The Idealist

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From William Archer, 'The Psychology of GBS', *Bookman*, December 1924. Shortly after this article appeared Archer underwent an operation. He died on 27 December 1924, and what he had written took on the aspect of a public valediction from one of Shaw's oldest and dearest friends. His private valediction, in a letter written on 17 December, may be found in St John Ervine's *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Constable, 1956) p. 504.

For many years it was impossible to mention the name of Bernard Shaw without being confronted with the question 'Is he ever serious?' or 'Does he expect people to take him seriously?' The question was not inexcusable, for he has said countless things regarding which he himself would have been puzzled to decide what element of seriousness lurked beneath the surface of reckless, irresponsible humour. But a very small acquaintance with his writings ought to have assured any discerning reader that at bottom he is intensely in earnest. I am tempted to call him the most uncompromising, not to say fanatical, idealist I have ever met. His life has been dominated by, and devoted to, a system of interwoven ideals to which he is immovably faithful. His sense of right and wrong is so overmastering that he carries it into regions – such as that of personal hygiene – which most people are apt to regard as morally indifferent. And his ideals, if sometimes a little crankish, are for the most part high and humane. He sometimes fights for them with a ferocity that appears like unscrupulousness: but this appearance is due to the fact that his perceptions are warped by the intensity of his feelings: the mirror of his mind does not accurately image the external object. His will is always intent on the good as he sees it; and that I take to be the essence of a high morality. Having known him for forty years, I say without hesitation that his greatest moral failing, in my judgement, is (or was) a certain impishness, a Puck-like *Schadenfreude*, to which he would sometimes give too free play. Apart from this, there is no man for the fundamentals of whose character I have a more real respect. I own myself deeply indebted to him for many lessons taught me in the years of our early intimacy; though he never succeeded in imbuing me with his inflexible devotion to ideals.