Chapter IV

The Superman: A Political Necessity

Nietzsche published his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1883, and the idea of the Superman came into English drame in 1901-3 with Shaw's *Man and Superman*. But in his own mind the idea was fermenting from an earlier time, at least from the time of his writing of Caesar and Cleopatra in 1898, in which the creation of Caesar was greatly influenced by his concept of the Superman. Shaw acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche for the word "Superman", but vehemently objected to the assumption that he was looking for "salvation of society to the despotism of a single Napoleonic Superman, in spite of my careful demonstration of the folly of that outworn infatuation."\(^1\) Shaw's rejection of conventional Christianity and conventional morality preceded his conversion to Socialism. But it was as a Socialist that he came to realise the failure of Man to tackle the gigantic problem modern civilization has raised and of the inadequacy of the political system he has evolved so far. True, there have been changes since

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civilization began, but they are changes only in names and labels or, as Shaw says, from Tweedledum to Tweedledee. There has been not a single change due to human character. Man has basically remained the same as before. This is how John Tanner (Shaw's Zoraster) has visualized the situation: "The mere transfiguration of institutions, as from military and priestly dominance to commercial and scientific dominance, from commercial dominance to proletarian democracy, from slavery to serfdom, from serfdom to capitalism, from monarchy to republicanism, from polytheism to monothelism, from monothelism to atheism, from atheism to pantheistic humanitarianism, from general illiteracy to general literacy, from romance to realism, from realism to mysticism, from metaphysics to physics, are all but changes from Tweedledum to Tweedledee." So long as man remains what he is, a slave to conventional morality with all his prejudices and superstitions, his hatred and jealousy, his cowardice and selfishness, the world will be a "den of dangerous animals" and the future of mankind is bleak. The catastrophe of 1914, followed by a bigger one in 1939, bore testimony to Shaw's apprehensions and confirmed his prognosis. Moreover, in respect of the genesis of slave morality he preferred the opinion of Stuart-Glennie to that of Nietzsche. He says, "Nietzsche, as I gather, regarded the slave-morality as having been

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invented and imposed on the world by the slaves making a virtue of necessity and religion of their servitude. Stuart-Gleennie regarded the slave-morality as an invention of the superior white race to subjugate the minds of the inferior races whom they wished to exploit, and who would have destroyed them by force of numbers if their minds had not been subjugated. As this process is in operation still, and can be studied at first hand not only in our Church schools and in the struggle between our modern proprietary classes and the proletariat, but in the part played by Christian missionaries in reconciling the black races of Africa to their subjugation by European Capitalism, we can judge for ourselves whether the initiative came from above or below. 3

Finally, by way of giving aid to his critics, who always chattered about Nietzsche whenever the word "Superman" occurred in his writings, he observed: "The cry for the Superman did not begin with Nietzsche, nor will it end with his vogue. But it has always been silenced by the same question: what kind of person is this Superman to be?" 4 Shaw answers the question in the Revolutionist's Handbook since his play on the Superman ends before the Superman is born. He describes the Superman as "some sort of goodlooking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for his mate, perhaps." 5 However casual

3 Preface to Major Barbara in Prefaces, p. 118.
5 Ibid., p. 168.
the definition or specification might be, it clearly brings out Shaw's emphasis not on the body or the mind alone but on both. Besides being goodlooking, the Superman must have the body of an athlete and the mind of philosopher. And it is natural that he should have a handsome healthy mate, this time the emphasis falling on the physical aspect alone. The Superman needs a woman to perpetuate the race of Supermen. But how is the Superman to be born? Shaw emphatically says that he is to be born of Man and Woman; there is no other way. The task is difficult, very difficult but not impossible. The Life Force will do the miracle as it has already done other miracles, beginning with the microbe and coming up to Man. Is the evolution of Man from the ape any less a miracle? So it is practicable; only Man has to co-operate with the Life Force by working up its Will to the highest pitch of intensity for the creation of the Superman and by removing all sorts of artificial barriers that stand in its way. Shaw argues that Property (private property) is the greatest of impediments to the emergence of the Superman, for Property divides society into classes and Marriage becomes class-ridden in the society. Equality is, therefore, an essential condition for the free functioning of the Life Force. It is, however, true that the Life Force has occasionally produced the Superman, one here, another there; they are what Shaw calls "our casual Superman." But for all their superhumanity they could not do much. Why? Here is Shaw's
own explanation: "We have been driven to Proletarian Democracy by the failure of all the alternative systems; for these depended on the existence of Supermen acting as despots or oligarchs; and not only were these Supermen not always or even often forthcoming at the right moment and in an eligible social position, but when they were forthcoming they could not, except for a short time and by morally suicidal coercive methods, impose superhumanity on those whom they governed; so, by force of 'human nature', government by consent of the governed has supplanted the old plan of governing citizen as a public-schoolboy is governed." Now Proletarian Democracy has also failed and Shaw never had faith in it as an efficient political system (which I have discussed in Chapter II). It is these failures that led Shaw to advocate "a Democracy of Supermen, and the production of such a Democracy is the only change that is now hopeful enough to nerve us to the effort that Revolution demands." The Will of Man functioning freely in a classless society alone can produce a race of Supermen and "until there is an England in which every man is a Cromwell, a France in which every man is a Napoleon, a Rome in which every man is a Caesar, a Germany in which every man is a Luther plus a Goethe, the world will be no more improved by its heroes than a Brixton

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7 Ibid., p. 175.
villa is improved by the pyramid of Cheops.\(^8\)

It is worthwhile, in this context, to recall Carlyle who, long before Shaw, thought of Great Men as the makers of human history and civilization. In *Heroes and Hero Worship*, which first appeared in Lecture form in 1841, Carlyle says, "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the teachers of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these" (Lecture I). He gives no importance to common people. In his concept of History the masses have no part to play. Moreover, socio-economic forces as determining the upbringing, growth and development of individuals are outside Carlyle's idealism. All this is natural, because he belongs to the pre-Marxian era, and it is in these respects that Shaw differs from Carlyle. Shaw's idea of the Superman, his Creative Evolution is organically related to his Socialism. Unlike Carlyle, he does not believe that human civilization can be

built up or sustained or saved by a dozen Great Men born in this or that age. The history of the past, Shaw believes, has been a history of shame.

Will man object to having the Superman? Shaw says that he will not, for "Man does desire an ideal Superman with such energy as he can spare from his nutrition, and has in every age magnified the best living substitute for it he can find. His least incompetent general is set up as an Alexander, his king is the first gentleman in the world; his Pope is a saint. He is never without an array of human idols who are all nothing but sham Superman. That the real Superman will snap his superfingers at all Man's present trumpery ideals of right, duty, honor, justice, religion, even decency, and accept moral obligations beyond present human endurance, is a thing that contemporary Man does not foresee: in fact he does not notice it when our casual Supermen do it in his very face. He actually does it himself every day without knowing it. He will therefore make no objection to the production of a race of what he calls Great Men or Heroes, because he will imagine them, not as true Supermen, but as himself endowed with infinite brains, infinite courage, and infinite money."  

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In *Caesar and Cleopatra* we have a glimpse of the Superman in the personage of Caesar. Caesar is a "conqueror of the world" but he conquers more by words than by the sword; he uses the sword only when he is compelled but always without malice. His way is the way of life and this is the way of the gods. In the Prologue to the play, Ra the god of Egypt, presents a comparative picture of Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar from which it transpires that the latter was always on the side of the gods. "Whilst the Romans still stood between the old Rome and the new," says Ra, "there arose among them a mighty soldier: Pompey the Great. And the way of the soldier is the way of death; but the way of the gods is the way of life; and so it comes that a god at the end of his way is wise and a soldier at the end of his way is a fool. So Pompey held by the old Rome, in which only soldiers could become great; but the gods turned to the new Rome, in which any man with wit enough could become what he would. And Pompey's friend Julius Caesar was on the side of the gods; for he saw that Rome had passed beyond the control of the little old Romans." Caesar stands for new values and is determined to break the tradition, the law of old Rome, Duty, law, justice, liberty, honour are part of the organised conspiracy to rob the poor and Caesar has little respect for them. The law by which old Rome flourished was essentially a law of exploitation. Caesar must go free, unfettered by old laws and customs. Otherwise he cannot do what he is determined to do.

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10 *Caesar and Cleopatra* in *Complete Bernard Shaw Plays*, p.251. Hereafter cited as *Plays*.
A Superman follows his own instinct and cares little for man-made laws. He lives for himself but more for others and accepts "moral obligations beyond present human endurance." His constant concern is to leave the world better than he found it. His personal habits are simple and he has complete self-control in all matters, especially in sex. He has immense power but it is tempered with mercy. Happily all these qualities are discernible in the personality of Shaw's Caesar.

Continuing the comparison between Pompey and Caesar, the god of Egypt says: "And thus it fell out between the old Rome and the new, that Caesar said, 'Unless I break the law of old Rome, I cannot take my share in ruling her; and the gift of ruling that the gods gave me will perish without fruit.' But Pompey said, 'The law is above all; and if thou break it thou shalt die.' Then Caesar said, 'I will break it; kill me who can.' And he broke it and ruled in his own way.

*Caesar and Cleopatra* opens in Egypt where Caesar discovers Cleopatra lying on her pet Sphinx on the Syrian border of the country. Cleopatra is still in her teens and her brother Ptolemy, aged 10, is at the Palace, ruling through his Guardian, Pothinas. Caesar is amused to see the misconceptions and apprehension of Cleopatra about the Romans in

11 *Plays*, p. 251.
general and of him in particular. Cleopatra knows that the Romans are barbarians and would eat her if they caught her and that their chief is called Julius Caesar. Caesar is, however, moved to see her innocence and helplessness. He takes upon himself the responsibility to set her on the throne and to make her the real ruler of Egypt. Only she has to be bold, steady and self-assertive. Thus begins the training of Cleopatra in queenship, Caesar making use of her misconceptions and fear psychosis to exact obedience in the initial state.

"The conqueror of the world" now turns to more serious business of his country in Egypt, the collection of arrear taxes, amounting to 11,600 talents, which the deceased King, father of Ptolemy, contracted to the Triumvirate. Pothinus does not understand how Caesar can bother himself with such a trifle as tax. He says, "Is it possible that Caesar, the conqueror of the world, has time to occupy himself with such a trifle as our taxes?" And Caesar replies: "My friend, taxes are the chief business of a conqueror of the world"\(^\text{12}\) (Act II). It is with such strokes as this that Shaw has portrayed his Caesar, a mighty conqueror, restrained in the use of force, having the power to foresee events and to tackle them, concerned with the welfare of the people rather than

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\(^{12}\) *Plays*, p. 264.
than with his own, simple in habits, full of courage and self-control, overflowing with the milk of kindness, hating none, and occasionally pining for the lost horizon.

There is a moment in the play when Caesar says, "Go, Ptolemy. Always take a throne when it is offered to you." But he himself does not do it as it is reported by his comrade in arms, Rufio: "I hope you will have the good sense to follow your own advice when we return to Rome, Caesar."¹³ No wonder, a Superman is disinterested in his own affairs.

Not satisfied with Caesar's suggestion that Ptolemy and Cleopatra shall reign jointly in Egypt, Pothinas and others want to dismiss him thus: "The money you demand is the price of our freedom. Take it; and leave us to settle our own affairs."¹⁴ Their army general Achilles underestimates the military genius of Caesar and says that his four thousand can never stand against the Egyptian army of 10,000 strong. Theodotus, teacher of Ptolemy, thinks that without money Caesar is sure to lose. They even remind Caesar of the service they have done him by making Lucius Septimius take off the head of his foe Pompey and claim his gratitude. Caesar's grief at the treacherous act finds expression in these words:

¹³ Plays, p. 264.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 265.
"Am I Julius Caesar or am I a wolf, that you fling to me the grey head of the old soldier, the laurelled conqueror, the mighty Roman, treacherously struck down by this callous ruffian, and then claim my gratitude for it."  

Caesar has repulsed the Egyptian attack and defended the palace of Cleopatra which, according to Pothinus, is nothing short of a miracle. "I know not by what strange gods you have been enabled to defend a palace and a few yards of beach against a city and an army. Since we cut you off from Lake Mareotis, and you dug wells in the salt sea sand and brought up buckets of fresh water from them, we have known that your gods are irresistible, and that you are a worker of miracles" (Act IV). Victorious but hungry, Caesar comes to the dinner which Cleopatra has ordered for him. Among the delicacies served are peacock's brains, nightingale's tongues, roast boar, but Caesar asks for oysters, It becomes a great disappointment to Cleopatra when Caesar wants to have 'barley water' leaving aside the aristocratic brand of wine, Sicilian, Lesbian, Chian. "It is waste of time giving you dinner, Caesar," says Cleopatra. "My scullions would not condescend to your diet."  

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15 Pleys, p. 267.
16 Ibid., p. 286.
17 Ibid., p. 288.
18 Ibid., p. 288.
Caesar's clemency to his prisoners sometimes causes dissatisfaction among his followers. His trusted comrade in arms, Rufio, for example says, "But mark this, Caesar. Clemency is very well for you; but what is it for your soldiers, who have to fight tomorrow the men you spared yesterday? You may give what orders you please; but I tell you that your next victory will be a massacre, thanks to your clemency. I, for one, will take no prisoners. I will kill my enemies in the field; and then you can preach as much clemency as you please: I shall never have to fight them again."\(^{19}\)

Pothinus has been held a prisoner by Caesar and Caesar knows that as usual he has been set free. But later when he comes to know that Pothinus is still there, he gets annoyed with Rufio and says: "Have I not told you always to let prisoners escape unless there are special orders to the contrary?"\(^{20}\)

In fact, Caesar is greatly shocked when the news of Pothinus's assassination reaches him. "Assassinated! - our prisoner, our guest: " exclaims Caesar. He even disowns Cleopatra for a moment for getting Pothinus killed by her nurse Flatateeta, and thereby getting "the powers of life and death" upon her. Caesar rules in his own way, having not the slightest tinge of hatred and malice in him. Cleopatra, however, needs no more reason to remonstrate: "I am not Julius Caesar the

\(^{19}\) *Plays*, p. 268.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 268.
Dreamer or no dreamer, Caesar's is the right way, the golden way, the way of the gods. The wisdom of Caesar as a conqueror of the world has taught him the supreme lesson that bloodshed breeds bloodshed as hatred breeds hatred. Drawing Cleopatra's attention to the violent knockers at her gate he says:

"These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and in stabbing. You have slain their leader; it is right that they shall slay you. If you doubt it, ask your four counsellors here. And then in the name of that right shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen as the invader of their fatherland? Can Rome do less than slay these slayers, too, to shew the world how Rome avenges her sons and her honor. And so, to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand." Towards the end of the play Cleopatra comes to realise the way of Caesar. In her words it is the way "without punishment", "without revenge", "without judgment" (Act V). Caesar preaches what he practises: "Ay: that is the right way, the

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21 Plays, p. 291.
22 Ibid., p. 292.
23 Ibid., p. 296.
great way, the only possible way in the end. " This is the conviction of the Superman and a race of Superman alone can put it into practice without discord.

A man's self-control is best tested in his relation with a young girl. Cleopatra has Caesar in her palace. She caresses him and entertains him to dinner. It is natural for her to be attracted to the conqueror of the world. But never for a moment does Caesar betray any weakness. Pothinus finds it difficult to believe that there has been no exchange of feeling between Caesar and Cleopatra. "But how can you be sure that he does not love you as men love women?" says Pothinus. Let me quote the dialogue:

" Cleopatra  Because I cannot make him jealous. I have tried.

Pothinus  Hm! Perhaps I should have asked, then, do you love him?

Cleopatra  Can you love a god? Besides, I love another Roman: one whom I saw long before Caesar — no god, but a man — one who can love and hate — one whom I can hurt and who would hurt me.

Pothinus  Does Caesar know this?

Cleopatra  Yes.

Pothinus  And he is not angry?

Cleopatra  He promises to send him to Egypt to please me!

Pothinus  I do not understand this man" (Act IV).

24 Plays, p. 296.
Caesar is not only a conqueror of the world but he is a political philosopher also. To him the past history of the world is a history of exploitation and persecution, of how the rich squeezed the poor, how the powerful subjugated the weak. Caesar has little sympathy for such a history. The Sooner it is destroyed the better. Theodotus rushes in, alarmed, shouting for help: "The first of the seven wonders of the world perishes. The history of Alexandria is in flames." Caesar's reaction embodied in "Is that all?" naturally exasperates Theodotus. To understand Caesar's attitude to the past one has to go through the following dialogue:

"Theodotus: All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?

Caesar: Theodotus: I am an author myself and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream away with the help of books.

Theodotus: Caesar: once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book.

Caesar: If it did not flatter mankind, the common executioner would burn it.

Theodotus: Without history, death will lay you beside your meanest soldier.

Caesar: Death will do that in any case. I ask no better grave.

Theodotus: What is burning there is the memory of mankind.

Caesar: A shameful memory. Let it burn"26(Act II).

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25 Plays, p. 284.
Caesar wants to destroy the past and build the future upon its ruin. Thus Caesar is not only Shaw's Superman but he is a Revolutionist too. Is not the similarity between Marx and Shaw in their attack on the past history of mankind only too obvious?

Now it is not difficult to understand why Shaw stresses the need for breeding the Supermen by our determined, sincere and wilful efforts. Man has made a mess of his power, culture and civilization through the ages, but in the modern age the situation has turned more serious with the invention of nuclear weapons. Problems like this are clearly beyond the capacity and comprehension of modern politicians like Burge and Lubin whom we have seen in Shaw's play Back to Methuselah. The future of mankind is never safe in their hands. Hence the cry for the Supermen.

It has already been noted that conditions prevailing in our society are not favourable to the emergence of Supermen. Yet when occasionally one like them appears in our midst we persecute him or kill him. This is the place where Socrates had been poisoned, Christ crucified, and Joan of Arc burnt to death. In the Epilogue to Saint Joan Shaw makes Joan say: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" The life of the Superman is safe only in a society of Supermen. This is the reason why Shaw speaks in terms of a race, not a score or two, of Supermen. What he wants us to do is to create conditions which will quicken the birth of a race of Supermen.