Back and Forth to Methuselah: Utopia, Dystopia, and Problematizing Age and Longevity in G. B. Shaw's Interwar Play Cycle

Bence Gábor Kvéder

Abstract

After the straightforward response to the horrors of the First World War in *Heartbreak House* (1919), Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) created a more nuanced and rather allegorical reflection on the aftermath of the military events that reshaped, among several fields of culture, both political and philosophical attitudes in Europe. In *Back to Methuselah* (1921), the author provides five interconnected plays from five different and, to a certain extent, imaginary eras of human history and civilization. Reaching back to biblical sources and origin myths, as well as forward to futuristic settings and certain predictions, this Shavian Pentateuch, accompanied by an equally complex Preface, is a representative of *interwar utopianism*. Aimed at general, age-old, and overarching, essentially eternal themes and issues, such as the meaning of life and death, possible ways to achieve maximum longevity, as well as the potential betterment and advancement of humankind, this five-part dramatic work appears to be Shaw's first, but not only, truly "speculative" writing in the literary sense of the term. This essay presents a reading of *Back to Methuselah* as both a modernist piece of utopian literature and an authorial answer to wartime inhumanity, keeping the scope of analysis primarily on the features and elements that create and maintain the modern-day scientific and speculative nature of the play(s). Furthermore, I look at the way(s) in which the concept of age and the social phenomenon of *ageism* are addressed and utilized in the play cycle, also analyzing certain Shavian predictions regarding the future of humankind in general, as well as the dramatist's views anticipating the emergence of a discourse later identified as *posthumanism*. Relying on the theoretical approaches and standpoints of recent scholarship, my ultimate goal is to examine the forward-looking plot(s), interwar significance, and present-day relevance of G. B. Shaw's utopian sci-fi drama cycle.

Keywords: *Back to Methuselah*, interwar utopianism, longevity, ageism, sci-fi

**

Introduction: Utopia, Dystopia, and Sci-Fi Drama in the Interwar Period

It is hardly surprising that an undeniably turbulent period of human history, namely the twentieth century, witnessed a considerable resurgence of utopian modes of

writing. For instance, in the "Introduction" to their book *Utopianism, Modernism, and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, editors Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell refer to that era as "a century of utopianism" (5). Besides the more advanced, yet not perfect worlds appearing in utopian literature, however, less optimistic prospects regarding humankind's potential future also emerged in noticeably great numbers during that conflict-ridden period of history.[1] The co-existence of and occasional rivalry between utopian and dystopian traditions have received widespread critical attention since the early 1900s. Providing a well-defined historical context for utopias and dystopias, Fátima Vieira notes that "the twentieth century was predominantly characterized by man's disappointment—and even incredulity—at the perception of his own nature, mostly when his terrifying deeds throughout the two World Wars were considered. In these contexts, utopian ideals seemed absurd; and the floor was inevitably left to dystopian discourse" (18). Not only does the critic elaborate on the process of dystopian views becoming more influential than utopian ones, but she also highlights the reason behind this shift by identifying the two major global military conflicts of the first half of the last century as the cornerstones of the perspectives and standpoints people developed regarding their social, economic, and political contexts (18).

Readers naturally tend to connect both utopian and dystopian modes of writing to fiction. The name "fiction" often refers to works belonging exclusively to one of the three main traditional genre categories, thus, upon encountering the terms "utopia" and "dystopia," one can easily think of prose works. Accordingly, novels (such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) and short stories (such as E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops") usually claim privilege in the corpus of utopian and/or dystopian texts. In scholarly literature, these two concepts indeed are widely associated, or even intertwined, with fiction, specifically with the sub-genre of sci-fi, which Patrícia Vieira regards as "their [i.e. utopia's and dystopia's] literary cousin" (25). A further classic example could be Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), a work of interwar speculative utopianism—as well as an example of dystopian literature at the same time. However, a thought-provoking tale or parable can be told in a form different from that of prose works. Despite the assumed implication of the term, "science *fiction*" might mean any fictitious plot using elements of and addressing certain themes prevalent in sci-fi novels and short stories, regardless of its structure. Consequently, the general characteristics of this literary form can be extended to the realm of drama, too. Theater has always been alert to social changes and even crises, thus dramatic pieces can offer insight into what their authors may consider the most significant, urgent, sensitive, or controversial issues within their own cultures. Therefore, the potential of drama to be influenced by and to take advantage of utopian and dystopian ideas and features can be acknowledged.

Plays drawing inspiration from and incorporating motifs of science fiction started emerging during the 1920s: a period of time when revolutionary advancement in

1 For a list of numerical data regarding utopian and dystopian texts published in English in the first half of the twentieth century—based on Lyman Tower Sargent's research—, see Marks, Vieira, and Wagner-Lawlor 11.

modern technology, major and potentially effective social phenomena, as well as strongly experimental modernist ambitions in literature fertilized theater, too.[2] Whereas technological developments and societal novelties provided rich subject matter for utopias, major military conflicts invited response in the form of dystopias. Furthermore, the early interwar period, when the world was still recuperating from the initial shock caused by the First World War, saw the crystallization of a more complicated, ambivalent approach to modern inventions, identifiable in literature as well. Summarizing the aftermath of the global conflict, Sara Danius captures this widespread social phenomenon and literary tendency: "Like never before, large parts of Europe had been subjected to methodical destruction. [. . .] The war seemed like a giant death machine, especially since recent technological advances in armor, warfare, and intelligence collection had been put to systematic use. Indeed, the Great War introduced whole new levels of abstraction, rationalization, and automatization" (69). The uncertainty regarding safety, political, social, and economic stability, technological advancement, as well as the future of humanity in general turned concepts like "abstraction," "rationalization," and "automatization" into a matter of lasting literary debate—whose battles started to be fought on the stage of sci-fi drama, too. The English-speaking playwright whose work includes dramatic texts that can be considered as case studies of such theatrical trends both during the interwar period (1919-1938) and in the post-World War II era (1946-1950) was George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).[3]

Relying on the theoretical approaches and standpoints of recent scholarship, in my essay I present a reading of Shaw's dramatic cycle, *Back to Methuselah* (1921), as both a manifestation of utopian literature in the form of sci-fi drama and an authorial response to wartime inhumanity. My analysis is going to focus on the up-to-date scientific elements and speculative features traceable in the plays within the cycle. I hypothesize that the text is a representative of interwar modernist literature: a series of five intertwined, dramatized narratives anticipating post-humanist theories[4]

---

2 One prominent non-English literary manifestation of the trend of sci-fi theater is Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920), whose robots exemplify the utter instability and fragile nature of utopian beliefs and prove to be capable of turning a utopian dream into a dystopian reality with relative ease, within a short amount of time. In *Utopian Literature and Science*, Patrick Parrinder dedicates a whole chapter to this Czech play ("Towards the Singularity? Čapek's *R.U.R.* and Its Times"), emphasizing its influence in Britain from its 1923 premiere onwards (see Parrinder 147–59). For a brief analysis of the play, see also Stock 139.

3 As a Hungarian researcher of G. B. Shaw's drama, I follow the conventional practice of using the author's full name at first and then consistently adhering to the use of his surname, preceded, at some points, by the initials of his first names in the text.

4 According to Rosi Braidotti's essay about post-human critical theory, the concept of posthumanism started emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, and it has since gained newfound momentum through the first post-Cold War and late capitalist globalizing tendencies of the 1990s and early 2000s. Braidotti refers to the process of gradually reconsidering humankind's general status in the world as "a response to growing public awareness of fast-moving technological advances and also of contemporary political developments linked to the limitations of economic globalization, the risks associated with the 'war on terror' and global security issues" (13). Certain elements of this summary—such as the threats brought about by modern technological innovations, political turmoil on an international and intercontinental level, as well as the dreaded image of yet another imminent military conflict (or even series of conflicts)—proved to be the major sources of fear and anxiety during the interwar period,

and issues of our time mainly addressed in modern science fiction. The present essay is primarily concerned with the Shavian idea of age, ageism, longevity, and Creative Evolution through the development of the human mind, thinking, as well as consciousness, will, morality, and identity. The concept of *ageism* is a particularly pivotal aspect of the analysis. Its centrality emerges due to the layered nature of Shaw's treatment of the idea throughout the cycle: not only do his characters respond to the general phenomenon and various fictitious manifestations of extreme longevity, but, especially in the second half of the overarching plot, widespread prejudice against the elderly and certain striking differences between generations are also depicted in a realistic manner.

A Monumental Treatise of Shavian Utopianism: *Back to Methuselah*

The views dramatized by G. B. Shaw in the five-part play cycle *Back to Methuselah*, as well as in its "Preface," can be located and analyzed on a considerably wide spectrum. Similarly to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it was written as a literary response to the First World War, and, through its premiere in New York, it also became a representative work of the *annus mirabilis* of English-language modernism, 1922. Peter Childs reflects on the connection between the horrors of the first truly global military conflict and the metaphysical aspects of subsequent modernist experimentations when he notes that "[t]he war produced a deep distrust of optimistic secular or teleological understandings of history and seemed a climactic, severing event that showed conclusively the failures of nineteenth-century rationalism" (20). *Back to Methuselah* fits into the context of uncertainty, the desperate desire to make sense of the events, and the almost instinctive reaction of looking forward to a more promising future of humankind. However, the range of authorial reflections conveyed by Shaw's monumental work might be found more nuanced, comprehensive, and even more optimistic than the literary output articulating the general atmosphere of early interwar (at that time post-war) Britain.

The tendency to provide a detailed, comprehensive yet not altogether somber image of an exceptionally turbulent era seems to have been accompanied and complemented by what Susan Stone-Blackburn observes about *Back to Methuselah*: namely that it "was written at a time when Shaw, who had for decades been belittling scientism, was moving toward a more positive view of at least the physical sciences and mathematics, although he maintained his opposition to the orthodox life sciences" (185). In other words, the play cycle is also an expressive representation of the extent of Shaw's

---

too. Shaw was particularly concerned about these prospects in the early 1920s. In addition, Braidotti also reminds her readers of humanity's de-centralized position in the universe, where the notion of *(hu)man* is no longer a privileged or unifying idea within the hierarchical system of living and non-living entities, but rather an ordinary and conspicuously heterogeneous concept, even in the biological classification of various species (14-16). The parts of Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* that venture into sci-fi territories and address potential future scenarios can shed light on the playwright's own views regarding the loss of humanity's dominant role in the world and the consequences of our kind's (next) fall from grace.

interest in the scientific discoveries and debates of his age and the intensity of his urge to, not unlike his most innovative contemporaries, reflect on these events and their social impact in his works. Thus, critical remarks such as those of Stone-Blackburn shed light on the role played by both intertextuality and the use of natural sciences in *Back to Methuselah*, which are inherently modernist features in an inherently modernist interwar drama.

As a potential case study of how sci-fi drama works, *Back to Methuselah* constantly alludes to the way in which the author seems to have been thinking about both the humankind of his time and its fate in the near and the very far future. Not only does the work initiate and maintain a strongly intertextual type of communication with some of the playwright's previous and even later texts,[5] but it also establishes its own evolutionary theoretical basis, upon which the body of the cycle is built. Since its structure follows, on the one hand, that of a logical-methodological treatise and, on the other hand, the chronological order of its plot(s), a complete overview and analysis ought to apply a meticulous, in-depth, step-by-step, and also play-by-play approach akin to and in synch with the nature of the work itself. As a Shavian drama to the core, *Back to Methuselah* is preceded by, or rather organically connected to, a lengthy Preface, functioning as the summary of the dramatist's personal creed concerning the speculative science of the direction humanity seemed to be heading towards at that time, which was an evidently crucial question after the Great War.

Theory before a Case Study: The "Preface" to *Back to Methuselah*

Besides its sheer length, the great variety of themes portrayed, discussed, and, in good Shavian fashion, mercilessly criticized in *Back to Methuselah* also makes this play cycle stand out in Shaw's vast dramatic oeuvre. Summarizing the topics its five parts encompass and deal with, Sally Peters mentions "[s]ocialism and philosophy,

5 Although the present article focuses solely on and goes into greater detail about the strongly intertextual relationship between *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*, it is important to note that there are numerous overt references and some more subtle allusions to Shaw's other plays in the latter text, too. For example, in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman," a character named Napoleon, upon entering the stage, declares himself to be "the Man of Destiny" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 175), thus providing a direct connection to the 1897 one-act play of the same name. Furthermore, in "As Far as Thought Can Reach," the two automatons bear names taken from ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern history, namely Ozymandias and Cleopatra-Semiramis (see *Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 237), which can easily remind the reader/spectator of Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), while the name of their creator, Pygmalion, might refer to one of the dramatist's arguably best-known works, *Pygmalion* (1913), a play about a different kind of (re-)creation than the one depicted in the final part of the cycle. It is certainly more difficult to find and, what is more, discuss intertextual implications bringing works not written by Shaw into the immense inventory of references *Back to Methuselah* has to offer. Thus, while their influence on and presence in the play cycle are undeniable, writers like H. G. Wells and Shaw's nemesis-idol, William Shakespeare, as well as pieces of literature such as the *King James Bible* (1611) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are not examined as sources in a scrupulous way here. For a detailed comparative analysis of how Swift's travelling Englishman seems to be juxtaposed with Shaw's short-livers in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman," see Crawford 102-16.

biology and metaphysics, merged into the religious-philosophical theory of Creative Evolution" as the fields Shaw "was to dramatize in *Back to Methuselah*" (16).[6] The complexity of the work, however, is held together and rendered consistent by the underlying themes that manifest themselves in the entirety of the immense overarching plot. The concept of longevity and a provocative yet not necessarily scornful attitude towards old age both have their respective theoretical frameworks outlined, again, in good Shavian fashion, in the "Preface" to the main text(s).

Criticizing the Darwinian approach to development and the by that time conventional theory of evolution, the "Preface" to *Back to Methuselah* introduces the reader to the theoretical basis of the scientific-philosophical "biological treatise" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xix) that is offered here in a dramatic format. The lengthy text, itself divided into subchapters, mentions the naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, the satirist Samuel Butler, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in a tone suggesting irony and admiration at the same time. However, the one historical figure receiving the most ambivalent authorial treatment is undoubtedly Charles Darwin himself. Reflecting on the general state and evaluation of the English biologist's scientific legacy during the period of modernism, Angelique Richardson notes that, "[w]ith the emerging materialist conception of mind, and the Darwinian dissolution of boundaries between human and animal, human distinctiveness was under threat" (51).[7] As a response to this apparent de-humanization of our species, Shaw utilized the motif of conscious human will in its purest and most uncorrupted form in the "Don Juan in Hell" scene of *Man and Superman* (1903) to depict a brighter and more promising future for thinking creatures, found in the concept of enhanced longevity.

As the playwright emphasizes, "[i]f on opportunist grounds Man now fixes the term of his life at three score and ten years, he can equally fix it at three hundred, or three thousand, or even at the genuine Circumstantial Selection limit, which would be until a sooner-or-later-inevitable fatal accident makes an end of the individual" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xix). Thus, the core idea of the Shavian utopia in *Back to Methuselah* can be described as an amalgam of natural selection and the Life Force. This attitude is interpreted by Matthew Yde as a kind of consensus found by Shaw between Lamarckian and Darwinian tenets of evolution (115-16), which can be considered the theoretical basis upon which the plots and ideological content of

6 Shaw seems to have taken the core idea of his version of Creative Evolution from Henri Bergson. The playwright's idea of the dormant yet constant workings of the Life Force and the way in which it is destined to lead humankind from an existence controlled and restrained by the physical boundaries of the body to a purely mental and spiritual state, i.e. a higher level, of being appears to be closely connected to what Bergson had to say about the importance of the *élan vital*. Accordingly, Shaw may have possessed an understanding of the concept of Creative Evolution akin to the definition provided by the French philosopher, namely "that acquired habits are not transmitted hereditarily, that the variations are not due to individual efforts, that, on the contrary, these variations emerge all of a sudden, in all the representatives of a species, or at least in many of them" (qtd. in Pharand 244). Personifications of this phenomenon, as we will see, are presented in parts three, four, and five of *Back to Methuselah* as well. For an analysis of the relationship between Shaw and Bergson, mainly built upon their views regarding the Life Force and Creative Evolution, see Pharand 243-52.

7 For a detailed analysis of the lasting influence of Darwinian, as well as Freudian, tenets on English-language literary modernism and concepts like the Life Force, see Richardson 51-62.

the plays are built. Furthermore, general themes like religion and socialism are also discussed by the playwright in an interwar British context. Combining the critique of Darwinism with that of the conventions of Christian faith, Shaw identifies the personal mission he has undertaken by declaring that he "must give here a little history of the conflict between the view of Evolution taken by the Darwinians (though not altogether by Darwin himself) and called Natural Selection, and that which is emerging, under the title of Creative Evolution, as the genuinely scientific religion for which all wise men are now anxiously looking" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xix). As a synthesis of seemingly incompatible fields like science and faith, *Back to Methuselah* offers a "genuinely scientific religion," advocated and, to a certain degree, known in the playwright's own life, too.

Besides elaborating on his personal creed, Shaw also presents a rather urgent call for the kind of mental work that might prove to be life-saving, or, at least, life-lengthening, in the long run. Deeply affected by the world war, the playwright summarizes the global conflict and its aftermath as the shocking yet inspiring source of motivation fueling the project of interwar Creative Evolution: "All that is necessary to make him [i.e. Man, representing humankind] extend his present span is that tremendous catastrophes such as the late war shall convince him of the necessity of at least outliving his taste for golf and cigars if the race is to be saved" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xix). Convinced that at this point the future of our kind is at stake, Shaw provides a new attitude towards longevity and the combination of science and religion as a matter of survival.

Functioning as a detailed and subjective overview of the history, (ir)relevance, and the then present state of evolutionary thinking, the "Preface" is concluded by a (relatively) brief summary of the relationship between the concept of evolution and the practice of theater. Furthermore, Shaw's own contribution to the legend of Don Juan as a manifestation of the Life Force, the driving power behind general human advancement, and the notion that establishes a direct correlation between *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah* is also highlighted in this section. Hence the intertextual nature of the latter work: although far from being an actual sci-fi drama, the existential basis of John Tanner's adventures and dialogues, both as the early twentieth-century English gentleman and as the Spanish libertine in Hell, reappears in *Back to Methuselah* as a result of organic literary embeddedness. This time, however, the Life Force is given a textual environment that is closely linked to the emerging discourse based on science fiction. In accordance with the conspicuous signs of an innovative literary trend, merely a few years after the premiere of Shaw's play cycle, in the second half of the 1920s, a newly coined term started becoming more and more widespread, mainly due to the growing popularity of Hugo Gernsback's magazine, *Amazing Stories*, first published in 1926. As Grant Wythoff points out, Gernsback and his periodical "gave a name to fiction treating the *speculative* and the otherworldly through the lens of systematic *realism*: scientifiction" (2; emphases mine). Considering the way in which Shaw manages to incorporate (the critique of) Darwinian ideas in an imaginary story of humankind's future, otherwise made up of realistic social and political debates, one might look at *Back to Methuselah* as a dramatic work of "scientifiction." An amalgam of

fictitious events and notable cultural awareness, Shaw's play cycle serves as a direct continuation of, as well as a set of case studies supporting the introductory theses regarding longevity and evolution.

The Seeds of a Shavian Utopia: "In the Beginning"

Applying time as the variable yet ubiquitous factor of humankind's story, the body of *Back to Methuselah* widens the temporal framework established in the "Preface" in both directions, i.e. back and forward in time. On the one hand, the first piece of the play cycle, "In the Beginning," presents a past based on the biblical origin story, with Adam, Eve, the Serpent, and Cain in the focus. On the other hand, parts three, four, and five are each set in different periods of an imaginary future, while the second play, "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas," takes place in the early 1920s.

A cycle of plays about life and the ephemeral nature of human existence aptly begins with a scene portraying death. After finding the dead fawn, Adam and Eve start discussing their own potential mortality:

> Eve: Adam.
> Adam: Yes?
> Eve: Suppose you were to trip and fall, would you go like that?
> [. . .]
> Adam: What is the good of being careful? We have to live here for ever. Think of what for ever means! Sooner or later I shall trip and fall. It may be tomorrow; it may be after as many days as there are leaves in the garden and grains of sand by the river. No matter: some day I shall forget and stumble.
> Eve: I too. (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 3-4)

Such a sudden but profound revelation can easily lead to an existential crisis, yet by being placed right at the onset of "In the Beginning" it underlines the presence of utopian thinking, with humankind's ultimate triumph against death in the center. The importance of mortality as an introductory motif is also highlighted by Peter Gahan when he notes that "[e]mbedded in it [i.e. *Back to Methuselah*] is a poetically structured theory of imagination, one intimately bound up with an awareness of death" (215). However, this combination of the human capacity to create and stick to previously inconceivable visions and goals and the very fact of life that prevents our species from exploiting this capacity to its possible maximum is hinted at in greater detail only near the end of the first play.

Although the Fall from Grace takes place in a way compatible with the biblical story, the age-centered utopian aspect of the first play is presented by Eve as a hopeful monologue near the end of Act 2. After some fierce verbal battles, in which she has to defend herself against her own firstborn son, Cain,[8] Eve describes the kind of

8 For a detailed analysis of the relevance and significance of the ideas represented by Cain within the broader context of "Creative Evolution," see Yde 120-22.

utopian image regarding the future of humankind that serves as the basis of the ideas prevailing across the other parts of the cycle:

> Adam (*to Eve, grumpily*): Why do you live on, if you can find nothing better to do than complain?
> Eve: Because there is still hope.
> Cain: Of what?
> Eve: Of the coming true of your dreams and mine. Of newly created things. Of better things. My sons and my son's sons are not all diggers and fighters. [. . .] They can remember their dreams. They can dream without sleeping. They have not will enough to create instead of dreaming; but the serpent said that every dream could be willed into creation by those strong enough to believe in it. [. . .] When they come, there is always some new wonder, or some new hope: something to live for. They never want to die, because they are always learning and always creating either things or wisdom, or at least dreaming of them. (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 31-32)

The joyful act of creation, a rudimentary yet meaningful imitation of the First Creation, provides not only hope but also a sufficient amount of motivation to seek out the farthest dimensions and parameters of this kind of human potential. However, as Glenn Clifton emphasizes, "Shaw casts embodiment—the very fact that life is incarnated in a material form—as the chief antagonist to the evolutionary Life Force" (109). In other words, the success of such a quest would require considerably longer lives sorted out to the representatives of our species, temporarily yet firmly trapped in their respective husks until their *physical* demise. The key to this phenomenon is directly presented by Eve here: by never wanting to die, some of her offspring may have already found the way out of the conundrum of the Life Force yearning for absolute fulfilment but, as seen later on, being eternally bound and restricted to the limits of the human body.

The mental engine ceaselessly powering the advancement of humanity is equal to the actual process celebrated by the Mother: imagination, (waking) dreams, and creation. When Gahan looks at the entirety of the play cycle as "an allegory in which the old promise of longer life and man's victory over death is to be taken as a hope that his imaginative capacity can be expanded" (215), the seeds of such a mental and physical state are traceable in Eve's monologue. As Shaw himself also points out, "the impulse that produces evolution is creative" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xviii), and the subsequent plays in the cycle are intended to show the details of how that is to be realized in practice.

The Rules of a Future Society: "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas"

Reminiscent of any early Shavian problem play, "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" focuses on politics, the public role of the Labor movement, and the frequently questioned importance of the Church. These themes are accompanied and

completed by the burgeoning romantic relationship of the two younger characters, Savvy and Haslam. In addition, this part sets the rules of the predominantly Lamarckian (or, more accurately, "Neo-Lamarckian"; see Clifton 109-16) idea of longevity, which later on becomes ubiquitous in the rest of the dramatic plots—and, along with them, the Shavian idea of the future of humankind.

Echoing the concept applied to Eve's monologue in "In the Beginning," the title of Gahan's article, "An Exercise of Imagination," already suggests that *Back to Methuselah* is a dramatic propagation of "a science of the imagination" (215). Gahan even highlights poetic sensitivity as an artistic manifestation of human imagination, in this case represented and propagated by Franklyn Barnabas (215-16). Indeed, the poet priest Franklyn and his sibling, the biologist Conrad, regularly interrupted by the more mundane, politically driven arguments of Burge and Lubin, provide the arguably pseudo-scientific explanation, initially presented as a mock-political program, behind the possibility of lengthening one's life through sheer human will and determination:

> Franklyn: Do not mistake mere idle fancies for the tremendous miracle-working force of Will nerved to creation by a conviction of Necessity. I tell you men capable of such willing, and realizing its necessity, will do it reluctantly, under inner compulsion, as all great efforts are made. They will hide what they are doing from themselves: they will take care not to know what they are doing. They will live three hundred years, not because they would like to, but because the soul deep down in them will know that they must, if the world is to be saved.
>
> (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 84)

Besides turning back to themes and concepts such as the Life Force and Creative Evolution—dramatized by Shaw in greater detail, albeit in a less overtly utopian context, in *Man and Superman*,[9]—this monologue sheds light on the hypothetical yet elaborate outline of the intentional and, as Franklyn Barnabas emphasizes, necessary increase of one's lifespan. The apparent indispensability of this shift in human life expectancy is also highlighted by Clifton when she, with some overt skepticism regarding the validity of the (r)evolutionary idea of the Brothers Barnabas, remarks that it is "an improbable biological theory that lends excessive credence to the 'Life Force' by arguing that humans *must* and can will themselves to live for three hundred years" (108; italics mine). The core of this attitude is summed up by one of the more traditional and practical minded characters, Lubin, when he concludes that "[t]he old must make room for the new" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 75). This shift from average lifespan to unprecedented longevity, albeit on a larger scale than the elderly politician would probably expect, starts taking place in the third play. Thus, the prophecy of an otherwise general expression of wisdom about the constant and seemingly inexhaustible supply of newer and newer generations is soon shown fulfilled. However, what later on emerges is not simply the next generation but a new species that represents embodied longevity.

---

9 For an analysis of the potential utopian and totalitarian elements of *Man and Superman*—mainly with a focus on the "Don Juan in Hell" scene—, see Yde 74-86.

Adam and Eve as the Superhuman Couple: "The Thing Happens"

The first play in the cycle that takes place in the future, "The Thing Happens" presents elements of an ageist dystopia, where, as Barnabas, "a descendant of the great Conrad Barnabas" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 129), emphasizes, people go against state legislations and are practically committing a crime by living longer than ordinary members of society:

> Barnabas: [. . .] I'm a plain man; and though I dont [sic] understand metaphysics, and dont [sic] believe in them, I understand figures; and if the Archbishop is only *entitled to* seventy-eight years, and he takes 283, I say he takes more than he is *entitled to*. Get over that if you can.
> [. . .]
> Barnabas: You ought to have killed yourself. As an honest man you were *entitled to* no more than an honest man's expectation of life.
> (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 107 and 110; emphases mine)

By repeatedly using the term "entitled," Barnabas reveals that, according to state regulations, the upper limit of a human's lifespan is to be taken especially seriously. Regardless of the futuristic scenario, as one with the typical, overly zealous and relentless clerk figures of Shavian drama,[10] Barnabas is willing to go to extreme lengths, including the suggestion of murder (see *Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 128), and put extra effort into his mission to prevent the newly emerged long-livers from populating the surface of the Earth.

Even though the longevity predicted by the Brothers Barnabas seems somewhat accidental and random in practice, functioning as a rather inexplicable counterargument against the thesis of death, it still manages to produce the first two representatives, i.e. the father and mother, of a new superhuman species, later known as long-livers. As the o(l)dd ones out in this situation, Haslam (now referred to as The Archbishop) and the long widowed parlormaid-turned-Domestic Minister, Mrs. Lutestring, bring about the emergence of their kind. Thus, they also function as the harbingers of a utopia that has the potential to counter the restrictive government policies based on a–from their perspective–rather narrow-minded attitude towards age.[11] Their self-conscious and ambitious behavior is emphasized by Yde when he points out the moment at which "it is intimated that the long-livers, small in number

10 Further examples of this Shavian character type, with some minor alterations and unique features here and there, include Lickcheese when we first meet him in *Widowers' Houses* (1892), Redpenny in *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), Soames in *Getting Married* (1908), and Mercer in *The Fascinating Foundling* (1909).

11 Adding a further instance of intertextuality to the reading of the play cycle, the future government is represented, besides the already mentioned Barnabas, by Burge-Lubin, the President of the British Islands, and his Chief Secretary and main consultant, Confucius. The exchanges of words these two politicians are having in the third part are reminiscent of the dialogues carried out by Prime Minister Balsquith and General Mitchener in Shaw's *Press Cuttings* (1909).

and isolated from one another, will now come together and begin to reproduce" (125). Thus, the dawn of a new era seems, and later on proves, to be inevitable. Despite the fierce and foreboding protestation of "the greatest living authority on the duration of human life" (93), the first two long-livers' marriage is destined to turn the world into a utopia for their offspring—and, at the same time, a dystopia for the ordinary homo sapiens (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 127).

The implied image of a later realized utopia for long-living human(oid)s functions as a milestone in the quest of our species for the meaning of existence. It is a *milestone* and not the final stage of this search. The ultimate goal, i.e. the escape of the human mind from the boundaries set by our physical bodies, is mentioned and described by the main character, or rather mouthpiece, in the "Don Juan in Hell" segment of *Man and Superman*, which has been found comparable with *Back to Methuselah* on this basis. For instance, Yde emphasizes the conspicuous parallels and thematic overlaps between the two plays by citing Shaw's own standpoint, namely that they "were the clearest expressions of his philosophical and religious views" (67).[12] Furthermore, John Barnes also does so when, reflecting on the title of the earlier play, he essentially looks at the dialogues in the third, fourth, and fifth parts of *Back to Methuselah* as conversations and arguments between men and "supermen" (159–60). In other words, the glorious advancement of the new species has already started with the encounter of Mrs. Lutestring and Haslam.

Focusing mainly on the final segment of the cycle, Clifton notes that "*Back to Methuselah* presents an important window on the ultimate destination Shaw envisioned for both the body and the mind, which undergo massive evolutionary shifts in the course of the five plays" (108-09).[13] However, while the far future is indeed the "ultimate destination" for our kind in more than one sense of the term, it is at this moment that the ultimate starting point of the actual physical process is properly explained, elaborated on, and even exemplified through two of the earliest specimens of the emerging species. The dialogues between human politicians and superhuman trailblazers mark the first, but arguably not the last, point in the play cycle when an overt reference to the promise of a utopian future is presented. Thus, "The Thing Happens" provides an established framework for the two subsequent segments, illustrating "the simple fact that the will to do anything can and does, at a certain pitch of intensity set up by conviction of its necessity, create and organize new tissue to do it with" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, xviii). The "necessity" of a remarkable leap and some "massive evolutionary shifts" is handled as an inevitable phenomenon here, while the new "tissue" is going to be recognizable both on the superhuman entities inhabiting future societies and on "the mind," i.e. the ethos and worldview, dominating their cultural discourses.

12 For a brief overview of the influence and continuation of the Shavian Devil's and Don Juan's ideas in *Back to Methuselah*, see Yde 116-18.

13 For a detailed analysis of the theoretical role and performativity of the body in *Back to Methuselah*, see Clifton 116-23. In addition, concentrating on the concept of body as depicted in the fifth segment, Yde remarks that "Shaw's horror of the body culminates in the final play of the cycle" (132).

The Old as New—and Immature: "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman"

Regarding ageism in a less pejorative but still discriminative sense, the last two plays in *Back to Methuselah* can be considered as the consecutive pinnacles of the Shavian attitude towards this theme. By setting them so far away from each other in time, 3000 and 31,920 A.D., respectively, the playwright provides the reader/spectator with two different yet intertwined utopias. These two fictitious future societies are separated—and near the end of the fifth play, connected—by the presence of our kind, i.e. ordinary human beings, referred to in the part "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman" as "short-livers." In the fourth part of *Back to Methuselah*, short-livers and the descendants of the long-livers introduced in the previous play(s) have been separated, living in their own respective cultures, only occasionally interacting with one another. As Yde observes, this "play offers an interesting perspective as we see both groups together in about equal number, unlike in the previous play where long-livers are a minority and the final play where the short-livers are extinct" (127). Whereas long-livers in the previous part of the drama are still an oddity, in the fourth play they have managed to build a society for themselves in future Ireland. Although they are still not dominant in numbers and are often looked at as a kind of sensation, their superiority is evident whenever an encounter between them and a short-living outsider occurs.

Ironically, the titular *Elderly* Gentleman is, in fact, as Lubin paraphrases his existence in the second part, "a mere child" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 73) in future Ireland. Coming from Baghdad, the capital of the fictitious future British Commonwealth, to the Emerald Isle, this character is not a jovial and energetic colonizer like Tom Broadbent in *John Bull's Other Island* (1904). Although his conversation with Zoo, his long-living guardian, sheds light on his status as an intruder, this time the guest and his family are the inferior party of the encounter. Issues and obstacles of communication arise between the two sets of characters, preventing them from having meaningful conversations, from the very beginning of the play. For instance, the indirect connotations of idioms like "blood is thicker than water" appear to have been lost. Furthermore, the lack of correlating semantic content with words like "trespassing," "landlord," "decent," and, perhaps most tellingly, "moral" or expressions such as "pious pilgrimage," "sentimental journey," and "lady doctor" only add to the deepening culture shock, depression, and "discouragement" of the Elderly Gentleman (see *Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 140-47, Crawford 110, and Yde 128).

Besides the general misunderstandings due to their different vocabularies and worldviews, as well as the "unnatural arrangements" (146) that permeate the fourth play, certain discrepancies truly emphasize and solidify the portrayed society as a nightmarish scenario, with the conditions being unbearable for short-living creatures—a dystopia for some and a utopia for others. On the one hand, related to the general problem regarding words and phrases, the concept and tradition of family life have evidently also been dropped, and all that remains of this human institution is a rather artificial way of preserving the superior species, a process in which human feelings are practically non-existent:

> Zoo: Do you mean to say that your mother bothered about you after you were ten?
> The Elderly Gentleman: Naturally, madam. She was my mother. What would you have had her do?
> Zoo: Go on to the next, of course. After eight or nine children become quite uninteresting, except to themselves. I shouldnt [sic] know my two eldest if I met them.
>
> (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 152)

Zoo's indifference and apparent skepticism about the idea of keeping in touch with her offspring functions as clear proof of the obliteration of family bonds in this *brave new world*. The negative—puzzled, frustrated, and, as the discussions proceed, more and more desperate—reactions of the Elderly Gentleman, referred to only as unmistakable signs of "discouragement," to such remarks clearly underline his status as a looked-down-upon outsider. His behavior, unanimously considered rather immature by the long-livers, offers a thought-provoking manifestation of the links between utopianism and age studies.

Although concentrating mainly on utopias in American literature, the theoretical basis of Mark R. Brand's research provides a relevant perspective for "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman." Brand observes that in utopian texts written at the end of the nineteenth and in the first decades of the twentieth century (roughly between 1890 and 1914), the concern with age was becoming a significant discourse. This development complemented the literary techniques of utopianism and, made the concept of "otherness" a relevant addition to the various depictions of fictitious future societies (163-64). Being a literary product of the 1920s and focusing primarily on issues surrounding age and aging, *Back to Methuselah* is a representative of this trend.

Providing a new layer to the politics and social criticism of speculative writing, Brand also mentions the play cycle, along with Huxley's *Brave New World*, as a relevant example of the impact the above described process of age emerging as a debated topic had on interwar and later literary utopias. Thus, he locates Shaw's work in a context where "age seems to function similarly to 'othering' categorical differences when deployed: it is socially constructed and reinforced, readily recognizable, patently harmful, and contains dynamic differences in scope even within individual biosocial phenomena" (167). Referred to as one of the "prominent early-adopters of this new approach to age" (Brand 172), Shaw pushes the idea of old age as "otherness" to the extreme by enabling his truly elderly, i.e. relatively close to the 300-year mark, long-living characters to kill short-livers with their mere gaze, making the otherness of the former as a new species both "readily recognizable" and "patently harmful." The most expressive instance of this radically unbalanced power structure is presented at the end of the play, when the Elderly Gentleman is practically euthanized by a renowned member of the local community, who also functions as the showrunner of a performance whose sole purpose is to intimidate and provide confusing political advice to official visitors of future Ireland (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 202). What makes that moment particularly grotesque is that not only is the outsider, the guest, destroyed

by the look of his host but it is also the younger one who has no place in this utopia of *old* age and, thus, is destined to perish there.[14]

As a kind of desperate, misunderstood youngster surrounded by true modern-day Methuselahs, the Elderly Gentleman's fate is decided from the very beginning of his journey to Ireland, but such a grim future can also be extended to the entirety of ordinary, short-living humankind. Going back to the age-old dichotomy of utopia and dystopia, Edward James notes that,

> [i]n the twentieth century, [. . .] utopian visions were attacked from two directions: by those who argue that in reality many such utopias would turn out to be "dystopias," that is, oppressive societies, because of the tyranny of the "perfect" system over the will of the individual, or because of the difficulty of stopping individuals or elites from imposing authority over the majority, or over minorities. (220)

Technically, the latter situation, in a more or less subtle way, appears to prevail in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman." By the time the plot starts, long-livers are accepted as the superior species, both by visitors to the Emerald Isle and by themselves. For instance, presenting a radical attitude towards the status quo of long-livers being the select few, the advanced minority in future Ireland, Zoo even admits that a party of long-livers has urged the total annihilation of short-living humans for some time (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 169-70). As a practical manifestation and continuation of the train of thought provided in the previous play, the species Barnabas collectively refers to as "[c]ursed thieves" and "[v]ampires" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 128) starts realizing that, as more powerful, superhuman beings, they are supposed to be the conquering aggressors.[15] Such a mission might even be justified by their status as a marginalized, objectified sensation, whose usefulness seems to extend merely to ridiculously ceremonious performances, such as the Envoy's pretentious but cowardly behavior and meaningless political questions about the upcoming elections in the Oracle's temple (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 194-99).

Convinced about the oftentimes confirmed mental and physical inferiority of short-livers, Zoo and her kind, echoing the words of another belligerent colonizer of modernist literature, ultimately decide to "[e]xterminate all the brutes" (Conrad 72). Thus, they declare their claim for a stable, truly realized global utopia. The presumable success, as well as the outcomes and certain repercussions of their actions, are chronicled in the final segment of the play cycle. Yet, even at the very end of the Shavian history of (super)human evolution, the question remains: What happens if these "brutes" are obliterated but are later on artificially brought back to life, intruding into an even better established utopian society?

---

14 For another analysis of the ending of "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman," see Yde 131.

15 At this point the play seems to offer a reference to the topic of eugenics, an issue Shaw was particularly interested in during the 1930s: he elaborated on his thoughts about it in greater detail in *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934). For an analysis of the morality and economy of killing as discussed by Zoo and the Elderly Gentleman, see Yde 129-31.

A Limited Eternity: "As Far as Thought Can Reach"

Although Clifton refers to the entirety of *Back to Methuselah* as "an extended treatment of Shaw's interest in longevity and maturity" (108), it is the fifth drama, "As Far as Thought Can Reach," which offers the truly utopian combination of the two abstract terms in the quotation. Ordinary human beings had apparently gone extinct—or rather had been, as Zoo foreshadows in the previous play, eliminated by long-livers—at an undisclosed point of (post-)human history. Thus, no obstacles could hinder the advancement of the new species and prevent true "longevity and maturity" from prevailing and evolving, surpassing the (much) earlier defined 300-year mark. Therefore, in the final play, as Clifton points out, "Shaw's future humans evince a radically unfamiliar picture of health and maturity" (109) compared to the two future scenarios of parts three and four of *Back to Methuselah*, respectively.

The fifth play appears to portray an ageist utopia where the script described by Brand is followed more closely, namely that within the framework of the truly far future, unlike in Ireland in 3000 A.D., the elderly are the "others." Therefore, they seem to fit even the present-day "assumption that society tends to view the old age group as a distinct and separate group with unique features" (Lev, Wurm, and Ayalon 52). Accordingly, they live mainly solitary lives, voluntarily segregated from the youth society,[16] and only interact with youngsters either by accident or on special occasions, such as the birth—or rather *hatching*[17]—of a new superhuman entity. A case of the former kind of encounter takes place right at the beginning of the play, when one of the Ancients unintentionally disturbs a festivity-like open-air dance:

> The Youth: Now, then, ancient sleepwalker, why dont [sic] you keep your eyes open and mind where you are going?
> The Ancient (*mild, bland, and indulgent*): I did not know there was a nursery here, or I should not have turned my face in this direction. Such *accidents* cannot always be avoided. Go on with your play: I will turn back.
> (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 205-06; emphasis mine)

The dialogue and the stage instructions describing the Youth's rather indignant reactions to the appearance of the Ancient immediately reveal the underlying ageist prejudice against the elderly and aging itself, thus shedding light on the internal mechanisms of the utopian society depicted here.

A rather skeptical attitude towards older generations can usually be explained through the considerable age gap between certain groups. In this particular case, notable periods seem to have been skipped both on the general time scale of the play cycle—i.e. between 3000 and 31,920 A.D.—and within the community introduced in the fifth segment. As for the latter aspect, not only do long-livers reach maturity at a

16 For a brief analysis of the lonesome way of life represented by the Ancients, see Yde 140.

17 The term—and the process described in the text (see *Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 214-15)—can easily evoke Huxley's *Brave New World* in a contemporary reader's mind.

fascinatingly young age (they are considered "old" by the fourth year of their lives), but they have also succeeded in extending their life expectancy beyond the original 300-year limit: one of the Ancients even confesses that she is more than 800 years old (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 246). The ensuing, almost inconceivable difference between the Youth and the Ancients in this world also contributes to the intense stigmatization of old age. For instance, ageist prejudice is echoed by Strephon shortly after Chloe's departure, when he, in his heart-broken, furious rage, refers to the Ancients as "unnatural, heartless, loveless, joyless monsters" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 213). Such a situation, however, does not necessarily erase all hope for mutual understanding and a lively, meaningful communication between the two groups.

Despite the permanent disillusionment of youngsters like Strephon, usually caused by one of their mates reaching the ripe age of four years, growing uninterested in their previous frivolous activities,[18] and being inspired by the lifestyle of the Ancients, "the ecstasy of life as [they] live it" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 208), this Shavian utopia seems to function well. Furthermore, and perhaps, it constantly offers the chance of dynamic discussions through the relatively rare yet meaningful arguments taking place between the Ancients and the Youth. Such exchanges of words take place about *art*, the act of an irrepressible need for *creation*, as well as, based on these concepts, the meaning of *existence*—keeping the community in incessant motion and promising further development. For instance, the He-Ancient's brief summary of the bodily restrictions limiting the fulfilment of spiritual needs (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 250; also cited and commented upon in Yde 133) proves to be a relevant topic for both age groups, leading to serious and thought-provoking inter-generational discussions.

Even though members of the two communities do have their respective criticisms and reservations about each other and, as a result, often find their interactions tedious, some mutual respect can be traced in their words even near the end of the play:

> The She-Ancient: It is tiresome for us, too. Children, we have to put things very crudely to you to make ourselves intelligible.
> The He-Ancient: And I am afraid we do not quite succeed.
> Strephon: Very kind of you to come at all and talk to us, I'm sure.
> Ecrasia: Why do the other ancients never come and give us a turn?
> (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 256)

The recurring topic of such exchanges is "the eternal life, the perpetual resurrection" (250) that has previously been present in the conversation of Chloe and Strephon—i.e. a newly made "old" long-liver, still referred to as a "Maiden" but just on the threshold of becoming an Ancient, and a youngster, probably in the prime of his life (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 208-13). Thus, regardless of the number of people involved, a peculiar balance appears to be maintained in these arguments and conversations: a truly utopian state of affairs, which is inevitably disturbed by an intrusive element, either from the inside or from the outside, or, ironically, from both sides.

18 For a concise overview of Strephon's complaints after Chloe's apparent betrayal, see Yde 133.

The imminent doom of the Shavian utopia is brought about by the eerily human-like vanity and shallowness of the artificial couple created by a scientist, Pygmalion, as an experiment. However, another reason of the momentary downfall of the way of life depicted in this play turns out to be its own apparent perfection: the theoretically immortal future superhumans, quite ironically, prove to be extremely easy to kill. The unsettling fragility of long-livers is demonstrated through the circumstances of Pygmalion's death. The ambitious scientist, the de facto father of the artificial humans, dies from merely being bitten by the female automaton created by him (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 238-39). As opposed to the unpredictable and unavoidable *accident* elaborated on and explained by the She-Ancient to the Newly Born (218) and also encountered by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 3), the concept and practice of violent death because of intentional murder causes a breach in the so far stable texture of a well-constructed utopia. In a sardonic twist of events, this future society is disturbed by a factor that is both alien to and inherent in it. Despite being made up of flesh and blood, the two figures were created in a laboratory, i.e. even less natural than an egg, and ultimately prove to resemble their predecessors, who have already been put to the test of human evolution in Shaw's previous plays, too much to be accepted by the natives as their own. However, although their status as outsiders and momentary sensations, not unlike that of long-livers in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman," seems to be solidified: Ozymandias and Cleopatra-Semiramis are the re-animated representatives of an ancestry without which superhuman beings could not exist. Consequently, their destructive and demoralizing words and deeds break the flow, albeit temporarily, of the utopian conditions both from the outside and from the inside of the established system. Thus, the sudden yet relieving death of the two figures re-establishes the superiority of the superhuman species, and the utopia founded upon it.

Intruders like the Elderly Gentleman in the previous play and the automaton couple here, i.e. people who have no business to exist in and, what is more, absolutely no chance to adapt to a society like the one presented in the fifth segment, perish rather unexpectedly: they simply break under the burden of life. By exclaiming that he is "discouraged" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 243) by his surroundings and the He-Ancient's way of looking at him, while asking him existential questions, the Male Figure creates a link to the utopia portrayed in the previous play, as well as to the Elderly Gentleman in it. This reference can be a reassuring sign that the two utopias, once again, are separated but also connected by the human factor. However, if the representatives of our kind have to be exterminated in order for the superhuman species to prevail and prosper, this particular Shavian utopian vision seems to celebrate the Life Force in post-human evolution, rather than in a gradual advancement of the ordinary, short-living sort. To illustrate and express his standpoint as a lifelong advocate of the superman, at the end of the fifth play, closing the drama cycle itself, Shaw presents an age-old, almost pre-human character, whose mere timelessness provides a comprehensive point of view for humankind's ultimate mission.

Lilith, as the first human being, keeper of the ancient wisdom of life derived directly from God, the witness of humankind's entire history, and the "actual" mother to all, functions as the definitive realization and mouthpiece of Shaw's optimism regarding

the future of humanity as the predecessor of a more successful and fit species. Just as Ann Whitefield and her alter ego, Doña Ana, in *Man and Superman* declare their wish to find "a father for the Superman" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 3, 649), Lilith appears to pass the torch on to all of humankind, but this time the mission is not to create new generations but to lay the foundations of an emerging superhuman species. Allowing them to prove themselves worthy of such a responsibility, the First Mother even stops herself from destroying our kind through "[t]he pangs of another birth" upon seeing how at one point in the history/future of humanity "one man repented and lived three hundred years" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 261). By identifying the pivotal revelation in the third play, i.e. the structural axis of the five-part cycle, as the exact moment she withdrew from the idea of wiping out humans and annulled her intention to give life to a new experiment of Creation, Lilith expresses her preference for the long-livers as Evolution's superior attempt to fulfil the ultimate duty of the Life Force. She sees considerable yet—even after the events of the fifth play—still dormant potential in "these infants that call themselves ancients," and, accordingly, vows to "have patience with them" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 262). Having put her trust into the superhuman life form, she reassures herself that her "seed" will eventually succeed (262) in making the ultimate Shavian utopia of "redemption from the flesh" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 261) as a reality.

Lilith's embodiment and monologue, making the immense, overarching plot and the logical route of the five plays come full circle, bring the classic dichotomy of *ou*topia ("no place") and *eu*topia ("good place")[19] into the discussion at the end:

> Lilith: [. . .] Of Life only is there no end; and though of its million *starry mansions* many are empty and many still unbuilt, and though its *vast domain* is as yet unbearably desert, my seed shall *one day* fill it and master its matter to its uttermost confines. (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 262; emphases mine)

Through Lilith's words, the central thought delivered here seems to be that there is indeed a good *place*, a (e)utopia taking the form of a mansion or a "vast domain" and, along with that, an *era* to be achieved "one day." Since the hopeful idea that "there is a beyond" (*Complete Plays*, Vol. 2, 262) can function in both spatial and temporal terms, it implies the potential establishment of a yet unknown, hypothetical, non-existent (o)utopia, towards which humankind is steadily heading, making even the (futuristic) present-day conditions bearable and tolerable for the greater good of human imagination, evolution, and the Life Force as sources of motivation.[20] This kind of optimism was later on disrupted by the ambiguities and contradictions of the 1930s and the sheer horrors of the 1940s—and each of these two decades received its

19 Ruth Levitas reflects on the two components of this "rather troublesome ghost" by tracing the problem back to the "benevolent founding father of the utopian genre" and suggesting that the pun implied by the very title of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) resulted in the common usage of the term "utopia" as a kind of amalgam of the two connotations, noting that "colloquially understood [it] contains two meanings: a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible, society" (2-3). For another brief summary of the same issue, see Waddell 8-9.

20 For a brief analysis of the final monologue in "As Far as Thought Can Reach," as compared to the idea of the superman, see Barnes 163.

own Shavian evaluation through utopian and dystopian drama, namely *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934) and *Farfetched Fables* (1948), respectively. *Back to Methuselah* was, and still is, an early interwar representation of some insolently hopeful prospects. The two later works, as well as the utter disillusionment expressed by them, eventually managed to criticize and overwrite these authorial predictions—but not before Shaw succeeded in declaring and elaborating on a vision that was looking forward to the promising and spiritually fulfilling age of Methuselah.

Conclusion: Forward to Methuselah

Summing up the intellectual scope of the play cycle, Yde emphasizes that "*Back to Methuselah* straddles a fine line between the most outrageous hope for the potential of humankind to escape the material conditions of reality (Shaw rejected any hope of the transcendent kind) and absolute despair at the reality of the human condition" (139). Yde does not neglect the fact that Shaw was never a playwright of clear-cut moral standpoints or existential declarations. The "fine line" of ambiguity, this time presented as an amalgam of "hope" and "despair," permeates this Shavian work, too. Thus, the drama suggests certain authorial doubts, primarily based on the often less than favorable social and economic circumstances, regarding the eventual outcome of humankind's evolution. However, the "outrageous hope" implied by the text may not refer to humankind being rewarded by Life in the end and the universal enjoyment of the final achievement. Rather, it is the kind of Shavian optimism derived from the prospect that humanity will do its bit and contribute to the glorious victory of the Life Force, even if that means the extinction of our species to give way to our (r) evolutionary descendants, the superhuman long-livers.

Shaw "himself considered [*Back to Methuselah*] his most important work" (Yde 112), so its importance as a point of reference within the Shavian canon is confirmed by the author as well, and understandably so. Despite having been criticized and overwritten by the playwright himself later on, *Back to Methuselah* can undoubtedly be considered a set of the Irish dramatist's most innovative, comprehensive, detailed, and provocative ideas regarding the future of humanity. Furthermore, highlighting the modernist aspect of the text, Yde notes that "*Back to Methuselah* remains a satire to the very end" (132). Indeed, besides being a long, five-part play cycle, it deals with serious and rather complex existential questions in an ironic, Shavian fashion throughout the plot and even in its "Preface." Overall, the entirety of the text presents a perhaps deliberately fragmented yet deeply contemplative take on the origins, length(s), and meaning(s) of life, not only on a human level but anticipating the twenty-first-century concept of posthumanism, as well as, exemplified by the creation, behavior, and demise of the automatons in the final part, the rise of—and controversial attitudes towards— artificial intelligence.

In conclusion, the very essence and pillars of the Shavian attitude in the early 1920s, characterized by positive views delivered in a witty, contemplative fashion, were later on shattered by the experiences of the Second World War. For a dramatist as sensitive to social phenomena and change as Shaw, the new global conflict meant a particularly

severe case of disillusionment. However, especially when compared to the sardonically realistic portrayal of human life in his earlier works, as well as the bitter tone and apocalyptic visions of his later plays, *Back to Methuselah* proved to be the epitome of a hopeful Shavian interwar utopianism. Its irony, similarly to the vast majority of the Irish playwright's works, stems from complicated conundrums and polemical paradoxes. Additionally, concerned with (as well as, to a certain degree, *about*) the potential future(s) of our species' existence, *Back to Methuselah* can be regarded as a lasting, meditative, thought-provoking, and original instance of modernist sci-fi drama, conveying relevant ideas to its audiences even a century after its premiere.

Works Cited

Barnes, John. "Tropics of a Desirable Oxymoron: The Radical Superman in *Back to Methuselah*." Wolf 155-64.

Bradshaw, David, and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, eds. *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. Print.

Braidotti, Rosi. "Posthuman Critical Theory." *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*. Ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape. New Delhi: Springer India, 2016. 13-32. Print.

Brand, Mark R. "Growing Old in Utopia: From Age to Otherness in American Literary Utopias." *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3 (2018): 163-87. Print.

Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Clifton, Glenn. "An Imperfect Butlerite: Aging and Embodiment in *Back to Methuselah*." *Dilemmas and Delusions: Bernard Shaw and Health*. Ed. Christopher Wixson. University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2014. 108-26. Print.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Group, 1994. Print.

Crawford, Fred D. "Shaw among the Houyhnhnms." *The Shaw Review* 19.3 (1976): 102-19.

Danius, Sara. "Technology." Bradshaw and Dettmar 66-78.

Gahan, Peter. "*Back to Methuselah*: An Exercise of Imagination." Wolf 215-38.

James, Edward. "Utopias and Anti-Utopias." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 219-29. Print.

Lev, Sagit, Susanne Wurm, and Liat Ayalon. "Origins of Ageism at the Individual Level." *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*. Ed. Liat Ayalon and Clemens Tesch-Römer. Cham: Springer, 2018. 51-72. Print.

Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. Print.

Marks, Peter, Fátima Vieira, and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Print.

—. "Introduction." Marks, Vieira, and Wagner-Lawlor 1-21.

Parrinder, Patrick. *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.

Peters, Sally. "Shaw's Life: A Feminist in Spite of Himself." *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*. Ed. Christopher Innes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 3-24. Print.

Pharand, Michel W. *Bernard Shaw and the French*. Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2000. Print.

Reeve-Tucker, Alice, and Nathan Waddell. "Introduction." *Utopianism, Modernism, and Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 1-18. Print.

Richardson, Angelique. "The Biological Sciences." Bradshaw and Dettmar 50-65.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Complete Plays with Prefaces*. Vols. 1-6. New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963. Print.

Stock, Adam. "The Twentieth Century." Marks, Vieira, and Wagner-Lawlor 137-48.

Stone-Blackburn, Susan. "Science and Spirituality in *Back to Methuselah* and *Last and First Men*." Wolf 185-98.

Vieira, Fátima. "The Concept of Utopia." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 3-27. Print.

Vieira, Patrícia. "Utopia." Marks, Vieira, and Wagner-Lawlor 25-38.

Waddell, Nathan. *Modernist Nowheres: Politics and Utopia in Early Modernist Writing, 1900-1920*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.

Wolf, Milton T., ed. *Shaw and Science Fiction*. University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1997. Print.

Wythoff, Grant. "Introduction." *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction*. Ed. Grant Wythoff. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2016. 1-59. Print.

Yde, Matthew. *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism: Longing for Utopia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.