Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. (131–2)

Like Lejeune, Shaw did not believe that autobiography was "possible." In a letter to Henderson written in June 1907, he declared,

I never intend to write an autobiography because I do not think that, psychologically and practically, it is possible to "tell all"—Cellini, Rousseau and Company to the contrary notwithstanding. I have written, at one time or another, enough biographical reminiscence to serve the purpose of anyone wishing to write about me. (*George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* xxv)

Shaw's reservations regarding autobiography, as expressed in his letter to Archibald Henderson, ostensibly relate to production rather than reception: he is doubtful that such a thing can be *written*. Yet, his persistence in composing his own "biographical" writings, as well as his practice of attributing his own self-criticism and self-portraiture to others, suggests that the limitations of autobiography, from Shaw's point of view, concern its reception rather than its production. If the reception of an autobiographical text could be manipulated in some way, so that autobiography would be read as biography, these limitations might be overcome.

The designations "biography" and "autobiography" take on extreme importance with regard to the reception of a life-text. While readers of biography are inclined to trust in the author as

a more or less objective source, readers of autobiography understand that the work is an act of self-portraiture, susceptible to all the distortions and omissions and embellishments that such a project invites. With this in mind, readers of autobiography do not seek the unalloyed "truth" in a work that is designated an "autobiography." How the reader is to interpret the text depends, then, on an understanding between the author and the reader that is coded by the generic identity of the work. This agreement, what Lejeune has termed the Autobiographical Pact, involves the author's making known to the reader that the work is self-reflexive, that its subject is the author's own life and personal development.

In his promise to proofread and "correct" Henderson's manuscript, Shaw discovered a unique solution to the apparent impossibility of autobiography and the trap of the autobiographical pact: to cleverly disguise his autobiographical contributions, to dress them up and pass them off as biography written by Archibald Henderson. In this manner Shaw was able to circumvent the loss of objectivity that inevitably befalls autobiography labeled as such, while retaining authorial control over the ostensibly biographical text. It is in this respect that the transcribed text in this essay is most remarkable; it eliminates the perceived "impossibility" of autobiography by masquerading as biography.

The collaborative text presented here occupies a unique point of intersection where biography and autobiography overlap and mingle; it is a "borderline case" in the complex system of genres. Philippe Lejeune has identified such borderline cases as being particularly interesting to the study of autobiography since they tend to foreground generic features that typically inhabit the background of a text. One borderline case he has concentrated on is autobiography in the third person, a rare form of autobiography that bears some resemblance to the text considered here. Lejeune's investigations into the nature of the autobiographical enterprise provide a critical language and theoretical perspective with which to further probe the intricacies of this (auto)biographical text.

Lejeune identifies four players in an autobiographical text. These are author, narrator, protagonist, and model. Lejeune uses these designations to differentiate autobiography from related genres such as biography and the autobiographical novel. The left-hand column of the Shaw-Henderson text serves to illustrate

how each of these elements figures in conventional biography. In the left-hand column, the author is Archibald Henderson, the narrator is Archibald Henderson as represented within the text itself, the protagonist is the "Shaw" of the text, and the model is the real-life Shaw in the world outside the text. While the model is a fixed identity (the real person), the protagonist is an image of the model represented, more or less accurately, by the writer. In the case of biography, the resemblance of the protagonist to the historically verifiable model is the ground for authenticating the work; hence Archibald Henderson's insistence on adhering to documented facts. It is in this particular that biography differs fundamentally from autobiography.

The right-hand column offers a slightly different scenario. This time the author is Shaw, the narrator, again, is Archibald Henderson, the protagonist is the "Shaw" of the text, and the model is the Shaw in the world outside the text. While conventional autobiography presupposes identity between the author, narrator, protagonist, and model, Shaw's text varies from these specifications in one particular only: the use of a third person narrator that is other than a version of Shaw himself. This use of a narrator in the third person transforms the reception of the text in a significant way.

While Shaw mimics the narrative voice of Archibald Henderson, his narrator is nonetheless distinct from the Archibald Henderson who narrates the left-hand column. Just as we recognize two "Shaws," the model and the protagonist, one a textual figure, the other a real person, we must also recognize two "Hendersons": the real-life Henderson (the author) and the textual Henderson (the narrator). This distinction only appears significant in the right-hand column where there is *resemblance* but not *identity*, unlike Henderson's own text in which there is virtual identity between author and narrator. The difference between these two narrative voices is analogous to the difference between the protagonist and the model; that is, the difference between the real-life Shaw and the fictionalized persona of G.B.S. Shaw uses the figure of Archibald Henderson to act as his mouthpiece, but he cannot fully assume Henderson's identity in the text. Nor does he wish to; it is by establishing a distance between Henderson's narrator and his own that Shaw succeeds in injecting his unique perspective into a text that poses as standard biography. The lack of identity between the author and the

narrator appears most noticeably in the passage of Chapter XLVI in which Shaw writes, "As a mathematician, myself, I cannot deny that the thesis is possible, strangely attractive, and certainly dignified" (56), a statement made in clear defiance of Henderson's own view as expressed in the left-hand column. The "I" of the right-hand column thus takes on some of the characteristics of a fictionalized voice.

Since Shaw clearly made no attempt to identify his narrator exactly with the author Archibald Henderson, it is tempting to attribute the words of the "I" of the right-hand column directly to Bernard Shaw, the historical model. Certainly the two are in some ways inseparable. Nevertheless, that they are, at least in parts of the text, distinct from one another can be seen in one of Shaw's annotations, one which relates to a portion of the galley proofs that does not appear in this essay. In this note, Shaw instructs, "First [line] next par should begin 'Perhaps Shaw now regards'; for I certainly dont take any such view." Although the point of view may resemble Henderson's in some places, and may be identical with Shaw's in others, there is no verifiably consistent perspective, and the overall effect is rather like that of a smokescreen which obscures protagonist and narrator while the author, Shaw, effects his escape: his virtual effacement from the text itself.

Philippe Lejeune has argued that all autobiography, even conventional autobiography in the first person, is indirect. Observing the linguistic distinction between *utterance* and *enunciation*, it is possible to see that in conventional biography, the "I" has two referents: the "I" that narrates and the "I" that is the protagonist. Autobiography in the third person acknowledges this division in a way that conventional autobiography does not. Lejeune explains:

Everything happens as if, in autobiography, no combination of the system of persons in enunciation could satisfactorily "totally express" the person. Or rather, to say things less naively, all the imaginable combinations reveal more or less clearly what is the distinctive feature of the person: the tension between impossible unity and intolerable division, and the fundamental split that makes of the speaking subject a creature of flight. (35-36)

Shaw's contributions to his own biography fall beyond the pale of even such a tiny subgenre as autobiography in the third person. It is simultaneously autobiographical and anti-autobiographical. Absolutely unique in terms of genre, it cannot be reduced to

biography, autobiography, or any other single literary kind. The right-hand column is itself a fusion of biography and autobiography, or more precisely, an infusion of autobiography into the generic framework of biography, while the two columns taken together comprise an interweaving of texts that are essentially at cross-purposes with one another. The resulting text is a kind of imposture, a subversion of conventional biography. While generic features of biography and autobiography are merged in the text, the narrative voices and critical perspectives are refracted into a polyphony of voices and perspectives that bear an ultimately problematic relationship to the authors themselves, so that the overall effect is one of double-exposure or parallax—a superimposing of viewpoints and voices.

Philippe Lejeune has devoted critical attention to the relatively common literary phenomenon of collaborative or ghostwritten autobiography, another class of “borderline” autobiography. Shaw’s revisions of his biographer’s text constitute an interesting reversal of the practice of collaborative or ghostwritten autobiography. Rather than solving a dilemma concentrated in the area of production, as in autobiography of persons who cannot write (or cannot write well), Shaw’s practice of ghostwriting for his biographer solved a problem of reception by endowing his words with a credibility that would not have been available to them without the “unbiased” authority of Archibald Henderson. Indeed, Henderson’s authority as biographer proved to be just as important to Shaw as Shaw’s authority as biographical subject was to Henderson. It is somewhat ironic that Henderson informs us in his biographies of G.B.S. that ghostwriting was Shaw’s first literary job; as this essay has revealed, it was a skill he could, and did, fall back on.

NOTES

1. From *George Bernard Shaw* by Archibald Henderson. Copyright 1932 by D. Appleton and Company. Renewal 1960 by Archibald Henderson. Copyright 1946 by Archibald Henderson. Renewed in 1984 by Archibald Henderson. Used by permission of Dutton Signet, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.
2. This is inattentive. There is nothing in *Methuselah* that is not to the Longevity point.

3. All this about Lamarck is superfluous, as it has been dealt with before, and *Methuselah* gets a very long distance away from that worthy soldier. And you say not a word about the novelties which distinguish *Meth.* from *Man and Superman*, especially the title theme.

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