

Parables of the East in Edward Bond's Political Drama

Loretta Visomirskis

Abstract

The themes of ancient and modern, of East and West, and of “journeys of discovery” form the ideological fabric of the work of Edward Bond (b. 1935), one of Britain’s most established contemporary playwrights. In his plays *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968) and *The Bundle* (1978), set in Japan in vaguely historicized seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Bond uses history as a prism of looking at the present and of deconstructing the political myths of the past. He introduces the character of the great seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho. In both plays, Basho becomes the Brechtian narrator, the “alienating factor,” as well as the medium for Bond’s philosophical dilemma of human choice and its political implications in society. In questioning the artist’s role and the individual’s responsibility in society, Bond creates political parables that oppose the “ivory tower” intellectualism and abstract meditation to active resistance to evil. Both plays signify Bond’s own evolution from the pacifism of the Tolstoyan philosophy of “non-resistance to violence by force” (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*) to the revolutionary theory of Brecht’s Epic Theatre and its social and political activism (*The Bundle*).

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The themes of the ancient and modern, of the East and West, and of “journeys of discovery” form the conceptual fabric of the work of Edward Bond (b. 1934), one of Britain’s most established

playwrights since the Second Wave of British drama in the 1960s. His first decade on the stage started with the exploration of English rural and urban life in *The Pope's Wedding* (1962) and *Saved* (1965) and continued with a surrealist historical fantasy *Early Morning* (1968) and an Oriental parable *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968). Both *Early Morning* and *Narrow Road to the Deep North* signified Bond's move away from the "kitchen-sink" naturalism of his earlier plays and his search for new forms of dramatic expression.

To Bond, the search for new dramatic forms has centered on modes of storytelling. In his "Rough Notes on Theatre," Bond coins the terms "storyness" and "storyability" to give emphasis to storytelling as the core element in creating a dramatic experience. He says:

The ability to analyse and calculate is characteristic of isolated reason: when it is combined with emotion, to produce imagination, it becomes 'storyness' (storyability etc.). Imagination is essentially storyability. Imagination needs to relate experience as story or as potentially storyable. (Bond 1996, qtd. in Doona 2005, p. 103)

The parable is a predominant mode of storytelling in Bond's theatre. He creates meaning in his parables through images that represent the multi-layered reality of the dramatic situation, which he calls a "theatre event." Bond's images capture the essence of the event by way of implication, allusion, and metaphoric association. Bond's parables contain implicit and explicit moral lessons about "truths that society obscures or denies" (Bond 1996, qtd. in Doona 2005, p. 103). "What attracted Bond to the parable form may well be what attracted Brecht: its history of instructional use, its connection with religious literature, and its tendency towards self-explication [. . .] As an art form, the parable does not impart knowledge directly, but through narrative, privileging the story as a method of learning" (Spencer 1992, p. 110).

In *Narrow Road to the Deep North* and later, in *The Bundle*, Bond sets his stories in the Far East and draws their imagery from Japan's historical past, its literature, religion, and philosophy. He molds Japan's historical realities into post-modern political parables and establishes the form of parable permanently in his repertoire. *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* show significant new stages in Bond's evolution as a playwright and demonstrate the influence of Oriental art forms on his aesthetics. Both plays are also highly indicative of the major tendencies in the development of British drama of the time, in particular the growing influence of Bertolt Brecht's work and his theory of the Epic Theatre, and the subsequent formation of contemporary post-modern historical drama in the 1960s.

When Bond came onto the stage in the early '60s, the socially engaged dramatists of the First Wave of the previous decade were shifting towards the exploration of the human condition in universal historical-political contexts. Under the influence of the civil rights and political youth movements in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Latin America, the new plays focused on the individual's role in society and its existential implications through the acts of choice and self-determination. This philosophical paradigm shaped by European existentialism and French intellectual drama (Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Anouilh) underlies the works of the major British playwrights of the period: Robert Bolt (*Man for All Seasons*, 1960), Christopher Frye (*Curtmantle*, 1961), John Osborne (*Luther*, 1961), John Whiting (*The Devils*, 1961), John Arden (*Left-Handed Liberty* and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, 1965), and Edward Bond (*Early Morning*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and *The Bundle*).

In their inquiry into the existential dilemmas of the individual and society, the playwrights often turn to historical subject matter as a new medium for their artistic explorations and philosophical generalizations. In this respect, the historical drama of the '60s shows the direct influence of Brecht

whose ideas and aesthetic principles gained substantial ground with the British playwrights after the tour of the Berliner Ensemble Company in London in the late 1950s. Brecht's influence swept across the ranks of British playwrights regardless of their political or aesthetic orientation, with his core techniques assimilated into British drama. These include: the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*); the infusion of the epic element into the dramatic structure of the plays; the objectification of the dramatic situation; the appeal to the spectator's reason over emotion; and irony arising from the clash of the opposites (*Widerspruchsgeist*). In her study of Bond, Jenny S. Spencer elaborates on Brecht's role in the process:

Though playwrights have used history as a source of inspiration long before Aristotle examined the activity, Brecht's example of ransacking history in pursuit of raw material for epic representation has specifically influenced the shape and uses of history for a recent generation of British playwrights. ...In some cases, the turn to historical subjects has involved the recovery and validation of marginalized figures or incidents from the past; in others, well-known events and famous people get presented unheroically, from the critical perspective of their victims. Often the return is to particular moments of history where class antagonisms are close to the surface, economic injustices apparent, and working-class consciousness sharply defined. (Spencer 1992, p. 42)

In their exploration of historical themes, *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* reflect the general tendencies of British drama of the period and link Bond's work to Brecht. Despite the apparent similarities and the universal recognition of Brecht's influence on Bond, Bond's attitude toward Brecht is ambivalent. In his interview with Michael Billington for *The Guardian*, Bond declares himself "the opposite of Brecht": he accuses Brecht of conformity and collaboration with the communist regime in East Germany where he lived, calling his work in the Berliner Ensemble "an absolute betrayal of

the duty of the writer” (Billington 2008). In spite of his harsh criticism of Brecht’s political choices, Bond acknowledges Brecht’s influence on his own work: “I saw the Berliner Ensemble when they came to London in 1956, and learned from Brecht how theatre could take on big subjects and banish decorative staging. There was no chintz in a Brecht set” (Billington 2008). A closer look at *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* reveals Bond’s deep affinity to Brecht’s theatre. Like Brecht, Bond employs historical settings as a stage convention, a mythical element in the dramatic situation which adds the dimensions of the parable to his story. Neither playwright is interested in the accuracy of historical detail: their use of history is symbolic, based on association rather than on fact. Hence the non-specific evocation of Japan’s history “about the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries” in Bond’s two plays (Bond 1968, p. 5), in which Japan’s history becomes a prism of looking at the present and a means of deconstructing the political myths of the past.

Bond’s interest in Japan is another similarity with Brecht. In his analysis of the last period of Brecht’s work, Robert Brustein writes:

Brecht’s contemplative interests are underlined by his increasing interest in Oriental forms, characters, and subject matter - a large proportion of his poems and plays are now inspired by the East. It is true that Brecht is attracted to the Noh play, the Chinese drama, and the Kabuki theatre because of their alienation techniques; and like Yeats, he uses such conventions as masks, mime, dance, and gesture in order to restore the naivete and simplicity that the oversophisticated Western theatre has lost. (Brustein 1964, p. 277)

The adoption of Brechtian techniques in *Narrow Road* marks a new stage in Bond’s theatre and with it, his growing involvement with political issues in society. He focuses on the political implications of the individual’s choice in society in both, *Narrow Road* and later, in *The Bundle*. In both plays, Bond

creates political parables that oppose “ivory tower” intellectualism and abstract meditation in favor of active resistance to evil. Bond’s medium for exploring the idea of the individual’s moral responsibility is the character of the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (1644-94). By criticizing Basho’s real-life isolation from society, Bond engages in an ideological polemic against Basho’s philosophy on life and art.

Bond names his plays after Basho’s *The Narrow Road To The Deep North And Other Travel Sketches* and incorporates Basho’s biographical facts into them. Basho’s poetic work, his mastery of the *haiku* verse, his travels in search of enlightenment, and pursuit of Zen truths serve as counterpoints in the dramatic structure of Bond’s plays. Bond’s choice of Matsuo Basho is not accidental: by Bond’s own admission, Chinese and Japanese literature and art have been major influences on his work. The language of Bond’s plays and his poetry bear the mark of highly structured *haiku* metrics. Bond’s storytelling also parallels the *haibun* technique, perfected by Basho, which allows for an organic fusion of the epic (Basho’s descriptive sketches) and the poetic (the *haiku*) in his plays. In structuring his dialog, Bond adopts the cornerstone principles of Basho’s aesthetics: “non-attachment” and “lightness” which account for the objectivity, detachment from emotion, and the highly stylized terseness of Bond’s literary style. As John Russell Taylor has written of Bond’s *Narrow Road*, “The dialogue is pared to the bone, and placed with a poetic wit and economy which shows the hand of a master stage craftsman” (Taylor 1978, p. 91).

As Bond writes in his Foreword to *Narrow Road*, “The introduction [of the play] is based on an incident in Matsuo Basho’s *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*” (1968, p. 5). In Bond’s plays, Basho’s encounter with an abandoned child on the banks of the River Fuji described in his travel sketch grows into a dismal setting of feudal Japan plagued by poverty and destitution. The plays open with desperate peasants leaving their children to die by the river because they cannot feed

them. Against this background, Basho comes on stage as a poet who lives in an ivory tower as he is removed from the hardships of people's daily lives. Faced with the dilemma of saving a child or proceeding with his journey to the deep north, he chooses spiritual inquiry into Buddhist truths and enlightenment through meditation, and so leaves the child by the river.

In both plays, Basho is a major character. He becomes the Brechtian narrator, the "alienating factor" as he comments on the happenings in the plays and adds an epic dimension to the dramatic action. In *Narrow Road*, Basho returns after thirty years and provides an account of the growth of the city which was "only a village" when he left. He also says that "the people in the north still live in tribes" which foreshadows further events in the play (1968, p. 9). There is violence on and off the stage with the new ruler, Shogo, in the city, and Basho adds insight into the consequences of his regime, "My old hut was by the place where they throw people in the river. Their friends and relatives used to come and stand quietly on the bank, with Shogo expressions on their faces. But when it was over they ran round looking for somewhere quiet to cry, and they always ended up behind my hut" (1968, p. 13).

In *Narrow Road*, Basho becomes Bond's mouthpiece when he admits to the young monk Kiro the futility of his meditation in isolation from society. "For twenty-nine and a half years I sat facing a wall and staring into space. Then one morning I suddenly saw what I was looking for - and I got enlightenment. I saw there was nothing to learn in the deep north - and I'd already known everything before I went there. You get enlightenment where you are" (1968, p. 10). Bond's character parallels the poet Basho's real-life experiences with the latter's travels and search of solitude—Basho's enlightenment, according to Zen Buddhism, was the discovery of his True Self. In his study of Basho, Leonard Biallas concludes:

Basho found the Real Self, the everlasting self, not in meditation, but in writing his poetry. This self attains a freedom, detachment, and wisdom that encompass all of nature [...] The Real Self identifies with the “greater life” of the universe [. . .] The Real Self is the poet, the one who recognizes ever-changing reality and is not attached to any particular aspect of it. (Biallas 2002, p. 82)

Basho’s epiphany in the play is highly indicative of Bond’s own belief in the active role of the poet/artist and art in society. He rejects the esoteric and metaphysical forms of art detached from the social and political realities of life. Like Brecht, Bond asserts the educational role of art, not in a mystical or religious sense (hence the intellectual and spiritual fiascos of Basho’s meditation), but in its ability to promote the rational understanding of the world. In his Introduction to *The Fool* (1976), Bond elaborates on the relationship of art and society stating:

Art isn’t just the articulation of utopia, or even a foretaste of it. It helps to monitor the consequence of change [. . .] Art is the imagination of the real, not the invention of fantasy [. . .] Art places the individual in the world, and interprets the world in accordance with possibilities and human needs. ...The artist’s job is to make the process public, to create public images, literal or figurative [. . .] in which our species recognizes itself and confirms its identity. (Bond 1976, pp. xiv-xv)

When Basho’s journeys of discovery bring him back to his native places, he emerges from social isolation and becomes active in the politics of the city. In fear of political repression from Shogo because of his enlightenment, Basho stages a coup against the dictator and later rises to the position of Prime Minister. The highest point in the process of Basho’s discovery comes with the realization that the bloodthirsty Shogo is the child whom he refused to help many years ago. Basho’s passivity

and indifference towards the world have come full circle: he becomes aware of his moral responsibility for the tragic consequences of Shogo's rule. "I, Basho, saw that child [. . .] lying in its own filth. I looked at it and went on. O god forgive me! If I had looked in its eyes I would have seen the devil, and I would have put it in the water and held it under with these poet's hands" (1968, p. 56). Basho's contemplation of resisting evil by force is suggestive of Bond's philosophical inquiry into the ways of humanity's moral and social progress. He has called *Narrow Road* "a question play," and he is seeking an answer to his most difficult question, "Can violence be justified in fighting evil in society?" (Coults 2005, p. 15).

The evil of Shogo's regime represents a consistent theme in Bond's work in his explorations of oppression and violence in society. Shogo, homonymous with "Shogun," a Japanese military ruler, usurps the power of the old Emperor and establishes a reign of terror, similar to the dictatorship of Stalin, Hitler or Pinochet, where the destruction of human life reached grotesque proportions. In his treatment of Shogo's violence Bond employs the Brechtian "clash of the opposites," which heightens the ironical effect of the events and reduces the notions behind them to the absurd. Driven by a paranoid fear of assassination, Shogo forbids his subjects to look at him—they can only crouch with their faces on the ground. People are killed or thrown into prison at Shogo's whim. Prisoners are executed in sacks with the words "Shogo is my friend" painted in red. On their way to the river where they are drowned, prisoners chant laudatory slogans to the dictator, which are ironically juxtaposed with Basho's haiku verse.

With the violence and torture inflicted on his people, Shogo is not a stereotype of an Oriental despot but a universal character codifying the grotesque behavior of dictators in repressive regimes throughout the world and throughout history. In Bond's terms, Shogo's aggression is the result of his deprived life. Bond views aggression as the individual's response to society's threats. Freudian in

its essence, Bond's idea that "violence breeds violence" becomes paradigmatic of his treatment of political issues in his plays. In his Preface to *Lear* (1972), Bond writes:

[Society] creates aggression in these ways: first, it is basically unjust, and second, it makes people live unnatural lives-both things which create a natural, biological aggressive response in the members of society. Society's formal answer to this is socialized morality; but this is only another form of violence, and so it must provoke more aggression. There is no way out for our sort of society, an unjust society must be violent.
(Bond 1972, pp. x-xi)

Violent as he is, Shogo finds his counterpart in the gentle and selfless Buddhist monk Kiro whom he saves from suffocating under a holy pot stuck on his head. In his innocence, Kiro represents Shogo's *alter ego*, his missing humanity, and complements his "split" personality which affirms Bond's idea that "there are good things and bad things in almost everybody in the play" (Taylor 1978, p. 91).

The thematic complexity of *Narrow Road* also includes the historical facts of Japan's Westernization in the 1850s brought about by the American fleet led by the Commodore Matthew Perry. In Bond's interpretation, the theme of East meets West is staged as colonial invasion of the city by the barbarians from the West. They are represented by the Commodore, in Basho's words, "a bragging, mindless savage," who uses the language of the nursery "to protect his confidence," and his evangelist sister/mistress Georgina (Bond 1968, p. 40). As the Commodore and Georgina are brought in from the tribal north to take over the city, the rule they establish is more ruthless than Shogo's. Georgina, who is determined to "preserve a little corner of England in the Pacific," says that "Shogo ruled by atrocity" but instead she uses morality (1968, p. 39):

I persuade people—in their hearts—that they are sin, that they have evil thoughts [. . .] that their bodies must be hidden, and that sex is nasty and corrupting and must be secret [. . .] That's how I run the city: the missions and churches [. . .] and papers will tell people they are sin and must be kept in order. If sin didn't exist it would be necessary to invent it. (1968, p. 42)

The perpetuation of repression and violence in the play illustrates Bond's idea of secular or religious morality as "moralized aggression": "any organization which denies the basic need for biological justice must become aggressive, even though it claims to be moral" (Bond 1972, p. xi).

As the cycle of violence continues, Georgina loses her sanity when Shogo kills the five children left in her care in his attempt to find the old emperor's son. Shogo is crucified by the Commodore. In the final scene, a grotesque effigy of the dictator's crucifix is erected on the stage: with his body parts loosely reassembled upside down, his body is askew and the limbs are not meeting the trunk. His head "hangs down with the mouth wide open. The genitals are intact" (Bond 1968, p. 56). Faced with Shogo's death, Kiro commits harakiri. Ironically, the Commodore and Georgina's Western rule brings about as much destruction and violence as Shogo's dictatorship. In their juxtaposition, Bond exposes the violent character of human society that is not culture-specific but unfortunately universal. However, Bond does not propose an alternative to the obsession with violence. Being "a pessimist by experience, but an optimist by nature" (Billington 2008), he offers a symbolic possibility of hope and renewal: while Kiro is dying, there is a cry for help from the river. A naked man in a loin-cloth, cleansed and untouched by the tragic events on land, emerges on the stage (Bond 1968, p. 7).

After a decade of growth and maturity as a playwright, Bond revisits *Narrow Road*. By then, he had produced many more short and full-length plays, and had experienced major theatrical successes at home and abroad, particularly with *Lear*, *Bingo*, and *The Fool*. *The Bundle*, subtitled *New Narrow Road to the Deep North*, establishes an association with *Narrow Road* which is more symbolic and philosophical than factual. There are similarities in both plays: the poverty of the common people, children abandoned by the river, and the character of the poet Basho. But *The Bundle* stands on its own as a truly epic saga of civil unrest which grows into a social revolution and brings about positive political change. The play enacts Bond's own ideological battle with the cardinal points of his own philosophy: his concern with the genesis of violence in society, the possibility of positive change, and the individual's role in a social revolution.

The play's protagonist and carrier of revolutionary ideals is Wang, who was rescued from drowning by the Ferryman and his wife. He is the character in *Narrow Road* that Shogo would have become, had he been saved before he grew up to become an evil dictator. Wang evolves into a revolutionary gradually and in several stages: nine years of work for Basho give him enlightenment; he leaves the comfort of Basho's home to join the poor peasants in their struggle for a better life; he saves a woman accused of stealing some cabbage from a stone cangue. Wang becomes the ideologue of the peasant movement when he says, "The landowner needs to do one thing. Only one. Keep us in ignorance. The river does that for him. So take the river and make it ours! That's why rifles are food and clothes and knowledge" (Bond, 1978: 46)!

Wang's call to revolutionary action in attainment of social progress is symbolic of Bond's move away from his pacifist position of non-resistance to violence by force. In his earlier plays, *Early Morning* and *Lear*, Bond rejects violence as a means of political change in society. *The Bundle* becomes Bond's manifesto in its affirmation of radical political action which leads to the

establishment of a peaceful peasant commune toiling joyfully to harness the river. Whereas in *Narrow Road* the antidote to society's corruption is the detached Jesus-like figure of the man emerging from the river, *The Bundle* offers a constructive alternative to violence. Under the leadership of Wang, the young peasants are "changing the river," building stone walls on the banks, locks, and a channel for the spring tides (Bond 1978, p. 75). Their shovels are "stacked like rifles" (1978, p. 73). The juxtaposition of shovels and rifles evokes the final scene in *Lear*: having realized the need for empathy for his fellow human beings as an antidote to social injustice, Lear sets out with a shovel to destroy the wall, the image of alienation and repression that he himself has built.

The recurrent image of the rifle is indicative of Bond's coming to terms with the concept of justified violence in society in the process of change. Quoting the example of the French Revolution, he has made statements in support of "the violence of the powerless, innocent violence caused by the revolution of individuals against the state" when there is "no alternative" (Bond 1996, p. xii). In Scene Four of *The Bundle*, Wang comes across an abandoned baby by the river and after Basho and his mother refuse to save him, he is faced with the dilemma of saving the child and providing for him in the comfort of Basho's home, or of leaving the child to die so that he can be free to take on the leadership of the peasant uprising. Wang's choice mirrors Basho's choices in *Narrow Road*: like Basho, Wang refuses to sacrifice his freedom for the survival and welfare of the child and hurls him into the river. The death of the child—the bundle of the play's title—is symbolic of human sacrifice for the cause of the revolution. Wang's violent act becomes, in Bond's later terms quoted above, "innocent violence," "the violence of the powerless" committed in the name of social justice. By contrast, Basho appears in *The Bundle* as a villain. After he returns from his journey to the deep north, he becomes the judge and serves the landowner and his regime. In Bond's terms, Basho represents the injustice of the establishment: he fights ruthlessly to crush the peasant uprising and

becomes responsible for the Ferryman's death. At the end of the play, he is old and delirious, a grotesque image of Shakespeare's Lear, still trying to find the road to the deep north.

As a dramatic analysis of social revolution, *The Bundle* expresses Bond's belief in the possibility of positive change in a society driven by violence and oppression. The pathos of Wang's victory affirms the need for radical action in the struggle against social evil and becomes symbolic of the shift in Bond's philosophy towards embracing political activism in the name of revolutionary change. As Spencer writes, "The emblematic thrust of *The Bundle* is positive, suggesting that social change is difficult, but possible, that moral choices can and must be made, that "right" and "wrong" are relative but not unknowable" (1992, p. 141). Bond's search for answers to the most poignant questions of human existence leads him to the play's paradigm of radical political change but he is concerned about the moral complexity of the choices made in the process and voices it in Wang's final words (Bond 1978, p.78):

We live in a time of great change. It is easy to find monsters--and as easy to find heroes. To judge rightly what is good--to choose between good and evil--that is all that it is to be human.

Written a decade apart, *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* mark the trajectory of Bond's growth as a dramatic thinker from "a question play" in *Narrow Road* to "the answer play" in the *Bundle*, where he juxtaposes active resistance by force to social evil and formulates his approach to playwriting as "dramatisation of the analysis instead of the story" (Bond 1978). Bond has defined this approach as "a way of reinstating meaning in literature" which he sees as the theatre's main function in edifying the audiences. In a recent editorial of *The Guardian*, Bond has been called "the theatre's most anguished moralist" ("In praise of ...Edward Bond), which is a well-deserved reputation, as in his Oriental parables, Bond agonizes with his characters over the loss of humanity in the world and

undertakes the most difficult mission--to change society by creating a theatre where "the audience are asked to be not passive victims or witnesses, but interpreters of experience, agents of the future, restoring meaning to action by recreating self-consciousness. At these moments the audience are superior to the actors: they are on the real stage" (Bond 1978).

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