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“Being Human”: Edward Bond’s Theories of Drama

ABSTRACT

The playwright Edward Bond has recalled the impact of seeing photographs of Nazi atrocities at the end of World War Two: “It was the ground zero of the human soul.” He argues we need a different kind of drama, based in “a new interpretation of what it means to be human.” He has developed an extensive body of theoretical writings to set alongside his plays. Arguably, his own reflections on “what it means to be human” are based in his reaction to the Holocaust, and his attempt to confront “the totality of evil.”

Bond argues we are born “radically innocent.” There is a “pre-psychological” state of being. The neonate does not “read” ideology; it has to use its own imagination to make sense of the world. To enter society, however, the child must be *corrupted*; its imagination is “ideologized.” Bond claims that “radical innocence” can never wholly be lost. Through drama, we can escape “ideology” and recover our “autonomy.” It leads us to confront extreme situations, and to define *for ourselves* “what it means to be human.” The terms of Bond’s theory are Manichean (innocent-corrupt, autonomous-ideologized etc.). His arguments are based in the assumption that there is a fundamental “humanity” that exists prior to socialization. In fact, the process of socialization begins at birth. As an account of child development, “radical innocence” does not stand up to close scrutiny. Arguably, however, Bond’s work escapes the confines of his own theory. It can be read, not in terms of the “ideologized” vs. the “autonomous” mind, but rather, in terms of “conscious” and “unconscious.” In *Coffee* (2000), Bond takes character of Nold on a journey into the Dantean hell of his own unconscious. He does not recover his “innocence,” but, rather, he has to face the darkness of both history and the psyche.

Keywords: Edward Bond, Jung, Holocaust, child development.

The playwright Edward Bond has recalled the impact on him of seeing photographs of Nazi atrocities at the end of the Second World War (when he was 11 years old):

At that moment, the world became old and mankind unfathomable. It was the ground zero of the human soul, the ice at the bottom of Dante's hell. . . . Really, we all died in Auschwitz. I sometimes think humanity itself died there. It didn't make any sense. Instead of the devil lurking somewhere around ready to catch you, suddenly we were confronted with the totality of evil. It was there as a fact even though you had survived. (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 17–18)

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Bond argues we are living in new times, and therefore need a different kind of drama, based in “a new interpretation of what it means to be human” (“Le théâtre”).¹ Arguably, his own reflections on “what it means to be human” are based in his reaction to the horrors of Auschwitz; and his drama is an attempt not only to address the question: “Why did it happen?” (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 191), but also to confront “the totality of evil”—to stare into the face of the “Gorgon” (to use Primo Levi's term).²

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Bond has developed an extensive body of theoretical writings, to set alongside his plays. As well as the book *The Hidden Plot* (2000), there have been numerous articles, and (to date) five volumes of letters. A key moment in the development of his theories came in 1983, when he undertook a series of drama workshops with students at the University of Palermo. He devised a scenario for an improvisation: a soldier is given an order to perpetrate an inhuman act. He/she is told to take a baby from the street where they live and kill it. Two babies live in the street: the soldier's own sibling, and a neighbour's child. The students performed the scene a number of times; but each time, the student playing the soldier chose to kill the sibling, rather than the neighbour's child. None of them “could bring himself to kill the ‘right’ baby. It was a paradox” (Bond, *Plays*: 6 247). Bond himself had anticipated that this would happen. The students, however, were per-

¹ All translations from the French are by the authors, with the support of Steph Terpant.

² “. . . we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. . . . [W]e are those who . . . did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the . . . complete witnesses” (Levi 70).

plexed. The improvisation had confounded all their expectations. As John Doona has observed:

The Palermo Improvisation describes the uncovering of a paradox in which the human individual acts in a manner which, to the understanding of the world, should be impossible. We all know that “Blood is thicker than water” and that “We look after our own.” (97)

Bond draws a parallel with a real-life incident, when a Russian guard, who was serving in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, was ordered to shoot his own brother, and refused, even though he knew that this would not save his brother, and could lead to his own death. Bond claims that the guard’s decision, and the students’ actions in the Palermo improvisation, came from the “same paradox” (*Plays*: 6 251). What exactly *is* this “paradox,” then?

Bond argues that we are born “radically innocent.” This is the newborn child’s desire “to be at home in the world, and that requires that the world be a home” (Bond, “Modern Drama” 25):

. . . the individual has a right to be. If you have a right to be, then you say to yourself, “well, where am I going to be?” and you say, “I have to be in my home,” and the infant believes that its right is that the world should be its home. That’s a basic premise of the human mind. (Bond, “Quality”)

The child expects “that it will be given not only food but emotional reassurance, that its vulnerability will be shielded, that it will be born into a world waiting to receive it, and that knows how to receive it” (Bond, *Lear* lx). Later, this becomes a desire that the world should be a place of peace and justice. The need for justice, then, is not a psychological need, but “a structural requirement in the human mind” (Bond, “Questions”)—a human imperative, that begins in the infant. This, Bond notes, reverses our usual assumptions; we think justice is learnt, rather than an existential necessity (see *Hidden Plot* 142).

Bond believes that the need for justice is by nature altruistic. The child’s desire that the world should be a “home” becomes the imperative to make the world the shared home of all people: “This is not an idealist wish, it is existential logic. . . . It is the necessity of human history” (Bond, “Density”). It is notable that the Palermo improvisation focused on the threat to a child. It is as if this is the Bondian “primal encounter”: the recognition of the Child-as-Other, and its “right to be”—based in an innate

conviction, that our desire for the world to be a “home” *has* to extend to others.

Bond argues, then, that we have a *need* for justice; but the society we live in is unjust. This creates a conflict, a “structural problem” in the self (Bond, “Le sens” 139). He insists, however, that “radical innocence” can never wholly be lost or suppressed. Rather, innocence and corruption “constantly dramatically agon-ise” in our minds (letter to Woodruff, 2005). Extreme situations expose this antimony: in them, we must decide for ourselves “what it is to be human” (Bond, *Hidden Plot* 48). No external authority can make the choice for us: “The students [in Palermo] were committed to being themselves: ‘You are the person who decides this’” (Bond qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 101).

The “paradox” in Bond, then, is the moment when “radical innocence” reasserts itself. It is “the confrontation of humanness with ideology, radical innocence with corruption” (*Plays*: 8 220). Following his experience at Palermo, Bond placed the “paradox” at the heart of his drama. He has used variations on it in plays such as *Great Peace* (1984) and *Jackets* (1989). (In *Great Peace*, for example, a soldier is given an order to kill a child; he chooses his own baby sister, rather than a neighbour’s child.) The aim is to confront the audience, “to make them responsible for their own assessment and involvement in what is being shown” (Bond qtd. in D. Davis, “Commentary” xxxvii). However, the “choice” which Bond identifies in the “paradox,” between “human” and inhuman,” is stark and reductive. One choice is “right” and the other is “wrong.” (Bond states that the students “got it right!—they did not make the conventional decision” [letter to Allen, 2004].)³ He maintains: “What I think appears in the ‘Palermo Paradox’ is the mind’s insistence on its own nobility, its own integrity—that is its shared humanness” (qtd. in Stuart, *Letters* 5 185). The implication is that there is some form of “categorical moral imperative” at work, which reasserts itself in extreme situations, even against our own reason or will.⁴

³ David Davis has argued: “Unlike with Brecht, there is no right way to respond to Bond’s plays. Each member of the audience has to find his or her own humanness or confirm his or her own corruption” (“Commentary” xxxvii). In other words: there *is* a right and a wrong way to respond!

⁴ Bond recognizes that his concept of “radical innocence,” and the use in his plays of moments of “absolute self-confrontation,” may be compared to Kant’s categorical moral imperative; but, he argues, “Kant interpreted it too rigidly because he did not see that in the moment we become responsible for reality and do not merely conform to it” (“Mind” 15). He has also observed: “Kant said that respect for the moral law—justice—was universal but he couldn’t say why: ‘. . . all human reason is totally incapable of explaining [it] . . . and all the effort and labour to seek such an explanation is waste.’ Kant is wrong. The imperative to be human is also the imperative to *create* justice” (“First Word” 36).

Bond insists that “radical innocence” is “not a natural state, an aspect of human nature existing outside history and society” (*Plays*: 6 254); and yet, he also states that it is “inherent in our natural self” (“Density”). He has developed his own model of the “self.” He argues that, in the newly-born child (or neonate), there is a “pre-psychological” state of being, which he terms the “pre-self” (“Modern Drama” 24). It might be more accurate to describe this as a pre-social state, because it exists prior to socialization and acculturation. The mind’s first activity, Bond contends, is to interpret the world, and to give it meaning. The child begins to make sense of the world by “imagining” it. It has to use its imagination to give meanings to all the things that surround it. It does not “read” ideology: “No person or authority intervenes between its imagination and the world” (*Plays*: 7 107).

Bond, then, sees in the neonate a comprehending spontaneity. The child “creates” meaning. To enter society, however, the child must be corrupted; its imagination is “ideologized.” The neonate “creates and owns the world” (*Plays*: 7 103), and so feels responsible for it; but in accepting the teachings of society, we abdicate responsibility. Bond believes that, through drama, we can recover our autonomy. In the “paradoxical” situations of drama, he claims,

the mind is forced to return to the structures of creativity, which originate in the neonate in the creation of its self (and initially its self-world). I say “forced” because drama makes the situations urgent, unavoidable. (letter to Roper, 2003)

Thus, drama “re-reverses the human process, which ideology has parasitised and deformed” (*Plays*: 8 219–20). The self “is returned to the core self” (*Plays*: 8 213).⁵ The only real evidence Bond offers for the existence of this “core self,” however, is the reaction of the students in Palermo. David Davis suggests that the improvisation was “touching the ‘pre-self’ of the actor. He . . . was in touch with what was most fundamental to his humanity, whose origins are in the radical innocence of the young child” (“Edward Bond” 168). This is naïve, however. Bond’s arguments are based in the assumption that there is a fundamental “humanity” that exists prior to socialization, and which can be uncovered (or rediscovered) through drama. In fact, the process of socialization begins from birth. As Howard Gardner has observed, from the very first moment when “parents react

⁵ Elsewhere, Bond argues that we cannot re-enter the neonate’s state—“the effects would be infantile” (*Hidden Plot* 140); at the same time, “by another route, [it] may enter our later state” (*Plays*: 8 207).

to the sex of their newly sighted offspring, the child enters into a world that is rich in interpretations and meanings, all introduced courtesy of the assumptions of the culture in which he happens to be born” (39). Bond himself has written that the mind “is socially formed and not the other way round” (qtd. in Stuart, *Letters* 4 27). The child’s imagination cannot, then, be autonomous.

As an account of child development, “radical innocence” does not stand up to close scrutiny. Arguably, the concept allows Bond to find his own answers to the horrors of Auschwitz. It posits a state of “innocence” outside the corruption of “ideology.” It is as if the “agon” between human and inhuman is really taking place in Bond himself. The terms of his theory are Manichean: innocent-corrupt, egotistic-altruistic, and so on. However, as we will see, these elements “constantly dramatically agonise” in the plays. Rather than “solving” the problem of “humanness,” what Bond shows is the continual *struggle* to define the self, in the face of the “inhuman.”

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In the play *Coffee* (2000), the central character is a soldier called Nold. In the climactic scene, he refuses an order he has been given to shoot two civilians. He tells his superior officer: “I can’t do what yer want. I don’t know why” (*Plays*: 7 203). It is as if the impulse rises in him unbidden; the officer’s orders are opposed, it seems, by another, more powerful “order” or imperative. Alain Françon (who directed the original production at the *Théâtre national de la Colline* in Paris⁶) claims that, in this moment, Nold “starts to become a human being.” However, the situation may be read differently.

In his introduction to *The War Plays* (1985), Bond writes:

Our unconscious is not more animal than our conscious, it is often even more human. The unconscious sees through us and our social corruption and sends us messages of our humanity, ingeniously and persistently trying to reconcile the divisive tensions in our lives. (*Plays*: 6 250)

In this analysis, Bond evidently locates “radical innocence” in the unconscious (or even equates the two). However, it also suggests another possible way of reading the plays—not in terms of the “ideologized” vs. the “autonomous” mind, but, rather, in terms of *conscious* and *unconscious*.

⁶ First performance was on 12 May 2000.

Jung argued that unconscious processes “stand in a compensatory relation to the conscious mind” (*Collected* 7 177). It is as if the unconscious sends signals, alerting us to things which are overlooked, repressed or undervalued by the conscious mind. Dreams, for example, are seen by Jung as “*the natural reaction of the self-regulating psychic system*” (*Collected* 18 110; italics in original); they address a problem or seek (in this sense) to “reconcile the divisive tensions in our lives.” In the case of Nold, as we will see, Bond introduces elements which disrupt the settled world of the character’s “ego.” Arguably, they stem from the character’s unconscious (rather than some form of “pre-self”), and take him on a (compensatory) journey into the darkness of his own psyche.

The opening scene in the play is called the “The First House.” Nold is at home, preparing to eat a meal. His concern at this stage, it seems, is for his own comfort—with making the world a “home,” if only for himself: “I got a good job. Tech one day a week. Savin up. Get married. People get on with me, I get on with them” (*Plays*: 7 126). The bareness of the room—there is only a table and chair, and two doors—conveys his isolation from the world. It is also an image, perhaps, of the “self-sufficiency” of the ego. (Jung suggests that a house may be read as an image of the individual ego or consciousness—see Jung, *Children’s* 411.) At the same time, it is evident that Nold, at this stage, is concerned to conform to social “norms” (marriage etc.). In this sense, his mind is “socialized” or “ideologized.” His isolation is disrupted, however, by the entrance of a stranger. A man, Gregory, stands in the doorway in silence. Nold has his back to him, and does not look at him, but senses he is there. “What d’yer want?” he asks (*Plays*: 7 126); but Gregory simply leaves without saying a word. Nold feels compelled to follow. With Gregory’s entrance, then, Nold is disturbed in his “self-sufficiency.” As we will see, Gregory functions in the play to some extent as Nold’s alter-ego (or Jungian “shadow”). Bond himself describes him thus: “Nold may have created Gregory—or he may exist as a reality he would like to avoid. . . . Nold is haunted by Gregory because he needs him to face himself, to create himself” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 139).

Gregory materializes, then, as a mysterious (imaginary) phantom. As David Tuailon has observed, he is “ghostly, mute and even somnambulist”; an “emissary of the imagination” (Tuailon, “L’horreur” 291), conjured up from Nold’s unconscious. For the audience, too, the character’s appearance is an unexplained irruption, causing a sense of dislocation.

Bond observes that, in leaving the house, Nold (whose name is evidently a conflation of “new” and “old”) embarks on

a journey, which I think is a journey of creativity; that he wants to experience those extreme situations which define the resources we have of

being human. . . . You have to go into that experience, in order to find the reason for living. (“Video”)

This follows the Bondian “template” for drama—“the journey for, to humanness” (letter to Bryanston, 2000), which will lead to the recovery of “radical innocence.” It implies that Nold is *consciously* seeking extreme situations, to find the “reason for living.” But in fact, from the moment he follows Gregory, his actions seem involuntary, as if he himself does not know why he is doing things. It might be argued, in Jungian terms, that his unconscious is *compensating* for something he is neglecting or repressing, drawing him out of his self-sufficiency, and disrupting the stability of the ego. The action of the play seems, in fact, to be taking place in Nold’s mind, unfolding as in a dream (“it’s happening in his head” [Bond qtd. in Tuallion, *Playwright* 146]).

In the next scene, Nold follows Gregory to a dark opening in a forest; there is a hole in the ground, leading to an underground hovel. A mother and her daughter are living in the hovel (called “The Second House” in the script). Bond omits the usual reference points we would be given in a more realistic drama, which would explain exactly who these new characters are, why they are living in the hovel etc. Rather, it is as if this is a scene in a fairytale, “where kids get lost in the forest where a wicked witch lives and they have strange tasks to perform—but it is also Dante’s forest which stands in the midst of existence and hides the door to hell” (Bond qtd. in Tuallion, *Playwright* 145). Forests are often seen as an image of the unconscious (see Jung, *Children’s* 262). The hovel, Bond suggests, may be seen as “the place of dreams, the place of unconscious creation”; and indeed, “All of Scene Two seems to occur in a hole—and there is a hole in this hole” (“Notes sur *Café*” 68, 71).

Bond notes that the scene is set “in the world of the imagination because this is how the infant experiences its relationship with the material world and this is what makes us human” (qtd. in Tuallion, *Playwright* 145). In part, Bond claims, we continue to “understand our adult world as a child. . . . Adults never face any problem that they have not already faced as a child in its rawest form” (145). This suggests, then, that Nold is regressing to a child’s point-of-view. But the fairytale element also suggests a shift into the unconscious. It reinforces the sense that the events may be happening in a dream; or that this is some Jungian encounter with “archetypes” in the psyche.

The Girl who is living in the hovel is a grown woman, but with the mind of a child. Her situation is desperate; it seems she has had to go days without food. Indeed, the women seem to be “forever dying from hunger” (Tuallion, “L’horreur” 291), as if they are caught in some eternal limbo—or in Dante’s hell. When Nold tells the Girl that he has already eaten that

morning, and left some food at home, she demands: “Fetch it. Fetch it” (*Plays*: 7 137). The play begins, as we have seen, with Nold setting the table for a meal in his own home, as an image of the self-sufficiency of the ego; so the Girl’s desperate hunger is an image of the opposite: vulnerability and exposure of the self. In this way, the encounter may be seen as a form of “compensation” for Nold. He becomes obsessed with trying to meet her demands. In part, then, what is set up is an “agon” between “for-the-self” and “for-the-Other” (to use Levinas’s terms—see *Totality* 88). Nold moves from preoccupation with his own needs, to caring for the Other. (Gregory, in contrast, seems untouched by the women’s plight; he even steals their last morsel of bread.)

When the Woman enters, she sees Nold at first as a threat, and she is fierce in defence of her child (“I’d kill for my daughter. I stay alive for ’er”—*Plays*: 7 133). It is, again, as if she has stepped from a fairytale: she is “like a fighting Yaga” (Tuailon, “L’horreur” 291; italics in original). Bond sees the relationship between mother and daughter as emblematic of “humanness”:

The Woman with the Girl shows what a motherly relationship is: she comforts her, makes her daughter endure hunger and threats or cope with her own fears and hopes. We see how this relationship produces humanness—the human passion can be expressed in the very gentle act of washing hands. (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 146)

We may recall here Jung’s description of the “Mother” archetype, which embraces “maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female . . . all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility” (Jung, *Archetypes* 82). Arguably, the Woman’s behaviour shifts Nold into adopting the “mother’s” role, in caring for the girl and trying to get food for her. In other words, the “imperative” at work is not simply the need to take responsibility for the Other; rather, it is about responding to the “maternal” archetype, and protecting the Child-as-Other.

Bond sees Gregory as the embodiment of an “ideologized” mind⁷—he tries to teach Nold that, in order to survive, “he has to let himself be corrupt” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 139). This makes it seem as if his function in the play is schematic: he is simply the “corrupting” agent, the “ideologizing” force. Bond also sees him as “a sort of father [to Nold], who looks at the education of his son. He represents authority, wisdom, what Virgil is to Dante—and he will be his guide in hell” (qtd. in Tuailon,

⁷ “Gregory’s is this ideological interpretation of reality” (Bond qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 139).

Playwright 139). In Lacanian terms, then, Gregory represents initiation into the “symbolic order” (see Lacan, *Freud’s Papers* 220–33). However, the character is also defined in his relationship to the “Mother” archetype.

It is significant that Gregory, when he first appears, has a bandage around his head. At this stage in the play, arguably, he represents the damaged ego. (Bond specifies the bandage is blood-stained on the left side—i.e. the rational, logical side of the brain [*Plays*: 7 125].)⁸ At the start of Scene Two (and before the two women appear), Gregory is still in a somnambulist state, and he is talking in his sleep; his language is a strange, dreamlike stream-of-consciousness. (Bond observes that “thought often escapes in sleep, when it cannot articulate the situation consciously”; and in this play, the characters frequently fall into “a trance of sleep” [“Notes sur *Café*”].) It appears he is dreaming about the Woman, seeing her as a threat to him, like some monster or ogre (“She took the bones out a ’er body ’n thrashed me with ’em” [*Plays*: 7 129]). Later, when Gregory is awake again, he warns Nold about her:

NOLD. Yer know ’er?

GREGORY. No—worse! I never ’eard ’er—never saw ’er—but she got inside me when I slept! (*Plays*: 7 131)

In Gregory’s dream, then, the Woman is a destabilizing force, invading his unconscious. He sees her as a kind of witch; and we may recall that Jung formulated an antithesis between “the loving and the terrible mother” (*Archetypes* 82). The counterpart to the “nurturing” Mother is “anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrible and inescapable like fate” (82). Nold and his “shadow” Gregory, then, are locked together in their opposing responses to the “maternal” archetype.

Bond conceives the Girl as a kind of “neonate”:

The Girl is not fully mentally aware, she is like a baby. She really is this aspect of Nold which has to learn, and she lives both in fear and joy towards the unknown. She is in the position of always being born. She constantly

uses her imagination to search for the meaning of what she sees and experiences by producing images. (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 146)

⁸ At the play’s climax, Nold shoots Gregory in the head; so the bandage he wears in the first scenes actually suggests that this event has *already happened*, and Gregory is a kind of ghost. This is one of the play’s games with time. It is as if, on some level, Gregory knows at the start that the Woman is a threat to him, and will lead to his “death.”

These images “are very direct, they are a form of knowledge in themselves, they don’t need to be interpreted but seen” (146). Bond’s account implies that the Girl has a child’s “autonomy” of the imagination, and this is what Nold needs to learn. But we also have to see that, throughout the scene, her images play on the liminal border between life and death. For example, at one point she says: “All the dolls died long ago. We’re sillier than them: we play with little dead things ’n pretend they’re alive” (*Plays: 7* 135). In her state of eternal hunger, the nearness of death is mirrored in her words. Arguably, she becomes a kind of “guide” (or psychopomp) to Nold to this limbo, or zone of death. She engages him—and the viewer—in the *imaginal* experience of death. At one point, for example, she is talking in her sleep, and she cries as she imagines her doll drowning:

She’s in the river—the ’and’s comin through the pebbles on the bottom—the pebbles are eyes—I can see ’er drown . . . the doll gave birth t’ little mice when it drowned—their little tongues are lickin at the sky—
(*Plays: 7* 139–40)

The images are, on one level, like a child’s “night terrors.” When Nold sees her crying, he says: “She mustn’t cry like that! . . . Somethin’s breakin inside ’er! . . . she’s tearin inside” (*Plays: 7* 139–40). It is as if something is breaking inside *him*. In this way, within his own “dream” (“it’s happening in his head”), Nold is brought to share, not only in another’s suffering, but also—in a very visceral way—in her “night terrors” and dreams of death.

It seems dubious, however, to see this as a *child’s* way of seeing or “imagining” (albeit it is presented by Bond as “childlike”). Rather, this is the language of the unconscious, where “thoughts” are expressed in a dream-like, intuitive way. As we have seen, Gregory also talks in his sleep in this “dream” register. Bond sets up two worlds in the play—the “factual” and the “imaginative”—and shows them “bleeding” into each other like “black blood” (Bond qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 148). This may also be read as the *unconscious* “bleeding” into the *conscious*.

In Scene Two, Nold leaves the women in search of food; but he returns empty-handed. He has not even been able to find his way home. (By implication, there is no way back for him now, to his previous, “safe” life.) Pressed by the Girl, he leaves again (“I’ll bring yer proper food. . . . I’ll find it, it’s still there”—*Plays: 7* 144); but the next time he returns, he is dressed in a soldier’s battledress. Bond notes that “reality” suddenly breaks in to the “fairy tale” (letter to Birch et al., 1999). It seems that the country is now in a state of war; Nold says: “There’s soldiers everywhere. I ’ad t’ steal a uniform” (*Plays: 7* 158). Subsequently, however, another

soldier enters, and there is another (dreamlike) shift in time and context. It emerges that Nold is now part of a “killing squad.” Again, we are not told how this change has occurred. There is an abrupt reversal in his attitude to the women. The Girl has died; her body lies nearby on the ground, as Nold and the other soldier sit and eat. Here, then, the act of eating is again an image of detachment, and indifference to the (Child-as-)Other. The men even talk about raping the corpse (see *Plays: 7* 160–61). Previously, as we have seen, the “female” principle was embodied as a life-force, in the “Mother” archetype (or “Mother-Child”). But now, it seems, we have entered the “real” (conscious) world; it is run exclusively by men, and women are treated as so much inert matter.

Bond’s starting point, in writing the play, was an incident ostensibly taken from real life. He notes:

In the middle of this play, there is a scene where someone throws away his coffee. It is a true story, which happened at Babi Yar, the site of a massacre in Russia. The soldiers were slaughtering people. They thought they had finished for the day; then someone noticed that there were some people left. They had to make all the soldiers come back. Thinking the day’s work was finished, they were drinking coffee. (Bond, “En situation” 44–45)

The soldiers had slaughtered hundreds in the course of their day’s work. Now, one of them—who had been preparing the coffee—groaned, “More work!”:

Not: more slaughter; more work. And he was so disgusted that he threw away his coffee. That is a paradox. . . . This little gesture contains the paradox of the last century. An entire century rests on this moment, and if you can understand that, you can understand what it means to be human. (44–45)

The incident, for Bond, was “like Galileo discovering the telescope”—enabling him to see the world differently: “I had to explain how it was that that soldier could do that” (“Video”).⁹

⁹ Bond claims that the scene he describes is based on a survivor’s account of the massacre, which he found in a book—but he cannot remember the title of the book, or the author (letter to Birch et al., 1999). One possible source is the book *Babi Yar* by Anatoly Kuznetsov (1970). This includes an account by a survivor, Dina Pronicheva, who recalled that when she entered the quarry—the scene of the massacre—she could make out a group of German soldiers, who had lit a bonfire, and were making coffee on it (see Kuznetsov 109). There

The action is significant for Bond as an image of human “corruption”: “Evil is throwing away the coffee. . . . Evil is our attempt to be at home in this world—to earn our coffee and drink it in peace” (*Hidden Plot* 165–66). In other words: in the midst of slaughter, the soldier is only concerned with his own needs and comfort. As Bond observes, the action “exemplifies Hannah Arendt’s idea of the ‘banality of evil’: nothing is more banal than a coffee cup—but evil is the least banal of things.” He even claims that “the horror of the coffee is more disturbing to face than the horror of Hiroshima and the death camps because it is about the perpetrators and not the victims” (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 141). In other words: facing the “Gorgon” (Levi 70) may be less about trying to imagine the *victims’* experience than confronting the human capacity for evil.

The action of drinking coffee in this context is an image of what Levinas terms *jouissance*: the individual’s consumption of the pleasures the world can offer. As Colin Davis notes, Levinas’s concept of “living from . . .” (“*vivre de . . .*”) suggests

a mode of identity with the world which confirms the identity and sovereignty of the self; the world is fully available to me, ready to meet my needs and fulfill my desires. This situation is characterized by what Levinas calls enjoyment (*jouissance*), the exhilaration of the self in its possession of the world. (43)

“All enjoyment [*jouissance*] is in this sense alimentation,” Levinas (111). “Living from” things is “essentially egoist” (Levinas 114). The action of drinking coffee embodies, then, the self-sufficiency of the ego.

It is notable, moreover, that the soldiers in Bond’s account see their task, not as slaughter, but simply as “work.” As David Tuailleon observes, despite “the enormity of the crime they are to commit, these men always obey a rule, and retain a strong sense of their rights, as well as their welfare” (Tuailleon, “L’horreur” 289). Their discourse remains, in other words, within the “symbolic register,” the ordinary world of “laws and contracts” (Lacan 230). Personal desire (*jouissance*) coincides with, or functions within, the social system. (As we have seen, at the start of the play, Nold is also locked into this world, with his dedication to work, money, marriage etc.) Moreover, there is an opposition running through

is no reference in this account, however, to a soldier overturning a coffee pot. In one interview, Bond also referred to an incident in a story by Zola, about a group of soldiers who were desperate to drink their coffee (“Video”). It is possible the two incidents have simply become merged in Bond’s mind.

the play, between the *male* world of “work” (which is rational/“real”—the world of ego, order and power), and the “irrational”/unconscious world associated with the women.

Bond observes that he called the scenes in the play “houses” (“The First House,” “The Second House” etc.) to suggest to the audience: “All of this is happening in your house. Babi Yar is a consequence of your ‘house-ness’” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 139). There is an implication that the individual, living in the security of his/her own home, is yet implicated in a system that can perpetuate atrocities such as Babi Yar. At the same time, the play is holding up a mirror to us, as spectators, and our *own* desire to live “for-the-self” as opposed to “for-the-other,” and to remain within the self-contained “house” of the ego.

The next scene in the play (“The Big Ditch”) is based on the incident Bond has described at Babi Yar. A ravine is being used for executions. Bond notes that the play now moves from the imaginary to the factual, to a scene from “history” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 149).¹⁰ He observes: “. . . before the play sends Nold to Babi Yar it puts him in this situation where the basic patterns of human self and society appear: what determines you as you are becoming human.” The scene in the forest is “like opening the situation [of Babi Yar] to see what is involved in it” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 144). In other words: the scene in the forest is the Bondian “primal encounter,” which puts Nold in touch with his “radical innocence” (but we may see it, rather, as a signal or irruption from the unconscious).

Even as the play shifts to the “factual,” the new scene may be seen to some degree as a *continuation* of Nold’s “dream”; as if he “visits” Babi Yar in his imagination (and by extension, so does the audience). (Similarly, in Bond’s 1997 play *At the Inland Sea*, a young boy pays a “visit” in his imagination to the gas chambers of the Holocaust.) Moreover, the juxtaposition of “fairytale” and “real” makes the situation in Babi Yar seem, in its own way, irrational, nightmarish, “unreal” (“. . . this is Babi Yar that should be imaginary, a vicious phantom—but it isn’t” [Bond qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 148]).

The soldiers in the scene are perched on a cliff top above the ravine, their guns trained on a ledge on the opposite cliff-face; groups of victims are sent out onto the ledge to be executed, and then fall to their deaths into the ditch. As the scene starts, the soldiers are beginning to pack their guns away, as if they have simply come to the end of an ordinary day’s work.

¹⁰ We should note that even though the scene is based on the incident in Babi Yar, Bond avoids locating it in the specific historical period. He “even demands that the play is performed in the contemporary uniforms of the country in which it is presented” (Tuailon, “Lhorreur” 285).

Coffee is being prepared. The location is designated as “The Big Ditch,” but the image of the brewing coffee-pot makes it seem another of the play’s “houses” (with the soldiers creating a form of “home-from-home”).

Then, the soldiers learn that there are some more victims to be executed. They have run out of ammunition, and so they have to pick the victims off with their rifles, one-by-one, meaning that they have time to observe the deaths, as if in slow motion. The men mock the suffering they see: “O don’t they run!” (*Plays*: 7 181). Meanwhile, Nold and another soldier stand apart, ignoring what is going on, staring at the coffee pot, waiting for it to boil.

Bond notes that there are three “sites” in the scene: “Three different places are put on stage, as if separated by transparent screens” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 141). They are: the top of the cliff, where the soldiers are perched; the ravine, where the victims are shot; and audience itself, which occupies its own “site.” The soldiers are “witnesses” who do not “see”: throwing away the coffee demonstrates that “they only see their own petty vexations and don’t have any true understanding of their own situation” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 142). There is *jouissance* in the shadow of death. In this context, it even seems to imply a *blindness* to death. The soldiers are locked in the world of “work,” pleasure and desire. They do not recognize that they are in a zone of death; they treat it as if it is “normal.” The scene exposes their *lack* of imagination, their inability to conceive of their victims as human. They are “like people shooting at dolls at the fair” (Bond qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 143).¹¹ The way they talk about the deaths they are witnessing, as a form of spectacle or entertainment, is in contrast to the Girl’s imaginal experience of death in Scene Two. The audience itself is distanced from the event: the soldiers occupy the space between it and the massacre. This may be seen as emblematic of our own distance (as viewers) in space and time from the events of the Holocaust. Moreover, we are compelled to see events through the eyes of the perpetrators (the soldiers), rather than the victims (“O don’t they run!”). At the same time, as viewers, we *can* imagine the victims from the soldiers’ descriptions (for example: “. . . she’s tryin t’ reach the top—clawin the rock—she can’t—’er claws—’er claws’re slippin where the cliffs bin soak with blood” [*Plays*: 7 183]). Our sense of the inhumanity of the soldiers’ actions is amplified by their very *absence* of empathy. The scene implies that we *should* bear witness; but it also makes us aware that we *cannot* see from the victims’ point-of-view—we cannot face “the Gorgon” in this sense, and be “true witnesses” (Levi 70). In fact, we are *implicated*

¹¹ See Tuailon, “L’horreur” (292–93), for a different account of this scene.

in the event, by being on the “side” of the perpetrators—making us aware of our own wish (like the soldiers), to “live from” things, to remain secure in our own “houses,” locked in our own egos of desire. (As Tuailon observes, the ordinary world of “men at work and coffee” is the audience’s own, “equally depraved world” before they enter the theatre [“L’horreur” 289].) The scene not only points to our failure to recognize our own “corruption”; it makes us confront the terrible realization that *we* could be—or even, *we are*—the men on the cliff.

At the same time, the “rational,” “real” world of the soldiers is emphatically an all-male world. The “ravine” itself can be seen as an image of the unconscious which is being repressed. What happens in the next scene (“The Third House”) is another “irruption.” Nold descends to the bottom of the ravine, which is filled with the bodies of the dead and dying. Bond specifies that the actual bodies do not need to be shown (*Plays*: 7 188); and indeed, in the first production of the play (at the *Colline theatre*), *the corpses were not represented*. This avoids the danger of turning the massacre into a spectacle for the viewer’s consumption; but it also means that the action is, on some level, *imaginary*, as if it is taking place in the unconscious. Nold has been given the task of finishing off any survivors. Two women are still alive; they are the mother and daughter from “The Second House.” Bond suggests that it is as if the “imaginary” world of the second scene now irrupts into the “real” world (of the war).¹² Indeed, he argues that the characters “are always in the Second House but they don’t know it objectively” (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 150)—in other words, it remains present in the unconscious. (It is “the place of unconscious creation” [“Notes sur *Café*” 68].) The ravine is another zone of the dead; and, indeed, there is something dreamlike in the appearance of the two women amid the “corpses” (as if this is, again, some metaphysical limbo or Dantean hell). Moreover, their presence re-introduces the element of “fairytale.” The world of the imagination “bleeds” into the “real”; or, rather, perhaps, the unconscious “bleeds” into conscious.

There is no indication in the text that Nold recognizes the women; and yet, it is as if the sense of responsibility he felt for them previously is now revived. At first, he seems intent on shooting them. He aims his rifle at the Girl, and threatens to kill her first, before the mother; the latter’s response is to emit a low sound, “almost a growl” (*Plays*: 7 190). He is astonished by the way that—even though she is injured—the mother is determined to defend her daughter, and is even willing to die for her. He says: “Why? Why? ’S no sense ’ere” (i.e. it does not make sense in the midst of so much slaughter)

¹² See Bond, *Hidden Plot* (168).

(*Plays*: 7 190). The mother’s action makes Nold pause in his “work,” and give them some food and drink; prompted, it seems, by signals from his unconscious, and the appeal of the “archetypal maternal.” Without consciously knowing it, he has finally fulfilled the promise he made in Scene Two, to feed them; the women have a “picnic” of a kind, among the dead. (The mother-daughter roles are reversed at one point, when the Girl feeds the Woman, and wipes her face clean [*Plays*: 7 192–93].)

The Girl describes the bodies of the dead that surround her:

All the dead look the same. They’re wearin my mother’s death mask. (*Looks at the WOMAN.*) Cover it! Cover it! Are all these dead people yer dolls? (*Stares round angrily.*) Why are they starin at me! They should ’ide under their sheets! That one bit ’er lips when she died—’er teeth’re comin through ’er chin! (*Plays*: 7 190)

In the absence of actual bodies on stage, we (as viewers) “see” the dead through her eyes. It is, indeed, as if she is dreaming, and they are “night terrors” that haunt her. She is, again, using childlike, “fairytale” imagery (“Are all these dead people yer dolls?”). This becomes the “distorting mirror” through which the horrors of the Holocaust are evoked.¹³

Gregory has entered; he observes Nold’s actions. He is now Nold’s superior officer, and he insists that Nold must follow orders and kill the women. What ensues is a battle-of-wills between them. Bond observes:

Nold and Gregory are disputing the meaning of human reality. For Nold this is a battle to become human. Then the scene is not so much about giving orders, obey or disobey them, but about taking the responsibility for the whole human species. (qtd. in Tuailon, *Playwright* 151)

Gregory realizes that Nold has started to see the women not as victims, but as “uman bein’s.” He is alarmed by the fact that Nold has given them food: “They don’t ‘ave t’ ‘ave a last meal. Only ’umans need ceremonies” (*Plays*: 7 193). Then, he tells Nold (and another soldier, Simon) to sit and eat, there among the corpses. Now, however, it is hard for them simply to focus on their own enjoyment. The women continue to eat, with the Girl feeding scraps to her mother; while Nold crouches awkwardly, eating

¹³ Irving Howe has suggested that the only way to represent the Holocaust in artistic form is to use indirect means, as if through a reflection in a mirror or shield (like Perseus in his battle with Medusa) (Howe 282). Giving us the Girl’s “point-of-view” on the massacre produces a form of estrangement—or shows it in a distorting mirror.

“mechanically with a bowed head,” and Simon “takes one mouthful and retches” (*Plays*: 7 194).

As we have seen, in the “dream” world of Scene Two, Gregory seems to embody the damaged (male) ego, terrified by the Woman as a force “that is terrible and inescapable like fate” (Jung, *Archetypes* 82). Now, however, he speaks as the voice of (male) “reason.” He appeals to Nold on the basis of a future life of *jouissance* (which is also a life of conformity to the social order):

When this war’s over you lads’ll look me up. Both a’ yer. We’re not grand but it’s comfortable. I’m suited. The wife cooks. She’s got mirrors in every room. Yer’ll get a surprise when yer see our town. There’s a park. ’Eated swimmin pool. (*Plays*: 7 196–97)

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We have to see Gregory, not simply as a character, but rather as a voice in Nold’s head—part of the internal “agon” that is taking place in him, between the pull of the ego on the one hand, and the signals from his “unconscious” on the other.

Gregory throws some food in the air, which sends the Girl scurrying among the corpses to collect the pieces together—anxious that the “dead’ll get it!” (*Plays*: 7 196). She even stamps on the face of a dead woman, thinking she has her mouth open to catch the food. Then, Gregory encourages her to go and “play”:

GREGORY: . . . Girlie don’t play too far. Stay where I can keep ’n eye on yer.

GIRL (*off*): I’m playin with the children.

GREGORY (*calls*). Don’t play too rough. (*Plays*: 7 197)

He speaks to her as if he is her parent, and they are simply on a normal day-out together in the park. She plays among the dead as if they are, to her, so many “living dolls.” At one point she describes what happened when she tugged on a rope around the neck of a corpse: “E slid along the ground. All the dead people bobbed up t’ see” (*Plays*: 7 198). It seems that Gregory (aware that Nold now sees the women as “human”) has manipulated her, to create this grotesque, nightmarish spectacle (as a contrast, perhaps, to the “idyll” he paints of ordinary life back home).

Nold cannot understand his own actions in refusing to obey Gregory’s orders. He tells him: “I can’t do what yer want. I don’t know why” (*Plays*: 7 203). Gregory, too, is driven by need: he is desperate to suppress this act of rebellion, to maintain the social order he understands (the “male” world of ego, order and power). Nold finally raises his gun;

he appears about to shoot the girl, but then he turns the gun on Gregory, and kills him instead. As we have seen, Alain Françon argues that, in this moment, Nold “starts to become a human being.” In this analysis, then, it is as if—like the students in Palermo—he finally rebels against the “inhuman” social order, and rediscovers his “radical innocence.” He makes the “right” choice.

In the scenes set in Babi Yar, Bond takes us, as audience members, to the “ground zero of the human soul” (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 17). However, in then showing a “humane” act in the midst of the inhuman, it could be argued that Bond is actually letting the audience off the hook—reassuring us that we did not all “die” in Auschwitz, after all; and there is an innate humanness, a need to care for the Other, and make the world a “home” for all.

We may read Nold’s actions differently, however, as the culmination of the “agon” in him. He has defeated his own “shadow”; but the result is that he can never feel secure again in his ego. The play ends in some ways as it begins. The final scene—called “The Fourth House”—is set, like the first, in a living room, with table and chairs. But now, it is Nold who is the “stranger at the door.” He has arrived at the house where Gregory used to live, where he meets the man’s daughter. (She is the only “real,” as opposed to archetypal or imaginary female character in the play. She has a baby daughter—heard off-stage; so Nold is encountering a situation “for real” which echoes his imagined experiences.) Nold sits at the table. Bond observes: “. . . the play looks at all the problematic of being human—but you still have to get up in the morning. That is why at the end we see Nold sitting at a kitchen table once again . . .” (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 153). But this house has been bombed in raids, which are still going on. (A blackout curtain half-covers a window.) Thus, the house can offer only a temporary refuge from the outside world (or “home” for the ego).

When Gregory’s daughter asks Nold what happened to him, he says: “I survived, I survived” (*Plays*: 7 216). Bond comments:

. . . it is true: he came out of the pit of Babi Yar alive and his innocence has not been corrupted by his experience. He says so with his eyes, fists and jaws clenched—he knows what it costs: it is written in his own darkness. This could be an answer to the problem of the coffee cup but it won’t solve all his dilemmas. (qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 193)

The ambiguity of this ending leaves it open, however, to a different interpretation, which Bond may or may not have intended. Nold’s clenched fists and teeth may suggest that he is barely able to hold on

to a residual sense of self, in the face of his experiences. He has had to confront the capacity for inhumanness, including his own. He has stared into the face of the Gorgon—and recognized himself. He cannot now return to the conscious (male) world of work, money and marriage; at the same time, the unconscious (female) world has not been redeemed: the Woman and Girl have both died. His imagination—which was suppressed when he stood on the cliff in Babi Yar, waiting for the coffee to boil—now has to encompass the sufferings of others. There is a baby crying off-stage. (The woman says: “I can’t stop ‘im cryin. ’E ain little—it’s the raids” [*Plays*: 7 215].) The sound represents a new “irruption,” a new demand on Nold, to take responsibility for the Child-as-Other. (The crying could be a voice in his head, as if his unconscious is calling to him again.) However, he does not move. It might be said that, as he sits at the table (the site of solitary *jouissance*), he is continuing to struggle, not so much against the desire to live “for-the-self,” but with the terrible responsibility of living “for-the-other.” Moreover, it is significant that he does not speak about his experience except to say, “I survived.” These are the last words in the play; the rest is silence, as if he *cannot* say more. He may be seen as an image of the “true witness,” to use Levi’s phrase: the “drowned” survivor, who has seen the “Gorgon,” but has returned mute, unable to express what they saw (Levi 70). Far from starting to “become a human being” (Françon), then, it could be argued that Nold is someone who has “touched bottom” and become “non-human” (Agamben 54). The world for him has become “old and mankind unfathomable” (Bond qtd. in Tuailleon, *Playwright* 17–18). The irony here is that the perpetrator has become the survivor, the “witness.” He may also be experiencing some “survivor shame” (see Levi 64)—aware, for example, that his actions did not, in the end, make any difference: the Girl he rescued was later shot by some soldiers. (He has failed her then, just as he did earlier, in “The Second House.”)

In this reading, the play—paradoxically—contradicts Bond’s own theories. It does not show a solution to the problem of “being human.” Rather, what Nold experiences is a journey into his own Dantean hell, and the darkness of both history and the psyche. He becomes burdened by a terrible knowledge. As he sits at the table, he has to face the burden of accepting responsibility for his own self, let alone the whole world.

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