Letter to a Teacher 24 11 13

Dear ------

Thanks for your letter. I was especially struck by what you say about my plays: they “... go on longer, and pursue their themes more remorselessly, than plays in the contemporary period are wont to do ... there are depths of meaning to be plumbed in ... many if not all of your plays, which greatly exceed what modern plays usually attain ... The great virtue of your plays. for me, is that they push spectators to keep thinking, and indeed feeling, way beyond the point at which they are accustomed to stop. ...”

When I began to write many other writers’ plays were what I called “anecdotes.” They were about self-contained incidents – whimsical, picturesque, eccentric. They couldn't be more serious because if they were they'd have to go beyond the anecdotal – and contemporary theatre couldn't. I disliked them partly because they provided actors with opportunities to be clever and stylish and superficial. Present day plays have more social and political concerns (partly because theatre can't simply ignore the last thirty and more years) but they have no analysis and so are “inconsequential.” In effect they can make an anecdote out of a revolution or a “‘tis-was” out of a catastrophe. And so the ends of these plays devour their beginnings – we’re back where we were. Traditionally drama ended with some sort of resolution that assured the audience the “matter was in hand” and this justified the storm and stress of the play that preceded it. So Lear dies in despair and the lords arrive to commend him and give the audience hope. Its much the same with Hamlet. The mind seems to require the security of that pattern. At the end of Simon Stephens’ new adaptation (about the dog and the autistic boy) the end of the play is announced and then the boy says but if some of the audience would like to stay on he’ll demonstrate to them how he achieves his autistic mathematical wonder-calculations. ... so its all right, there’s a mysterious mathematical order holding up the universe and we can all go on shopping. Even before that its significant that the main character is autistic – socially dysfunctional not because of a lack of social understanding or political grasp but because of a biological or psychological incapacity. Simon Stephens is a significant writer but this is typical of present-day theatre (the romantic misfit in “Jerusalem,” the cloned mismatches in “Numbers.”) Plays are now based on Lear’s Fool, not on Lear. The Fool has anarchic insights but no responsibility: he is the living anecdote.

Culture is now being infantilised (in a bad sense). This is a consequence of the Reagan-Thatcher-Pinochet deregulation of capital and the market. The economic consequences are obvious – and capital has no solution for them. The “invisible hand” that is supposed to conjure the market works like a pickpocket and has a swastika tattooed on it. The cultural consequences are not obvious – because (being culture) they destroy the means of recognizing and judging the destruction. Everything has to be made for the market and to sustain itself capitalism requires that it is a “mass market.” The “goods” must be instantly consumable and they must seem novel but the novel must need no interpretation – that is, they must be sensational, and sensationalism destroys the difference between sentimentality and cynicism. In capitalist culture there is no difference. Culture becomes a fog in which everything is the same. This is trying to turn history into an anecdote.
The relationship between nature and human consciousness has changed, the relationships between objects (“goods”) and the human mind has changed. That means our relation to reality has changed. I recently heard a businessman say “reality is perception.” That’s true only of the market. The relationship between nature (our use of its things) and our mind has logical structural consequences which can’t be evaded. The relationship – the way we share reality with things – depends on values, and that is not a matter of perception. It is a matter of shops, schools, prisons and jobs. We are lost in the fog and go in circles. We don’t perceive the car till it hits us. The situation has become, in fact, worse: Lear is the fool and the autistic boy quotes him: “Howl. Howl. Howl. Howl. Howl.” The relationship between nature and mind was changed in the Enlightenment by reason’s appropriation of technology. The earlier morality enabled imagination to persistently undermine power – but the reversal of the nature-mind relationship increasingly makes imagination a form of violence by infiltrating it with the market. We need a new interpretation of morality. In the introduction to The Chair Plays I wrote that (in “Saved”) the young men’s motive in stoning the baby was “the nostalgia to be human.” Conventional (and therefore reactionary) interpretations see them as “creatures” in the jungle. The scene isn’t set in a jungle, it’s in a city park.

How can drama reinterpret morality? -- by using the logic of drama to change the interrelations between nature and mind. The space fiction opens in reality requires this because it is in factual reality and not outside it. The interrelations (between nature and mind) are the processes of drama. (All theatre is about convention and law, all drama is about drama.) I try to dramatise the modern course of that relationship in all my plays – and specifically in The Paris Pentad, in the young man who searches for his identity. This is not just to enable an audience to sense the nostalgia to be human, to sense morality interrogating itself – but to articulate it. If that can be done, then society doesn’t just sense it but knows it. Our theatre can’t articulate morality because it can’t even sense it. Its said that my plays have influence. They don’t. Its the historical dilemma: how can you change society when you have to change society before you can see why and how it needs changing? Yet the change can’t be made blindly as Hegel thinks. Drama combines how and why. But drama is also an institution and it needs “means.” So its the same dilemma: what does something “mean” and what are the “means”? The market corrupts the means. Recently Sean Holmes said that theatre was not corrupt but its processes (casting, rehearsing etc) were. That puts it the wrong way round. The “means” are corrupted by the corrupt “meaning” of the play and its staging. In fact the “means” are usually extremely skilful and inventive and even brilliant – at delivering the corrupt meaning.

In “The Pope’s Wedding” and “Saved” I posed a problem. In “Saved” the young men in the park act out of the nostalgia to be human. So does Len. Not just The Paris Pentad but everything I’ve written since works at unravelling that human dilemma. To see those plays you have to leave the UK. But it should still be possible to at least speak about the problem. At the recent Warwick seminar on my plays it wasn’t spoken about – not even to prove that the things I say are wrong. The worst speaker there was Peter Billingham. When I came back from Warwick I found a student’s letter about The Pope’s Wedding. My reply is on my website. The unnamed teacher in that letter is Billingham. When he spoke at Warwick he was skipping about on the rostrum, grinning and abandoning unread (literally casting aside) some of his printed pages. That was because I’d already told him his misinterpretations of
my plays actually reversed their meaning and some of the misinterpretations were grotesque. So – on that one occasion – he was trying to censoring himself. He couldn’t do it adequately because he had nothing to put in its place. He has now written a book about my plays which couldn’t be more misleading if it were intended to mislead. You would be shocked if you knew the way he set about writing it. In the book he claims to like my work but he writes with a smug self-approval that blinds him to what he is doing. And then a young woman studying for her PhD on my plays writes to me. She lives and studies in Mosul. It is one of the most violent places in Iraq. She must surely be in fear of her life. That she can study anything in that city is astonishing, that she chooses to study my plays there requires me to be as honest as she must be (though I could not be as brave). She is searching to find how my plays might help her to understand the violence in her city. What if Billingham’s book falls into her hands? He might as well kick her in the face. I won’t say “stone her” because compared to his academic betrayal the young men in the park had at least some dignity: they shared responsibility for each other. Billingham shows only responsibility for himself. In your letter to me you write about hope. Dostoevsky said “Only narrow-minded people hope.” Hope may mean leaving the problem for others to solve. Instead of hope we need knowledge. That’s why you should teach your students about my Paris and later plays. Warwick -- or wherever they happen to live -- is a suburb of Mosul.

Best wishes, Edward