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## Review of Martha Fodeski Black's Shaw and Joyce: "The Last Word in Stolentelling."

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## Book Review

### *Shaw and Joyce: "The Last Word in Stolentelling"*

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*Shaw and Joyce: "The Last Word in Stolentelling."* Martha Fodasky Black. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995. Pp. 445. \$49.95.

A book that would look at George Bernard Shaw and James Joyce together, following their reception of each other and probing for traces of influence, would seem to be long overdue. Since the publication of Dominic Manganiello's *Joyce's Politics* (1980), interest in Joyce's anarchist and socialist sympathies has made Joyce more of a subject of the kind of political studies that have long focused on Shaw. Likewise, given poststructuralists' appetite for new authors on which to focus, Shaw's playful inversions of melodramatic convention and his inveterate use of paradox would seem ripe for comparison with Joyce's more celebrated language experiments. Certainly, as Martha Fodasky Black points out in her new book, notable similarities between the two men make them a tempting pair to discuss in tandem. Both were Dublin expatriates; both revolted against the strictures of nation, religion, and marriage; both repudiated the Irish literary revival; both found inspiration in Ibsen; both were early exponents of antiromantic realism; and both to a large extent were comic modernists. Their differences may not have been negligible. Shaw grew up in a Protestant home and Joyce a Catholic one, Shaw became a celebrity of enormous influence whereas Joyce wrote for a small and very select audience, and each had totally opposed views on the proper role of art, Joyce carefully avoiding anything resembling Shaw's political instrumentalization of his plays. But these differences merely serve to heighten interest in why their rebellions against Irish insularity took such different paths.

Unfortunately, *Shaw and Joyce: "The Last Word in Stolentelling"* is a somewhat disappointing study of the two writers. Rather than rigorously comparing their views, literary methods, and responses to each other in the context of the intellectual milieu of their time, Black focuses almost exclusively on tracing Shaw's influence in Joyce's writings, with predictably blindered results. It is her thesis that Shaw is more than simply an important and heretofore unrecognized influence; she argues that he is *the* important factor, albeit one Joyce sedulously tried to hide, behind the younger Irishman's art--that Shaw is Joyce's "secret mentor" (65), "literary father" (69), and "ideological sire" (79). Although she recognizes that both writers are stylistically dissimilar, Black asserts that "the germs of Joyce's themes are in the polemics, prefaces, and plays of the famous Fabian" (5).

Much of what Black has to say in defense of her "stolentelling" thesis is provocative. Joyce's early critical essay "Ibsen's New Drama" borrows arguments from and makes specific textual reference to Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). Like Shaw's plays, *Dubliners* depicts people trapped by social convention and beholden to delusory ideals. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

*Man* portrays Stephen Dedalus as a kind of "devil's disciple" who exemplifies Shaw's much repeated injunction to reject "duty." And *Finnegans Wake* makes numerous mischievous references to Shaw and his plays. But Black is not content to rest her case on such solid but modest foundations; she insists on finding evidence confirming Joyce's covert discipleship to Shaw in all but the most inhospitable places. In trying to link the two writers politically, for example, Black writes, "Joyce's nonviolent, individualistic 'anarchist' sympathies were, in fact, a clone of Shaw's, which, like Joyce's, did not extend to belief in planting bombs or dismantling governments" (16). Never mind that Shaw's anarchist "sympathies" are of little relevance in comparison to his deep allegiance to Fabian state socialism; by reducing Shaw and Joyce's political differences to a shared lack of faith in "planting bombs," Black can make them look more similar than they in truth were. Similarly, in trying to argue that Leopold [End Page 179] Bloom is "a *doppelgänger* of Shaw" (225), Black selectively calls attention to a series of potentially Shavian characteristics in Bloom that might as easily point toward other sources. Bloom may, like Shaw, oppose corporal punishment, advocate the humane treatment of animals, speak against the dangers of alcohol, carry on a love liaison by mail (as Shaw did with the actresses Ellen Terry and Stella Campbell), and be "sensitive to the suffering of women" (collecting money for Dignam's widow as Shaw did for the deceased James Connolly's wife after the 1916 Easter uprising), but these characteristics hardly constitute a specifically Shavian set of qualities (206). Nor do Bloom's nighttown "animadversions on the state of the world and how to reform it imply a Shavian model and source of information, ideological substance, and harebrained utopian schemes" (224). Although the anticapitalist tenor of Bloom's New Bloomusalem speech and its emphasis on municipal reform and compulsory labor resemble Shaw's brand of Fabianism, the sentimental humanitarianism and utopian character of Bloom's ideas could not be more different. Despite the peculiar nature of his Life Force philosophy, Shaw was coldly realistic and had no interest in reform schemes that did not have immediate practical value.

To be fair to Black, however, it should be pointed out that such imperfect attempts to locate Shaw in Joyce's texts do less damage to her thesis than one might expect. Because her thesis rests on the assumption that Joyce tried to "disguise" (258) and "parody" (201) his borrowings, for reasons ranging from fear of avant-garde ridicule to a jealous desire to be perceived as self-generated, it behooves her to be able to locate only a fractured Shavian presence in his writings. Unfortunately, the license this provides her as an interpreter creates its own problems. Nothing in Joyce need be quite what it seems. Criticisms of Shaw in Joyce's letters become smokescreens to divert friends from the true source of his ideas. Fictional references to Caesar, Napoleon, and other historical figures, however untheatrical in nature, become references to Shaw's dramatizations of them. Even Joyce's claim to have used Giambattista Vico's ideas throughout *Finnegans Wake* becomes a ploy to hide that work's ultimate indebtedness to Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, a play whose "recurring and interpenetrating" (264) characters bear some admittedly striking but finally unconvincing parallels to those of Joyce. But this is not to say that *Shaw and Joyce* is without merit. If Black's occasionally conspiracy-driven interpretive zeal sometimes causes her to be blind to more obvious sources of influence, she nevertheless opens important vistas onto a subject that deserves greater attention than it has received. I can only hope future scholarship builds on her work.

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