January 1997

Shaw for the Utopians, Capek for the Anti-Utopians

Julie A. Sparks
San Jose State University, julie.sparks@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/eng_complit_pub

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
The continuing argument between utopian writers who prefigure the Millennium and the anti-utopian writers who prophesy the approach of Armageddon is generally assumed to be a struggle between wide-eyed optimism and misanthropic pessimism. But the profoundest thinkers in each camp sometimes find, after a prolonged engagement with their dialogic opposites, that their tents are pitched on common ground—that a Hegelian synthesis has occurred wherein the seemingly irreconcilable positions have merged into a guarded but life-affirming optimism. One such reconciliation can be found in the dramatic dialogue between Bernard Shaw, representing the utopians, and Karel Capek (1890–1938), a Czech anti-utopian writer with Luddite tendencies and conservative religious views who respected Shaw’s work but disagreed with some of its deepest philosophical underpinnings. They began working out their different visions of humanity’s future independently, both weighing the unprecedented destructive ferocity of World War I against the great promise of the early twentieth century’s technological advances and exploring humanity’s prospects in a utopian-dystopian format. Both also employed their own variations on biblical themes—Creation, Armageddon, and the achievement of the Millennium—to illustrate their different conclusions. Eventually, however, they were drawn into a dialogue that focused on a question central to utopian and anti-utopian discourse: Should humanity strive for a secular millennium, struggling to re-create man and society into the image suggested by our brightest
hopes, or should we content ourselves with the status quo and wait patiently for divine orchestration to work out our destiny?

Their essential disagreement on this point stems in part from their very different concepts of humankind’s progress. As J. L. Wisenthal explains in his study of Shaw’s dialectic dramatic method, “His perspective is evolutionary, and he thinks in terms of progress toward goals rather than their actual attainment. In an evolutionary world no stage is final, and in a neo-Lamarckian evolutionary world the human will is always aiming at something higher.” In contrast to this evolutionary outlook, Čapek agrees with the prophet of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun, and he found evidence for this belief even in a London art museum. In his Letters from England, written after his trip there in 1924, he wrote, “How awful a discovery to find the perfection of man even at the very beginning of existence; to find it in the formation of the first stone arrow, to find it in a Bushman drawing. . . . [D]readful is the relativity of culture and history; nowhere behind us or before us is there a point of rest, of an ideal, of the finish and perfection of man; for it is everywhere and nowhere, and every spot in space and time where man has set up his work is unsurpassable.” There could hardly be a more radical divergence of perspective than this, and it led the two writers to present very different interpretations of humanity’s distant past and hypothetical future, especially when they became aware of each other’s work and squared off for a theological battle. Nevertheless, the first arguments in the debate did not begin as such.

Between 1918 and 1920 Shaw labored on an immense work, a five-play cycle called Back to Methuselah, in an effort to provide a modern credible religion that could guide us all out of the error and folly that seemed to have brought us so close to the edge of doom during the Great War. The resulting work was his “metabiological pentateuch” which begins “In the Beginning” with a re-working of the Genesis myth and extends “As Far as Thought Can Reach” to a far-distant future when humankind has evolved into god-like Ancients who live for centuries in their serene, intensely intellectual utopia. Although Shaw’s history of humankind recognizes the power-mad, wantonly destructive Cain element in our early stages, he shows how the truly vital, creative element finally prevails and pulls humanity onward and upward straight past the tidy millennial societies that the socialist utopian reformers were dreaming about. The last play of the cycle, As Far as Thought Can Reach, ends with a prophecy that some super-evolved humanity, discarding the bodies that encumber it, will eventually spread to populate the stars.

Although many critics objected that the utopia of Shaw’s Ancients is not a very appealing goal to strive for and that Back to Methuselah only
demonstrated Shaw’s misanthropy, Shaw seriously intended to offer modern man hope that through willing ourselves to be better, we could ascend the evolutionary ladder from the Yahoo to the Houyhnhnm stage of intellectual and spiritual development. Thus understood, Shaw’s Creative Evolution is probably the brightest optimism that could be maintained in the aftermath of Neo-Darwinism and the Great War.

In 1920, the same year Shaw finished his utopian pentateuch, Čapek, writing in Czechoslovakia, finished his first anti-utopian play, *R. U. R.* (*Rossum’s Universal Robots*), wherein he, like Shaw, evaluates twentieth-century millennial ambitions and Apocalyptic fears employing a modern version of biblical motifs. In Čapek’s own words, he meant to write “a comedy, partly of science, partly of truth. The old inventor, Mr. Rossum . . . is no more or less than a typical representative of the scientific materialism of the last century. His desire to create an artificial man—in the chemical and biological, not the mechanical sense—is inspired by a foolish and obstinate wish to prove God to be unnecessary and absurd. Young Rossum is the modern scientist, untroubled by metaphysical ideas; scientific experiment is to him the road to industrial production, he is not concerned to prove, but to manufacture.”

This scenario develops into a dark cautionary tale. Young Rossum, hoping to free humanity from toil and establish a leisurely millennial society on android labor—and to make a fortune in the process—is at first phenomenally successful. But the utopian scheme creates too much leisure and renders humans obsolete. Recognizing this, the robots rise up and destroy humanity, then realize that they too soon face extinction because they are not designed for reproduction. Yet the play ends with a life-affirming miracle as two of the robots metamorphose into love-struck humans. Ending where *Back to Methuselah* begins, this Adam and Eve go forth to renew and repopulate the earth.

Although the central concerns of *Back to Methuselah* and *R. U. R.* are very different, both feature automatons that are created in a laboratory to resemble human flesh and intellect very closely—more “androids” in the current use of the term than the metallic, mechanical beings usually implied by the term “robot” (a Čapek-coined word from the Czech “robota” for “forced labor, drudgery”), although the robots hold a much more central position in Čapek’s play. In *Methuselah* the automatons appear in only one scene of the last play of the cycle, *As Far as Thought Can Reach*, and they live only briefly before they turn vicious, kill their creator, and then die. In Čapek’s play, however, the robot revolution easily upstages the human characters’ petty concerns, giving the play a more “science fiction” feel and a more coherent focus than Shaw’s eclectic, rambling chronicle could achieve.

Despite their differences, the two plays were linked in the public's
consciousness when, in 1922, both were given their American debut (it was a world premiere for *Methuselah*) by New York's Theatre Guild—Shaw's in February and March, Capek's in October. One reviewer with the *New York Herald* noticed an affinity between the two plays immediately, observing that *R.U.R.* "has as many social implications as the most handy of the Shavian comedies," while a reviewer with the *New York American* goes so far as to assert (rather snidely) that "Bernard Shaw did not write *R.U.R.* but he probably will. Possibly later on we shall have a variation of *R.U.R.* by Mr. Shaw and then what we accepted last night as an exceedingly enjoyable and imaginative fantasy will become a dull diatribe." Yet the two playwrights who were being discussed together in New York both insisted later that they remained unaware of each other's work for some time, and the evidence seems to support this.

*R.U.R.*'s principal motif—man-made automatons that try to overthrow their creators—can be traced back to much earlier influences. One obvious possibility is the medieval Jewish folk-tale of the Golem, a clay manikin brought to life through cabalistic magic to defend the Jews of the Prague ghetto. Since a German film version of this legend was being shown widely in Czechoslovakia in 1920, the year Capek wrote *R.U.R.*, its influence on the play seems probable. Another obvious precedent is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (the *New York Times* critic titled his review "A Czecho-Slovak Frankenstein"). Probably the closest previous literary precedent, however, describes, like Capek's play, a society that reaches for the utopian ideal of universal leisure by relegating most of the labor to manufactured automatons: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's anti-utopian novel, *The Coming Race* (1871). Although we can only speculate whether Capek may have had access to this novel, precedents for his robots are certainly in evidence. When Bulwer-Lytton's narrator first encounters the highly advanced society several miles underground, he reports, "In all service, whether in or out of doors, they make great use of automaton figures, which are so ingenious, and so pliant to the operations of Vril [an energy source], that they actually seem gifted with reason. It was scarcely possible to distinguish the figures I beheld, apparently guiding or superintending the rapid movements of vast engines, from the human forms endowed with thought."

We do know that Shaw was familiar with Bulwer-Lytton's novel, and he tells us in a speech he delivered to the Fabians in 1933 that he borrowed from it the idea that one possible key to a utopian society is "mutually assured destruction" at the personal level—that is, if each member of society could kill with a thought, that society would have to make sure it arranged its institutions carefully so that all members would be content with their lot, and the race would have to develop a high degree of self-control and a horror of killing or it would self-destruct in
short order. We see this awful power being demonstrated on a small scale in the fourth play of the Methuselah cycle, *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, just before Shaw's “coming race” finally decides that it must humanely but implacably exterminate the more primitive species of humanity that has failed to evolve this power (just as Čapek's robots decide to exterminate the human race). Although Bulwer-Lytton draws a utopia that many socialist reformers (including Shaw) would approve of, his anti-utopian message—that humankind is constitutionally incapable of either establishing or living in such a perfect society—would appeal more to Čapek, as he makes clear in his later dystopian works.

It is important to note, however, that even at this early stage of his career, Čapek seemed to be working with the same biblical motifs Shaw used in his utopian works, and the plot similarities that result between *R.U.R.* and *Methuselah* are striking, particularly in their revision of Genesis. For example, Čapek's robotic Adam and Eve prove their worthiness to take on the grave responsibility of regenerating the species by demonstrating their willingness to die for each other—in a scene with parallels in Shaw's *In the Beginning* and *As Far as Thought Can Reach*. The scene is pivotal in Čapek's play, providing the deus ex machina device that prevents a species-wide tragedy as God mercifully decides to give humankind a second chance despite the disastrous effects of our greed and hubris. Just as the last remaining human, Alquist, has completely given up hope of rediscovering the lost robot formula and despairing that life will perish from the earth, he discovers that a young robot couple, Helena and Primus, seem to have developed a crucial human quality: they are in love with each other. They don't know what is happening to them, but it is clear to the audience from their behavior and is proven in a classic test when Alquist tells them he must dissect one of them to save the robot race, and each begs to be the sacrificial victim so that the other might live. Finally Primus declares “I won't allow it. You won't kill either of us, old man... We—we—belong to each other.” Alquist then sends the pair out into the world with a benediction: “Go, Adam. Go, Eve—be a wife to him. Be a husband to her, Primus.” In case we did not catch the biblical allusion, Alquist proceeds to read from Genesis: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” This receives special emphasis because it is Čapek's principal theme, in this and all of his anti-utopian works. Alquist voices Čapek's challenge to the worshipers of technology when he asks (rhetorically, since they are all dead), “[G]reat inventors, what did you ever invent that was great when compared to that girl, to that boy, to this first couple who have discovered love, tears, beloved laughter, the love of husband and wife?” Finally, on his knees, Alquist thanks God that his eyes have “beheld Thy deliverance through love, and life shall not perish!”
Although Shaw’s version of Genesis is quite different in many respects, there is a strong parallel to what Alquist describes as “this first couple who have discovered love . . . beloved laughter, the love of husband and wife.” In Shaw’s Eden these phenomena (and many others) are also discovered, and words are found for them by the very articulate Serpent, who also explains to Eve how they can reproduce their kind. (This secret Alquist delicately leaves the robot couple to discover for themselves.) Also like the robots, Shaw’s Adam and Eve are faced with the threat of extinction, for we meet them the morning they discover death in the garden. This discovery makes them suddenly terrified for the other’s safety, and like Primus, Adam is especially protective: “You must never put yourself in danger of stumbling,” he tells Eve. “I will take care of you and bring you what you want.” After discovering the feelings of uncertainty and jealousy, the two discover (like the robots) that they belong to each other, so they invent marriage, and the Serpent, like Alquist, supplies the titles “husband” and “wife” (18).

If we skip from the first to the last play of Shaw’s cycle, As Far as Thought Can Reach, we see another sort of “first couple” that resembles Čapek’s: the automatons created by Pygmalion. Although physically superb, they are morally defective, for the most part, as haughty and self-centered as thoroughly spoiled children. When reproached for killing their creator, they respond as the Bible’s Adam and Eve do when reproached for their disobedience: they try to blame each other. However, they manage to rise briefly to the level of Helena and Primus when the very superior He-Ancient, taking Alquist’s role, presents them with the same ultimatum: “Now listen,” he says, “One of you two is to be destroyed. Which of you shall it be?” “Spare her; and kill me,” the male figure responds. “Kill us both,” urges the woman, “How could either of us live without the other?” (243). As it happens, they do both die, for they are deeply flawed creatures who cannot live among the super-evolved Ancients, but Shaw’s play ends on a note that is as emphatically life-affirming as Čapek’s. Lilith, another character Shaw has appropriated from biblical legend and radically reinterpreted, sounds a bit like Alquist when she declares, reverently and exultantly, “Of life only is there no end; and though of its million starry mansions many are empty and many still unbuilt . . . my seed shall one day fill it and master its matter to its uttermost confines. And for what may be beyond, the eyesight of Lilith is too short. It is enough that there is a beyond” (262).

Although both plays are in their different ways life-affirming, they clearly take opposite positions on the issue of humanity’s role in shaping its own destiny. Shaw does not believe God could really survey creation and declare it “good” in the same sense that Čapek means it, which is to say “quite good enough for us.” Like most utopians, Shaw believed that
both humanity and human society needed to be vastly improved and that our duty as humans (in his view, gods in embryo) is to strive continually toward that end. Shaw expresses this belief in defending “the divine force of curiosity” in an earlier preface (to *The Doctor’s Dilemma*):

> I have always despised Adam because he had to be tempted by the woman, as she was by the serpent, before he could be induced to pluck the apple from the tree of knowledge. I should have swallowed every apple on the tree the moment the owner’s back was turned. When Gray said “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise,” he forgot that it is godlike to be wise; and since nobody wants bliss particularly, or could stand more than a very brief taste of it if it were attainable, and since everybody, by the deepest law of the Life Force, desires to be godlike, it is stupid, and indeed blasphemous and despairing, to hope that the thirst for knowledge will either diminish or consent to be subordinated to any other end whatsoever. 10

Čapek, conversely, seems to be asserting in *R.U.R.* that striving to be “godlike” is not only ill-advised but downright sinful—a classic expression of the kind of willfulness and pride that led to our Fall in the first place. Čapek soon added another anti-utopian play to the argument in his next work, *The Makropoulos Secret*.

In 1922, the same year that the New York Theatre Guild produced *Methuselah* and *R.U.R.*, Čapek’s *Makropoulos Secret* had its debut in Prague. Like *R.U.R.*, it was immediately considered in relation to *Methuselah* (especially the third play of Shaw’s cycle, *The Thing Happens*) because it demonstrates how extreme longevity would be a curse to humanity. Čapek was rather insistent in the play’s preface that he had heard only sketchily of Shaw’s play when he was writing his, but the plot similarities suggest otherwise. Both plays feature a woman who has taken a step toward immortality—each can live for three centuries without any decrease in vigor or change in appearance after the first forty years or so—and both plays focus on evaluating whether that miracle would be a blessing or a curse were it more widespread in the race. As before, both playwrights take diametrically opposed positions on the desirability of humankind’s striving to achieve this miracle. Shaw believes our survival absolutely depends on our developing the level of maturity and sense of social responsibility that only a very long, vigorous life can provide, while Čapek insists it is not only ill-advised but downright sinful to aspire to more than our traditionally allotted three score and ten—Adam and Eve were, after all, driven from Eden to prevent
Despite the diametrically opposed themes, however, the two plays contain several remarkably similar plot elements. Most striking is the exact period of longevity in both plays: three centuries. It really looks as if Capek was being clever in pretending to arrive as this figure by “coincidence” because Shaw begins the second play of his pentateuch, The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas, with this same coincidence: the two brothers who have been developing their plan for the salvation of humanity decide independently but simultaneously that we must achieve life-spans of three centuries if we are to survive as a species. When Conrad bursts into his brother Franklyn’s study with this announcement, Franklyn says, “Now that is extraordinary . . . . The very last words I wrote when you interrupted me were ‘at least three centuries’ ” (37–38). Unfortunately, the two are interrupted before Franklyn can answer his brother’s question, “How did you arrive at it?” Could this be another instance of the artists’ intuitive synchronity? Or did Capek appropriate at least this detail from the “resume” of Shaw’s play that he says he read in 1921?

The other plot parallels may simply have followed logically from the similar situation depicted. Anyone who lives for a couple of centuries would experience similar difficulties and thus could be expected to respond with similar stratagems if forced to live among people of normal life-spans. Accordingly, we find Shaw’s Mrs. Lutestring, who survives from the day of the Brothers Barnabas to the distant future of the next play, The Thing Happens, describing problems similar to Emilia’s. Both must periodically stage a death and adopt a new persona to allay the suspicions of short-livers; both must suffer the loss of beloved friends and family who age and die in the usual way; both finally become emotionally detached from their numerous progeny and, indeed, from all short-lived people, who begin to seem rather tediously childish; and both acquire a mysterious power of inspiring awe and fear in ordinary mortals, who cannot help feeling their own inferiority in the presence of these majestic, goddess-like women. Perhaps certain other plot details are also inevitable, arising from the conflict between the desire for eternal youth and the fear of the unknown. Thus, both plays contain characters who consider with trepidation how this phenomenal longevity, if it became widespread in the population, would wreck the current political structure; both contain moving passages that describe the unbearable brevity of the traditional life-span and the great potential for human improvement that any significant extension could make possible; both plays refer to a race of “supermen”; and both plays include characters who are not brave enough to face the prospect of a three-century life-span.
Despite all these similarities, the playwrights come down on opposite sides of the question of whether this is a desirable development, whether the possibilities for human improvement that greater longevity could provide—the striving for a nobler quality of life, even an approach to godhead—are worth the risks and the burden involved. In order to present their very different answers to this philosophical question, the playwrights had to present their heroines' characters somewhat differently. Shaw suggests that a longer lifetime would produce wise, goddess-like women by describing Mrs. Lutestring as "a handsome woman, apparently in the prime of life, with elegant, tense, well held-up figure, and the walk of a goddess. Her expression and deportment are grave, swift, decisive, awful, unanswerable. She wears a Dianesque tunic . . . [T]he men, who rise as she enters . . . incline their heads with instinctive awe" (113–14). Her interaction with the short-livers bears out this description of her awful magnificence and shows that she is quite capable of bearing the grave responsibility of establishing and maintaining a utopia. When the relatively ineffectual and shallow president, Burge-Lubin, speculates that "The complications must be frightful. Really I hardly know whether I do want to live much longer than other people," Mrs. Lutestring replies regally, "You can always kill yourself. . . . Long life is complicated, and even terrible; but it is glorious all the same. I would no more change places with an ordinary woman than with a mayfly that lives only an hour" (119).

Čapek is more terse in his stage directions than Shaw, so we hear of Emilia Marty's magnificence only from the other characters, but they all rave about her beauty, her charisma, her marvelous singing voice (she is an opera diva), and, as with Mrs. Lutestring, the instinctive fear she inspires. Even without stage directions, however, one director seems to have captured what Shaw describes as the irresistible psychic force that longevity would produce in a woman like this. The effect is reported precisely in Walter Kerr's review of the 1957 New York revival of the play. In describing the scene wherein Emilia is confronted by an old lover of hers, now elderly, Kerr says, "Miss [Eileen] Herlie rests on a chaise-longue, turned thoroughly away from us. The old sport's eyes meet hers. In the intake of a breath, and a few seconds' silence, something happens between them—something strong enough to blow the frail gallant backward, like a windblown dandelion, into the lap of the nearest onlooker." Shaw presents a very similar scene in the fourth play of the cycle, Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman, between an ancient oracle and some presumptuous short-livers who fall to their knees in terror and awe when she is revealed to them.

Despite these similarities, however, Shaw's and Čapek's heroines are very different people. We can see just how different Čapek's heroine is from the "Dianesque" Mrs. Lutestring when Gregor, a character who
has been so unfortunate as to have fallen passionately in love with Emilia, raves, “I am terrified of you. . . . There is something dreadful about you. . . . You are vicious, low, awful, you are a callous animal. . . . Nothing means anything to you. Cold like a knife. As if you’d come out of a grave.”12 It is significant that while Shaw invokes the imagery of Greek mythology—and specifically a goddess “chaste and fair” (although really Athena would have been a more appropriate model)—Capek presents Emilia as a vampire. Both are immortal and awe-inspiring, but only one is admirable. While Shaw’s heroine works hard, devotes herself to the future of humankind, and finds the effort “glorious,” Capek’s heroine is locked in the tail-chasing aimlessness of narcissism. We are not terribly surprised when we find the other characters pitying Emilia her fate, as Gulliver pitied the Struldbruggs, when Emilia cries, in the last act, “One should not, should not, should not live so long! . . . One cannot stand it. For 100, 130 years, one can go on. But then . . . then . . . one finds out . . . and then one’s soul dies.” The soul-withering truth she discovers is that “one cannot believe in anything. Anything” (173). Acute ennui has turned to nihilism and the despairing conclusion that “People are never better. Nothing can ever be changed. Nothing, nothing, nothing ever really matters” (174). Considering how Shaw’s estimation of modern man had suffered from the grim spectacle of World War I, he could never have preserved his essential hopefulness had he agreed with Emilia on this point. He had to believe radical improvement to be possible or despair over the future of the race because, as Stanley Weintraub put it, Shaw had come to believe humanity was engaged in a “race between Utopia and catastrophe.”13

Considering the striking plot similarities, the diametrically opposed positions the two plays take on utopian aspirations, and that The Makropulos Secret was published in 1922, a year after Methuselah appeared in print, it is easy to see how Capek’s play could be so widely assumed to be a direct rebuttal of Methuselah. Capek therefore felt it necessary to insist in the preface to his play that he was actually inspired not by Shaw but by “the theory of Professor Mecnikov [Metchnikov] . . . that old age is autointoxication of the organism.” He mentions this, he explains, “because this winter there appeared a new work by Shaw . . . which so far I know only from a resume, and which also—on a scale apparently much more grandiose—treats the question of longevity.”14 He adds, “This coincidence in subject is entirely accidental, and, as it would seem from the resume, purely superficial, for Bernard Shaw comes to quite the opposite conclusions” (112). It should be noted, however, that Capek may have first heard of Metchnikov from an earlier Shaw play, The Doctor’s Dilemma, where Shaw mentions him in discussing the latest theories of immunization, in both the play and preface. Since The
Doctor's Dilemma was written in 1906 and first translated into German in 1908, it is reasonable to suppose that Čapek may have read it or seen it performed before he wrote The Makropulos Secret, whether he would later remember the Metchnikov discussion or not.

Although Čapek is quite explicit in pointing out that his position on the longevity question differed from Shaw's, he goes on to explain how the two playwrights, although one is utopian and the other anti-utopian, could both be seen as "optimists." Although he acknowledges that "Shaw's thesis will be received as a classical case of optimism" while his will be labeled "pessimism," he mildly explains that

In my comedy I intended, on the contrary, to tell people something consoling and optimistic. I do not know if it is optimistic to maintain that to live sixty years is bad, while to live three hundred years is good; I only think that to declare that a life of sixty years (on the average) is adequate and good enough is not exactly committing the crime of pessimism... Perhaps there are two kinds of optimism: one which turns away from bad things to something better, even dreams; another, which searches among bad things for something at least a little better, if only dreams. The first looks straight off for paradise; there is no finer direction for the human soul. The second searches here and there for at least some crumbs of relative good; perhaps this effort is not quite without value. (112)

This is a diplomatic effort to reconcile the two opposing attitudes, and indeed some important similarities can be found between the habits of thought and theories of their art professed by these otherwise very different people. There is, for example, the striking similarity in their statements that assert the necessity for artists to reject a simplistic absolutism. In his preface to Plays Pleasant, Shaw declares that "the obvious conflicts of unmistakable good with unmistakable evil can only supply the crude drama of villain and hero, in which some absolute point of view is taken, and the dissentients are treated by the dramatist as enemies to be piously glorified or indignantly vilified. In such cheap wares I do not deal. Even in my unpleasant propagandist plays I have allowed every person his or her own point of view, and have, I hope to the full extent of my understanding of him, been as sympathetic with Sir George Crofts [the "villain" of Mrs Warren's Profession] as with any of the more genial and popular characters in the present volume" (3:111). Čapek makes a very similar assertion about the kind of morally complicated conflict he wanted to dramatize in R.U.R. After explaining each
major character's particular ideological stance and declaring them all to be “right,” Capek explains that

the most important thing is . . . that all of them are right in the plain and moral sense of the word. Each . . . has the deepest reasons, material and moral, for his beliefs, and according to his lights seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest possible number of his fellow-men. I ask whether it is not possible to see in the present social conflict of the world an analogous struggle between two, three, five, equally serious verities and equally generous idealisms? I think . . . this is the most dramatic element in modern civilization, that a human truth is opposed to another truth no less human, ideal against ideal . . . instead of the struggle being, as we are so often told it is, between noble truth and vile selfish error. 

This agreement on objective relativism for the sake of truth in art did not preclude disagreement on other important philosophical issues. Nevertheless, Čapek's report of his first visit to Shaw's flat in London describes the beginning of a friendship that appears to have been warm and respectful on both sides. It is also clear that Shaw's pentateuch was still in Čapek's mind. He describes the great Irishman much as Shaw describes his Ancients: "an almost supernatural personality. . . . He looks half like God and half like a very malicious satyr, who however, by a process of sublimation extending over thousands of years, has lost all that is too closely akin to nature." He confesses to having felt actually afraid since he had "never seen so unusual a being," but he was also charmed, concluding that Shaw "sparkles with life and has heaps of interesting things to say about himself, about Strindberg, about Rodin, and other famous things; to listen to him is a delight coupled with awe" (183). After returning to Prague, Čapek wrote Shaw a letter urging him to "put your interest in our country in order." Referring to their meeting in London, Čapek repeats his original assessment of Shaw's Czech translator, offering to help find a more trustworthy one and inviting him to come and see a Prague production of Man and Superman. A later letter indicates that Shaw took this advice about the translator. But their mutual friendship and respect did not bring them any closer to accord on their basic philosophical disagreement about the legitimacy of utopian aspirations, and in 1927 Čapek carried the debate back onto the stage, producing his most emphatically anti-utopian play, Adam the Creator.

This time there is no question about coincidental influence. Adam the Creator is clearly a conscious, deliberate refutation of Shaw's entire
utopian oeuvre from his treatment of the Superman, to his faith in
willed Creative Evolution, to his mystical, human-centered In the Begin-
ning. The play opens with the violent end of the world as we know it
when the Adam of the title, disgusted with the "petty, miserable human
race," writes a manifesto proclaiming "all order, all customs and institu-
tions bad, null, and void . . . every effort to improve or change the world
order is cowardly compromise . . . life is a bad habit." 18 Then he loads
his Cannon of Negation and blows up the world. The empty wasteland
that results disconcerts him somewhat, but he concludes defiantly, "Yes,
it was badly made, and I've abolished it" (15). This remark is not allowed
to pass: God's voice thunders down a command that as a penalty for his
presumption, Adam must create the world anew himself, from the clay
on which he kneels. Still in the grip of Darwinism, Adam hurrumphs,
"As if one could create life out of clay! It's clear he has no idea of
modern biology" (17). Yet when life does not appear spontaneously out
of the clay, as he expects, Adam takes on the role of Creator with relish.
"Let's skip this monkey-stage of human beings!" he cries, and instead
sets out to make a "Superman," then changes his mind and makes a
Superwoman instead, named Eve (19). Here we get a reprise of Henry
Higgins and Eliza, for once she is completed, the woman turns on her
creator and refuses to acknowledge his claims on her, prompting Adam
to complain "Why, I with my own hands created her, and all there is in
her is my big words; and if you please, she now puts on to me these lofty
airs!" (28). None of Adam's other creations turns out any better: the
Nietzschean Übermensch, Miles, scorns his creator as an inferior crea-
ture and runs off to the hills with Eve; the sweet, womanly little Lilith
becomes a tediously clinging wife; and Alter Ego, intended as a friend
and collaborator, becomes a critic and a rival (since he is as opinionated
and argumentative as Adam).

Alter Ego proves to be Adam's most significant creation, however,
because he finally persuades Adam to let him create, too. Operating on
different artistic principles, Adam and Alter Ego produce two different
races of men. Adam creates artistic, anarchic individualists while Alter
Ego manufactures identical, lock-step collectivists who march in step
and whistle the same tune, the one Alter Ego whistled as he made them.
This essential dichotomy brings intensified discord into this new world
because both races have been created with all of mankind's old propen-
sity toward bigotry, so they bicker over which has the greater claim to
being "real people." Adam's people claim to be "Personalities," "Souls,"
"Images of God," while Alter Ego's declare themselves "the New World,"
"the Mass," and most crushingly (twisting Shaw's hope-inspired religion
of Creative Evolution) "creative revolution!" (115).

These blank myrmidons were not at all what Shaw had in mind when
he expounded his theory of Creative Evolution, but Čapek, like many other anti-utopians of his time, equated any willful reorganization of the social order with totalitarian uniformity. This places Čapek firmly in the mainstream of his anti-utopian contemporaries because, as Lyman Tower Sargent points out, "[t]he tendency in this century has been to equate utopia with force, violence, and totalitarianism." Sargent adds that "Much of the original basis for the antiutopian position came from anti-communism or anti-fascism. It was transformed first by the coalescence of these two positions into an anti-totalitarian position, and transformed second by the development of dystopia" (26). Accordingly, Čapek's play contains a scene that specifically demonstrates the danger that utopian efforts might pave the way for powerful tyrants: the scene where Miles returns from the hills. This Superman, instead of leading the newly created human race to the highest possible intellectual and spiritual development, drags it back to the level of the angry ape, introducing modern warfare just as Shaw's Cain does in Act II of *In the Beginning*, and as Shaw's Napoleon Cain Adamson continues to threaten in the thirty-first century in *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*. But while Shaw introduced the Cain figure only to show an atavistic type of barbarian to be resisted and eventually left behind, Čapek presents Miles (whose name, derived from the Latin word for "soldier," suggests his inherently bellicose nature) to help drive home his point that the besetting difficulty of changing the world is that we can never eradicate the inherent flaws of human nature: hubris, aggression, lust for power and glory, and even defeatism and misanthropy.

While the Cain type of person is subject to the first two flaws, utopian aspirants like Adam are subject to the latter two. Like all the would-be world-betterers before him, Adam had eagerly written ideas for five different kinds of Golden Ages in little notebooks—he names Plato, Bakunin, and Marx as inspirations—but he becomes demoralized trying to realize his schemes and advises the equally sanguine Alter Ego not to bother: "You can write it down so beautifully; you can write down whatever you want, but the moment you begin to put it into practice—" (84). And that seems to be Čapek's principal theme. Čapek's play is unusual in its expressionistic approach to the subject, but the anti-utopian use of the Edenic motif is not surprising for the period, for as Sargent explains, "Some dystopias ... can be seen as a continuation of the idea of original sin. Ejected from the Garden of Eden, unable to return and unable to achieve a secularized version of it, [the anti-utopians believe] the human race is incapable of utopia" (26).

But Čapek gives the play an optimistic, comic denouement. When Adam and Alter Ego find themselves in the position God held at the beginning of the play—first denied credit for being Creators, then
reproached for the flawed world they produced—they almost decide to destroy the world again but are finally won over by a sublime religious festival of the people (who worship their creators with an abstract, slightly garbled tribute to their real genesis). Humbled and uplifted at the same time, Adam promises God to leave the world as it is. And God, given the last line of the play, says "So will I!" (183). Although Adam the Creator failed on the stage, it was translated into English in 1929 and was popular as a book, and it seems fair to assume that at this point in their acquaintance, Shaw would have received his own copy from the author.

In 1932 Shaw produced an odd little novella, The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God, wherein he again takes up the issue that Adam and God wrangle over in Capek's play and exposes some rhetorical sleights of hand Capek had used in presenting his case. In Shaw's novel, an intelligent, inquisitive, clear-eyed African girl meets a succession of God-figures who represent stages in the evolution of our conception of the deity. The second of these is the God revealed in the book of Job, and the Black Girl naturally asks him Job's question (which is also Adam's complaint in Capek's play): "I want to know why, if you really made the world, you made it so badly." And God answers according to tradition (and Capek): "Who are you, pray, that you should criticize me? Can you make a better world yourself? Just try: that's all." The Black Girl is not abashed as Job and Capek's Adam are. She points out that this response is not an answer or an argument, "it's a sneer." She adds "I don't mind your laughing at me . . . but you have not told me why you did not make the world all good instead of a mixture of good and bad . . . . If I were God there would be no tsetse flies. My people would not fall down in fits and have dreadful swellings and commit sins" (14). Because he can make no satisfactory answer to this question, she concludes that he is no God but an imposter and continues on her quest.

In the postscript, Shaw affirms this conclusion, asserting that "God's attempt at an argument is only a repetition and elaboration of the sneers of Elihu, and is so abruptly tacked on to them that one concludes that it must be a pious forgery to conceal the fact that the original poem left the problem of evil unsolved and Job's criticism unanswered, as indeed it remained until Creative Evolution solved it" (90). According to Shaw's scheme of development, Capek's deity would probably be classified with Micah's, who tells the Black Girl of a God who requires only that we "do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with Him." She finds this is a great improvement over Job's God, but still insufficient, for he does not provide the answer she seeks. "But doing justice and shewing mercy is only a small part of life when one is not a baas or a judge. And what is the use of walking humbly if you don't know where you are walking to?" she asks Micah (23).
We cannot know what Čapek would have replied to this because he died only a few years later, in 1938, and his widow had to burn his letters to prevent their falling into the hands of the Nazis and implicating Čapek's correspondents in his anti-Fascist agitations. But Shaw was not finished with the argument. Shaw's last utopian play, *Farfetched Fables*, written almost twenty years after *The Black Girl*, returns to the biblical motifs of Armageddon and the Millennium that the Shaw-Čapek debate had employed. Despite his steadfast repudiation of Čapek's anti-utopianism, Shaw's final vision of utopia synthesizes Čapek's appreciation for ordinary humankind with more rarefied Shavian aspirations. Shaw deprecates *Farfetched Fables* as a "few crumbs dropped from the literary loaves I distributed in my prime," but it seems more than coincidence, considering that Čapek's *Adam* had been subtitled "A Comedy in Six Scenes and an Epilogue," that Shaw's last utopia takes the form of six little fables rather than the three- or one-act plays he usually produced. Like Čapek's play, Shaw's begins with a vision of an Armageddon that, although cataclysmic, is not final: the last four fables show how human civilization rebuilds itself from its own ashes.

Despite these similarities, however, the distinction between utopian and anti-utopian remains. While Čapek shows civilization revived with all its flaws, Shaw depicts one that has evolved onto a somewhat higher plane, and this society shares the universe with the Ancients of *Methuselah* who have managed to continue their evolution into disembodied spirits, or "thought vortexes," to use Shaw's term. After the initial Apocalypse, each fable shows how our development progressed from "the dark ages that followed the 20th century," each describing a new strategy for world-bettering: an advanced science for measuring and classifying human potential, improved diet, and eugenic manipulation in the lab to create "the Just Man Made Perfect." The fifth fable revives an idea presented at the end of *Methuselah*, for one of the eugenic scientists decides that "we shall never make decent human beings out of chemical salts . . . . We must get rid of our physical bodies altogether."21 Like the Ancients, he longs to be a disembodied spirit, a "vortex in thought." It was this theme in *Methuselah* that led critics to declare Shaw a misanthrope since it looks as if he is proposing to empty the universe of human life altogether. Yet this fable ends with a forward-looking assertion that echoes Lilith's and is, in its own Shavian way, life affirming: "The pursuit of knowledge and power will never end" (511).

It may appear at this point that Shaw remains an unrepentant utopian, defying Čapek's contention that ordinary human life is enough, but the final fable is the crucial point in the Shaw-Čapek debate because it contains a synthesis of their two kinds of optimism—their two versions of humanism—and presents the two positions in a way that shows them
to be complementary. The last fable is set in a school for advanced children where a sort of Socratic schoolmarm conducts a lively anarchic debate that ranges through epistemology, history, and biology to evaluate the theory of the Disembodied Races, which holds that some of the highly advanced people we saw in the fifth fable did manage to escape their bodies to become “Thought Vortexes” although they continue to interact with ordinary humans, “penetrating our thick skulls in their continual pursuit of knowledge and power, since they need our hands and brains as tools in that pursuit” (517). The teacher accounts for the problem of evil in the world—the Job question—by explaining that “the pursuit of knowledge and power involves the slaughter and destruction of everything that opposes it,” and the opposition arises because “even the vortexes have to do their work by trial and error. They have to learn by mistakes as well as by successes” (517). Then one of the thought vortexes materializes as “a youth, clothed in feathers like a bird” who announces that he is Raphael, “an embodied thought. . . . What you call the word made flesh” (519). His motive is simple curiosity to “know what it is like to be a body,” for even among the immortals, “Curiosity never dies” (520). After this brief visitation, the curious being vanishes back into the infinite, and the ordinary human youths and maidens are sent off to read the Book of Job for next Friday. Since the theory of the Disembodied Races has at least partially explained the pain and evil that remain in the world, much of that ancient story’s power will, no doubt, be lost, but the teacher presents it not as a theological text but as an example of clever rhetoric. Here, then, is the most optimistic vision of humanity’s prospects that Shaw could devise when the destruction of Hiroshima had provided a preview of Armageddon and the hope was fading, even for an old Fabian like Shaw, that communism could bring about a millennial society.

Things had looked even grimmer in the final years of Čapek’s life as the Nazis swept through Europe and crushed his country. During a period of despair Čapek wrote The White Illness (1937), which Harkins describes as an anticipation of Fascism’s triumph: “half gruesome fantasy, half dystopian image” (150). Yet Čapek absolved himself from “the charge of pessimism,” for he wrote The Mother in 1938, a play that ends with a stirring call to defend the ideals of liberty. He sounds even more defiantly optimistic in his essay “The Crossroads of Europe,” also written in 1938, wherein he seems to have joined forces with the utopian idealists in his own country, especially T. G. Masaryk, a friend since the 1920s. With a nationalistic and humanistic fervor that departs radically from his usual mild, ironic, understated tone, Čapek writes,

This democratic spirit, this love of liberty and of peace, is part and parcel of the very character of the Czechoslovak nation.
Over and above that, however, T. G. Masaryk, the Liberator and first President of our Republic, made those things the moral and political program of our people. For him ... politics represented a realization of love of our fellow men; in his eyes democracy and liberty were based on respect for man, for every man; they issued from recognition of his immortal soul and the infinite value of human life; for Masaryk the ultimate goal of all honest politics and all true statesmanship was to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. . . .

It would be facile to say that his dialogue with Shaw had finally vanquished Capek’s objections to the idea of ordinary humans striving to establish a millennial society without waiting for divine intervention. Certainly the influence of Masaryk and the threat of Fascism also had their impact. But the dauntless hopefulness expressed here testifies to the power of the sort of optimism Shaw’s utopian works continued to assert. Shaw himself, who lived to see all the brutality of the Holocaust and the horror of Hiroshima, retained his stubborn belief in humanity’s prospects to the end. His final words on the subject, the last lines of the “What Is My Religious Faith?” chapter of his autobiographical Sixteen Self Sketches, could be taken as a manifesto for all utopians: “Creative Evolution can replace us; but meanwhile we must work for our survival and development as if we are Creation’s last word. Defeatism is the wretchedest of policies.”

Notes

5. Ibid., p. 55.
15. Ibid., p. 92.