EPISTLE
DEDICATORY TO
ARTHUR
BINGHAM
WALKLEY

MY DEAR WALKLEY:
You once asked me why I did not write a
Don Juan play. The levity with which you assumed
this frightful responsibility has probably
by this time enabled you to forget it; but
the day of reckoning has arrived: here is your
play! I say your play, because qui facit per alium
facit per se. Its profits, like its labor, belong
to me: its morals, its manners, its philosophy,
its influence on the young, are for
you to justify. You were of mature age when
you made the suggestion; and you knew your
man. It is hardly fifteen years since, as twin
pioneers of the New Journalism of that time,
we two, cradled in the same new sheets, made
an epoch in the criticism of the theatre and
the opera house by making it a pretext for a
propaganda of our own views of life. So you
cannot plead ignorance of the character of the
force you set in motion. You meant me to épater
lé bourgeois; and if he protests, I hereby
refer him to you as the accountable party.
I warn you that if you attempt to repudiate
your responsibility, I shall suspect you of
finding the play too decorous for your taste.
The fifteen years have made me older and
graver. In you I can detect no such becoming
change. Your levities and audacities are
like the loves and comforts prayed for by Desdemona:
they increase, even as your days do
grow. No mere pioneering journal dares meddle
with them now: the stately Times itself
is alone sufficiently above suspicion to act as
your chaperone; and even the Times must
sometimes thank its stars that new plays are
not produced every day, since after each such
event its gravity is compromised, its platitude
turned to epigram, its portentousness to wit,
its propriety to elegance, and even its decorum
into naughtiness by criticisms which the traditions
of the paper do not allow you to sign at
the end, but which you take care to sign with
the most extravagant flourishes between the
lines. I am not sure that this is not a portent of
Revolution. In eighteenth century France the
end was at hand when men bought the Encyclopedia
and found Diderot there. When I buy
the Times and find you there, my prophetic
ear catches a rattle of twentieth century tumbrils.

However, that is not my present anxiety.
The question is, will you not be disappointed
with a Don Juan play in which not one of
that hero’s mille e tre adventures is brought
upon the stage? To propitiate you, let me explain
myself. You will retort that I never do
anything else: it is your favorite jibe at me
that what I call drama is nothing but explanation.
But you must not expect me to adopt
your inexplicable, fantastic, petulant, fastidious
ways: you must take me as I am, a reasonable,
patient, consistent, apologetic, laborious
person, with the temperament of a schoolmaster
and the pursuits of a vestryman. No doubt
that literary knack of mine which happens to
amuse the British public distracts attention
from my character; but the character is there
none the less, solid as bricks. I have a conscience;
and conscience is always anxiously
explanatory. You, on the contrary, feel that a
man who discusses his conscience is much like
a woman who discusses her modesty. The only
moral force you condescend to parade is the
force of your wit: the only demand you make
in public is the demand of your artistic temperament
for symmetry, elegance, style, grace,
refinement, and the cleanliness which comes
next to godliness if not before it. But my conscience
is the genuine pulpit article: it annoys
me to see people comfortable when they ought
to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making
them think in order to bring them to conviction
of sin. If you don’t like my preaching you
must lump it. I really cannot help it.

In the preface to my Plays for Puritans I
explained the predicament of our contemporary
English drama, forced to deal almost ex-
clusively with cases of sexual attraction, and
yet forbidden to exhibit the incidents of that
attraction or even to discuss its nature. Your
suggestion that I should write a Don Juan
play was virtually a challenge to me to treat
this subject myself dramatically. The challenge
was difficult enough to be worth accepting,
because, when you come to think of it,
though we have plenty of dramas with heroes
and heroines who are in love and must accordingly
marry or perish at the end of the play,
or about people whose relations with one another
have been complicated by the marriage
laws, not to mention the looser sort of plays
which trade on the tradition that illicit love
affairs are at once vicious and delightful, we
have no modern English plays in which the
natural attraction of the sexes for one another
is made the mainspring of the action. That
is why we insist on beauty in our performers,
differing herein from the countries our friend
William Archer holds up as examples of seriousness
to our childish theatres. There the
Juliets and Isoldes, the Romeos and Tristans,
might be our mothers and fathers. Not so the
English actress. The heroine she impersonates
is not allowed to discuss the elemental
relations of men and women: all her romantic
twaddle about novelet-made love, all her
purely legal dilemmas as to whether she was
married or “betrayed,” quite miss our hearts
and worry our minds. To console ourselves
we must just look at her. We do so; and her
beauty feeds our starving emotions. Sometimes
we grumble ungallantly at the lady be-
cause she does not act as well as she looks.
But in a drama which, with all its preoccupation
with sex, is really void of sexual interest,
good looks are more desired than histrionic
skill.
Let me press this point on you, since you are too clever to raise the fool’s cry of paradox whenever I take hold of a stick by the right instead of the wrong end. Why are our occasional attempts to deal with the sex problem on the stage so repulsive and dreary that even those who are most determined that sex questions shall be held open and their discussion kept free, cannot pretend to relish these joyless attempts at social sanitation? Is it not because at bottom they are utterly sexless? What is the usual formula for such plays? A woman has, on some past occasion, been brought into conflict with the law which regulates the relations of the sexes. A man, by falling in love with her, or marrying her, is brought into conflict with the social convention which discountenances the woman. Now the conflicts of individuals with law and convention can be dramatized like all other human conflicts; but they are purely judicial; and the fact that we are much more curious about the suppressed relations between the man and the woman than about the relations between both and our courts of law and private juries of matrons, produces that sensation of evasion, of dissatisfaction, of fundamental irrelevance, of shallowness, of useless disagreeableness, of total failure to edify and partial failure to interest, which is as familiar to you in the theatres as it was to me when I, too, frequented those uncomfortable buildings, and found our popular playwrights in the mind to (as they thought) emulate Ibsen.

I take it that when you asked me for a Don Juan play you did not want that sort of thing. Nobody does: the successes such plays sometimes obtain are due to the incidental conventional melodrama with which the experienced popular author instinctively saves himself from failure. But what did you want? Owing to your unfortunate habit—you now, I hope, feel its inconvenience—of not explaining yourself, I have had to discover this for
myself. First, then, I have had to ask myself, what is a Don Juan? Vulgarly, a libertine. But your dislike of vulgarity is pushed to the length of a defect (universality of character is impossible without a share of vulgarity); and even if you could acquire the taste, you would find yourself overfed from ordinary sources without troubling me. So I took it that you demanded a Don Juan in the philosophic sense.

Philosophically, Don Juan is a man who, though gifted enough to be exceptionally capable of distinguishing between good and evil, follows his own instincts without regard to the common statute, or canon law; and therefore, whilst gaining the ardent sympathy of our rebellious instincts (which are flattered by the brilliancies with which Don Juan associates them) finds himself in mortal conflict with existing institutions, and defends himself by fraud and farce as unscrupulously as a farmer defends his crops by the same means against vermin. The prototypic Don Juan, invented early in the XVI century by a Spanish monk, was presented, according to the ideas of that time, as the enemy of God, the approach of whose vengeance is felt throughout the drama, growing in menace from minute to minute. No anxiety is caused on Don Juan’s account by any minor antagonist: he easily eludes the police, temporal and spiritual; and when an indignant father seeks private redress with the sword, Don Juan kills him without an effort. Not until the slain father returns from heaven as the agent of God, in the form of his own statue, does he prevail against his slayer and cast him into hell. The moral is a monkish one: repent and reform now; for to-morrow it may be too late. This is really the only point on which Don Juan is sceptical; for he is a devout believer in an ultimate hell, and risks damnation only because, as he is young, it seems so far off that repentance can be postponed until he has amused himself to his heart’s content.
But the lesson intended by an author is hardly ever the lesson the world chooses to learn from his book. What attracts and impresses us in El Burlador de Sevilla is not the immediate urgency of repentance, but the heroism of daring to be the enemy of God. From Prometheus to my own Devil's Disciple, such enemies have always been popular. Don Juan became such a pet that the world could not bear his damnation. It reconciled him sentimentally to God in a second version, and clamored for his canonization for a whole century, thus treating him as English journalism has treated that comic foe of the gods, Punch.

Molière's Don Juan casts back to the original in point of impenitence; but in piety he falls off greatly. True, he also proposes to repent; but in what terms? “Oui, ma foi! il faut s'amender. Encore vingt où trente ans de cette vie-ci, et puis nous songerons a nous.” After Moliere comes the artist-enchanter, the master of masters, Mozart, who reveals the hero's spirit in magical harmonies, elfin tones, and elate darting rhythms as of summer lightning made audible. Here you have freedom in love and in morality mocking exquisitely at slavery to them, and interesting you, attracting you, tempting you, inexplicably forcing you to range the hero with his enemy the statue on a transcendant plane, leaving the prudish daughter and her priggish lover on a crockery shelf below to live piously ever after.

After these completed works Byron's fragment does not count for much philosophically. Our vagabond libertines are no more interesting from that point of view than the sailor who has a wife in every port, and Byron's hero is, after all, only a vagabond libertine. And he is dumb: he does not discuss himself with a Sganarelle-Leporello or with the fathers or brothers of his mistresses: he does not even, like Casanova, tell his own story. In fact he is not a true Don Juan at all; for he is no more an enemy of God than any romantic and
adventurous young sower of wild oats. Had you and I been in his place at his age, who knows whether we might not have done as he did, unless indeed your fastidiousness had saved you from the empress Catherine. Byron was as little of a philosopher as Peter the Great: both were instances of that rare and useful, but unedifying variation, an energetic genius born without the prejudices or superstitions of his contemporaries. The resultant unscrupulous freedom of thought made Byron a greater poet than Wordsworth just as it made Peter a greater king than George III; but as it was, after all, only a negative qualification, it did not prevent Peter from being an appalling blackguard and an arrant poltroon, nor did it enable Byron to become a religious force like Shelley. Let us, then, leave Byron’s Don Juan out of account. Mozart’s is the last of the true Don Juans; for by the time he was of age, his cousin Faust had, in the hands of Goethe, taken his place and carried both his warfare and his reconciliation with the gods far beyond mere lovemaking into politics, high art, schemes for reclaiming new continents from the ocean, and recognition of an eternal womanly principle in the universe. Goethe’s Faust and Mozart’s Don Juan were the last words of the XVIII century on the subject; and by the time the polite critics of the XIX century, ignoring William Blake as superficially as the XVIII had ignored Hogarth or the XVII Bunyan, had got past the Dickens-Macaulay Dumas-Guizot stage and the Stendhal-Meredith-Turgenieff stage, and were confronted with philosophic fiction by such pens as Ibsen’s and Tolstoy’s, Don Juan had changed his sex and become Dona Juana, breaking out of the Doll’s House and asserting herself as an individual instead of a mere item in a moral pageant.

Now it is all very well for you at the beginning of the XX century to ask me for a Don Juan play; but you will see from the foregoing survey that Don Juan is a full century out
of date for you and for me; and if there are
millions of less literate people who are still in
the eighteenth century, have they not Moliere
and Mozart, upon whose art no human hand
can improve? You would laugh at me if at
this time of day I dealt in duels and ghosts
and “womanly” women. As to mere libertinism,
you would be the first to remind me that
the Festin de Pierre of Moliere is not a play for
amorists, and that one bar of the voluptuous
sentimentality of Gounod or Bizet would appear
as a licentious stain on the score of Don
Giovanni. Even the more abstract parts of
the Don Juan play are dilapidated past use:
for instance, Don Juan’s supernatural antagonist
hurled those who refuse to repent into
lakes of burning brimstone, there to be tormented
by devils with horns and tails. Of
that antagonist, and of that conception of repentance,
how much is left that could be used
in a play by me dedicated to you? On the
other hand, those forces of middle class public
opinion which hardly existed for a Spanish
nobleman in the days of the first Don
Juan, are now triumphant everywhere. Civilized
society is one huge bourgeoisie: no nobleman
dares now shock his greengrocer. The
women, “marchesane, principesse, cameriere,
cittadine” and all, are become equally dangerous:
the sex is aggressive, powerful: when
women are wronged they do not group themselves
pathetically to sing “Protegga il giusto
cielo”: they grasp formidable legal and social
weapons, and retaliate. Political parties are
wrecked and public careers undone by a single
indiscretion. A man had better have all the
statues in London to supper with him, ugly
as they are, than be brought to the bar of the
Nonconformist Conscience by Donna Elvira.
Excommunication has become almost as serious
a business as it was in the X century.
As a result, Man is no longer, like Don
Juan, victor in the duel of sex. Whether he has
ever really been may be doubted: at all events
the enormous superiority of Woman’s natural
position in this matter is telling with greater
and greater force. As to pulling the Nonconformist Conscience by the beard as Don Juan plucked the beard of the Commandant's statue in the convent of San Francisco, that is out of the question nowadays: prudence and good manners alike forbid it to a hero with any mind. Besides, it is Don Juan's own beard that is in danger of plucking. Far from relapsing into hypocrisy, as Sganarelle feared, he has unexpectedly discovered a moral in his immorality. The growing recognition of his new point of view is heaping responsibility on him. His former jests he has had to take as seriously as I have had to take some of the jests of Mr. W. S. Gilbert. His scepticism, once his least tolerated quality, has now triumphed so completely that he can no longer assert himself by witty negations, and must, to save himself from cipherdom, find an affirmative position. His thousand and three affairs of gallantry, after becoming, at most, two immature intrigues leading to sordid and prolonged complications and humiliations, have been discarded altogether as unworthy of his philosophic dignity and compromising to his newly acknowledged position as the founder of a school. Instead of pretending to read Ovid he does actually read Schopenhaur and Nietzsche, studies Westermarck, and is concerned for the future of the race instead of for the freedom of his own instincts. Thus his profligacy and his dare-devil airs have gone the way of his sword and mandoline into the rag shop of anachronisms and superstitions. In fact, he is now more Hamlet than Don Juan; for though the lines put into the actor's mouth to indicate to the pit that Hamlet is a philosopher are for the most part mere harmonious platitude which, with a little debasement of the word-music, would be properer to Pecksniff, yet if you separate the real hero, inarticulate and unintelligible to himself except in flashes of inspiration, from the performer who has to talk at any cost through five acts; and if you also do what you must always do in Shakespear's tragedies: that is, dissect out
the absurd sensational incidents and physical
violences of the borrowed story from the genuine
Shakespearian tissue, you will get a true
Promethean foe of the gods, whose instinctive
attitude towards women much resembles that
to which Don Juan is now driven. From this
point of view Hamlet was a developed Don
Juan whom Shakespear palmed off as a reputable
man just as he palmed poor Macbeth
off as a murderer. To-day the palming off is no
longer necessary (at least on your plane and
mine) because Don Juanism is no longer misunderstood
as mere Casanovism. Don Juan
himself is almost ascetic in his desire to avoid
that misunderstanding; and so my attempt to
bring him up to date by launching him as a
modern Englishman into a modern English
environment has produced a figure superficially
quite unlike the hero of Mozart.

And yet I have not the heart to disappoint
you wholly of another glimpse of the
Mozartian dissoluto punito and his antagonist
the statue. I feel sure you would like to know
more of that statue—to draw him out when
he is off duty, so to speak. To gratify you,
I have resorted to the trick of the strolling
theatrical manager who advertizes the pantomime
of Sinbad the Sailor with a stock of
second-hand picture posters designed for Ali
Baba. He simply thrusts a few oil jars into the
valley of diamonds, and so fulfils the promise
held out by the hoardings to the public eye.
I have adapted this simple device to our occasion
by thrusting into my perfectly modern
three-act play a totally extraneous act in
which my hero, enchanted by the air of the
Sierra, has a dream in which his Mozartian
ancestor appears and philosophizes at great
length in a Shavio-Socratic dialogue with the
lady, the statue, and the devil.

But this pleasantry is not the essence of
the play. Over this essence I have no control.
You propound a certain social substance,
sexual attraction to wit, for dramatic distillation;
and I distil it for you. I do not adulterate
the product with aphrodisiacs nor dilute
it with romance and water; for I am merely
executing your commission, not producing a
popular play for the market. You must therefore
(unless, like most wise men, you read the
play first and the preface afterwards) prepare
yourself to face a trumpery story of modern
London life, a life in which, as you know, the
ordinary man’s main business is to get means
to keep up the position and habits of a gentleman,
and the ordinary woman’s business is to
get married. In 9,999 cases out of 10,000, you
can count on their doing nothing, whether noble
or base, that conflicts with these ends; and
that assurance is what you rely on as their
religion, their morality, their principles, their
patriotism, their reputation, their honor and
so forth.

On the whole, this is a sensible and satisfactory
foundation for society. Money means
nourishment and marriage means children;
and that men should put nourishment first
and women children first is, broadly speaking,
the law of Nature and not the dictate of
personal ambition. The secret of the prosaic
man’s success, such as it is, is the simplicity
with which he pursues these ends: the secret
of the artistic man’s failure, such as that is,
is the versatility with which he strays in all
directions after secondary ideals. The artist is
either a poet or a scallawag: as poet, he cannot
see, as the prosaic man does, that chivalry is
at bottom only romantic suicide: as scallawag,
he cannot see that it does not pay to spunge
and beg and lie and brag and neglect his
person. Therefore do not misunderstand my
plain statement of the fundamental constitution
of London society as an Irishman’s reproach
to your nation. From the day I first
set foot on this foreign soil I knew the value of
the prosaic qualities of which Irishmen teach
Englishmen to be ashamed as well as I knew
the vanity of the poetic qualities of which Englishmen
teach Irishmen to be proud. For the
Irishman instinctively disparages the quality which makes the Englishman dangerous to him; and the Englishman instinctively flatters the fault that makes the Irishman harmless and amusing to him. What is wrong with the prosaic Englishman is what is wrong with the prosaic men of all countries: stupidity. The vitality which places nourishment and children first, heaven and hell a somewhat remote second, and the health of society as an organic whole nowhere, may muddle successfully through the comparatively tribal stages of gregariousness; but in nineteenth century nations and twentieth century empires the determination of every man to be rich at all costs, and of every woman to be married at all costs, must, without a highly scientific social organization, produce a ruinous development of poverty, celibacy, prostitution, infant mortality, adult degeneracy, and everything that wise men most dread. In short, there is no future for men, however brimming with crude vitality, who are neither intelligent nor politically educated enough to be Socialists. So do not misunderstand me in the other direction either: if I appreciate the vital qualities of the Englishman as I appreciate the vital qualities of the bee, I do not guarantee the Englishman against being, like the bee (or the Canaanite) smoked out and unloaded of his honey by beings inferior to himself in simple acquisitiveness, combativeness, and fecundity, but superior to him in imagination and cunning.

The Don Juan play, however, is to deal with sexual attraction, and not with nutrition, and to deal with it in a society in which the serious business of sex is left by men to women, as the serious business of nutrition is left by women to men. That the men, to protect themselves against a too aggressive prosecution of the women's business, have set up a feeble romantic convention that the initiative in sex business must always come from the man, is true; but the pretence is so shallow that even in the theatre, that last sanctuary of unreality,
it imposes only on the inexperienced. In
Shakespeare’s plays the woman always takes
the initiative. In his problem plays and his
popular plays alike the love interest is the
interest of seeing the woman hunt the man
down. She may do it by blandishment, like
Rosalind, or by stratagem, like Mariana; but
in every case the relation between the woman
and the man is the same: she is the pursuer
and contriver, he the pursued and disposed of.
When she is baffled, like Ophelia, she goes
mad and commits suicide; and the man goes
straight from her funeral to a fencing match.
No doubt Nature, with very young creatures,
may save the woman the trouble of scheming:
Prospero knows that he has only to throw Ferdinand
and Miranda together and they will
mate like a pair of doves; and there is no need
for Perdita to capture Florizel as the lady doctor
in All’s Well That Ends Well (an early Ibsenite
heroine) captures Bertram. But the
mature cases all illustrate the Shakespearean
law. The one apparent exception, Petruchio, is
not a real one: he is most carefully characterized
as a purely commercial matrimonial adventurer.
Once he is assured that Katharine
has money, he undertakes to marry her before
he has seen her. In real life we find not only
Petruchios, but Mantalinis and Dobbins who
pursue women with appeals to their pity or
jealousy or vanity, or cling to them in a romantically
infatuated way. Such effeminate
do not count in the world scheme: even Bunsby
dropping like a fascinated bird into the jaws
of Mrs. MacStinger is by comparison a true
tragic object of pity and terror. I find in my
own plays that Woman, projecting herself dramatically
by my hands (a process over which
I assure you I have no more real control than
I have over my wife), behaves just as Woman
did in the plays of Shakespeare.

And so your Don Juan has come to birth
as a stage projection of the tragi-comic love
chase of the man by the woman; and my Don
Juan is the quarry instead of the huntsman.
Yet he is a true Don Juan, with a sense of reality that disables convention, defying to the last the fate which finally overtakes him. The woman’s need of him to enable her to carry on Nature’s most urgent work, does not prevail against him until his resistance gathers her energy to a climax at which she dares to throw away her customary exploitations of the conventional affectionate and dutiful poses, and claim him by natural right for a purpose that far transcends their mortal personal purposes.

Among the friends to whom I have read this play in manuscript are some of our own sex who are shocked at the “unscrupulousness,” meaning the total disregard of masculine fastidiousness, with which the woman pursues her purpose. It does not occur to them that if women were as fastidious as men, morally or physically, there would be an end of the race. Is there anything meaner then to throw necessary work upon other people and then disparage it as unworthy and indelicate. We laugh at the haughty American nation because it makes the negro clean its boots and then proves the moral and physical inferiority of the negro by the fact that he is a shoeblack; but we ourselves throw the whole drudgery of creation on one sex, and then imply that no female of any womanliness or delicacy would initiate any effort in that direction. There are no limits to male hypocrisy in this matter. No doubt there are moments when man’s sexual immunities are made acutely humiliating to him. When the terrible moment of birth arrives, its supreme importance and its superhuman effort and peril, in which the father has no part, dwarf him into the meanest insignificance: he slinks out of the way of the humblest petticoat, happy if he be poor enough to be pushed out of the house to outface his ignominy by drunken rejoicings. But when the crisis is over he takes his revenge, swaggering as the breadwinner, and speaking of Woman’s “sphere” with condescension, even with chivalry, as if the kitchen and the nursery
were less important than the office in the city. When his swagger is exhausted he drivels into erotic poetry or sentimental uxoriousness; and the Tennysonian King Arthur posing as Guinevere becomes Don Quixote grovelling before Dulcinea. You must admit that here Nature beats Comedy out of the field: the wildest hominist or feminist farce is insipid after the most commonplace “slice of life.” The pretence that women do not take the initiative is part of the farce. Why, the whole world is strewn with snares, traps, gins and pitfalls for the capture of men by women. Give women the vote, and in five years there will be a crushing tax on bachelors. Men, on the other hand, attach penalties to marriage, depriving women of property, of the franchise, of the free use of their limbs, of that ancient symbol of immortality, the right to make oneself at home in the house of God by taking off the hat, of everything that he can force Woman to dispense with without compelling himself to dispense with her. All in vain. Woman must marry because the race must perish without her travail: if the risk of death and the certainty of pain, danger and unutterable discomforts cannot deter her, slavery and swaddled ankles will not. And yet we assume that the force that carries women through all these perils and hardships, stops abashed before the primnesses of our behavior for young ladies. It is assumed that the woman must wait, motionless, until she is wooed. Nay, she often does wait motionless. That is how the spider waits for the fly. But the spider spins her web. And if the fly, like my hero, shows a strength that promises to extricate him, how swiftly does she abandon her pretence of passiveness, and openly fling coil after coil about him until he is secured for ever!

If the really impressive books and other art-works of the world were produced by ordinary men, they would express more fear of women’s pursuit than love of their illusory beauty. But ordinary men cannot produce really
impressive art-works. Those who can are men of genius: that is, men selected by Nature to carry on the work of building up an intellectual consciousness of her own instinctive purpose. Accordingly, we observe in the man of genius all the unscrupulousness and all the "self-sacrifice" (the two things are the same) of Woman. He will risk the stake and the cross; starve, when necessary, in a garret all his life; study women and live on their work and care as Darwin studied worms and lived upon sheep; work his nerves into rags without payment, a sublime altruist in his disregard of himself, an atrocious egotist in his disregard of others. Here Woman meets a purpose as impersonal, as irresistible as her own; and the clash is sometimes tragic. When it is complicated by the genius being a woman, then the game is one for a king of critics: your George Sand becomes a mother to gain experience for the novelist and to develop her, and gobbles up men of genius, Chopins, Mussets and the like, as mere hors d'oeuvres.

I state the extreme case, of course; but what is true of the great man who incarnates the philosophic consciousness of Life and the woman who incarnates its fecundity, is true in some degree of all geniuses and all women. Hence it is that the world's books get written, its pictures painted, its statues modelled, its symphonies composed, by people who are free of the otherwise universal dominion of the tyranny of sex. Which leads us to the conclusion, astonishing to the vulgar, that art, instead of being before all things the expression of the normal sexual situation, is really the only department in which sex is a superseded and secondary power, with its consciousness so confused and its purpose so perverted, that its ideas are mere fantasy to common men. Whether the artist becomes poet or philosopher, moralist or founder of a religion, his sexual doctrine is nothing but a barren special pleading for pleasure, excitement, and knowledge when he is young, and
for contemplative tranquillity when he is old
and satiated. Romance and Asceticism, Amorism
and Puritanism are equally unreal in the
great Philistine world. The world shown us in
books, whether the books be confessed epics
or professed gospels, or in codes, or in political
orations, or in philosophic systems, is
not the main world at all: it is only the selfconsciousness
of certain abnormal people who
have the specific artistic talent and temperament.
A serious matter this for you and me,
because the man whose consciousness does
not correspond to that of the majority is a
madman; and the old habit of worshipping
madmen is giving way to the new habit of
locking them up. And since what we call education
and culture is for the most part nothing
but the substitution of reading for experience,
of literature for life, of the obsolete fictitious
for the contemporary real, education, as
you no doubt observed at Oxford, destroys, by
supplantation, every mind that is not strong
enough to see through the imposture and to
use the great Masters of Arts as what they
really are and no more: that is, patentees of
highly questionable methods of thinking, and
manufacturers of highly questionable, and for
the majority but half valid representations of
life. The schoolboy who uses his Homer to
throw at his fellow's head makes perhaps the
safest and most rational use of him; and I observe
with reassurance that you occasionally
do the same, in your prime, with your Aristotle.

Fortunately for us, whose minds have been
so overwhelmingly sophisticated by literature,
what produces all these treatises and poems
and scriptures of one sort or another is
the struggle of Life to become divinely conscious
of itself instead of blindly stumbling
hither and thither in the line of least resistance.
Hence there is a driving towards
truth in all books on matters where the writer,
though exceptionally gifted is normally constituted,
and has no private axe to grind. Copernicus
had no motive for misleading his fellowmen
as to the place of the sun in the solar system:
he looked for it as honestly as a shepherd
seeks his path in a mist. But Copernicus
would not have written love stories scientifically.

When it comes to sex relations,
the man of genius does not share the common
man’s danger of capture, nor the woman
of genius the common woman’s overwhelming
specialization. And that is why our scriptures
and other art works, when they deal
with love, turn from honest attempts at science
in physics to romantic nonsense, erotic
ecstasy, or the stern asceticism of satiety (“the
road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”
said William Blake; for “you never know what
is enough unless you know what is more than
enough”).

There is a political aspect of this sex question
which is too big for my comedy, and too
momentous to be passed over without culpable
frivolity. It is impossible to demonstrate
that the initiative in sex transactions
remains with Woman, and has been confirmed
to her, so far, more and more by the suppression
of rapine and discouragement of importunity,
without being driven to very serious
reflections on the fact that this initiative is
politically the most important of all the initiatives,
because our political experiment of
democracy, the last refuge of cheap misgovernment,
will ruin us if our citizens are ill bred.

When we two were born, this country was
still dominated by a selected class bred by political
marriages. The commercial class had
not then completed the first twenty-five years
of its new share of political power; and it
was itself selected by money qualification, and
bred, if not by political marriage, at least by
a pretty rigorous class marriage. Aristocracy
and plutocracy still furnish the figureheads
of politics; but they are now dependent on
the votes of the promiscuously bred masses.
And this, if you please, at the very moment
when the political problem, having suddenly ceased to mean a very limited and occasional interference, mostly by way of jobbing public appointments, in the mismanagement of a tight but parochial little island, with occasional meaningless prosecution of dynastic wars, has become the industrial reorganization of Britain, the construction of a practically international Commonwealth, and the partition of the whole of Africa and perhaps the whole of Asia by the civilized Powers. Can you believe that the people whose conceptions of society and conduct, whose power of attention and scope of interest, are measured by the British theatre as you know it to-day, can either handle this colossal task themselves, or understand and support the sort of mind and character that is (at least comparatively) capable of handling it? For remember: what our voters are in the pit and gallery they are also in the polling booth. We are all now under what Burke called “the hoofs of the swinish multitude.” Burke’s language gave great offence because the implied exceptions to its universal application made it a class insult; and it certainly was not for the pot to call the kettle black. The aristocracy he defended, in spite of the political marriages by which it tried to secure breeding for itself, had its mind undertrained by silly schoolmasters and governesses, its character corrupted by gratuitous luxury, its self-respect adulterated to complete spuriousness by flattery and flunkeyism. It is no better to-day and never will be any better: our very peasants have something morally hardier in them that culminates occasionally in a Bunyan, a Burns, or a Carlyle. But observe, this aristocracy, which was overpowered from 1832 to 1885 by the middle class, has come back to power by the votes of “the swinish multitude.” Tom Paine has triumphed over Edmund Burke; and the swine are now courted electors. How many of their own class have these electors sent to parliament? Hardly a dozen out of 670, and these only under the persuasion of conspicuous
personal qualifications and popular eloquence.

The multitude thus pronounces judgment on its own units: it admits itself unfit to govern, and will vote only for a man morphologically and generically transfigured by palatial residence and equipage, by transcendent tailoring, by the glamor of aristocratic kinship. Well, we two know these transfigured persons, these college passmen, these well groomed monocular Algys and Bobbies, these cricketers to whom age brings golf instead of wisdom, these plutocratic products of "the nail and sarspan business as he got his money by." Do you know whether to laugh or cry at the notion that they, poor devils! will drive a team of continents as they drive a four-in-hand; turn a jostling anarchy of casual trade and speculation into an ordered productivity; and federate our colonies into a world-Power of the first magnitude? Give these people the most perfect political constitution and the soundest political program that benevolent omniscience can devise for them, and they will interpret it into mere fashionable folly or canting charity as infallibly as a savage converts the philosophical theology of a Scotch missionary into crude African idolatry.

I do not know whether you have any illusions left on the subject of education, progress, and so forth. I have none. Any pamphleteer can show the way to better things; but when there is no will there is no way. My nurse was fond of remarking that you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, and the more I see of the efforts of our churches and universities and literary sages to raise the mass above its own level, the more convinced I am that my nurse was right. Progress can do nothing but make the most of us all as we are, and that most would clearly not be enough even if those who are already raised out of the lowest abysses would allow the others a chance. The bubble of Heredity has been pricked: the certainty that acquirements are negligible as
elements in practical heredity has demolished
the hopes of the educationists as well as the
terrors of the degeneracy mongers; and we
know now that there is no hereditary “governing
class” any more than a hereditary hooliganism.
We must either breed political capacity
or be ruined by Democracy, which was
forced on us by the failure of the older alternatives.

Yet if Despotism failed only for want
of a capable benevolent despot, what chance
has Democracy, which requires a whole population
of capable voters: that is, of political
critics who, if they cannot govern in person
for lack of spare energy or specific talent
for administration, can at least recognize and
appreciate capacity and benevolence in others,
and so govern through capably benevolent
representatives? Where are such voters to be
found to-day? Nowhere. Promiscuous breeding
has produced a weakness of character that
is too timid to face the full stringency of a thoroughly
competitive struggle for existence and
too lazy and petty to organize the commonwealth
co-operatively. Being cowards, we defeat
natural selection under cover of philanthropy:
being sluggards, we neglect artificial
selection under cover of delicacy and morality.

Yet we must get an electorate of capable
critics or collapse as Rome and Egypt collapsed.
At this moment the Roman decadent
phase of panem et circenses is being inaugurated
under our eyes. Our newspapers and
melodramas are blustering about our imperial
destiny; but our eyes and hearts turn
eagerly to the American millionaire. As his
hand goes down to his pocket, our fingers
go up to the brims of our hats by instinct.
Our ideal prosperity is not the prosperity of
the industrial north, but the prosperity of
the Isle of Wight, of Folkestone and Ramsgate,
of Nice and Monte Carlo. That is the
only prosperity you see on the stage, where
the workers are all footmen, parlourmaids,
comic lodging-letters and fashionable professional
men, whilst the heroes and heroines
are miraculously provided with unlimited dividends,
and eat gratuitously, like the knights
in Don Quixote’s books of chivalry.

The city papers prate of the competition of Bombay with Manchester and the like. The real competition is the competition of Regent Street with the Rue de Rivoli, of Brighton and the south coast with the Riviera, for the spending money of the American Trusts. What is all this growing love of pageantry, this effusive loyalty, this officious rising and uncovering at a wave from a flag or a blast from a brass band? Imperialism: Not a bit of it. Obsequiousness, servility, cupidity roused by the prevailing smell of money. When Mr. Carnegie rattled his millions in his pockets all England became one rapacious cringe. Only, when Rhodes (who had probably been reading my Socialism for Millionaires) left word that no idler was to inherit his estate, the bent backs straightened mistrustfully for a moment. Could it be that the Diamond King was no gentleman after all? However, it was easy to ignore a rich man’s solecism. The un-gentlemanly clause was not mentioned again; and the backs soon bowed themselves back into their natural shape.

But I hear you asking me in alarm whether I have actually put all this tub thumping into a Don Juan comedy. I have not. I have only made my Don Juan a political pamphleteer, and given you his pamphlet in full by way of appendix. You will find it at the end of the book. I am sorry to say that it is a common practice with romancers to announce their hero as a man of extraordinary genius, and to leave his works entirely to the reader’s imagination; so that at the end of the book you whisper to yourself ruefully that but for the author’s solemn preliminary assurance you should hardly have given the gentleman credit for ordinary good sense. You cannot accuse me of this pitiable barrenness, this feeble
evasion. I not only tell you that my hero
wrote a revolutionists’ handbook: I give you
the handbook at full length for your edification
if you care to read it. And in that handbook
you will find the politics of the sex question
as I conceive Don Juan’s descendant to
understand them. Not that I disclaim the
fullest responsibility for his opinions and for
those of all my characters, pleasant and unpleasant.
They are all right from their several
points of view; and their points of view
are, for the dramatic moment, mine also. This
may puzzle the people who believe that there
is such a thing as an absolutely right point
of view, usually their own. It may seem to
them that nobody who doubts this can be in
a state of grace. However that may be, it is
certainly true that nobody who agrees with
them can possibly be a dramatist, or indeed
anything else that turns upon a knowledge of
mankind. Hence it has been pointed out that
Shakespear had no conscience. Neither have
I, in that sense.

You may, however, remind me that this digression
of mine into politics was preceded
by a very convincing demonstration that the
artist never catches the point of view of the
common man on the question of sex, because
he is not in the same predicament. I first
prove that anything I write on the relation of
the sexes is sure to be misleading; and then I
proceed to write a Don Juan play. Well, if you
insist on asking me why I behave in this absurd
way, I can only reply that you asked me
to, and that in any case my treatment of the
subject may be valid for the artist, amusing
to the amateur, and at least intelligible and
therefore possibly suggestive to the Philistine.
Every man who records his illusions is providing
data for the genuinely scientific psychology
which the world still waits for. I plank
down my view of the existing relations of men
to women in the most highly civilized society
for what it is worth. It is a view like any other
view and no more, neither true nor false, but,
I hope, a way of looking at the subject which throws into the familiar order of cause and effect a sufficient body of fact and experience to be interesting to you, if not to the play-going public of London. I have certainly shown little consideration for that public in this enterprise; but I know that it has the friendliest disposition towards you and me as far as it has any consciousness of our existence, and quite understands that what I write for you must pass at a considerable height over its simple romantic head. It will take my books as read and my genius for granted, trusting me to put forth work of such quality as shall bear out its verdict. So we may disport ourselves on our own plane to the top of our bent; and if any gentleman points out that neither this epistle dedicatory nor the dream of Don Juan in the third act of the ensuing comedy is suitable for immediate production at a popular theatre we need not contradict him. Napoleon provided Talma with a pit of kings, with what effect on Talma’s acting is not recorded. As for me, what I have always wanted is a pit of philosophers; and this is a play for such a pit.

I should make formal acknowledgment to the authors whom I have pillaged in the following pages if I could recollect them all. The theft of the brigand-poetaster from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is deliberate; and the metamorphosis of Leporello into Enry Straker, motor engineer and New Man, is an intentional dramatic sketch for the contemporary embryo of Mr. H. G. Wells’s anticipation of the efficient engineering class which will, he hopes, finally sweep the jabberers out of the way of civilization. Mr. Barrio has also, whilst I am correcting my proofs, delighted London with a servant who knows more than his masters. The conception of Mendoza Limited I trace back to a certain West Indian colonial secretary, who, at a period when he and I and Mr. Sidney Webb were sowing our political wild oats as a sort of Fabian Three Musketeers, without
any prevision of the surprising respectability
of the crop that followed, recommended Webb,
the encyclopedic and inexhaustible, to form
himself into a company for the benefit of the
shareholders. Octavius I take over unaltered
from Mozart; and I hereby authorize any actor
who impersonates him, to sing "Dalla sua
pace" (if he can) at any convenient moment
during the representation. Ann was suggested
to me by the fifteenth century Dutch
morality called Everyman, which Mr. William
Poel has lately resuscitated so triumphantly.
I trust he will work that vein further, and recognize
that Elizabethan Renascence fustian is
no more bearable after medieval poesy than
Scribe after Ibsen. As I sat watching Everyman
at the Charterhouse, I said to myself
Why not Everywoman? Ann was the result:
every woman is not Ann; but Ann is Everywoman.
That the author of Everyman was no mere
artist, but an artist-philosopher, and that the
artist-philosophers are the only sort of artists
I take quite seriously, will be no news to you.
Even Plato and Boswell, as the dramatists
who invented Socrates and Dr Johnson, impress
me more deeply than the romantic playwrights.
Ever since, as a boy, I first breathed
the air of the transcendental regions at a performance
of Mozart’s Zauberflöte, I have been
proof against the garish splendors and alco-
holic excitements of the ordinary stage combinations
of Tappertitian romance with the police
intelligence. Bunyan, Blake, Hogarth and
Turner (these four apart and above all the English
Classics), Goethe, Shelley, Schopenhaur,
Wagner, Ibsen, Morris, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche
are among the writers whose peculiar sense of
the world I recognize as more or less akin to
my own. Mark the word peculiar. I read Dickens
and Shakespear without shame or stint;
but their pregnant observations and demonstrations
of life are not co-ordinated into any
philosophy or religion: on the contrary, Dickens’s
sentimental assumptions are violently
contradicted by his observations; and Shakespear’s
pessimism is only his wounded humanity.
Both have the specific genius of the fictionist and the common sympathies of human feeling and thought in pre-eminent degree. They are often saner and shrewder than the philosophers just as Sancho-Panza was often saner and shrewder than Don Quixote. They clear away vast masses of oppressive gravity by their sense of the ridiculous, which is at bottom a combination of sound moral judgment with lighthearted good humor. But they are concerned with the diversities of the world instead of with its unities: they are so irreligious that they exploit popular religion for professional purposes without delicacy or scruple (for example, Sydney Carton and the ghost in Hamlet!): they are anarchical, and cannot balance their exposures of Angelo and Dogberry, Sir Leicester Dedlock and Mr. Tite Barnacle, with any portrait of a prophet or a worthy leader: they have no constructive ideas: they regard those who have them as dangerous fanatics: in all their fictions there is no leading thought or inspiration for which any man could conceivably risk the spoiling of his hat in a shower, much less his life. Both are alike forced to borrow motives for the more strenuous actions of their personages from the common stockpot of melodramatic plots; so that Hamlet has to be stimulated by the prejudices of a policeman and Macbeth by the cupidities of a bushranger.

Dickens, without the excuse of having to manufacture motives for Hamlets and Macbeths, superfluously punt his crew down the stream of his monthly parts by mechanical devices which I leave you to describe, my own memory being quite baffled by the simplest question as to Monks in Oliver Twist, or the long lost parentage of Smike, or the relations between the Dorrit and Clennam families so inopportune discovered by Monsieur Rigaud Blandois. The truth is, the world was to Shakespear a great “stage of fools” on which he was utterly bewildered. He could see no sort of sense in living at all; and Dickens saved himself from the
despair of the dream in The Chimes by taking
the world for granted and busying himself
with its details. Neither of them could
do anything with a serious positive character:
they could place a human figure before you
with perfect verisimilitude; but when the moment
came for making it live and move, they
found, unless it made them laugh, that they
had a puppet on their hands, and had to in-
vent some artificial external stimulus to make
it work. This is what is the matter with Hamlet
all through: he has no will except in his
bursts of temper. Foolish Bardolaters make a
virtue of this after their fashion: they declare
that the play is the tragedy of irresolution;
but all Shakespear’s projections of the deepest
humanity he knew have the same defect:
their characters and manners are lifelike; but
their actions are forced on them from without,
and the external force is grotesquely inappropriate
except when it is quite conventional, as
in the case of Henry V. Falstaff is more vivid
than any of these serious reflective characters,
because he is self-acting: his motives are
his own appetites and instincts and humors.
Richard III, too, is delightful as the whimsical
comedian who stops a funeral to make love to
the corpse’s widow; but when, in the next act,
he is replaced by a stage villain who smothers
babies and offs with people’s heads, we
are revolted at the imposture and repudiate
the changeling. Faulconbridge, Coriolanus,
Leontes are admirable descriptions of instinctive
temperaments: indeed the play of Coriolanus
is the greatest of Shakespear’s comedies;
but description is not philosophy; and
comedy neither compromises the author nor
reveals him. He must be judged by those characters
into which he puts what he knows of
himself, his Hamlets and Macbeths and Lears
and Prosperos. If these characters are agonizing
in a void about factitious melodramatic
murders and revenges and the like, whilst the
comic characters walk with their feet on solid
ground, vivid and amusing, you know that
the author has much to show and nothing to
teach. The comparison between Falstaff and
Prospero is like the comparison between Micawber
and David Copperfield. At the end
of the book you know Micawber, whereas you
only know what has happened to David, and
are not interested enough in him to wonder
what his politics or religion might be if anything
so stupendous as a religious or political
idea, or a general idea of any sort, were
to occur to him. He is tolerable as a child;
but he never becomes a man, and might be
left out of his own biography altogether but
for his usefulness as a stage confidant, a Horatio
or “Charles his friend” what they call on
the stage a feeder.

Now you cannot say this of the works of
the artist-philosophers. You cannot say it, for
instance, of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Put your
Shakespearian hero and coward, Henry V and
Pistol or Parolles, beside Mr. Valiant and Mr.
Fearing, and you have a sudden revelation of
the abyss that lies between the fashionable
author who could see nothing in the world but
personal aims and the tragedy of their disappointment
or the comedy of their incongruity,
and the field preacher who achieved virtue
and courage by identifying himself with the
purpose of the world as he understood it. The
contrast is enormous: Bunyan’s coward stirs
your blood more than Shakespear’s hero, who
actually leaves you cold and secretly hostile.
You suddenly see that Shakespear, with all
his flashes and divinations, never understood
virtue and courage, never conceived how any
man who was not a fool could, like Bunyan’s
hero, look back from the brink of the river
of death over the strife and labor of his pilgrimage,
and say “yet do I not repent me”; or,
with the panache of a millionaire, bequeath
“my sword to him that shall succeed me in
my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to
him that can get it.” This is the true joy in
life, the being used for a purpose recognized
by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly
worn out before you are thrown on the
scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. And also the only real tragedy in life is the being used by personally minded men for purposes which you recognize to be base. All the rest is at worst mere misfortune or mortality: this alone is misery, slavery, hell on earth; and the revolt against it is the only force that offers a man’s work to the poor artist, whom our personally minded rich people would so willingly employ as pandar, buffoon, beauty monger, sentimentalizer and the like.

It may seem a long step from Bunyan to Nietzsche; but the difference between their conclusions is purely formal. Bunyan’s perception that righteousness is filthy rags, his scorn for Mr. Legality in the village of Morality, his defiance of the Church as the supplanter of religion, his insistence on courage as the virtue of virtues, his estimate of the career of the conventionally respectable and sensible Worldly Wiseman as no better at bottom than the life and death of Mr. Badman: all this, expressed by Bunyan in the terms of a tinker’s theology, is what Nietzsche has expressed in terms of post-Darwinian, post-Schopenhaurian philosophy; Wagner in terms of polytheistic mythology; and Ibsen in terms of mid-XIX century Parisian dramaturgy. Nothing is new in these matters except their novelties: for instance, it is a novelty to call Justification by Faith “Wille,” and Justification by Works “Vorstellung.” The sole use of the novelty is that you and I buy and read Schopenhaur’s treatise on Will and Representation when we should not dream of buying a set of sermons on Faith versus Works. At bottom the controversy is the same, and the dramatic results are the same. Bunyan makes no attempt to present his pilgrims as more sensible or better conducted than Mr. Worldly Wiseman. Mr. W. W.’s worst enemies, as Mr. Embezzler, Mr. Never-go-to-Church-on-
Sunday, Mr. Bad Form, Mr. Murderer, Mr. Burglar, Mr. Co-respondent, Mr. Blackmailer, Mr. Cad, Mr. Drunkard, Mr. Labor Agitator and so forth, can read the Pilgrim’s Progress without finding a word said against them; whereas the respectable people who snub them and put them in prison, such as Mr. W. W. himself and his young friend Civility; Formalist and Hypocrisy; Wildhead, Inconsiderate, and Pragmatick (who were clearly young university men of good family and high feeding); that brisk lad Ignorance, Talkative, By-Ends of Fairspeech and his mother-in-law Lady Feigning, and other reputable gentlemen and citizens, catch it very severely. Even Little Faith, though he gets to heaven at last, is given to understand that it served him right to be mobbed by the brothers Faint Heart, Mistrust, and Guilt, all three recognized members of respectable society and veritable pillars of the law. The whole allegory is a consistent attack on morality and respectability, without a word that one can remember against vice and crime. Exactly what is complained of in Nietzsche and Ibsen, is it not? And also exactly what would be complained of in all the literature which is great enough and old enough to have attained canonical rank, officially or unofficially, were it not that books are admitted to the canon by a compact which confesses their greatness in consideration of abrogating their meaning; so that the reverend rector can agree with the prophet Micah as to his inspired style without being committed to any complicity in Micah’s furiously Radical opinions.

Why, even I, as I force myself; pen in hand, into recognition and civility, find all the force of my onslaught destroyed by a simple policy of non-resistance. In vain do I redouble the violence of the language in which I proclaim my heterodoxies. I rail at the theistic credulity of Voltaire, the amoristic superstition of Shelley, the revival of tribal soothsaying and idolatrous rites which Huxley called
Science and mistook for an advance on the Pentateuch, no less than at the welter of ecclesiastical and professional humbug which saves the face of the stupid system of violence and robbery which we call Law and Industry. Even atheists reproach me with infidelity and anarchists with nihilism because I cannot endure their moral tirades. And yet, instead of exclaiming “Send this inconceivable Satanist to the stake,” the respectable newspapers pith me by announcing “another book by this brilliant and thoughtful writer.” And the ordinary citizen, knowing that an author who is well spoken of by a respectable newspaper must be all right, reads me, as he reads Micah, with undisturbed edification from his own point of view. It is narrated that in the eighteen-seventies an old lady, a very devout Methodist, moved from Colchester to a house in the neighborhood of the City Road, in London, where, mistaking the Hall of Science for a chapel, she sat at the feet of Charles Bradlaugh for many years, entranced by his eloquence, without questioning his orthodoxy or moulting a feather of her faith. I fear I shall be defrauded of my just martyrdom in the same way.

However, I am digressing, as a man with a grievance always does. And after all, the main thing in determining the artistic quality of a book is not the opinions it propagates, but the fact that the writer has opinions. The old lady from Colchester was right to sun her simple soul in the energetic radiance of Bradlaugh’s genuine beliefs and disbeliefs rather than in the chill of such mere painting of light and heat as elocution and convention can achieve. My contempt for belles lettres, and for amateurs who become the heroes of the fanciers of literary virtuosity, is not founded on any illusion of mind as to the permanence of those forms of thought (call them opinions) by which I strive to communicate my bent to my fellows. To younger men they are already outmoded; for though they have no more lost their logic
than an eighteenth century pastel has lost its
drawing or its color, yet, like the pastel, they
grow indefinably shabby, and will grow shabbier
until they cease to count at all, when
my books will either perish, or, if the world
is still poor enough to want them, will have
to stand, with Bunyan’s, by quite amorphous
qualities of temper and energy. With this conviction
I cannot be a bellettrist. No doubt I
must recognize, as even the Ancient Mariner
did, that I must tell my story entertainingly
if I am to hold the wedding guest spellbound
in spite of the siren sounds of the loud bassoon.
But “for art’s sake” alone I would not
face the toil of writing a single sentence. I
know that there are men who, having nothing
to say and nothing to write, are nevertheless
so in love with oratory and with literature
that they keep desperately repeating as much
as they can understand of what others have
said or written aforetime. I know that the
leisurely tricks which their want of conviction
leaves them free to play with the diluted and
misapprehended message supply them with a
pleasant parlor game which they call style.
I can pity their dotage and even sympathize
with their fancy. But a true original style is
never achieved for its own sake: a man may
pay from a shilling to a guinea, according to
his means, to see, hear, or read another man’s
act of genius; but he will not pay with his
whole life and soul to become a mere virtuoso
in literature, exhibiting an accomplishment
which will not even make money for him, like
fiddle playing. Effectiveness of assertion is
the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has
nothing to assert has no style and can have
none: he who has something to assert will go
as far in power of style as its momentousness
and his conviction will carry him. Disprove
his assertion after it is made, yet its style remains.
Darwin has no more destroyed the
style of Job nor of Handel than Martin Luther
destroyed the style of Giotto. All the assertions
get disproved sooner or later; and so we
find the world full of a magnificent debris of
artistic fossils, with the matter-of-fact credibility
gone clean out of them, but the form
still splendid. And that is why the old masters
play the deuce with our mere susceptibles.
Your Royal Academician thinks he can
get the style of Giotto without Giotto’s beliefs,
and correct his perspective into the bargain.
Your man of letters thinks he can get Bunyan’s
or Shakespear’s style without Bunyan’s
conviction or Shakespear’s apprehension, especially
if he takes care not to split his infinitives.
And so with your Doctors of Music,
who, with their collections of discords duly
prepared and resolved or retarded or anticipated
in the manner of the great composers,
think they can learn the art of Palestrina from
Cherubim’s treatise. All this academic art is
far worse than the trade in sham antique furniture;
for the man who sells me an oaken
chest which he swears was made in the XIII
century, though as a matter of fact he made it
himself only yesterday, at least does not pretend
that there are any modern ideas in it,
whereas your academic copier of fossils offers
them to you as the latest outpouring of the human
spirit, and, worst of all, kidnaps young
people as pupils and persuades them that his
limitations are rules, his observances dexterities,
his timidities good taste, and his emptinesses
purities. And when he declares that
art should not be didactic, all the people who
have nothing to teach and all the people who
don’t want to learn agree with him emphatically.
I pride myself on not being one of these
susceptible: If you study the electric light with
which I supply you in that Bumbledonian public
capacity of mine over which you make
merry from time to time, you will find that
your house contains a great quantity of highly
susceptible copper wire which gorges itself
with electricity and gives you no light whatever.
But here and there occurs a scrap of intensely
insusceptible, intensely resistant material;
and that stubborn scrap grapples with
the current and will not let it through until
it has made itself useful to you as those two
vital qualities of literature, light and heat. Now if I am to be no mere copper wire amateur but a luminous author, I must also be a most intensely refractory person, liable to go out and to go wrong at inconvenient moments, and with incendiary possibilities. These are the faults of my qualities; and I assure you that I sometimes dislike myself so much that when some irritable reviewer chances at that moment to pitch into me with zest, I feel unspeakably relieved and obliged. But I never dream of reforming, knowing that I must take myself as I am and get what work I can out of myself. All this you will understand; for there is community of material between us: we are both critics of life as well as of art; and you have perhaps said to yourself when I have passed your windows, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” An awful and chastening reflection, which shall be the closing cadence of this immoderately long letter from yours faithfully,

G. BERNARD SHAW.

WOKING, 1903