

Edward Bond: Tragedy, Postmodernity, *The Woman*

Sean Carney

A man's stature is shown by what he mourns and in what way he mourns it. To raise mourning to a high plane, to make it into an element of social progress: that is an artistic task.
—Brecht, "On Gestic Music"¹

In his recent book, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton makes a persuasive case for the contemporary political importance of tragedy in the situation of postmodernity. The claim is provocative, because, as Eagleton himself observes, tragedy has, since the rise of the bourgeoisie, been degraded into an ideological tool of middle class interests. As an endorsement of the status quo, tragedy has often served as what Fredric Jameson calls an *ideologue*.² Tragic narratives became assertions of the indestructibility of the moral order and the valorization of poetic justice; it is for just this reason that Bertolt Brecht, most famously, distanced his political, dialectical theatre from tragedy, although his greatest plays also bear an oblique relationship to the tragic. Key to Terry Eagleton's defense of tragedy as political is the argument, drawn from German Romantic philosophy, that tragic actions actually embody a form of dialectics, a bringing to consciousness of contradictions. Tragic thinking, then, may be used as an aesthetic tool in the project of dialectical materialism. Yet curiously, while Eagleton's survey and analysis of thinking about tragedy is broad and detailed, *Sweet Violence* makes little reference to contemporary playwrights. This is not fatal for his impressive work of scholarship, but it does risk replicating a bias he exposes in the book: the historical elevation of tragic theory over tragic practice. If the idea of tragedy is to have relevance for the present, it must include detailed attention to contemporary tragedians in whose work we can detect the dialectical thinking that Eagleton describes. Otherwise, we risk reifying older tragic forms into the position of "high culture," effectively placing them in the position of an authoritative tragic theory, albeit in dramatic form. Among contemporary playwrights, no one has more consistently associated his political theatre with tragedy than British writer and director Edward Bond. In this essay I argue that the work of Edward Bond

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constitutes a form of contemporary tragedy informed by dialectical thinking and that this makes Bond a respondent both to Bertolt Brecht's call for dialectics in the theatre and to Eagleton's call for a politics of contemporary tragedy. Such an approach to Bond's work is, in part, self-evident, since Bond often refers to his work as tragedy and situates himself in relation to Brecht's dialectical theatre. However, while his plays have been analyzed for how they appropriate and modify the plots of classical tragedies (*Lear* being the most famous instance of this), I am interested instead in how Bond's work absorbs and recasts the tragic ideologeme itself, which is less a single plot than a general, though recognizable, ideological stance. In this essay I will analyze Bond's *The Woman* (1978), attending to its manipulation of the tragic ideologeme's basic content, the conflict between freedom and necessity.

Dialectical Theatre

While Bond's tragedy is politicized, contemporary, and also profoundly philosophical about its own position within the history of tragic form, Bond is also an important figure to consider because of his own critical writings on tragedy. Bond is the author of numerous theoretical essays on tragedy and postmodernity, but critics have taken little interest in interpreting Bond's plays in the light of his own theories. I want to argue that the theory that accompanies Bond's later work, such as his "Notes on Postmodernism," the "Commentary on *The War Plays*," and "Notes on Imagination," all comment as much on Bond's mid-career *The Woman* as upon his more recent plays.³ He presents a theory of the politics of dramatic aesthetics, specifically arranged around the importance of tragedy for engendering historical consciousness and dialectical thinking, which responds directly to Brecht's mature work and to the project for a dialectical theatre.⁴ We can see this dialectical theory of tragedy enacted in *The Woman*, which maintains a dialectical sense of tragedy where an earlier play such as *Lear* (1971), as a materialist tragedy, fails.

In 1984, Terry Eagleton published a pointed criticism of Bond's prefaces, "Nature and Violence: The Prefaces of Edward Bond."⁵ In this essay, Eagleton criticizes Bond for an insufficiently dialectical theory of human violence. Bond, he argues, too often appeals to an uninterrogated concept of human nature and then stigmatizes aggression as "unnatural." The problem with this idea is that, by assuming a definition of human nature, it assumes a sense of the human as a fixed, natural state rather than as an ongoing process, which is the very idea at the heart of *Lear* that makes it undialectical. In *Lear* the peaceful nature of the human animal is portrayed as corrupted by socialization, giving rise to a nostalgic lament for lost human nature. If Bond's theory is caught in a contradiction "between culturalism and biologism,"⁶ Eagleton is prepared to offer an escape from that contradiction via Freud and structuralism: "the nature of human beings is culture."⁷ Eagleton suggests that Bond's art must come to terms with the dialectic between creation and destruction. Eagleton asserts that

technology is of our nature: what is specific about the human body, as opposed to the bodies of other animals, is that because it is linguistic it can create extensions of itself which then outrun its natural inhibitions. The human animal is the animal whose nature it is to overreach itself; its most distinctive mark—language—is precisely such a ceaseless distancing, transgression and transformation of the instinctual. . . . The conditions which make for human creativity, conditions which entail a break beyond the instinctual, are precisely the same conditions which make for human destructiveness.⁸

Eagleton thus offers to Bond a theory of “nature” as sedimented culture. In a sense, he practices an estrangement upon Bond’s givens, one that recalls Brecht’s theorizations of nature and technology. As Brecht points out, when we drive a model T Ford it estranges us from the current achievements of technology: henceforth, “[w]e understand cars, by looking at them as something strange, new, as a triumph of engineering and to that extent something unnatural. Nature, which certainly embraces the motor-car, is suddenly imbued with an element of unnaturalness, and from now on this is an indelible part of the concept of nature.”⁹ Technology, like language, is our hope and our curse. In and of itself technology cannot be trusted to bring about social change, because technology is always already entrenched in dominant class interests: “What is technologically developed is on the whole a matter of what the ruling social relations require to sustain themselves,” Eagleton writes.¹⁰ Technology, while potentially liberating, is only so when driven by a dialectical struggle for freedom. For Eagleton, Bond’s work encompasses such a possibility, constituting “the seeds of a powerful, subversive political morality,”¹¹ and needs only a dialectical, structuralist intervention, the acceptance “that we are, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, born into the world of the Other, and that the fact that such a world will always be other to us, that we will never be quite adapted or at home, is the source of our creativity just as much as it is the source of our violence.”¹² I will demonstrate that, in his later prefaces, Bond theorizes his work through just such a dialectical, structuralist lens, with specific attention to how the alienation of the human within culture is both tragic and dialectically liberating. Moreover, *The Woman* demonstrates an increasingly dialectical attitude towards human beings in Bond’s work, even before Eagleton’s criticism appeared, indicating that Bond had already anticipated the issues Eagleton raises in his essay.

There is a dialectical theory of art discernible in Bond’s later work in the 1970s, demonstrating that Eagleton’s criticism applies only to one strand of thought in Bond’s artistic output. Bond is contradictory, and if there is a Rousseau-esque Bond who valorizes “natural man,” there is also a dialectical, Brechtian Bond who rejects such ideological nostalgia for lost origins. We need not look far in Bond’s

theory for his essentially Brechtian aims. In “Notes on Acting *The Woman*,” he states, “Our production is real. It has its feet on the ground. It is not over-realistic (as some Chekhov productions are) for a particular reason: we want to tell a story or analyse the truth. We don’t want to record things but to show the connection between things, to show how one thing leads to another, how things go wrong and how they could be made to go well.”¹³ Like Brecht’s theatre, this is neither a naturalism nor a formalism. It is a form of storytelling in which all elements of the production are carefully manufactured to *signify*. Bond writes,

[w]e can think of the play as a story. The actors then become the illustrations of the story as well as the speakers of the text. When you are on the stage you should have a graphic sense. Use your acting as illustration. . . . Don’t let emotion dictate the gesture. Find the gesture through emotion in rehearsal. But then work on the gesture. Find what is significant in it and use this. Omit everything superfluous.¹⁴

Like Brecht’s Epic Theatre, *The Woman* is primarily a form of dramatic storytelling. This Brechtian acting endeavours to be dialectical in its form, resembling the technique of *gestus*: “Our acting does not recreate. It recollects. Its energy is intellectual. It makes the particular general and the general particular. It finds the law in the incidental. Thus it restores moral importance to human behaviour.”¹⁵ While Bond, in his early prefaces, and even in the content of plays like *Lear*, often appears to be an essentialist and a rationalist, appealing to concepts of human nature corrupted under capitalism, he is ultimately an artist, not a biologist or a scientist. His material is signification itself, and his plays are concerned with the political function of the human imagination, the imagination being the one human and humanizing constant that he allows in his later prefaces and commentaries. Far from being nostalgic for a lost or repressed human nature, Bond’s theatre takes as its subject art, imagination, and the possibilities for justice that the human imagination and aesthetic creativity render possible.

Theatre Events

Bond’s 1978 National Theatre production of *The Woman*, which Bond himself directed on the massive Olivier stage, is a demythologizing of the narrative of the siege of Troy, not through attempts to recreate a historical record of what actually happened, but through an opposite approach: a retelling of the story that transforms it from a mythic to a dialectical narrative. The play is subtitled “Scenes of War and Freedom,” and this distinction describes the two parts of this lengthy theatre work. Taken separately, either part of the play might be the source of an individual production. What critics have passed over in *The Woman* is the subtle

manner in which each part constitutes one of Bond's "two worlds" and stages what he calls a "Theatre Event." Due to the length and unorthodox structure of the play, it challenges an audience's received notion of dramatic form and seeks to engender a new, more complex type of aesthetic vision. *The Woman* presents a potential opportunity for the production of a critical re-reading in the audience, and the tragedy seeks to engender a spectatorial confrontation with what Bond, in his critical prefaces, calls "the boundary."

Theatre Events are key to Bond's dialectical theatre. The events he stages do not embody a meaning, he insists: the sense of them comes from the audience, and it is in this that a dialectical theatre must have a stubborn, optimistic faith in its audience's ability to recognize, in the aesthetic form, the necessity and vision of justice that in fact exist only in the spectator's mind. Bond calls such occurrences "Theatre Events," although they need not necessarily happen in a Theatre. Bond formulated the idea of the Theatre Event when he saw a woman on the street in an unnamed middle-eastern city, lamenting over the body of her dead son with "age-old sounds, gestures and expressions of grief," who realized that men were filming her with a TV camera. With one hand she gestured to the body, then clenched her fist and raised it to heaven, while with the other hand she gently patted her hair into place: "She is on TV."¹⁶ The two gestures of her arms are the "Theatre Event." The woman's actions are not superficial or insincere; her pain is not false or trivial. Rather, the "gesture comes from her social situation."¹⁷ "Alone, neither the shaking fist nor the gentle, patting hand tells the truth, but together they tell the violence and waste of war. . . . The gesture may be interpreted and performed in totally opposed ways: it depends on the philosophy."¹⁸ TEs are a theory of metatext, posited upon the understanding that "the meanings of our acts are never our motivation for doing them. The reasons for our acts come from society We act as we do because we are in a particular sort of society."¹⁹ TEs must stage the class and social contradictions that communicate themselves through human actions; the resolution of these contradictory imperatives "increases or diminishes our humanity,"²⁰ depending on whether the resolution is real or ideological.

Theatre Events take their inspiration from the small, gestic contradictions that are made manifest through the interaction of the human mind with its social environment. In this sense, Theatre Events materialize the elements of society that are at war with one another and that make it impossible for society, as such, to exist. Thus we may understand Theatre Events to be expressions of class contradictions. At the same time, the contradictions staged by Theatre Events may be related to conflicting modes of production that overlap at any given historical moment and, in their collision, give rise to contradictions in aesthetic forms. Bond relates the Theatre Event to his observation that in his plays

there are always two worlds. In many of them this is overt, but all of them fall into two parts. . . . There are nearly always two worlds in the way we look at things. And my plays exploit the difference between the two worlds, taking the character from one world to the other. . . . All my characters have to struggle in two worlds, they have to take the journey from one world to the other world. If they don't do that, they are destroyed. The imagination in our postmodern worlds has to rethink the ways in which it can negotiate its travelling from one world to the other.²¹

The “two worlds” theory is also key to the analysis of *The Woman*. Interestingly, Bond's concept of “two worlds” can be represented not only through a journey from one world to another, but in overlapping but contradictory social spaces, seen to occupy the same location on stage: “TEs can separate two worlds that meet in one room by basing each of them on a different form of theatre.”²² A single scene might have some actors performing a tragedy and another actor performing a farce. A generic discontinuity serves to make manifest the conflicting co-existence of two mutually antagonistic class spaces. “The scene's tragedy and farce are like the hands of the mourning woman, one a fist shaken at heaven, one patting the hair—together they make the TE.”²³ The result, then, for the spectator, must be an inability to merge these two worlds and an awareness that they are irreconcilable. A woman mourning over the senseless death of her son can shake her fist at heaven in an expression of defiant rage; it is a paradigmatic gesture of tragedy, and still possible, but not without the overlapping and contradictory gesture of the other hand, which mediates and undermines the tragic moment.

Theatre Events are clearly moments of estrangement, and, although Bond makes several attempts in this essay to distance his Theatre Events from Brecht's music-hall style techniques, Bond's dismissal of Brecht here is predicated upon received ideas of “alienation” that have less to do with Brecht than with his anglophone reception. Bond's Theatre Events exploit the fact that what we take as given, the self-evident, the familiar, has at the heart of it a radical strangeness. Bond's logic here replicates the theory of Freud's *Unheimliche*. Bond writes, “it is always the familiar which is most strange. . . . [B]ecause the familiar always has one hand on ‘nothingness’ . . . Ideology depends on the ‘self-evident’. Yet always part of our experience appears strange to us and threatens the self-evident. It creates doubt, which leads to insecurity and strife.”²⁴ For Bond, this doubt is a force of potential political change; doubt here is reminiscent not only of Brecht's poems from the late 1930s on the importance of doubting, but also of doubting in *Life of Galileo* as a whole. Bond claims that there is an unresolvable ontological doubt that “is related to radical innocence.”²⁵ Yet on a day-to-day basis the doubts we experience, the moments of strangeness at the heart of the self-evident, are exploited

by social authority, which turns the fear spawned by our doubts into antagonism towards aliens and outsiders. Our doubt would like to doubt authority as everything else, and so when we allow ourselves to identify with social authority, we “adopt its world view but at the same time we doubt it; and the more seriously we doubt it the more strenuously we deny the doubt—for fear of losing the self-evident and the protection of power. . . . Both fanaticism and complacency are energized by doubt. The beliefs that cross class barriers (such as patriotism) are the ones held most fanatically and brutally.”²⁶ Patriotism escalates into fanaticism because authority and ideology are weakest when they try to cross the real contradictions of economic class and, thus, require the reinforcement of fascistic belief systems. Therefore, our doubt, our ability to estrange the self-evident, is resolutely opposed to authoritarian and ideological thinking; yet, at the same time, our ontological doubt is an encroaching encounter with nothingness, a terrifying non-presence that, when we seek to avoid it, pushes us directly into the hands of totalizing authority and fascism. Thus “[d]oubt is the cause of terror, but it is also the reason for hope. Doubt stopped us being the creatures of evolution and made us the creators of history.”²⁷ Here we find the dialectical theory of art and the human that Eagleton sought in Bond’s work. Bond’s Theatre Events are like both Freud’s aesthetic of the *Unheimliche* and Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* in their power to disrupt and distance the opacity of authoritarian thought and engender historical consciousness.

The Woman’s subtitle, “Scenes of War and Freedom” may be understood as a description of the two dialectical poles of tragic action: necessity and liberation. They are, I will suggest, the “two worlds” in this play that are placed in dialectical contradiction with one another through the Theatre Event, *The Woman*’s dramatic action. As Eagleton points out, the two basic philosophical positions of necessity and freedom, opposed to but inseparable from one another, survive throughout different tragic forms, and we may understand a tragedy through its attitude toward determination and contingency. Discussing Walter Benjamin’s theory of *Trauerspiel*, Eagleton notes that in this unorthodox tragic form, “freedom and fatality are alike in that both turn their back on the mechanistic realm of causality.”²⁸ The affinity between freedom and fate is found in the term *Trauerspiel* itself: as a mourning play, *Trauerspiel* functions to find identity between a sense of freedom and a sense of mortality or fatality. The result of this identity is a rejection of vulgar teleology, or of a mechanistic causal vision of history as the bluntly “inevitable.” *The Woman* bears a subtle relationship to *Trauerspiel* and addresses mourning plays in its opening scene and in its conclusion. The play begins and ends with “funeral games”: in the opening, boys parodically recreate the funeral procession of Priam, King of Troy. The boys’ games on the wall of Troy alert the Greek army outside that Priam has died. This generates for Heros, leader of the Greek army, a fantasy of Priam’s funeral scene, which is performed on stage by the Greek soldiers themselves with an air of conscious theatricality, emphasizing that it is a fiction. This

is a quite self-conscious play of mourning, in which the grieving royal family take on a mock heroic grandeur and act out Heros's fantasy: he imagines that Priam's wife Hecuba will vindictively and fearfully refuse to give the Greeks what they want because she knows that if they get it, they will destroy Troy anyway. These two mourning plays should be contrasted with one another: the first is a play of liberation, the second the performance of ideological fantasy. By the end of *The Woman*, the play of liberation will triumph: when Hecuba dies, and the "funeral games" for her begin, young men will race their boats as Hecuba is burned on the quay. Three kinds of plays of mourning thus bookend the drama: the first, in which children mirthfully and productively iterate a mournful ritual, the second, in which a funeral is given a strange staging as a satire of militaristic ideology, and the concluding moment, which, while still play, is now the thing-in-itself, a funeral game to be joyfully contrasted with mournful despair. In the first and third cases, tragic mourning is transformed, through performance, into a celebratory tragedy of liberation. Mortality is celebrated with freedom. This will also take place in the tragic action of *The Woman*.

Destiny as Ideology

Despite its historical setting, *The Woman* is a tragedy concerned with the function of ideology within postmodernity. In *The Woman* the conflict between Greece and Troy is over the "statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune," a material embodiment of destiny emphasizing the paradoxes of imperialist ideology and the concept of national destiny as it is embodied in contemporary nation-states. This is not an attempt by Bond to represent Greek religious practices; it is a dramatic representation of modern colonialist, nationalist ideology and how it figures itself through the rhetoric of destiny. From the beginning, Heros is obsessed with the statue:

Let's review the situation. Twenty-five years ago Troy was already a falling city and Athens in the ascent. My father'd won his war for the Eastern mines. He'd captured the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune and was bringing it to Athens. Hecuba told Priam that if he owned the statue Troy would be saved. He took it—and since then Troy's had nothing but disasters. Why? The statue brings good fortune only to those destined to own her. But how can we win the war and capture the statue of Good Fortune when we haven't got the statue to give us the good fortune to win the war?²⁹

Heros lives a logic that dictates that he cannot lose: he masks over all contradictions with the belief that Greece will triumph because it is destined to triumph. The

Trojans will be defeated because they are holding the supreme goddess “against her will,” and such actions demand the “greatest misfortune” (175). Therefore, the Greeks must win the war. Heros wants the statue back, and he is willing to offer the Trojans peace should they return the statue. In Heros’s fantasy of Priam’s funeral, Queen Hecuba does not trust Heros, although he seems, here, to trust himself. His imagination tells us something about him that he does not yet know: that he is more than willing to allow the ransacking of Troy. His is a logic in which ends justify means, and the significance of an event can be retrospectively rewritten without risk of self-contradiction, because it can be justified with the ideology of destiny. It is precisely this nationalistic, ideological thinking that Bond’s tragic action works through and transcends.

The consciousness of Heros remains of central importance throughout *The Woman*. He is, in his own words, a metonym for the Greek nation-state. He tells his wife Ismene: “I was born at a time when I summed up a nation’s strength. My father had doubts, my heirs will have weaknesses. Of course I’m only a dummy on Athens’s knees: but the voice is clear in me. They say the ewe killed in the compound to celebrate my birth had human milk in the udder” (181). He is destined for greatness, and so when Troy is afflicted with plague, Heros sees it not as a reason for caution, but as a sign that the goddess is punishing the Trojans. In contrast, both Hecuba and Ismene emerge as free-thinking characters in the play, capable of a tragic consciousness that refuses the ideology of war. Hecuba is a figure of reason in the midst of irrationality. Surrounded by High Priests, and a son, who pray instead of solving the problem of war and plague, Hecuba comments: “I’ve begun to hate you young-old people. I’m tired of listening to you argue with your undertakers about the future. Even victory would now cost us more than defeat at the beginning—and what hope is there of victory?” (187). While she wants peace, she does not trust the Greeks because they are clearly fools enslaved to an ideology of national destiny. Meeting a Greek envoy, she demonstrates how far she is from Heros’s thinking: “Perhaps I shall just destroy the statue. God knows, it’s not given us much luck—. . . . But you still might not go. I’ve had five years to study the Greeks. Only a fool would stay for a statue that didn’t exist, but only a fool would have sat out there for five years” (188). Left alone with Ismene, Hecuba further demonstrates her ability to see through nationalistic ideology, such as Ismene’s insistence that the Greeks are trustworthy because Athens is a republic. Hecuba comments: “As to Athens a republic. Well, your husband’s family is the richest in Athens and money buys power. Shall we tell the truth?” (191). Pushing aside all obfuscation, Hecuba flatly insists that Heros “will burn Troy to the ground” (191). Ismene, we will see, is Bond’s figure for the childlike innocence of tragic consciousness: to prove that her husband will keep his word she asks to stay in

Troy as a captive until the Greeks have left, but this merely exacerbates Heros's irrationality. He feels personally affronted by Hecuba and sees no alternative but to destroy Troy "[s]tone by stone" (195).

The Boundary

Through the characters of Heros, Hecuba, and Ismene, Bond presents both ideological and dialectically questioning attitudes towards human reality. Heros embodies the mind of authoritarian fascistic thinking, while Hecuba and Ismene make hopeful transitions into a tragic state of consciousness. For Bond, the characters struggle within the situation of postmodernity, despite the historical setting of the play. In the essay, "Notes on Postmodernism," Bond articulates the importance of drama under the condition of late capitalism, or postmodernity. His notes describe "the relationship between people, technology and authority; and the way in which theatre and the other arts are part of that relationship."³⁰ Human beings do not live individually but in societies, and because there is a dialectical, reciprocal relationship between individuals and their societies, human beings experience what Bond calls an overcapacity of mind: "The overcapacity makes possible the ramifications of society and culture."³¹ We have more mental capacity than we strictly need to survive, and as a result, this excess of thinking opens uniquely human possibilities. The overcapacity of mind is of central political importance to Bond. It causes the human mind to be "radically interrogative. No answer stops it because the capacity to interrogate engulfs the answer."³² Interrogation pushes us towards philosophical contemplation of the outside horizons of our understanding, what Bond refers to as "the boundary."³³ The boundary is by definition "unknowable. Its mystery is analogous to the mystery people know as their 'self.'"³⁴ The mind is driven to interrogate the boundary. However, this interrogative force of the human mind is also the aspect of the human mind most jeopardized by the circumstances of postmodernity.

In our interrogations of the boundary, we can only assign meanings to it through narratives, or what Bond calls stories. In any social organization, authority is manifested, and authority shapes itself as claiming to speak for the boundary, which cannot speak for itself because "the boundary has no story."³⁵ The function of authority is to relate "people, technology and the boundary to each other. In speaking for the boundary and interpreting the relationship authority increases the humanness of the human mind."³⁶ Bond is dialectical here, in as much as he sees humanness not as an innate condition but as an ongoing process in which the mind is increasingly humanized through its interrogative activity. Since this interrogative activity is made possible only through the grace of social organizations, humanness is not natural but a cultural product, requiring constant energy to generate it. Interrogation is developed in the "drama of childhood,"³⁷ a period of role-playing that shapes us as fundamentally interrogative in our thinking. In our later interrogations, and in

aesthetic experience, we relive and restage the drama of childhood. "All pleasure is the satisfactory—that is, precise—asking of a question: because the flesh is made literature. But we cannot remember the question, only its interrogative form."³⁸ Bond's theory resembles a psychoanalytic approach to art. Our dialectical, open minds are the form of a question; in effect, a questioning form without a content. Ideology forecloses upon this form and occludes its openness, but the content of the interrogative form is always transitory. All of this is spawned by early formative socializations, and, as we age, we relive and restage this formative drama. The facts of human existence place under erasure what we take to be the truth. New facts "must change the truth—and that is the redramatization of childhood necessary to maturity. . . . We would die without our trauma."³⁹ The ambivalence of this statement is key: our trauma is the source of our humanness; it is both our curse and our blessing. For Bond, our foundational trauma is the impetus for our overcapacity of mind, and it is what gives us the ability to change and question that which is given. Yet because this trauma is "absent," a non-event that nevertheless asserts itself in our psychic histories as a foundational event, there arises the problematic possibility that this dialectic of trauma can lead to an excessive lamentation. This arises when the reliving of the trauma becomes a mournful nostalgia for something that did not happen and for something that was not lost: "Provided it is not reactionary (reaction is nostalgia for the dramatization of childhood; it treats the events which did not happen as if they had, and brings the dead past into the present as clues . . .) interrogation itself is humanizing."⁴⁰ While trauma is an absent cause that drives us forward, it can become an obsessive fixation, one with political consequences: a reactionary conservatism that can lead to fascism. At the same time, this ongoing process means that dehumanization can take place when the mind's interrogative activity is suppressed, as it is under postmodernity. Through the characters of Heros, Hecuba, and Ismene, we see the dramatization of different confrontations with the boundary. With Heros, ideological thinking will triumph: tragic consciousness will be foreclosed upon by the nostalgic search for the lost object, figured literally in the play by the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune. Ismene and Hecuba will transcend ideological thinking and achieve a true tragic consciousness, a confrontation with the boundary in all its meaninglessness. In turn, this will finally engender an historical consciousness in Hecuba.

Radical Innocence

Ismene enacts the combined elements of radical doubt and innocence that Bond imagines as the truth of the human, free of ideological encumbrance. The siege of Troy comes to an abrupt end when the combination of pressures proves too much for the Trojan populace to bear. As a result, for a crowd of plague-ridden Trojans, the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune eventually comes to embody misfortune itself; the crowd takes the statue to turn it over to the Greeks. Liberated from her

captivity, Ismene is tried for treason and refuses to defend herself. She explains that she was not coerced to denounce the war:

In Troy I saw the people suffer. Young men crippled or killed,
their parents in despair and dying of disease. I told them as they
were dying—they couldn't hear but I told them because I'm
Greek!—I shall do all I can to stop this. No more suffering caused
by men! I said that—if the sight of them hadn't made my mouth
dry I would have sung it! (211-12)

Asked whether she has any doubts about her proclamations, she insists that she has “many doubts” (212), but she means that she is driven now to denounce the war through this radical sense of doubt, doubt that, for Bond, is central to a tragic consciousness. She has, now, the ability to question war and to denounce suffering, and it provokes from her an aesthetic response, a desire to sing out her rejection of war, arising from a part of herself that is not quite conscious and thus all the more authentic. Heros asks Ismene, “Why did you say you'd have sung those things?” to which Ismene replies, “Sung? I don't think I said I'd—(*She stops again.*) I only know what I saw!” (212). Ismene's revelation, then, is a telling parapraxis. She has no memory of what she has just said to them, and does not really understand the experience she is going through, even though she tries her best to narrate it in words. Ismene personifies Bond's interrogative, doubting mind, radically questioning reality and expressing itself through the imagination. She is awakening to a new kind of consciousness, one that is open to the experience of suffering, one that doubts, and that seeks to denounce this suffering with a song erupting not from the centered position of her ego, but from the truth of her unconscious. Ismene is Bond's re-visioning of a Greek tragic protagonist. As James C. Bulman points out, despite some superficial similarities between *The Woman* and Euripides' plays, Bond's play is far more reminiscent of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Ismene resembles Antigone in her unrepentant declaration of the senselessness of war.⁴¹

Key to my reading is the moment when Ismene reveals that her doubt and awareness of suffering have provoked her desire to sing. Like Antigone, Ismene refuses to swerve from her actions no matter what the consequences. In this, she manifests an innocence upon which Heros comments:

Ismene, I've made love to you but you're still a virgin. If the
army raped you on the street corners of Troy tomorrow, you'd
still be a virgin. You receive nothing—you only give. All women
are virgins when they're faced with murder—perhaps that's why
soldiers murder them. (214)

Ismene has realized the radical innocence, the ontological doubt, and the ability to question authority that Bond sees as essential factors in our self-humanizations. He sees this in the protagonists of Greek tragedy, and he sees it in children. That this interrogative questioning takes the form of a song is most relevant to us: here Bond embeds in his play a paradigm for the aesthetic activity itself, as an act of imagination provoked by the human ability to radically doubt reality, to ask whether things might be otherwise. Ismene is a figure for the artist, committed to confronting reality and declaring the truth at all costs. Heros's appreciation of her innocence has little effect on his politics. Like Antigone, Ismene is bricked up alive in the wall of Troy. No one has learned from her, and Troy is looted and destroyed.

Tragedy's Ruin

Yet while Ismene seems open to a tragic consciousness from the start, it is Hecuba's growing historical, tragic consciousness that occupies the largest portion of the dramatic action and that bridges the two parts of the play. The tragic action of the siege of Troy comes to a climax when Heros orders that Hecuba's grandson, Astyanax, be thrown from the city wall. A group of Trojan women plead for the boy's life, becoming choral in their lamentations: "The rest are dead. Leave us this child. We're all his mother. Don't kill our son, you'd kill hundreds of children at one blow. Make a hundred women childless!" (219). Heros will not be swayed. Hecuba blinds herself in one eye offstage and re-enters, becoming now, from the perspective of the Greeks, a figure of abjection. The Greek soldiers hold her off with their swords as she flaunts her condition before Heros. In blinding herself, she seems to have sought to block Heros out of her sight; when she realizes she can still see him she tries to blind her other eye. This climactic moment at the end of the first part of the play cements *The Woman's* formal resemblance to a tragic action. The significance here is compatible with that of a classical tragedy: faced with a degree of suffering that her mind cannot reckon with, Hecuba blinds herself. Within a classical tragic rubric, Hecuba's submission to the senselessness of this suffering would be a judgment of inhuman judgment, and clearly this scene in the play contains enough typical tragic elements for it to resonate visibly with tragic form. The whole of the scene has a ritualistic shape, a formal, building lamentation that, in Greek tragedy, would end with a choral address to the gods and to the incomprehensible fate that has been doled out by a mysterious and unknowable cosmos. The crucial elements of tragedy are present but they have been rearranged into a new, more secular configuration. The *deus ex machina* of Greek tragedy has been transformed, here, into the inert statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune, which is carried on by the Greek High Priests at the beginning of the scene. They take it to one side where it stands while Astyanax is killed, but when Hecuba enters with her blinded eye, the Greek Priests run out with the statue (221). The absence of the statue is telling. What is missing from the scene

of Hecuba's blinding is the traditional metacommentary that would give to it any tragic significance. The events are tragic, but their circumstances are secular, no longer, we see, the product of an unknowable destiny, but rather of human cruelty, and what is manifestly absent from the scene of Hecuba's blinding is the intimation that she has achieved some kind of reconciliation with her circumstances. Instead, Hecuba's self-mutilation is a form of attack on the Greeks, an attempt to affront them with her self-transformation into a pollutant, an impurity. This is, then, a parodic iteration of tragedy, the repetition of tragedy that is instead tragedy's ruin. As a repetition, it stages for us the distance between this first part of *The Woman* and tragedy proper. This distance is the impossibility of classical tragedy today. Instead of the tragedy of people and the gods, it is a tragedy of humanity that is to transform tragedy into a kind of *Trauerspiel*. Bond's staging of the scene makes of it a theatre of mourning, the staging of lamentation that marks the gap between classical tragedy and the secular performance of Bond's art. This is mourning transformed into art, lamentation elevated to the status of signification, imbued with meaning. As Bond's comments on the Brechtian acting style demanded by the play indicate, the performance of emotions on stage demanded an intellectualization that emphasized the performativity of these sorrowful actions:

You cannot act an emotion, you can only act an idea. . . . An emotion reproduces itself and changes nothing. This is the decadence method acting has been reduced to. . . . On the Olivier it's seen for what it is: not just right acting in the wrong place, but a lie. A lie because it cannot tell a story. Telling a story is an essential part of epic theatre—. . .

[The Olivier stage] can help us to create the new sort of acting we need to demonstrate our world to audiences. It needs broad, unfidgety acting that moves from image to image, each image graphically analysing the story. When the audience's attention has been won in this way it's possible to do very small, subtle things. The combination of large and small, far and near, is a visual language of politics.⁴²

The function of acting style in Bond's theatre is to communicate this visual language of politics, in which performance signifies history and social life, and emotions function to energize this representation of history. The final scene of Part One of *The Woman* is an example of this: mourning signifies here the mortality of human life, the centrality of decay in human social existence, allegorically represented by the ruins of Troy. The concrete materiality of human suffering, the refusal of transcendence, and the staging of history instead of myth are performed in this scene. As Eagleton remarks, "[t]he motor of history for Hegel is negativity, and

negativity is ultimately death.”⁴³ Mortality infuses every element of the scene. This is supported by the epigrammatic final moments of Part One: the Trojan women, Hecuba among them, have been taken away to be loaded onto ships bound for Athens. The elderly Greek officer Nestor and two soldiers then arrive from plundering the city, “*drunk, oily, dirty and bloody*” (222). They reminisce about their day of raping and pillaging, reveling in their own vicious and corrupt corporeality. They are drunk, but they seem most of all drunk with their own physicality, elated by their callous virility. Nestor summarizes the experience for them: “O lads let us remember the solemnity of the world and the awfulness of war. . . . And that we’re mortal” (223). This signification, that they are mortal beings in history, appears to me to be the overarching referent of the first part of *The Woman*.

Tragic Consciousness

This is only one half of *The Woman*, yet it seems to be a self-contained action. The second part of *The Woman* emerges, however, as a repetition-with-a-difference and reveals that Hecuba, despite her self-blinding in Part One, has not yet achieved a tragic consciousness. Far from being historically aware, Hecuba has instead simply closed her eyes and her mind. Whereas the first dramatic action took place within a situation of war, the second occurs within the seeming realm of freedom. Yet the same action, namely Heros’s unbending, destructive quest for the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune, is repeated in both of parts of the play, which indicates that these are not mutually exclusive spaces but are dialectically interrelated. In Part Two we are on the shore of an island, “half outside the world” (246), and a crowd of fishing islanders are in the midst of a celebratory festival. Among them are Hecuba and Ismene. Ismene has lost her memory and cannot remember her escape from her tomb. Hecuba, blind in one eye and wearing a painful, pressing eyepug upon the other, reminds Ismene that it has been twelve years since the siege of Troy ended. Ismene escaped her prison by insisting that she be allowed to wear her jewels in her tomb, knowing that soldiers would loot the tomb, and she would have a chance to escape. The two women have been living safely on this island since a storm at sea shipwrecked them. Hecuba, now a skeptical atheist, has nevertheless become a Priestess of Apollo and manipulates the islanders’ superstitious beliefs. Immediately the scene begins, Greek ships arrive, allegedly to offer Hecuba sanctuary in New Athens, which Nestor describes to Hecuba as a prosperous land of plenty and of justice for all. “The world,” he tells her, “is reconciled” (230). In truth, Nestor is here on Heros’s orders, seeking the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune, which Hecuba explains was lost at sea. Heros has not lost his central driving obsession with the statue of the goddess, and no matter how utopian the “*pax athenaea*” (239) may apparently be, Heros remains obsessed with this lost object. Thus while the setting and overall tone of this second part suggest a hopeful break from the past through the creation of a new world of peace, liberty, and freedom, this new world is

immediately undermined by the intrusion of the old, the past they all seek to escape, represented by the statue of ideology. Late in the second part of the play, Hecuba reveals that this realm of freedom is still inhabited by the war when she says, “it’s the last day of the war that destroyed my city” (258). Moreover, the arrival on the island of a crippled man who has escaped from a life of servitude in the Athenian silver mines drives home the fact that New Athens’s prosperity, its transformation, through reason, law, order, and work, of the world into “a place where it’s wise to hope” (239), is predicated upon slavery and dehumanizing suffering.

Both Hecuba and Heros are torn between a desire to escape the effects of the past and an irresistible drive to relive what has happened. Heros is trapped by an image of the statue in his mind: “One day I’ll look over the side of the boat and see it smiling up at me from the bottom” (246). This imagined vision obsesses him: “One day they’ll bring her out in a net. The net will be full of slippery seaweed and fish thrashing for life. It’ll stretch and bulge as if she was alive inside” (247). While Heros is imprisoned by his own mind, he is aware of his irrationality and obsession and can compare it to Hecuba’s: “It’s a millstone around my neck. God rot it. I must close the past! Say: finished. Not all that rational. But you cover your eye. That’s not rational. I look at the face that Priam kissed—and it’s a mask” (246). Hecuba’s blindness is not the symbolic blindness of Greek tragedy or *King Lear*, in which the loss of eyesight paradoxically reveals a deeper understanding and acceptance of the significance of human life, but rather a willed blindness towards the past: “If I uncovered my eye—I’d have to keep it uncovered, once I’d seen the light! I won’t! The dead are dead, the past is past, my children are gone. Ismene, don’t remind me!” (242). Hecuba seeks peace and tranquillity here, but is haunted by the past she seeks to block out along with her vision. Alone on the beach, just after Nestor’s arrival on the island, she says:

Ah! Ah! I can hear my grandchild’s voice. I thought I’d forgotten.
Let me die quietly here, in dignity . . . I love to play on the
beach, there’s nothing to bump into—. . . I listen to the sea and
it washes away all my anger and so I’m at peace. Now there’s
a storm blowing up. Millions of drops of rain, each one with a
human face. (232)

Peace, for Hecuba, means forgetting the past, but like the gathering storm, unresolved memories come back to her and sweep away her sense of isolation. Hecuba has cut herself off from humanity. “I left the world when my children were killed—” (241), she claims, but as Ismene points out, “the world comes here” (241), and Hecuba has a tendency, despite herself, to call Ismene her daughter. The struggle Hecuba must face is a confrontation with, and acceptance of, a past she cannot change so

that she may achieve some freedom in the present: she must reconcile necessity and freedom in order to engender a tragic, historical consciousness in herself.

Bond estranges and reinscribes the Oedipal imagery of blindness; this revisionism is reflective of his contemporary concerns. Nevertheless, Hecuba finally confronts tragic necessity. Despite her jaded attitude and her attempts to deny the past, when Heros arrives Hecuba accepts that she has no choice but to face her history and open her eye. The imagery of Greek tragedy informs Hecuba's expectations: "If I were a priestess a god would come down now and tell me what to do. Instead, my enemies come—and I must be ready again. Yes, ready for all my old anger to sweep through me, like the fire in Troy" (242-43). Hecuba's words reveal the distance between her mortal, historical world and the mythic world of classical tragedy. Hecuba's attitude towards her self-willed blindness is tellingly mediated through a tragic paradigm: "Once I thought I would open my eye . . . I imagined the scene. Some great occasion. I looked, and recognised a child left on the mountain. Or reconciled two brothers" (242). She expects a moment of Aristotelian recognition, yet when she reveals her eye, moments later, Hecuba's recognition is not *quite* the anagnorisis of Greek tragedy. When she does open her eye, she realizes that she has long been blind and did not know it: "I thought I could choose! O Ismene that day has come back!" (244). Hecuba, here, overcomes her fear of the past. She is swept back to the moment in Troy when she blinded herself, thinking it was a choice she could make. Only now, after labouring for twelve years under the belief that she had agency over her actions, does she realize that, figuratively, she has been deluded. In the realization that she is really blind, Hecuba comes to a self-humanizing recognition of where freedom lies: not in the refusal of the past in a seeming act of free will, but through a confrontation with necessity, what Bond calls the mystery of the boundary. She becomes iterative of a tragic protagonist here, but in a new way. She achieves the confrontation with necessity, with suffering, that is ultimately humanizing and liberating. And this is why at the end of this scene Hecuba realizes what she has known, on some level, all those years: that Ismene is "the child [she] hasn't lost" (245). Hecuba rejoins humanity.

Ideological Nostalgia

Heros, on the other hand, is unable to reconcile himself with the past and move beyond it. His obsession with the statue is an unquenchable drive, an irrational desire that masks itself behind rationality: he will divide the ocean into squares and have the island's fishermen search them one by one. Months pass, and he shows no sign of giving up. His authoritarian tyranny reshapes the island life, and the populace now lives in fear. Even Nestor and the Greek soldiers would be more than happy to leave: "The Athenians don't even want his statue," Nestor remarks (253). Heros's consciousness remains a driving force for the dramatic action: "Don't see the statue

as lost,” he says. “It’s hidden! The whole world was upside down. That’s why the goddess hid in the sea: it’s the safest place” (24). His obsession is the dramatization of an ideology, the ideology that shapes the bourgeois consciousness around the interminable, nostalgic search for a lost object. Over the course of the play, Heros comes to represent the false consciousness of the narcissistic ego. Not so much a human character as a dramatically embodied psychic action, Heros is the drive of neurosis itself, the self trapped in the ahistorical mirror stage that forecloses upon the possibility of historical action. There is a useful contrast, here, between Hecuba’s literal blindness that is a symbolic vision and Heros’s imaginary vision that is an ideological blindness. Hecuba, in realizing her real blindness, her necessity that she cannot change, awakens into historical freedom and agency, while Heros, in his narcissism and sense of agency, looks only into an imaginary past. That Heros is caught in a nostalgic, repetitive trap becomes most apparent after a month of searching, when he reveals that

A thought keeps coming in my head. It’s so clear. Perhaps we’ve already found it—on the first day—one of our nets scraped it up from the bottom—and then it slipped back. I see it so clearly: falling back in the water. Then slowly rocking, backwards and forwards. (*Calmly and thoughtfully.*) Perhaps we shouldn’t move on to new areas. Go back over the old ones. (246)

Heros yearns to reconcile a past that cannot be reconciled, and his desire for the statue ultimately leads him to the same decision that he made twelve years earlier. He will have to destroy the islanders to prove to Athens that he made every effort to find the statue: “I have a duty to Athens not to let chance make me a laughing stock. I take a duty to Athens very seriously: it is the home of freedom” (250). Hero’s investment in his ideological vision of freedom in fact makes him an enemy of chance, and he is antagonistic towards the sense of the contingent that arises out of a dialectical relationship with tragic necessity. Heros opposes the freedom of chance and accident because his own vision of freedom is oppressive and fascistic.

Heros’s consciousness is the imperialist’s social psychosis, the tragic paradigm degraded into the ideology of destiny and predetermination, a tautological, destructive logic that seeks to map over reality in its image. Eventually, Hecuba realizes that Heros, quite simply, “must be killed” (252), but that it must happen in a way that will not bring the retribution of the soldiers upon the islanders. When it becomes clear that Heros will never leave and never release the island from the grip of the “pax Athenaea” (252), and as the storm season arrives on the island, Hecuba plots a scheme with the crippled slave. Hecuba exploits Heros’s obsession with the statue: she claims that the goddess sent her a dream announcing that the winner of a footrace around the island will be the man who finds the statue. Heros is to race

against the crippled slave. The loser is to be killed. While Nestor sees that it is some kind of trick designed to dupe the foolish, Heros is unable to resist because the story evokes his deeply held ideological belief in destiny. Hecuba claims she will reveal her eye and watch the race from the hill; Nestor will judge the winner.

Freedom and Fatality

There is something reminiscent of the conclusion of *Hamlet* in the resolution of *The Woman*. The concluding race between the slave and Heros is a strange dramaturgical twist. It is a scene that has defied accurate critical summary and demands close attention to its elusiveness. When Hegel criticized *Hamlet*'s conclusion for its lack of tragic grandeur, for the absence of any sense that the resolution of the plot was destined to happen this way, he undoubtedly pointed out what is most important about the play. No doubt this is why *Hamlet* is, for Walter Benjamin, the foremost example not of tragedy, but of *Trauerspiel*, in which fatality is not localized in a protagonist, but is disseminated throughout the mortality of the characters: in *Hamlet*, fate is contingent. Chance and fatality are identical. Just as *Hamlet*'s action concludes with a seemingly innocuous game that proves fatal, so in *The Woman* a contest is undertaken with a casualness that belies the seriousness of what it resolves. For Hecuba, this race between Heros and the slave marks the last day of the Trojan war (258). Yet its resolution is not saturated with the sense that the universe has overdetermined these events and forced a just conclusion. In fact it is the opposite: the only justice here will be made by human beings.

Nestor supervises the race with a disinterested attitude belying the fact that a man will die at the end of it. It is clear to everyone, the slave included, that this crippled man cannot outrun Heros. Instead of trying to win the race, the slave, following Hecuba's directions, merely runs until he is winded and then returns to the starting line. Nestor, clearly, sees that the slave has given up and lost the race (261). Meanwhile the village youths dance in imitation of the gathering storm, seemingly heedless of the apparent consequences of the race. Heros arrives, exhausted and triumphant, and is cheered by the Greek soldiers. He promises the slave a proper burial, to which, amazingly, the slave replies, "I won" (263). It is perfectly obvious to all the Greek soldiers, Nestor included, that the slave did not even run the race and was disqualified. Nestor, impatient, demands the execution happen immediately, but Heros is seduced by the slave's insistence that he won the race. Heros will not be tricked into cheating, and he wrestles the desperate Nestor's sword away from him, then orders his men to disarm themselves. As Hecuba arrives, pretending she can see, she supports the slave's claim that he won. Against Heros's insistence that he won, Hecuba mystifies him with this description of what she claims she saw:

You stopped. I walked down the hill. You were sitting under the tree like a schoolboy. I stood in front of you and stared at your

face. You smiled. You didn't blink. A fly walked across your mouth and over your teeth. The goddess had trapped you under a tree. I shuddered. If I could run I'd have run up the hill. When I got to the top Ismene was still asleep. I'd come from one child to another. I looked back and saw you jump up and run on. You knew nothing of what had happened to you. (265)

Hecuba's story seems to momentarily paralyze the Greeks: they are reluctant to either confirm or deny her story for Heros. In this space of stasis, Hecuba hands the slave a sword she has concealed on herself: "This is your only chance," she says. "I take it!" the slave replies (266) and kills Heros. It is a peculiar and interesting dramatic turn, in which Hecuba seems to open, for a moment, a space of chance or contingency, in which the slave can act, by turning the ideology of the ruling class against the ruler. Yet what follows is still more important: Nestor and the soldiers make to take up their swords, but Hecuba intervenes. Her logic comes to this: "There was one winner and one loser. One is dead. Don't disturb it" (267). Nestor's response is both cryptic and evocative, signifying his own struggle to understand his reaction to the events: "But I say to myself, shouldn't I ask what is justice? There's too much truth in this story. I can't find the loose ends" (267). Hecuba has fashioned a new kind of story, in which the resolution disrupts the inherited narrative paradigm of justice. The only justice here, the only truth, is that which humans manufacture through their own activities. It does not come from above. It is in this way, by effectively changing the narrative, that these characters defeat the ideology of destiny embodied in the statue of the Goddess of Good Fortune. In this way liberating change takes place. Early in Part One of the play, Heros asks Ismene, "Does God cheat? I don't know" (180). In the conclusion of the play, the ability to cheat is shown to be the capacity to produce liberation. It is an escape from metaphysical thinking into a secular, historical world.

Yet this is no utopian ending, and Heros's death is but one moment in what will be an ongoing process. The islanders, fearful of the return of the Greeks, will abandon their island for a time. Overnight, Hecuba has been caught in a storm and lifted up by a waterspout, which she has been anticipating (259), and thrown to her death. Looking at her body on stage, the slave describes for Ismene a grotesque image of mortality: "She was caught in a fence like a piece of sheep's wool. When the spout passed over her it ripped out her hair and her eyes. Her tits were sticking up like knives. Her face was screwed up and her tongue—a long thin tongue—was poking out" (268). Language here serves to drive home a striking final image of the mortality of the human body, its grotesque physicality and, I would suggest, its historicity. Ultimately, what the slave describes here is what Bond's theatre, as a whole aesthetic object, seeks to evoke in a spectator: a sense of the simultaneous insignificance of the human and its absolute centrality, the human as a ruin, evoking

something more than itself, but at the same time insisting on its own materiality. This dialectical tension is also what Bond sought to stage in the Olivier auditorium through the deployment of human bodies on a bare stage so enormous that it dwarfed the actors. This is not the subjection of human beings to blind historical forces that transcend the human, but instead the refusal of transcendence through the insistence on the human as historical. Taken in the context of the play, this narrative image of Hecuba's death functions as a dialectical image. Just as Brecht found in Brueghel's "narrative paintings," such as "The Fall of Icarus," *Verfremdungseffekte* in which tragedy was estranged, so Hecuba's death is part of a contradictory image. The catastrophe of her death is contradicted by Ismene and the slave, who turn to each other and express their love and commitment. Meanwhile, in the distance come the sounds of the young men starting their funeral games. Life here goes on, just as Icarus's fall nearly disappears in the surrounding idyll of the landscape. Yet as Brecht notes of Brueghel's paintings, the contradictions in the aesthetic object do not merge into one another or provide an artistic resolution. The catastrophe does not alter the idyll, "the latter rather remains unaltered and survives undestroyed, merely disturbed."⁴⁴ They co-habit, so to speak, the same space, but these "two worlds" are apparent in all their contradictions. While in the figure of Hecuba's body we find the identity between freedom and fatality that is a rejection of the ideology of destiny and of self-justifying teleology, the conclusion resists a utopianism because the ongoing historical contradiction between necessity and freedom is finally and hopefully staged through the constellatory arrangement of human figures.

Tragedy and Postmodernity

The Woman is Bond's critical response to the condition of postmodernity. Tragic thinking is, for him, a political intervention into the modern world precisely because the modern world renders tragic thinking more and more impossible. Bond's theory of the contradiction between tragedy and postmodernity resembles in many ways the thesis of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Therein, they argue that late capitalism suppresses dialectical thinking through a seamless positivism and enforced sameness, the kernel of fascist ideology. The dialectic of tragedy is not immune from ideological absorption: "Tragedy is leveled down to the threat to destroy anyone who does not conform, whereas its paradoxical meaning once lay in hopeless resistance to mythic threat. Tragic fate becomes the just punishment into which bourgeois aesthetics has always longed to transform it."⁴⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno offer the solution to late capitalism in the dialectical negation of reification. Bond's theory and practice of tragedy is just such an activity. Bond's concept of interrogation, described in his late essay "Notes on Postmodernism," is a theory of dialectical negation. The tragic interpretation of the boundary, driven by the mind's interrogative force, is an ongoing process of narrating and renarrating. Interrogation has the power to turn answers into new

questions, and to transform satisfaction into dissatisfaction. Bond's placement of Greek tragedy in this rubric casts art as fundamentally emancipatory and humanizing and clarifies why Bond will argue that tragedy, albeit somewhat modified, without "catharsis," is an effective aesthetic intervention into postmodernity:

In greek [*sic*] drama human suffering was enormous and served no natural, totemic purpose. It was—amazingly—endured for the purposes of the inner boundary, so that it might interrogate the outer boundary. . . . [P]eople achieved their humanity in defying the gods. Their ability to choose to submit to fate was a moral condemnation of its arbitrariness. A judgement on it. The radicalness of the greeks in doing this has not been surpassed. . . . The gods were judged, the world was explored and new maps were made.⁴⁶

As Bond points out, Greek tragedy constitutes a fundamental break from ritual, which in earlier societies had served to interrogate the boundary and "had increased the humanness of mind."⁴⁷ Mythic thinking today is ideology: it does not interrogate and thus does not humanize. One of the repercussions of the separation of ritual from tragedy, and the transformation of authority into tyranny, is that certain tragic elements can serve social functions that are not interrogative but repressive and dehumanizing. In particular, Bond singles out catharsis, as a tragic experience degraded into an ideological tool: "Catharsis is not the evacuation of emotion but the means by which inhuman acts of *Realpolitik* are legitimized, in the face of needs, as part of the human icon," he writes.⁴⁸ Catharsis is an ideological scapegoating mechanism for retrenching the status quo. As Raymond Williams comments in *Modern Tragedy* and Eagleton reiterates in *Sweet Violence*, there is a general sense on the part of leftists and instigators of social change that tragedy has little significance today other than as such a scapegoating ritual.⁴⁹ It is Bond's contention that, while tragic catharsis has indeed been co-opted as such an ideological reflex, tragedy itself need not be and, instead, can continue to provoke interrogation and humanization.

Contemporary tragedy emerges as an aesthetic negation of postmodern reification, a means of engendering dialectical thinking where it is most jeopardized. Bond argues that the moment of late capitalism has had dire effects upon the human mind's essential capacity, the result of a fundamental disruption of the relationship between people, the boundary, and authority due to technological developments. "Post-modernity is the result of the exponentially increasing productivity of technology in goods and in the passing of information," Bond states.⁵⁰ The proliferation of technology and goods has, today, mutated human culture and human thought. Under postmodernity the function of art seems to

change because everything else changes, beginning with the meaning of human need, which, in the past,

was the foundation of technology, organisation and morality. It led to the increase in the humanness of the human mind. But in post-modernity needs are met; or if they are not met it is a matter of mere interruption or shortfalls in organisation and not because meeting needs is sometimes impossible because the boundary (seemingly) does not will it. Post-modern society is a society of wants. Wants cannot function in the threefold relationship as needs or be broken down into needs. The extraordinary consequence of this is that we can no longer have a utopian vision and so any mystery of any boundary cannot have any ethical content.⁵¹

We cannot interrogate, because we cannot experience need, and we cannot experience need because we cannot confront “the boundary” and judge it for its arbitrary and meaningless refusal of our needs. We cannot confront the metaphysical implications of real impossibility, of the senselessness of the cosmos and of the human position within it, because we do not live in a world where anyone needs to suffer and starve to death. Rather, people suffer and starve to death because other people decide to build nuclear weapons.

The problem is a tragic one. In a sense, the significance of human suffering has been mutated under postmodernity. It can no longer be used by the human mind to further humanize us, because the significance of suffering cannot be interrogated as it was in tragedy, since the significance of suffering is now, all over the world, nothing more than the want of affluence. The situation of late capitalism is precisely not hopeful, since it has done away with the category of hope and replaced it with commodities. The response that theatre can make to the condition of postmodernity is a simple one. What is needed is nothing more than what postmodernity renders impossible: “the use of interrogation in post-modernity.”⁵² For Bond this is an essentially Brechtian theatre. Not, he notes, “the dream world of performance art, the autistic world of minimalism or a return to the young Brecht,”⁵³ but instead a theatre that “would use the theatre pioneered by Brecht but not reify his techniques.”⁵⁴ This theatre follows a certain Brechtian method, specifically the dialectical method at the heart of the late plays, such as *Mother Courage and her Children* and *Life of Galileo*, but without the importation of the more overtly “Brechtian” techniques, namely the use of songs, half-curtains, and title cards, all techniques that speak more to their specific historical time and place than to a lasting dramaturgical method. Instead, Bond offers a theatre that more subtly and effectively takes “things apart

so that they subvert the past we know,"⁵⁵ resulting in a dialectical theatre in which "the future would be chosen, not determined by the past."⁵⁶

The means by which contemporary tragedy will realize itself is not through the presentation of any particular dramatic content or through the delineation of particular themes or ideas, but rather through a manipulation of dramatic form that will in performance provoke a phenomenological experience of the mind's fundamentally interrogative shape. Tragedy must activate the imagination. In articulating the potential political usefulness of tragedy in postmodernity, Bond gives special attention to the inherent antagonism between imagination and ideology and, importantly, the manipulation and suppression of the imagination under capitalist democracy, which contorts the imagination into ideological thinking. Imagination here describes the kind of thinking that Horkheimer and Adorno also argue has been rendered increasingly impossible by late capitalism: Imagination is the ability to dialectically negate the given state of society and imagine that things might be otherwise. For Bond, the activity of imaginative interrogation is a negation of the world and thus a kind of productive lie. Tragedy has the potential to disrupt ideological thinking and to provoke the mind's inherent capacity to interrogate. Bond argues that in drama, "the imagination directly confronts itself, and when it does it is always drawn to an extreme because it remembers nothingness."⁵⁷ We inherit this capacity from childhood. It is a capacity for extreme responsibility, an imaginative sense of connectedness to the cosmos: "the border with nothingness gives imagination its concern for the world. Imagination has the exuberance to endure and know tragedy," he writes.⁵⁸ However, Bond's thought also makes clear for us the dangers of nostalgia for the political playwright. Bond does not yearn for the unalienated existence lamented by Greek tragedy; nor does he imagine that the metaphysical confrontation with the boundary that art provoked in the past can be recovered today. While he looks to Greek tragedy for an inspiration for future theatre, he does not want to recover a theatre "of people and gods," but to create "the theatre of people and people."⁵⁹ In *The Woman* Bond fashions a drama in which the tragedy of the gods collides with the tragedy of humanity; the latter finally triumphs, and myth is displaced by history. This is a theatre without determinism, manufactured by an interrogator: "His theatre does not disinter the cause or meaning of things but creates them by his own actions. One day people will be amazed that their forebears thought ghosts had power over the living."⁶⁰ Bond emphasizes the need for the theatre to escape the dangerous pull of nostalgia and yearning for the past.

As we have seen with *The Woman*, Bond does not replicate the structure of Greek tragedy. Art today does not function as it did in other cultures and modes of production. There is no naive endorsement of transhistorical forms in his work. Today, he explains, any art must respond to the technological changes that have transformed human society: "we are agents of the change, and art is a means of

making the change human. Society sends us to the theatre in order to teach the machines to talk to us more kindly. Or to put it less provocatively, we are sent to the theatre to learn how to live with our machines and each other.”⁶¹ This is because technology, and by implication language itself, are both the instigators of our humanity and the causes of our inhumanity. This double-edged consequence of the intertwining of the human with the alienating effects of language and technology is a dialectical, Lacanian intervention in Bond’s thought. In order to be humanizing art must bring human beings into awareness of the symbolic order that speaks through us and is the precondition of our agency. Bond writes:

The first tools made the first humans, and made the first human psyche by giving us free will. Perhaps the first tool was part of our body: perhaps to the first humans the opposable thumb was as mysterious as an object without a shadow, was the symbolic that pointed to nothingness.⁶²

It is the symbolic order that is the ambiguous liberation into history in Lacan’s theory. There can be no freedom without that “primordial” alienation, which, as Bond knows well, never happened. It is a traumatic non-memory. Like Lacanian psychoanalysis, Bond suggests a theatre that brings us into confrontation with the aphanisis, the fading of the subject, produced by the symbolic order’s metonymic play of signification. It is only then that we have some presentiment, however fleeting or phantasmatic, of the Lacanian “Real,” the absent cause that resists symbolization absolutely, or what Fredric Jameson, after Marx and Engels, calls History, “the experience of Necessity.”⁶³ Bond’s aesthetic is ultimately a structuralist view of language and technology. These alienating structures precede us and shape us: “It is not easy to acknowledge that machines make society and its relations, and even harder to acknowledge that these relations make our mind.”⁶⁴ This sobering implication applies equally to art, although art has the ability to dialectically liberate, like the chain of signification. Bond states that a “work of art is like a machine which does not grow obsolete because it changes what it produces. It does this by changing its relation with its consumers. It is like a machine which learns new languages.”⁶⁵ Today, tragedy must learn a new language, one which does not reify reactionary ideologies.

The Politics of Mourning

Bond has often been described as a poet of the theatre, much like Brecht. Bond’s theatre poems, which often accompany the published versions of his plays, are only the most obvious example of this. Yet while there is a general consensus that Bond’s theatre language reaches for a certain poeticity, a subtly aestheticized artificiality, at the same time I think it is evident from the passages quoted from *The Woman*

that there is a tension in his language between the yearning, in language, for the decorum of aesthetic form, and a grounding in the materiality of human life. Just as his plot and his stage images embody such a contradiction, so too does his language. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin finds a similarity between the baroque *Trauerspiel* and contemporary expressionistic theatre. Significantly, he gives the example of Franz Werfel's 1915 *The Trojan Women* (*Die Troerinnen*), a subject also taken up by the baroque dramatist Opitz:

In both works the poet was concerned with the instrument of lamentation and its resonance. In both cases what was therefore required was not ambitious artificial developments, but a verse-form modelled on dramatic recitative. The analogy between the endeavours of the baroque and those of the present and the recent past is most apparent in the use of language. Exaggeration is characteristic of both.⁶⁶

With *The Woman*, Bond, like Werfel, has created his own form of *Trauerspiel*, using the story of the Trojan Women to create a play of mourning for the present. For Benjamin, the "baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will."⁶⁷ The baroque and, by implication, the moment of German expressionism are historical eddies that, due to their contradictions, produced not works of individual genius but rather cunning manipulations of artistic form. In periods of artistic will, the "form as such is within the reach of this will, a well-made individual work is not."⁶⁸ The work of art in a period of artistic will is not self-contained but rather formal and generic. Accompanying this artistic will is "the desire for a vigorous style of language, which would make it seem equal to the violence of world-events. . . . Now, as then, many of them are an expression of a desire for new pathos."⁶⁹ For Benjamin, such poetic language, be it baroque or expressionistic, is political. Baroque language's peculiar materiality demonstrates that these artists, living in a period of decline and massive social contradiction, who "live their lives in a sphere cut off from the active national feeling of the people, are once again consumed by an ambition"⁷⁰ to engage in political action. The significance of Bond's dramatic language, is, I feel, nothing less than political resistance itself: alienation from ideology during a moment of massive social crisis and decline, Britain in 1978, combined with radical doubt, an openness of the aesthetic to political questioning, which is also at the same time a refusal of national identity in the very British theatre space designated for its expression: the Royal National Theatre. *The Woman*, emerging in a period of profound social contradiction, served as a symptom of the possibilities that arise during such moments of strife. Historically, the possibilities were seized in 1979 by the conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, who would embody

the ideology of national destiny espoused by Heros. *The Woman* stands, then, as an historical testament to lost opportunity. Bond's language, while not baroque or expressionistic in a literal sense, is however a mourning language for the present, but one that, I think, may finally liberate us from mourning.

Notes

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964) 105.

² "The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about 'the collective characters' which are the classes in opposition." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 87.

³ Bond's first play, *The Pope's Wedding*, was performed at the Royal Court in 1962. In the 1960s and 1970s he wrote and directed numerous plays that have become part of the canon of modern British theatre. Most well known of these is *Saved*, performed at the Royal Court in 1965. Beginning with *The War Plays* (1984-85), Bond's work became increasingly experimental and unconventional, rejecting all trappings of realism in favor of obliqueness and indirection, though it was no less political in its concerns. This artistic turn corresponded to a gradual alienation on Bond's part from the major venues that had staged his work, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre. Bond's change of direction with *The War Plays* continues to the present day.

⁴ As John Willett documents in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Brecht suggested in the last year of his life (1956) that he would put aside the term "epic theatre" and instead pursue the project of a "dialectical theatre," while also implying that dialectics had always been an aspect of the epic. In effect, Brecht was placing a new emphasis on dialectical thinking. By the "mature Brecht," I mean both this theoretical turn as well as the accomplished quartet of plays, *The Good Person of Szechuan* (1938-42), *Life of Galileo* (1937-39, 1945-47), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1938-39), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1943-5).

⁵ Terry Eagleton, "Nature and Violence: The Prefaces of Edward Bond," *Critical Quarterly* 26.1-2 (1984): 127-35.

⁶ 130.

⁷ 132.

⁸ 133.

⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 144-45.

¹⁰ Eagleton, "Nature and Violence" 134.

¹¹ 135.

¹² 135.

¹³ Edward Bond, "Notes on Acting *The Woman*," *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1987) 286.

¹⁴ 287.

¹⁵ 288-89.

¹⁶ Edward Bond, "Commentary on *The War Plays*," *The War Plays: A Trilogy* (London: Methuen, 1991) 308.

¹⁷ 308.

¹⁸ 309.

¹⁹ 314-15.

²⁰ 315.

²¹ Edward Bond, "Modern and Postmodern Theatres," interview with Ulrich Köppen, *New Theatre Quarterly* 50 (1997): 104.

²² Bond, "Commentary on *the War Plays*" 323.

²³ 323.

²⁴ 332.

²⁵ 333.

²⁶ 333.

²⁷ 334.

²⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 116.

²⁹ Bond, *The Woman, Plays: Three* 175. All subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition.

³⁰ Bond, "Notes on Postmodernism," *Plays: Five* (London: Methuen, 1996) 1.

³¹ 1.

³² 1.

³³ 1.

³⁴ 2.

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³⁸ 5.

³⁹ 5.

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⁴¹ James C. Bulman, "The Woman and Greek Myth: Bond's Theatre of History," *Modern Drama* 29.4 (1986): 505-15. Both Bulman and Jenny S. Spencer, in *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), make numerous interesting comparisons between *The Woman* and extant Greek tragedies, arguing that in *The Woman*, as with *Lear*, Bond has rewritten canonical narratives for contemporary political purposes. Obviously, this is also my point, but whereas Spencer and Bulman are interested in how Bond uses concrete narrative elements by other writers in new ways, I am interested in how Bond's play manipulates the tragic ideologeme itself and recasts it through a dialecticizing of events.

⁴² Bond, "Us, Our Drama and the National Theatre," *Plays and Players* 26.1 (1978): 8-9.

⁴³ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* 41.

⁴⁴ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 157.

⁴⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical*

Fragments, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford, UP 2002) 122.

⁴⁶ Bond, "Notes on Postmodernism" 7.

⁴⁷ 7.

⁴⁸ 12.

⁴⁹ "The most influential kinds of explicitly social thinking have often rejected tragedy as itself defeatist." Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966) 63. See also Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* xii-xvii.

⁵⁰ Bond, "Notes on Postmodernism" 24.

⁵¹ 24.

⁵² 32.

⁵³ 31.

⁵⁴ 32.

⁵⁵ 31.

⁵⁶ 31.

⁵⁷ Edward Bond, "Notes on Imagination," *Coffee: A Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1995) xxxiii.

⁵⁸ xxxiii.

⁵⁹ Bond, "Notes on Postmodernism" 32.

⁶⁰ 32.

⁶¹ Bond, "Commentary on *The War Plays*" 277.

⁶² 277.

⁶³ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 102.

⁶⁴ Bond, "Commentary on *The War Plays*" 278.

⁶⁵ 278-79.

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977) 54.

⁶⁷ 55.

⁶⁸ 55.

⁶⁹ 55.

⁷⁰ 55.

