Reply to a student who wrote to ask “Does the variety that dominates the modern drama also dominate the works of Edward Bond or does he belong to a particular school such as realism or symbolism?”

Dear ------ ---- ---- 24 April 13

You ask if my work is dominated by the “variety” that dominates modern drama or if it belongs to a particular school such as realism or symbolism. My answer will be longer than you had expected. This is because your question has a lot of interest for me. I’ll answer it by writing about the language in my plays. This should be easier to understand. I’ll try to avoid the technical terms that I use in my theoretical writings.

My plays aren’t symbolist or “realism.” They don’t belong in any of the customary categories now used for analysing plays. I’ve always sought to create a new understanding of what a human being is. I’ve used drama not merely to show what “being human” means but also to be actually part of the creation of that meaning – because we are the dramatic species and drama (as opposed to theatre) is the way we create our humanness. That’s why the substitution of theatre for drama is so destructive. We create or destroy our humanness every day of our private lives, but formal drama is a means of creating humanness as part of the community – humanness is shared and can’t be private. Doing this means finding out the sources of humanness and how they are put together. Most societies agreed on the definition of a stone or a tree but they differ widely on what a human being is and even more so on what “humanness” is. To understand humanness we have to know the origin and nature of human morality. Societies disagree about this probably more than about anything else. But I needed to find the answer because the one subject of drama is justice. I’ve written about this elsewhere, here I’m relating it to language.

To find out what a human being is I put characters in extreme situations. I have no presuppositions such as symbolism or even realism – though the situations must be “realistic.” Many of my plays relate to actual contemporary events (and even when the events are in the past I treat the problems as contemporary). I have to describe these extreme situations but it’s critical that they are always seen from the point of view of the people in them. This is true even when they speak without obvious passion -- this is because they have passed the “Eureka!” or “Ouch!” barrier and are in the world of understanding that lies beyond the barrier. (Acting the extreme is one way in which the Invisible Object may be created.) In these situations the characters speak in a way that goes beyond what normally passes as realism. Is Shakespeare’s metred language realism? Is Oedipus in “realism” when immediately after blinding himself he speaks, sings, and then speaks again? In both instances, yes. But it goes beyond “realism” to confront the problem of the “reality” of humanness. But people don’t behave like that in ordinary “realism”. If you are knocked down by a car you don’t sing or talk in verse, you are in the world of “realism.” Contemporary theatre tries to authenticate itself by imitating this realism. Fundamentally it does this because our society isn’t interested in humanness but in conformity and rationalistic, mechanical reason, and in consumption. But there is a difference between “realism” and “reality.” The whole point of formal drama is to reveal the reality that realism conceals. Drama creates reality. That is, it recreates the existing reality in response to changing times. Drama creates reality and is not merely in it. To understand this we have to understand that reality and its meaning are one and the same. When its
meaning changes, reality changes. Drama is the only “means” reality has of changing its “meaning,” of changing itself. This is because the objective is perceived and understood by the subjective, the world is “real” but “reality” is in our minds. The world can enter our minds only in the form of meaning, and when we add ourselves to the world we change its meaning -- and then reality is changed. Drama involves the profoundest problems of philosophy. Here I’m relating some of them to the use of speech in drama. But I can add that the relation between drama and reality is critical to culture and politics. Drama turns reality into our tool, and without drama nature becomes the weapon realism uses against us.

Poetic dramatists try to bring reality into realism by consciously writing in “poetic” language. But the poetry is reflective. It evades the extreme of the situation, it is outside it, and so the situation is not allowed to speak. In the extreme situation we hear the voice of the individual speaking, but in fact it’s the situation itself that speaks. This is because the situation -- whatever it is -- is common to everyone and shared by everyone. Otherwise it could not make drama. We have all been in the drama’s extreme situation or our imagination has already been in it for us. Not always in its contingent details, but always in its central dilemma. The situation speaks because it is the site of a universal human -- but not as part of a common, determined human nature. On the contrary, in the extreme there is always a choice, the possibility of accepting the situation or of recognising it and turning away from it. It is an empty shibboleth of realism to say “human nature never changes.” What is involved (for the actor and the audience) at the centre of the extreme situation is how to be human, how to create humanness out of the catastrophe. That is the centre of drama. What the character says (and does) tells us what meaning the situation has for “being human,” and this is the language of shared humanity, the language of dramatic logic. We have language because we have to communicate our private selves publicly. In drama’s extreme situations the communication is urgent and fundamental because it describes in its purest form what “being human” is, what it means, what defines us, and what the inhuman is that we have to overcome. We define ourselves by knowing this and saying it. Its what the language of the Jacobean and Greek dramatists did.

But our age is commercial and scientific. The necessities of commerce distort the logic of humanness. And science’s definition of “being human” restricts modern cultures to the language of “realism.” It creates a void in which all the debris of fake spirituality and self-deceiving “art” flourishes. Science is “realism” but it can never enter the “reality” of the scientist. Just as science cannot examine subatomic particles without altering what it examines, the scientist cannot scientifically examine, know, himself without losing himself. In the supra-atomic world the problem is even more critical, because what is examined alters whoever (scientist or otherwise) examines it -- only drama can release us from this aporia. Without drama we are prisoners of the culture we must use to define things, to give meaning to anything. That’s the limitation of the age of scientists and salesmen. There is no unified self to examine itself, and the statistics of realism cannot record reality. The reason for this is that human beings have imagination. Imagination is not an adjunct to reasoning, to rational logic. Imagination has its own logic: the logic of humanness. Imagination is the way the infant understands the world, gives meaning to it. I’ve written about this elsewhere but here I should say at least this: reason has no morality, in itself it can only be formally right or wrong.
Reason is to imagination what a mask is to a face. If we were not people of imagination there would be no morality. Before we can use the reason of realism and science, before we can speak, we are already human and have human concerns. In the infant these are highly dramatic and open, because adult understanding does not restrain or condition them. But adult understanding itself is not restrained or conditioned! – it can be that only in the day-to-day world of realism where we may take for granted the meaning of being human, but not in human reality. Its as if we had two languages and so two potential ways of being – the rational language which enables us to be in and manipulate the natural world (and society in so far as it is part of that) and the imagination which is the language which makes us more than part of the natural world: it makes us human. Pascal said man transcends himself, but it would be better to say our species has transcended nature, and that in consequence our problems are more dangerous than those of animals.

We are human when we relate the two languages in a way which enables us to be more just. Justice is the imperative created in us by our first self, by the first use we make of our minds. In the new-born this is the desire to be free of pain and panic or, in other words, to be in a “world home.” The infant cant use the second, rational language to do this, to physically change the world, about which it knows nothing practical – and so it does it creatively in its imagination. To the infant its as if the sky ached for it to be human. It grows up and then to survive it must learn the second language, the language of practical reason.. But the second language may occupy it, it may be colonised by “rationalising” and the degenerate form of rationalising that is the contemporary language of calculating and consuming. It passes from reality into realism. It loses its self because it cannot speak with itself in the first language in which it learnt to seek the world home, the reality that was just. When that happens it is on the edge of losing the imperative to be human. But it cannot be lost because the mind cannot erase its foundations, its early self -- it is an identity that endures through all vicissitudes and vacillations. This makes us the dramatic species. Drama steepes the rational world and its language in the demanding, implacable logic of the imagination. Drama, obviously, is a form of play, but it’s the play of the infant-become-adult and in the drama of this play the human imperative is of immense, inexorable consequence. The Tragic cannot lie and in that it is like the newborn infant. The Tragic and the infant cannot lie because they have the absolute responsibility of imagination. This is the origin of the political fact that there is no freedom without responsibility. Death stands in the Tragic to remind us we are always young, it gives us the radical innocence of our first youth, our childhood and infancy. Audiences have to recognise the Tragic as what it is because from their beginning they have known it is the unhousing of the world and the responsibility of being human. The recognition is innate in the human self and its situation, because the mind, the brain, cant erase its origin in imagination. The paradox of drama is that because the infant’s imagination wrongly conceived that it might make the world its home, conceived in its infancy and ignorance of death that it might free reality from suffering -- then ever afterwards we must seek to create that justice in the actual world. Once this imperative might have been understood as the geometry of the soul. It gives the logic of imagination the force of natural law and makes the creation of justice practical. There are people who each day repress the imperative in themselves by living unjustly and understanding the lives of others, and the meaning of reality, unjustly. Paradoxically they commit an injustice against themselves because since childhood the need for justice has been inherent in them. The paradox distorts the logic even of realism and plays havoc
with daily life. Unjust societies and people are always irrational -- it could be called the chaos of ir-realism. Politically it leads to tyranny, in which the irrational is held together by violence.

There are these two worlds. If our culture divides them so that we live in only one -- it doesn’t matter which -- then we are insane because we don’t know the reality in which we live. To be sane we must integrate the two worlds. Only drama can do this. It does it by entering the crisis in which they are being torn apart. The crisis is the centre of the drama and it produces the dramatic action and language. Here I am illustrating this by the use of language. It’s a sign of our duality that either language can be spoken in extreme Tragedy or in ordinary conversation. What was once tragic revelation may become casual chatter, as if the last words spoken in agony and desperation by a Lear or an Antigone had become embalmed in a cliché -- its as if humanness is always tugging at our sleeve. In my play “The Testament of This Day” I deliberately divide the two worlds and give each its own language and imagery. The world of imagination is a house isolated on the edge of a ravine. The world of reason is in a train. In our culture we live our daily lives in the practical world of realism and speak the second language because it “pays” us to. But to be in “reality” we must live in both worlds. That’s our situation -- and our problem. Drama pushes it to an extreme so that the first world may be heard in the second. In “The Testament of This Day” a mother tries to catch her son as he falls into the ravine. Later she is accused of trying to kill him. She tells him that:

You slipped. On the cliff. I saw your heel split the ground and the brown earth vomit into the -- you clung to the branch -- a withered bush -- I went down -- your head was under my face -- the branches --white -- withered -- wrapped round your limbs --holding you like a skeleton while I gave you my breast. You slipped. Fell. In the ravine. That gorge. That abyss.

Times and places that are distant to each other “happen” together in the same event. Later the event itself “happens” in the train and, at the end, the first language speaks to the second language. The audience hear both. The silence in their lives -- the silence of reality -- is broken. But modern theatre is gagged. In modern theatre the gag speaks.

The elements of drama are the site, the situation and the centre. The site is the natural world, society, its institutions, economy and culture, the individual, birth and mortality -- all that is relevant to the “human stage”. These elements are in conflict. Nature cannot organise and combine them into a liveable relationship. Instead we create this relationship ourselves. That is the purpose of drama. Essential this means relating each element to the others and to something so unnatural, alien and strange as justice -- which is beyond organisation and the individual need for justice and belongs to the dignity of the human race.

The second element of drama is the situation. Drama’s situations are unjust. The injustice may be overt or concealed by ideology. Drama forces the situation to the extreme to reveal the irrationality and suffering that in daily realism may pass unnoticed or even be accepted. It makes the acceptable unacceptable. Because the situation is unjust it is Tragic. The Tragic makes the situation and the site one. They
form the spot on which the Tragic protagonist stands. The responsibility of standing there is enormous, absolute. It is as if he or she were the last surviving human being. He or she answers for the whole human race, is the protector of its humanness. Reality itself is traumatised. Then by any standard of realism the Tragic figure must always make his situation worse. Antigone, Hecuba, Lear must go deeper into their situation to uncover the last scraps of private or corporate depravity and to recover the last shreds of innocence and justice. Then they choose and speak and an age defines itself.

The third element of drama is the centre. This is the centre of the situation where justice is repressed and meaning corrupted. Usually its the specific event or situation on which the story is based. But reality is holistic and the centre is found in every part of the drama. So everything in the play and its performance -- writing, designing, direction, acting -- must pass through the centre. Otherwise there is theatre instead of drama. In our societies culture is a symptom of the injustice on which it is based. The function of drama is to decipher the symptoms. This creates the form of dramaturgy that is appropriate to its times. The defining difference between theatre and drama is that theatre has no centre. Theatre is a sort of funereal gift-wrapping.

My characters are in situations in which they could not speak the language of, say, characters in the plays of David Hare or Stoppard. Their characters would be concerned with injustice on the level of realism, fantasy, theatre. They could rearrange the elements of “what is,” but the elements are corrupt and would remain corrupt in the rearrangement. This letter is my response to your remark about the bewildering “variety” of types that now dominates theatre. The best of these types are empty aestheticism, bogus spirituality, and the “shock” that is addicted to itself. The worst are consumer products for sale in the market. In the present economic crisis the worst has begun to destroy the best. It is now the common theatre practice. To survive acting, directing and writing must be part of it. Theatre has become a sumptuous irrelevancy. It was bound to happen. The irresponsibility for the last twenty and more years of the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company made it inevitable. A younger theatre generation is paying for it.

Ive explained why I needed to create a new sort of drama. It would be based on the basic structures of “being human” and would understand society as the personal and political search for justice. The empty fantasies, mystiques and realism (or ir-realism) of theatre would be replaced by the reality of drama. It would be Tragic because the state of the world is tragic. But comedy is part of the Tragic’s inner strength and impulse and not even the market can degrade all of comedy’s resources. Tragic figures may laugh even in extreme situations . . .there only needs to be a reason for laughing. (Its an irony of English language that it calls the last line of a joke the “punch” line, which itself suggests tragic violence.) My characters, to be and know themselves in the situations in which the world -- not I -- put them, have to find their own language. But they do not speak through me and I do not speak in them. The situation speaks. If you wish to understand my plays, look in the street.

Ive explained my plays through their language, but you can relate this to their situations and actions. They need new ways of staging, acting, designing and directing. The old ways destroy their dramatic centre and reduce them to theatre. Its the new drama our age needs. I don’t know what to call it. Perhaps you can think of
something.

Thanks for writing to me. I hope my reply will help you with your studies. Good luck and best wishes, Edward.