

William Pierce and a Play by George Bernard Shaw
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In the early part of this century, I published a portrait, as I called it, of the white activist William Pierce, who died shortly thereafter, called *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*. I called the book a portrait rather than a biography because it was basically my sense of Pearce after spending a month living in close contact with him on his remote compound in West Virginia.

Pierce was the most remarkable human being I have ever been around. He was incredibly intelligent and enormously committed to doing something of lasting worth with his life. In stark contrast to how his adversaries depicted him, he was a decent and kind person, a gentleman, a gentle man. I've never seen anyone work that hard—ten, twelve, fourteen hour days, seven days a week. One of Pierce's prime traits, he took ideas very seriously and lived in accordance with the ones that gave him direction in his life's project of living an honorable and meaningful existence in the time he had allotted to him on earth (it turned out to be 68 years). One major source of perspective and guidance for Pierce was a stage play, *Man and Superman*, by George Bernard Shaw. The following is an excerpt from the Fame book about that play's impact on him.

"As an undergraduate in college [at Rice University in Texas]," Pierce told me, "I had a nagging worry about whether I was doing the right thing with my life. Did I really want to be a physicist, the route I was taking at that time? What standards best assess the paths in life I might take? I had an awareness of my mortality from a very early age, and it seemed to me that I shouldn't waste my life doing things that weren't truly important. I didn't want to be on my deathbed thinking, 'I've blown it; I had one life to live, and I didn't do what I should have done.'

"When I got to Oregon State as a professor of physics [in

1962], I started to do more general reading—before, with all my science courses, I hadn't had the time—and gradually things started to take shape about what was important in my life. It was a process of taking the insights and teachings from what I was reading and refining them and learning how to exemplify them.

"One of the things that helped me find direction was a play I first came upon at Caltech [where he had gotten his doctorate] back in 1955 or so—*Man and Superman*. Act three of the play was the one that really struck me. It expressed the idea that a man shouldn't hold himself back. He should completely use himself up in service to the Life Force. I bought a set of phonograph records that just had that act. As I remember, it had Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Agnes Moorehead, and Cedric Hardwicke—it was well done.

"Don Juan's expositions were what resonated with me. I listened to that set of records over and over and let it really sink in. The idea of an evolutionary universe hit me as being true, with the evolution toward higher and higher states of self-consciousness, and the philosopher's brain being the tool for the cosmos coming to know itself. Over time, I elaborated upon this idea—I came to call it Cosmotheism—and discussed it in a series of talks I gave in the 1970s."

I obtained a copy of *Man and Superman* and read it. It was first performed in 1905 in London and has been a theater staple ever since. Coincidentally, a successful run of the play was about to end in Washington at the time I talked to Pierce about it, and I was able to drive over from West Virginia to catch a performance before it closed.

Man and Superman was written by the renowned critic, pundit, and playwright George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was born in 1856 in Dublin and died in 1950. *Man and Superman* is a long play, about three-and-a-half hours. Often act three is performed as a separate piece and called *Don Juan in Hell*, and this is what Pierce listened to on the record.

After reading and seeing the play, it became clear what it was

about this particular play that so captured Pierce's imagination at that time in his life. The central question the play explores is the very one that Pierce was confronting: what is the most important thing to do with one's life? And not only was the question relevant to Pierce's life at that point, the answer Shaw gives to that question in this play had great appeal to him, and that was to give your all to being a "force of nature." In prefatory remarks to the published version of the play, Shaw wrote:

This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; 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. The only real tragedy in life is being used by personally minded men for purposes you recognize to be base.

The idea of being worn out in the service of a mighty purpose was exactly what this exceedingly bright young graduate student in California had been looking for.

In act three of *Man and Superman*, its central characters have traveled from their homes in London to vacation in an untamed mountainous area of Spain. There is Jack Tanner (modeled after a young Shaw?); his potential love interest, Ann Whitefield; and Ann's guardian Roebuck Ramsden.

Immediately upon arriving in Spain, they are pounced upon by bandits whose chief is a man named Mendoza. Mendoza, it so happens, is a Jew. Says Mendoza, the role of the gang he leads is to "hold up motor cars and secure a more equitable distribution of wealth."

Mendoza informs Jack and the others that the band of brigands aims to extract a tidy ransom before allowing them to go on their way. Jack tells Mendoza that he is amenable to that idea, but it is mutually decided that since it is late in the evening the

transfer of funds would best wait until the morning. They all bed down for the night and fall off to sleep, and Jack has a dream. Almost all of the rest of the act—or play when it is performed separately—is Jack's dream.

The setting of Jack's dream is Hell, and everyone in the dream is a character we have met before in the play but transformed into someone else. Jack is the fifteenth-century nobleman Don Juan. Ann is Doña Ana de Ulloa—Ana for short. Roebuck is a talking statue. Mendoza is the Devil.

This dream-state setting and cast of characters sets up what is essentially a debate between Don Juan and the Devil about what life ought to be about, and which is a better place to be, Don Juan's version of Heaven or the Devil's version of Hell. When the antagonists talk about Heaven and Hell it is clear that they aren't referring to places or states "up there" or "down there" in an afterlife. They are using Heaven and Hell as metaphors for ways of being in this life.

Don Juan sets out his case: Hell is the situation here on earth now. It is the way most people live, and he wants out. "In Heaven, as I picture it, you live and work instead of playing and pretending. You face things as they are; you escape nothing but glamour; and your steadfastness and your peril are your glory."

What will Don Juan do once he gets to Heaven? A big thing, he will *think*: "I hope to escape at last from the lies and the tedious, vulgar pursuit of happiness, to spend my eons in contemplation." And it is not just any kind of contemplation that will occupy Don Juan's time in Heaven. It is contemplation of Life (with a capital "L"), or as it comes to be called as the act proceeds, the Life Force. Don Juan declares to Mendoza: "Even as you enjoy the contemplation of such romantic mirages as beauty and pleasure, so would I enjoy the contemplation of that which interests me above all things, namely, Life: the force that ever strives to attain greater power of contemplating itself."

Don Juan speaks of Life as an entity unto itself, a separate being of sorts. Life, or the Life Force, this entity, this being, has a

monumentally important purpose: to become aware of itself and understand itself, and to realize itself, that is to say, become the finest version of what it truly is. He refers to Life's "continual effort not only to maintain itself, but to achieve higher and higher organization and more complete self-consciousness." He refers to the full achievement of these ends as the attainment of "godhead." As Don Juan sees it, godhead won't come without a mighty struggle. Life faces extremely formidable enemies: "the forces of Death and Degeneration."

Life's central impulse, Don Juan asserts, is to move toward the creation of a superior kind of human being. Here Don Juan is expressing an evolutionary, Darwinian concept, man evolving into something higher, more advanced than he is now. Life, as Don Juan perceives it, is the force that seeks to bring about "higher and higher individuals, the ideal individual being, omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, and withal completely, unilludedly self-conscious: in short, a god." He brings race into it as he affirms the "great central purpose of breeding the race; ay, breeding it to heights now deemed superhuman [perhaps an allusion to the ideas of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche]."

Says Don Juan, if the Life Force is going to accomplish its great mission, prevail in its epic struggle, it is going to need help. "It needs a brain, this irresistible force, lest in its ignorance it should resist itself." And later on in the act: "To Life, the force behind the Man, intellect is a necessity, because without it he [the Life Force? man? both?] blunders into death."

And where is the Life Force going to get the brain it needs? From contemplative people like Don Juan. That is why he is leaving Hell and going to Heaven in the first place, to establish better contact with the Life Force and discern exactly what it needs in order to become self-conscious and self-realized.

Beyond providing the needed philosopher's brain, Don Juan also aims to provide the Life Force with brawn to help it stay on course and move forward. He's going to do more than think; he is going to *act*.

Thus Don Juan lauds a certain kind of individual, one who "seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will by the so-discovered means." He holds up the ideal of a person who can see beyond surface events and preoccupations and come to grips with the true purpose of Life, so that he can work toward that end rather than "thwarting it and baffling it by setting up shortsighted personal aims as at present."

What keeps someone from pursuing this ideal? According to Don Juan it is a lack of courage and a concern with respectability. "Man gives every reason for his conduct save one, and that is his cowardice," he asserts. "All civilization is founded on his cowardice, on his abject tameness, which he calls his respectability."

There is a way to overcome these personal limitations, however, and that is to find an idea worth giving one's life to. "Men will never really overcome fear until they imagine they are fighting to further a universal purpose—fighting for an idea," Don Juan declares. Serving the Life Force is a powerful idea because it enables people to live the life they would lead if they weren't so afraid and caught up in what others think of them.

The Devil responds to Don Juan's assertions by declaring that Nature (his term for the Life Force) in fact has no purpose.

You're wrong, counters Don Juan, and the philosopher's brain is Nature's pilot helping it get to its destination. "It is the success with which you have directed the attention of men from their real purpose," Don Juan accuses the Devil, "which is in one degree or another the same as mine, to yours, that has earned you the name of The Tempter. It is the fact that they are doing your will, or rather drifting with your want of a will, instead of doing their own, that makes them the uncomfortable, false, restless, artificial, petulant, and wretched creatures they are."

In place of that negative circumstance, Don Juan offers a positive alternative: an individual with a purpose in life that goes beyond his own individual needs and wants. Don Juan holds up

the ideal of someone who devotes his life to serving the Life Force, who supports the Life Force in knowing itself and reaching its destination.

That sounds a bit staid and drab to Ana, who has been listening to the exchange between the two men. "Is there nothing in Heaven but contemplation, Juan?"

Don Juan replies, "In Heaven I seek no other joy! There is the work of helping Life in its struggle upward. Think of how it wastes and scatters itself, how it raises up obstacles to itself and destroys itself in its ignorance and blindness. As long as I can conceive of something better than myself I cannot be easy until I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. That is the law of my life. That is the working within me of Life's incessant aspiration to higher organization, wider, deeper, more intense self-consciousness, and clearer self-understanding. It was the supremacy of this purpose that reduced love for me to the mere pleasure of a moment, art for me to the mere schooling of my faculties, religion for me to the mere excuse for laziness, since it had set up a god who looked at the world and said it was good, against the instinct in me that looked through my eyes at the world and saw it could be improved. I tell you that in pursuit of my own pleasure, my own health, my own fortune, I have never known happiness. It was not love for Woman that delivered me into her hands; it was fatigue, exhaustion."

This last sentence in Don Juan's speech hints at the notion that women get in the way of what a man has to do in life. It is a coolness toward women that shows up several places in this act of Shaw's play. One example, "I turned my back on the romantic man with the artist nature. I told him that his beauty worshipping and happiness hunting and woman idealizing was not worth a dump as a philosophy of life." Another example, Don Juan talks about how "romantic men" had led him "into the worship of Woman." And another, he asserts that men are "deluded and mind-bended towards honorable love as the highest good, and to understand by honorable love that romance, beauty, and happiness

are obtained by the possession of beautiful, refined, delicate, affectionate women." At one point, Ana says to Don Juan, "I'm going with you," to which he replies, "I can find my own way to Heaven, Ana; not yours."

"I prefer to be my own master, and not the tool of any blundering universal force," the Devil informs Don Juan. "I know that beauty is good to look at; that music is good to hear; that love is good to feel; and that they are all good to think about and talk about. As for your Life force, in the end serving it will lead you to despair and decrepitude, broken nerve and shattered hopes, vain regrets for the worst and silliest of wastes and sacrifices, the waste and sacrifice of the power of enjoyment: in a word, the punishment of the fool who pursues the better before he has secured the good."

"But at least I won't be bored," Don Juan replies. "So fare you well, Señor Satan."

Don Juan asks the Statue to direct him to Heaven. The Statue replies that the frontier between Heaven and Hell is only the difference between two ways of looking at things. "Any road will take you across if you really want to get there."

And off goes Don Juan.

The Devil warns Ana, "Beware of the pursuit of the Superhuman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human."

"Tell me," Ana asks the Devil, "where can I find the Superman?"

"He is not yet created," the Devil answers.

"Not yet created!" Ana cries. "Then my work is not yet done. I believe in the Life to Come!" Ana looks at where Don Juan had been standing, but he is gone.

Shaw's play contained so many of the elements that became integral to William Pierce's life. The disdain for the shallowness and misguidedness of contemporary life. The idea of seeking a grand purpose to direct one's life. The value in facing reality head-on rather than living a life of "playing and pretending." The vital

importance of the intellect and acquiring a comprehensive perspective on things. The idea of serving the Life Force as the organizing principle and purpose of one's life. The focus on improving the race. The view of life as a struggle against powerful opposing forces. Jews as the "other side." The importance of courage and the will to rise above one's desire for respectability. The virtue in steadfastness, of holding firm and staying the course. The contradiction between love, women, and family and a man achieving his true purpose in life, along with the challenge to reconcile, transcend, this contradiction (Pierce wasn't successful at doing this).

It is too simple to say that there is a direct and singular causal connection between this play and what Pierce did with his life. Indeed, many factors account for what he became. But Pierce singles out listening to the Shaw play as being a major turning point in his life, and after looking into the play, I believe him.

Pierce has passed on. He was given direction by Shaw's play, and his successes and failures were what they were. We're still here. The task for us, still in possession of the incredible gift of life, is to determine what, if anything, Shaw's ideas means for our own existence; and more fundamentally, what ideas, what vision, what purpose or purposes, will guide us from here forward. We need to put what we are about as human beings into words that have clear meaning to us, and then discern what those words imply for the way we conduct our lives today and tomorrow, and the days and months and years after that, until time runs out for us as it did for Pierce, as it did for Shaw, as it does for everyone.