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The Development of the Superman in Shaw and Shelly

The figure of the Superman is a powerful one, existing in different forms through Western mythology, but always as the man who defies accepted morality and destroys contemporary social structures: "The superior man creates his own laws, and 'the iron claws of Destiny,' which tear only the flanks of the weak, have no hold on him. He lives in an atmosphere beyond what ordinary men call 'good and evil'" (Chaix-Ruy 35). As an intellectual rebel and dissenter toward tyrannical regimes, the Superman begins to accumulate praise from Romantic authors feeling a kinship with the classical Prometheus and the Miltonic Satan. In the modern period, the Superman, "the newest of the old crazes" (Shaw 172), is given full characterization by Friedrich Nietzsche and later Henri Bergson and Bernard Shaw, responding to a need for purpose and direction left unfulfilled in the wake of evolutionist's negation of conventional Christianity. Writing from the period of the early popularity of Supermen-types, Mary Shelley investigates in *Frankenstein* the rebel as existing in a framework of good and evil, while Shaw in his philosophical drama *Man and Superman* explicitly defines the Superman and the human obligation to assist its creation. Shelley and Shaw use many of the same figures in their analogies – the devil and the Prometheus, for example - but each reinterpret them to facilitate their own arguments, further complicating the in-text parallels between characters that each work boasts. The Superman may be an enduring icon, but as a representative of moral and social transgression, it is particularly subject to valuation and redefinition on an individual as well as cultural level.

Published at approximately the same time as Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Bergson's *Creative Evolution* defines the title theory as a scientific one expanding on Darwinian principles, elevating the Superman figure from a literary motif to the biological fate of humanity. As a response to *The Origin of the Species*, Bergson's work reaffirms a direction and goal held by the human community, such meaning having been lost after the pre-modern disproval of creationist beliefs through geological and evolutionary discovery. From the observation that Darwinian evolution accounts for adaptation of species, but not the general advancement of life as "life need not evolved at all, or might have evolved only in very restricted limits", Bergson assumes "an original impetus…that has carried life, by more and more complex forms, to higher and higher destinies" (Bergson 102). Shaw's Don Juan draws the same conclusions as evidence for the Life Force: "What made this brain of mine, so you think? Not the need to move my limbs; for a rat with half my brains moves as well as I. Not merely the need to do, but the need to know what I do" (Shaw 141). The unseen purpose of the Life Force, or Élan Vital, is complete self understanding, an "ideal individual being omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, and withal completely, unilludedly self-conscious" (149). For Shaw, this is achieved by a succession of increasingly intellectual men willing to act as iconoclasts, but Bergson involves the additional step of intuition, that is, "instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely" (Bergson 176). The Life Force is a vital aspect of the Vitalist Superman, and replies to the question of Victor Frankenstein: "Whence…did the principle of life proceed?" (Shelley 79).

In *Man and Superman* Nietzsche is characterized off-handedly by the Devil as "a confirmed Life Force worshipper," placing him within the "latest fashion" (Shaw 172) of thought succeeding his death but ongoing in the Shavian afterlife. While Bergson's Superman is an amoral biological development, Nietzsche's Superman, or 'overman' depending on translation, exists on the horizon of civilization: "Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman" (Nietzsche 197). Similarly, Bergsonian evolution relies on Darwinian selection and the guidance of the Life Force for advancement, but as a social imperative, the aide to the Nietzschean Superman must "wage war everywhere so that through him will be born the one before whom Nature has retreated" (Chaix-Ruy 32). The violence and destruction implicit in the call for reform is clear: "I shatter creeds and demolish idols…Construction cumbers the ground with institutions made by busybodies. Destruction clears it and gives us breathing space and liberty" (Shaw 74). Just as Victor "must have recourse to death" so as "to examine the causes of life" (Shelley 79), to "create the man of the future" (Chaix-Ruy 36) he must be born of chaos and fallen social structures: "To offer oneself as a holocaust so that the Superman may come, that is the mission Zarathustra sets forth to man" (Chaix-Ruy 49).

Shaw and Nietzsche add another social dimension to the formulation of the Superman in the obligation for the philosophical man to participate in the will of the Life Force lest he unintentionally hinder evolution: "He who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will by the so-discovered means" (Shaw 151). The man who attends the will, "like the daring pilot who risks in the storm the lives of his crew and the

terrified passengers" (Chaix-Ruy 47), understands the worth and cost of the plan. Bergson acknowledges the function of the will of man in disrupting common thought and conceiving the direction of the Élan Vital, also describing it as a Nietzschean act of destruction, but places no emphasis on any moral responsibility to the will:

> In order that our consciousness shall coincide with something of its principle, it must detach itself from the *already-made* and attach itself to the *being-made*. It needs that…the faculty of *seeing* should be made to be one with the act of *willing* – a painful effort which we can make suddenly, doing violence to our nature, but cannot sustain more than a few moments. (Bergson 237)

In the "Don Juan in Hell" scene, Shaw develops the "battle between those who serve Creative Evolution, attacking 'what is'", the philosophers and realists of heaven, and "those who unwittingly foil the progress" (Berg 145), the artists and Romantics of hell who engender stagnation or devolution: "Nietzsche saw that if mankind is left to itself and allowed to follow its own course, it will slide down the incline of instincts until it reaches the elementary reflexes" (Chaix-Ruy 36). While Tanner and Don Juan voice the theory of the will, the conclusion to *Man and Superman* involves the feminine as an integral counterpart to the philosophic male.

The "Eternal Feminine" of Goethe's *Faust* acts as a surrogate Life Force in the play, drawing the title character "ever upward and on" (Shaw 140) through the redemptive power of love. Don Juan, though denouncing marriage, concedes the benefit of the Eternal Feminine for more than birthing the Superman: "It was a Woman who taught me to say 'I am; therefore I think.' And also 'I would think more; therefore I must be more" (Shaw 154). Ann and her doppelganger Ana feel compelled "instinctively" into "service to a cause: the Shavian Life Force" (Berg 148), and are responsible for the literal will which is the impetus for the play. Fredric Berg suggests that Tanner's ideology is

comprised of infertile "shortsighted personal aims" (Berg 149), but Ana's cries for "a father for the Superman!" (Shaw 173) foreshadow a coupling between Tanner and Ann which will "move the species slightly up the evolutionary ladder" (Berg 152). In *Frankenstein*, Justine and Elizabeth appear as paragons of Goethe's female goodness, and possess all the capacity through their love and innocence to draw Victor toward higher purposes. However, the novel depicts primarily Victor's failed communication with or usurpation of the Life Force, his selfishness causing him to resist the potential redemption and forgiveness offered by the women in exchange for honesty and familial caring. Notably, Victor neglects the influence of Elizabeth during his actions as a rebel-Superman, and attempts to create a new humanity born motherless. The female figures of both works are a fundamental part of the creation of the Superman, as a motivating source as well as in the role of mother.

Shaw and Shelley each conceive of the Superman as a rebel figure but acknowledge that he has not yet been created. The authors suffice with "mediators" or "models" (Chaix-Ruy 41) as their characters and inter-textual references, though "Nietzsche realizes more and more that we cannot turn to the past for models" (Chaix-Ruy 36). In manipulating the Prometheus and the devil, a century of cultural currency separates Shaw and Shelley leading them each to different conclusions concerning their Supermen figures. As with the writing of Bergson and Nietzsche, *Man and Superman* delivers an inspirational philosophy on life and a guide for behaviour, while Shelley's is a cautionary tale about the hubris of the rebel which returns to the ambiguous message of the Prometheus myth and the Miltonic Satan.

The Prometheus figure combines two aspects pertinent to the Superman theory - Prometheus as a maker of man and as a thief of fire – both of which had become popular in Shelley's era as symbolic of the creative artist or scientist and of the iconoclast in an unjust regime: "The spirit of the age may include certain images: the idea of Prometheus was in the air" (Small 52). While her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley along with fellow Romantic poets lauded the revolutionary, Shelley portrays Victor Frankenstein as a literal maker of man, flawed as an individual, and the creator of a potential, but ultimately imperfect Superman. "Prometheus as the original creator of mankind, blamable therefore for all man's imperfections" (Small 51), is mirrored by Victor's motivation by a sort of corrupt, inverted Life Force, a "frantic impulse" or "unnatural stimulus" (Shelley 82) to labour, which produces defect where there should be improvement: "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley 85). Early in the play, Tanner remarks on the "unscrupulous" nature of the artist, declaring him a type of false Superman, "half vivisector, half vampire" (Shaw 61), improving not humanity but his own art through the destruction of others: "Perish the race and wither a thousand women if only the sacrifice of them enable him to act Hamlet better" (Shaw 62). In creating his monster, "my own vampire" (Shelley 104), Victor's scientific inspiration leads him "to forget those friends who were so many miles absent" (Shelley 83). As the Devil warns, "Beware of the pursuit of the Superhuman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human" (Shaw 171).

Shaw and Bergson address the fact "that biological progress must precede intellectual development" (Berg 155), Don Juan observing that "Life was driving at

brains" (Shaw 150) rather than beauty. With his "superhuman speed", "stature" which "seemed to exceed that of a man", "unearthly ugliness" (Shelley 125), and apparent proficiency at learning language, the monster meets these criteria, but fails by his Romantic sensibility, his desire to integrate himself into the human community and conform to prevailing ideals of good and evil, rather than reform or destroy social institutions. Victor, though censured by Shelley, may be awarded a place in Shavian heaven for his efforts; however, his creature would be condemned to Shavian hell for his aimless violence without larger vision.

As the creator Prometheus, Victor is unable to achieve a Superman, and as the fire-thief Prometheus, Victor warns of overreaching such as his own: "Learn from me…how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to be greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley 81). By his own admission, he has transgressed beyond the moral boundaries of human knowledge: a Faustian error that a Shavian Superman would not regret making. "An example for all who sought to combat ignorance" (Small 49), the heroic Prometheus was returned to with Shaw's Superman, "who is as old as Prometheus" (Shaw 172), from Shelley's critical approach to the figure.

Similarly, the Miltonic Satan was endowed with the same Promethean traits of courage and just revolt, *Paradise Lost* reinterpreted as "the great guide-book of spiritual rebellion" (Small 58). Victor and his creature both characterize themselves using Satan's exclamations of suffering and isolation in Pandemonium, and while this parallels the defiance and subsequent eternal punishment of Prometheus, the Satan figure is further complicated by Shaw's use of the Devil as a representative of "the unreal and of the

seekers for happiness" (Shaw 139). The original Superman model, Milton's Satan was cast from heaven for waging war on God, while the Shavian Devil is not only in hell voluntarily, but would not have a place in the Shavian heaven for it is, conversely, a place for iconoclasts: "There is a notion that I was turned out of it; but as a matter of fact nothing could have induced me to stay there. I simply left it and organized this place" (Shaw 136). For Shelley, hell is the guilt and inner turmoil from violent and selfish offense, from attempting to act a Superman when one is not, and for Shaw, hell is to take a laissez-faire approach to the economics of human evolution toward the Superman, reveling in the Romantic and illusory: "To be in Hell is to drift: to be in Heaven is to steer" (Shaw 169). Through seemingly endless circumlocutions in parallel characters and icons, Shaw and Shelley furnish the discourse of their respective eras with new interpretations of the Superman and its development.

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