Edward Bond’s *Lear*

Leslie Smith

Imagine, if you will, a mixture of the plays of Brecht and Strindberg, Brecht’s social and political purposiveness allied to Strindberg’s tormented vision of man’s self-destructiveness, and you will get some idea of the double vision that informs Edward Bond’s dramatic world. It is a world in which a sombre sense of man’s inhumanity to man co-exists with hopefulness and a strong socio-political awareness. Bond has a great playwright’s ability to express this double vision in dramatic images, in dialogue and action that have extraordinary force and power. In the earlier plays of contemporary working-class life, *The Pope’s Wedding* and *Saved*, the tension between perverse, destructive energies and constructive ones was expressed in naturalistic terms: in *Saved*, the gang stoning the baby in a South London park, Len mending the chair in his girl-friend’s house. In later plays, Bond experiments with surrealism and the grotesque: the tug of war between rival armies on Beachy Head in *Early Morning*, the Balmoral Picnic in Heaven in the same play, in which Queen Victoria, her ministers and her subjects, governors and governed alike, devour each other; and Florence Nightingale hides the head of her loved one in her voluminous skirts. The later plays in general make more use of fable and fantasy and are set in places and periods remote from present day England: Japan in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*), Shakespeare’s England (*Bingo*), a Victorian fantasy world (*Early Morning*), a Britain that is a timeless mix of the primitive and the contemporary (*Lear*). But there is a clear line of development between the earlier, more naturalistic plays, and the later ones. “I think quite often,” Bond has said, “one feels the need to see something at a bit of a distance just to see its relationship to oneself better.”1 Fable and fantasy are ways of exploring, not of escaping from, contemporary reality: “I can’t think that *Early Morning* is set in a limbo in a way that *Saved*
isn't. In order to express reality, the simplest and best and most
direct way isn't necessarily to say, well, the time is now six
fifteen and it's the third of March... The plays I am told are
based on social realism very often seem to me the wildest fairy
stories...” (TQ, 8). I would suggest, in fact, that in Bond's
Lear (1972) there is a coming together of the matter-of-fact
realism of the earlier plays, and the mythical, fantasy elements
of Early Morning and Narrow Road to the Deep North. It is
the culmination of Bond's work up to 1972. And it has particu-
lar interest for a modern audience because of the relationship
in which it stands to Shakespeare's great original.

When T. S. Eliot sought to create a distinctive poetic drama
between 1934 and 1958, he felt the overpowering necessity of
escaping from the shadow of Shakespeare, whose genius had
queered the pitch for subsequent poetic dramatists. But Eliot's
efforts were doomed to failure. Putting his poetry on too thin
a diet, he often rendered it indistinguishable from prose; reject-
ing Shakespeare, he tried for a mixture of classical myth and
drawing room comedy that never quite gelled. Bond suffers from
no such inhibitions. His poetry of the theatre is not dependent
on verse: it functions through the concrete action and the phy-
sical images of the drama. “What I begin from,” he has said, “is
a series of small visual images... when I write, the rhythm—
the whole concentration of the writing—requires action. Finally
somebody has to get up and do something” (TQ, 6). And be-
cause he is secure in his own technique and moves confidently
in the medium of drama as Eliot never did, Bond has always
felt free to respond to and use aspects of Shakespeare's dramatic
world in his own plays.

It was indeed a performance by Wolfit of Shakespeare's
Macbeth that gave him his first impulse to become a writer:

My education really consisted of one evening, which was or-
organised by the school (Crouch End Secondary Modern). They
took us along to a play at the old Bedford Theatre in Camden
Town. We saw Donald Wolfit in Macbeth, and for the very
first time in my life—I remember this quite distinctly—I met
somebody who was actually talking about my problems... I
knew all these people, they were there in the street or in the
newspapers—this in fact was my world. And also out of the
play I got a feeling of resolution—that there were certain stand-
dards. My reactions were absolutely naive, but I knew that if one
could maintain these standards they could work in social situa-
tions and produce certain results. So that after seeing that play
I could say, well, yes, now I know what I have to do, what it means to be alive. . . . And also what came across from Wolfit's performance—and that play suited him very well—was a sense of dignity about people. . . . And so I got from that play a sense of human dignity—of the value of human beings. (TQ, 5-6)

Bond's subsequent career as a dramatist can be seen as stemming from that first realisation of the power of the theatre and its potential for enlarging our sensibilities.

But his approach to Shakespeare was never merely reverential. Bond has pondered deeply the question of the artist's relationship to society. To be an artist, a dedicated "being apart," is not enough; for Bond the artist is a man among men, and he must be a functioning part of the moral structure of society. In *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, the play that preceded *Lear*, Bond had written a bitter Brechtian parable about the seventeenth-century Japanese poet, Basho, who in his personal pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment, passes by opportunities to help his fellow citizens and, in so doing, brings terrible suffering upon his country. "What particularly incensed me about Basho," writes Bond, "was that everybody says oh, what a marvellous poet. But I really am only talking about his actions."2 And in the play that follows *Lear, Bingo* (1973), Bond audaciously turns an equally disenchanted eye on Shakespeare in retirement at Stratford. We know that at the time of Shakespeare's retirement, the livelihood of farm-labourers and small-holders was being threatened by the wealthier landowners, with their policy of enclosing common land. We know further, as Bond puts it, that "a large part of [Shakespeare's] income came from rents [or tithes] paid on common fields at Welcombe near Stratford. Some important landowners wanted to enclose these fields and there was a risk that the enclosure would affect Shakespeare's rents . . . [Shakespeare] sided with the landowners." Bond is keenly interested in the resulting paradox, between the art and the life. For art, he affirms, "is always sane."

It always insists on the truth, and tries to express the justice and order that are necessary to sanity, but are usually destroyed by society. All imagination is political. It has the urgency of passion, the force of appetite, the self-authenticity of pain or happiness. . . . Shakespeare's plays show this need for sanity, and its political expression, justice. But how did he live? His behaviour as a property owner made him closer to Goneril than Lear. He supported and benefitted from the Goneril society,
with its prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria, and all the rest of it.  

To some extent Bond resolves the paradox in his play by having Shakespeare expiate the moral neutrality into which he has retreated, by committing suicide. But Bond is a more complex playwright than his prefatory statements sometimes indicate. (He is in this respect comparable with Shaw.) He may have intended a sardonic portrait of a great artist failing as a human being and pronouncing his own self-condemnation in suicide. But what in fact comes over as the strong feeling of the play is the pain and bewilderment of a man who understands more profoundly and sees further than his fellow citizens, and is—perhaps precisely because of that vision—somehow powerless to act. Not least of the ironies of this fascinating play is that Shakespeare, the great word-magician, is for large parts of the action left speechless, stunned into silence by the confusion and violence he sees around him. Consumed by the suffering he witnesses, and wandering, the worse for drink, in the snowbound Stratford landscape past a gallows tree from which a corpse is hanging, Shakespeare becomes his own tormented Lear, adrift among the elements, with only a mad old gardener for companion. And when he does speak it is to affirm that writer's responsibility to his society that is central to Bond's own vision:

Every writer writes in other men's blood. . . . Even when I sat at my table, when I put on my clothes, I was a hangman's assistant, a gaoler's errand boy. If children go in rags, we make the wind. If the table's empty we blight the harvest. If the roof leaks we send the storm. God made the elements but we inflict them on each other.

Bond, far from distancing himself critically from Shakespeare, seems here to identify with him.

When Bond conceived the idea of doing his own version of King Lear, he did so with a very real sense of its disturbing power as a play: "I can only say that Lear was standing in my path and I had to get him out of the way. I couldn't get beyond him to do other things that I also wanted, so I had to come to terms with him" (TQ, 8). But he also approached the play in a questioning and sceptical spirit directed particularly at traditional responses to it:

I very much object to the worshipping of that play by the academic theatre . . . because it is a totally dishonest experience.
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"Oh, yes, you know, this marvellous man suffering, and all the rest of it." I think that at the time it would have been a completely, totally different experience to see Lear reacting in the Tudor set up. ... Now, I think it's an invitation to be artistically lazy, to say, "Oh, how ... sensitive we are and this marvellous artistic experience we're having, understanding this play," and all the rest of it. ... He's a Renaissance figure and he doesn't impinge on our society as much as he should. So that I would like to rewrite the play to try and make it more relevant. (G, 24)

One can develop Bond's point a little by saying that what an audience gets from a traditional production of the play is the sense of a man ennobled by suffering, who initially brings that suffering upon himself. Lear's progress through the play is a kind of purgatorial pilgrimage in which his arrogance, moral blindness and inhumanity are stripped away, and a fundamental humanity is left. The deaths of Cordelia and Lear are cathartic in the extreme, arousing deep pity and fear in the audience, the more so since they come so quickly upon the almost paradise awakening into new life that the old king experiences in the brief reunion with his daughter. Goneril and Regan, in a traditional production, are types of ultimate evil and total inhumanity. In the world of the play that evil is finally expelled, but at a terrible cost in human suffering. In the subdued final passages of the play there is a sense of order in the kingdom reasserting itself. If perhaps any lines can be quoted as central to this traditional view, which Bond rejects, they might be the lines of Sophoclean resignation spoken by Edgar: "Men must endure/ Their going hence, even as their coming hither./ Ripeness is all." But, if Bond rejects the traditional view certain directors take of the play, I do not think Peter Brook's very untraditional and contemporary view of the play, in his production for the RSC, with Paul Scofield as Lear, would altogether have satisfied him. For this production, the bitter despair of Gloucester, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods:/ They kill us for their sport," was more the keynote. Brook, influenced to some extent by Jan Kott's essay on Lear in Shakespeare Our Contemporary, saw Shakespeare's play in terms of Beckett's End Game. The scenes on Dover Cliff between the mad Lear and the blind Gloucester seemed to echo some of the exchanges between Hamm and Clov in Beckett's play: man's existential despair in a world of minimal meaning. Brook refused
to distance his audience in any way from the action. He wished
to involve them totally, as with a play of contemporary life.

To this end, Scofield's Lear was no absolute monarch, set
apart by Divine Right; instead he was an impossibly difficult,
unpredictable and choleric old man, whose knights were indeed
as turbulent and bad-mannered as his daughters alleged: an
elderly relative who would be an embarrassment in any house-
hold. Goneril and Regan, in this production, were no types of
absolute evil: unpleasant and vicious certainly, but with some
justification, given Lear's behaviour. Brook made us feel the
kinship between the father and the evil daughters. He human-
ised and scaled down the situation, removing from it some of
the awesome, ritualistic, larger-than-life quality that a traditional
production can give us. One of the small, but significant touches
in Brook's production, symptomatic of his handling of the play,
occurred with the scene of Gloucester's blinding. The sadistic
violence of Cornwall and Regan is visited on the helpless old
man, whose eyes are gouged out on stage in full view of the
audience. At the end of the scene, two of the servants are left
on stage with the blind and bleeding Gloucester. In the script,
they express concern and sympathy, horror at what has
happened.

If she live long
And in the end, meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters.

... ... ...
Go thou, I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs,
To apply to his bleeding face. Now heaven help him.

Shakespeare places the horrific deed in a context of normal and
kindly human behaviour, and to some extent guides our response
to it, through these comments. Peter Brook cut the servants' brief
conversation at the end of the scene, and brought the house
lights up for the interval as the blinded Gloucester attempted to
grope his way off stage, bumped into furniture, was jostled by
indifferent servants—all this while some members of the audi-
ence, encouraged by the house lights, were already on their way
to the bar. Brook was most certainly not inviting our mockery
of a blind old man, or adding an extra sadistic turn of the screw
to the cruelty of the scene. What he was doing was to give us a
powerful image of our potentially dangerous indifference to vio-
lence and cruelty. He brought this home to us directly, by
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bringing up the house lights as the scene ended, enabling a majority of the audience to see a minority of their fellows hurrying off at once to the bar, showing an indifference to Gloucester's fate similar to that evidenced among the servants on stage.

Brook evidently felt that the expressed indignation of the servants in the original script too easily let the audience off the hook, allowing them to feel that condemnation had been expressed, guilt apportioned. He wished to bring the uncomfortable facts more directly home to us. How would we respond, undistanced by the historical perspective and moral framework that may come between us and the play? Brook returns to this problem of violence and our reaction to it in a section of his book *The Empty Space*, which could almost be a comment on his own staging of the blinding scene, and which I quote because his views are very relevant to Bond's use of violence in the theatre. In real life, he asserts, the shocking atrocity stories, or the photograph of the napalmed child,

are the roughest of experiences—but they open the spectator's eyes to the need for an action which in the event they somehow sap. It is as though the fact of experiencing a need vividly quickens the need and quenches it in the same breath. What then can be done? I know of one acid test in the theatre. And it is literally an acid test. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself—then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell, a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended, this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved in my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell—or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery. I haven't a hope of remembering the meanings precisely, but from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost, but not quite impossible to achieve.4

Perhaps, of the two kinds of *Lear* production I have been describing, Bond would prefer Peter Brook's untraditional and contemporary view of the play. Brook's views on the problem of violence and how the theatre may deal with it are close to his
own. He is equally concerned to see the relevance of the play to our own age. Yet as a dramatist bent on writing his own version of Lear, the Beckett-like existential despair of Brook’s version serves his purpose no better than the Sophoclean resignation of traditional Lears.

Bond’s is a more radical, a more revolutionary concept of art: “Art has to be the equivalent of hooliganism in the streets. It has to be disruptive and questioning, also at the same time to give a rational explanation of the circumstances in which it is occurring” (G, 5). His Preface to Lear describes the moralised aggression of our social and political institutions, “as if an animal was locked in a cage—and then fed with the key. It shakes the bars but can never get out.” Yet the description of our “diseased culture,” our “institutionalised and legitimised tyranny,” is given less from a Marxist than a Blakean humanist-anarchist viewpoint. Bond has a healthy disrespect for power-politics, whether of the left or right: “It is so easy to subordinate justice to power . . . when this happens power takes on the dynamics and dialectics of aggression, and then nothing is really changed. Marx did not know about this problem, and Lenin discovered it when it was too late.” He has no wish to put forward a blueprint of the future: “If your plan of the future is too rigid you start to coerce people to fit into it. We do not need a plan of the future. We need a method of change.” If his art is to have a function, it is to contribute “to a general consciousness of the sort of dangers that society is now in.” So, if he sometimes prompts comparison with Brecht, it is not because he is overtly didactic as Brecht can be, but because of a purposiveness in his drama, an impulse towards “a method of change,” and because, like Brecht, he is too good a dramatist not to give full value to irony, complexity, and ambiguity in his plays. What he has said of Brecht he could have said of himself: “His naivety covers painful knowledge.”

Bond’s Lear has a three-act structure, which Bond characterises thus: “Act I shows a world dominated by myth. Act II shows the clash between myth and reality, between superstitious men and the autonomous world. Act III shows a resolution of this in the world we prove real by dying in it.” In discussing the play I will try to suggest how the Shakespearean original functions as stimulus and point of departure for Bond’s contemporary version.
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In Act I of Bond’s play, Lear does not abandon his authority as in Shakespeare’s play. Bond wishes to get away from the Renaissance concept of a betrayal of kingly responsibility which releases powers of evil and anarchy in the land, and instead to focus on an old man, an authority figure, overtaken by revolutionary violence, who becomes as a child again, and learns, ultimately at the cost of his own life, the true nature of his society (which could be our own) and of the folly of its power structure. So, says Bond, “I begin at the Revolution.” Lear’s great enterprise in Bond’s play, his lifetime’s work, has been the building of a great wall, to keep his enemies out and his allies in. The play begins and ends with the killing of a man working on the wall. It is one of the great central images of oppression and confinement in the play, and it brilliantly evokes both an ancient landscape and a modern one: we think at one and the same time of the Berlin wall and the Cold War; and of the massive earthworks near Bond’s home called Devil’s Dyke and Fleam Dyke thrown up by the East Anglians after the departure of the Romans to protect themselves from marauders. Lear, on the tour of inspection that starts the play, could be any contemporary field marshal or bellicose politician claiming to defend the peace by preparing for war, and calling self-imprisonment freedom:

I started this wall when I was young. I stopped my enemies in the field, but there were always more of them. How could we ever be free? So I built this wall to keep our enemies out. My people will live behind this wall when I’m dead. You may be governed by fools but you’ll always live in peace. My wall will make you free.

The dramatic irony of the scene is given an additional savage twist as Lear, in the same breath as he proclaims his love for his people, shoots one of the workers, wrongly suspected of sabotage.

With a number of swift, bold strokes, and using various forms of theatrical foreshortening and simplification, Bond gives us, in the remainder of Act I, the revolution that overthrows Lear, the irresponsible cruelty and violence it brings with it, Lear’s madness, and the temporary pastoral refuge he secures with only a “fool” (the gravedigger’s boy) and a “wild man” (his tortured general, Warrington) for company. The Shakespearean echoes are strong and insistent: Goneril and Regan, renamed Bodice and Fontanelle, exist in a kind of parodic rela-
tion to their formidable and venomous prototypes. They are, for Bond, figures of black farce, figures out of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, childishly indulging their cruelties and sexual appetites. They initiate the revolution by contracting marriages with Lear’s enemies, the Dukes of North and Cornwall, and then complain in bitter asides to the audience of their husbands’ sexual incompetence. “When he gets on top of me,” says Fontanelle, “I’m so angry I have to count to ten. That’s long enough. Then I wait till he’s asleep and work myself off. I’m not making do with that for long.” “Virility,” says Bodice, “It’d be easier to get blood out of a stone, and far more probable. I’ve bribed a major on his staff to shoot him in the battle.” Bond’s variation on the blinding of Gloucester has Warrington subjected, like a puppet figure in an evil Punch and Judy show, to every kind of monstrous cruelty. His tongue already cut out, he is methodically beaten up, while Bodice calmly knits and Fontanelle jumps up and down with perverse, infantile glee:

*Fontanelle*: Christ, why did I cut his tongue out? I want to hear him scream . . . smash his hands; . . . kill his feet! . . . kill him inside! Make him dead!

*Father, Father!* I want to sit on his lungs!

*Bodice (knits)*: Plain, pearl, plain. She was just the same at school.

We have to remember that Bond’s purpose in Act I is to create a world dominated by myth. These caricature figures belong well enough to this mythical world, albeit that world has its contemporary reference, and we can glimpse something of twentieth-century cruelties and obscenities in the distorting mirror of farce and grand guignol. The horrible fun that Bond gets from these grotesque figures also serves some very useful dramatic purposes. Bond knows many in the audience will be familiar with the Lear original. He wants in Act I to confront directly and in caricature form the extremities of cruelty and violence in *King Lear*, and, as it were, to exorcise some Shakespearean ghosts. In so doing he prepares the ground for his own exploration of violence and oppression in Acts II and III. And it is not only a matter of the *King Lear* original. Bond has written: “I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them
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writing about us and our time. . . ."6 For such a writer it is very important to create the right context for the subject. In introducing the theme on a farcical level before returning to it at a deeper and more serious level, Bond prepares the audience psychologically. He does the same thing in Early Morning, where the theme of cannibalism is first introduced farcically—Len and Joyce stand trial for eating a man while queuing outside the Kilburn Empire to see a film called “Policeman in Black Nylons”—and cannibalism then becomes more and more the central image for men devouring and destroying each other. It is of course a technique that goes as far back in British drama as the medieval miracle plays, where in the Towneley Secunda Pastorum the farcical sheep-stealing and mock nativity precede and strengthen the serious and real nativity.

Lear, overthrown by his daughters, seeks refuge with the Gravedigger's boy, who is a pig-farmer, and his wife, Cordelia (not, as in Shakespeare, one of Lear's daughters). Both are figures of crucial importance in the later action of the play. Suffice here to note that the gravedigger's boy, like Shakespeare's fool, criticises the king, but offers him counsel and friendship; and that echoes of Shakespeare's storm scenes on the heath are never far away. There is Lear's constant obsession with filial ingratitude: “Have you any daughters?” he asks the boy. “No.” “Then I'll come. No daughters! Where he lives the rain can't be wet or the wind cold, and the holes cry out when you're going to tread in them.” There is the macabre animal imagery that runs through Lear's speeches: “My daughters empty their prisons and feed the men to the dead in their graveyards. The wolf crawls away in terror and hides with the rats. Hup, Prince! Hup, Rebel! Do tricks for human flesh! When the dead have eaten they go home to their pits and sleep.” And there is the presence of a Mad Tom figure in the crazed and tortured figure of Warrington hiding in the well. At the same time the house of the gravedigger's boy is a real, if temporary pastoral refuge for Lear; no thunder, lightning, and tempestuous rain show us disorder in the universe, reflecting disorder in the body politic. Here is no great chain of being in the Elizabethan manner. Bond's world is a world without God or the gods. And it is at the end of Act I, when the brief pastoral dream turns to nightmare, that Bond's strong individual presence asserts itself and the very different direction of his play begins to become clear. The pillaging
soldiers hunting for the escaped king arrive on the scene. They capture Lear, slaughter the pigs, kill the boy, and rape his wife. The violence here is not in any way caricatured. It is grimly matter-of-fact. And Bond drives home the cruelty most powerfully by two very striking dramatic effects. One is an auditory effect: the off-stage squealing of the pigs as they are slaughtered, a sound which is to return, quite spine-chillingly, near the end of the play. The second is an extraordinary and most powerfully contrived visual effect on the death of the gravedigger's boy. His wife's washing is on the line, and, as he is shot, he clutches at one of the sheets which folds round him. The stage direction reads: "For a second he stands in silence with the white sheet draped round him. Only his head is seen. It is pushed back in shock and his eyes and mouth are open. He stands rigid. Suddenly a huge red stain spreads on the sheet." This is not simply a shock effect. Although it does, undeniably, shock. It is a strange, fantastic image of a living man turning into a ghost before our eyes, preparing the way for the continuing presence of the boy as a ghost accompanying Lear for much of Acts II and III, rather as the skeleton of Arthur's Siamese twin George is fixed to him for much of Early Morning. The red stain is a fine image of the creeping and spreading violence consuming the world of the play: and in the strange paradox it also suggests of a bleeding ghost, it evokes a kind of death-in-life, a feeling of something sinister and unhealthy which we shall increasingly come to associate with the ghost of the gravedigger's boy.

In Act II Bond opens up his own contemporary world of dream and nightmare, of purgatorial suffering, through which Lear must pass to achieve sanity and understanding. In a succession of strange and haunting scenes he creates a dramatic poetry of action, speech, and image no less powerful than some of Shakespeare's scenes.

Thus, Lear, put on trial, refuses to recognise either his daughter Bodice or his own reflection in a mirror that is handed to him:

How ugly that voice is! That's not my daughter's voice. It sounds like chains on a prison wall. And she walks like something struggling in a sack (Lear glances down briefly at the mirror). No, that's not the king. . . . This is a little cage of bars with an animal in it. No, no, that's not the king! Who shut that animal in that cage? Let it out. Have you seen its face
behind the bars? There's a poor animal with blood on its head and tears running down its face.

Bond may be recalling the abdication scene in *Richard II* where Richard calls for a mirror and eventually shatters it; if so the echo is apt, for Lear demonstrates a similar self-pity and self-dramatisation here. But Bond's vivid imagery and terse command of colloquial idiom is very much his own; and the image of man as a caged animal reverberates beyond the immediate context, and is as central to the meaning of Bond's play as the imagery of storm and tempest is to *Lear*. It relates to the governed as much as the governors, people and rulers alike, imprisoned within a social and political structure that does not answer to their real needs.

The trial is followed by a succession of prison scenes, quite extraordinary in their blend of realism and fantasy, the timeless and the contemporary, pathos and terror. In the first of these scenes (scene 2), it is a little as if Bond had taken the speech of Lear to Cordelia as point of departure for his own dramatic invention:

> Come, let's away to prison;  
> We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.  
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
> And ask of thee forgiveness.

The modern soldiers acting as prison orderlies bring Lear to his cell. He is just another number to be ticked off the list; it's a job they prefer to front-line duty. Then, as it might be in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, “The ghost of the gravedigger's boy appears. His skin and clothes are faded. There's old dry blood on them.” Lear's appalled sense of the world's cruelty and destructiveness strangely now impels him to reach out towards his evil daughters. “What I wanted Lear to do,” says Bond, “was to recognise that they were his daughters—they had been formed by his activity, they were children of his state, and he was totally responsible for them” (TQ, 8). The gravedigger's boy, as in some strange folk ballad, whistles up the ghostly presences of Bodice and Fontanelle as the children they once were. The scene of mutual comfort and tenderness that results as Lear cradles the heads of his daughters in his lap and strokes their hair is in no way mawkish. It is important dramatically in a number of ways. It shows Lear reaching out beyond his immediate anguish to a vision of a world that might be:
We won't chain ourselves to the dead, or send our children to school in the graveyard. The torturers and ministers and priests will lose their office. And we'll pass each other in the street without shuddering at what we've done to each other. . . . The animal will step out of its cage, and lie in the fields, and run by the river, and groom itself in the sun, and sleep in its hole from night to morning.

Here is a dramatic poetry not dependent on verse which captures something of the same restorative peace as is found in Shakespeare's "We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage." It is important too in humanising the daughters after the grand guignol horror of the earlier scenes. But, above all, it establishes, in the re-enacted terror of Lear's daughters as little children, the responsibility of environment and family for shaping or misshaping its sons and daughters. Bond invents a striking and effective piece of stage business for this. Bodice, as a child, struggles frantically to get into the dress of her dead mother, and comes to Lear for his approval. "Take it off!" says Lear. Bodice refuses. And Lear replies: "Yes, or you will always wear it! (He pulls her to him) Bodice! My poor child, you might as well have worn her shroud." Nothing could better suggest the child's development, distorted or misshaped by parental pressures, and Lear's tardy realisation of his responsibility in this direction. We are brought back to "everyday" reality from this strange dream world, with its visual suggestion of Blake's engraving of *Job and His Daughters*, by the soldier's cell-inspection routine and by the old orderly coming to fetch Lear's untouched food. The orderly, like the porter in *Macbeth*, lists all those lost souls including himself who have been consigned to oblivion in this place of suffering and death:

I come in 'ere thousands a years back, 'undreds a thousands.
I don't know what I come in for. I forgot. I 'eard so many
tell what they come in for it's all mixed up in me 'eard. I've
'eard every crime in the book confessed t' me. Must be a record.
Don't know which was mine now. Murder? Robbery? Violence?
I'd like to know. Just t'put me mind t'rest. Satisfy me con-
science. But no-one knows now. It's all gone. Long ago. The
records is lost. 'Undreds a years back.

This is, if you like, Shakespearean in its down-to-earth comic relief; but it also evokes a very contemporary, Kafka-escape world, of the KGB, the midnight knock on the door; the unspecified crime for which you are put away for ever. The scene ends with the ghost's frightened plea to remain with Lear:
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Ghost: Let me stay with you Lear. . . . Look at my hands, they're like an old man's. They're withered, I'm young but my stomach's shrivelled up, and the hairs turned white. Look, my arms! Feel how thin I am. Are you afraid to touch me. . . .

Lear: . . . Yes, yes. Poor boy. Lie down by me. Here, I'll hold you. We'll help each other. Cry while I sleep, and I'll cry and watch you while you sleep. We'll take turns. The sound of the human voice will comfort us.

There are echoes here of Shakespeare's Lear and the fool on the heath:

Lear: Poor fool and knave. I have one part in my heart That's sorry yet for thee

. . .

In boy, go first. Your houseless poverty
Nay get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep.

Lear's human concern for the boy in the Bond scene is moving; but there is also a sense that Lear, in embracing the ghost, is nursing his own grief too much, and withdrawing into an unreal world. Particularly is this so, as the ghost himself is a strange, equivocal figure who is already wasting away and clinging parasite-like to the living Lear. When he whispers ingratiatingly, "Let me stay with you Lear. . . . Are you afraid to touch me?" there is already the suggestion, which is to become stronger, of the ghost representing something in Lear (as George does for Arthur in Early Morning), which has to die before Lear can find his true strength. After two brief scenes, set in the rival army camps, of revolution and counter-revolution (Cordelia is now leading the "freedom-fighter" forces of counter-revolution), the counter-revolutionaries carry the day; and Bond returns us, for the conclusion of the Act, to the prison and the caged animals within it. A chain of prisoners moves along a country road, with heavy gunfire in the distance. Lear is one of the chain gang, and to it the defeated Fontanelle, in her turn, is manacled. Bond's great gift for vivid theatrical metaphor, for images that act out the meaning of the play, is here again in evidence: one of the central themes of the play—the vicious circle of violence and oppression, in which governors and governed, tyrants and victims end up chained to each other, is simply and memorably expressed. Then, back in the prison, Bond brings the act to its audacious climax. Katherine Worth has said that often with Bond "it is in the most grotesque areas of the play that his
technique is seen at its most boldly inventive, and—strange paradox—the mystery of human feeling is given most delicate expression.”

The paintings of Francis Bacon, or the Goya engravings of the Disasters of War, might provide comparable examples in the world of art. In Shakespeare’s original we have the mad Lear crying out in the hovel: “Then let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” Bond, as it were, accepts the challenge of that despairing question, and uses the idea literally. Fontanelle is executed, and the prison officer conducts an autopsy in cool scientific fashion. He “anatomises” Fontanelle, and Lear, tormented by his sense of the cruelty of mankind, looks on to “see what breeds about her heart.”

Lear: So much blood and bits and pieces packed in with all that care. Where is the . . . Where? . . . Where is the beast? The blood is as still as a lake. . . . Where? Where? . . .

4th Prisoner: What’s the man asking?

Lear: She sleeps inside like a lion and a lamb and a child. The things are so beautiful. I am astonished. I have never seen anything so beautiful. If I had known she was so beautiful . . . how I would have loved her . . . Did I make this—and destroy it? . . . I knew nothing, saw nothing, learned nothing! Fool! Fool! Worse than I knew. (He puts his hands into Fontanelle and brings them out with organs and viscera. The soldiers react awkwardly and ineffectually). Look at my dead daughter! . . . I killed her! Her blood is on my hands! Destroyer! Murderer! And now I must begin again. I must walk through my life, step after step, I must walk in weariness and bitterness, I must become a child, hungry and stripped and shivering in blood. I must open my eyes and see!

Harry Andrews, who played Lear in Bill Gaskill’s production at the Royal Court, was worried about whether this scene would produce the wrong reactions in the audience; and Gaskill told him: “The author has made a big gesture. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work, but you have to have the courage to play it.”

In the event, the scene did work, and very powerfully, as Katherine Worth testifies: “[It] could so easily have been either ludicrous or overpoweringly offensive. But it worked. There was no laughter of the wrong kind. . . . We were too deep in feeling, too
affected by the solemn and complex movements of events.”9 Lear, then, at this moment, finds his answer to the question posed in Shakespeare’s play. There is no cause in nature, that makes these hard hearts. The speech, with its Blakean and Biblical overtones (c.f. “Dare he laugh his work to see? Dare he who made the lamb make thee?”—The Tyger; “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . and the calf and the young lion together; and a little child shall lead them “—Isaiah 2) expresses Lear’s astonished reverence for the mystery and beauty of creation and for the natural innocence of man, uncorrupted by environment. The cause is in man, not nature. And Lear takes upon himself a total, almost Christ-like responsibility for man’s destructiveness: “I must become a child . . . I must open my eyes and see . . .”

Ironically, but aptly enough, it is at this moment, in the crowning act of violence in Act II, that he is blinded. The blinding continues the use of Shakespeare’s text for Bond’s own purposes. As in Shakespeare, it is a dramatic metaphor for insight. “I stumbled when I saw,” says the blinded Gloucester: that Lear is blinded immediately after the revelation he experiences at the autopsy suggests how much that he has needed to learn he has now learnt. What he will choose to do with this wisdom will be the theme of Act III. The blinding also continues and extends the image of power imprisoning and hurting those who wield it. For Lear’s “crown” in this scene, which “turns him into a king again,” is in fact the square, box-like device fitted over his head to extract his eyes. It is a kind of savage, theatrical conceit, in which Bond forces together the idea of power and the idea of a cruel blindness, a self-imprisonment associated with authority. And it also continues the deliberate and very effective use of anachronisms—the mixing of contemporary and historic detail—in the play. Bond, in a postcard to Gaskill during the rehearsals of the production, spoke of the need to preserve this mixture: “The anachronisms are for the horrible moments in a dream when you know it’s a dream but can’t help being afraid. The anachronisms must increase, and not lessen the seriousness. . . . They are like desperate facts.”10 So here this latest scientific gadget which hygienically “decants” the eyes into a “soothing solution of formaldehyde crystals” and sprays the sockets with an aerosol reminds us of modern torture tech-
niques and pseudo-scientific concentration camp experiments practised on victims of the Nazi terror.

The final act of Bond's play differs in three crucial respects from Shakespeare's. For Bond's Lear, ripeness is not all; and though he is tempted towards an "easeful death" by the gravedigger's boy and his own moments of despair, he finds the courage to resist this mood, to realise that, far from enduring his "going hence" even as his "coming hither," he still has work to do. This Lear's death is a heroic death that comes about as a result of a political act—a small and seemingly ineffectual act, but none the less one of great symbolic importance. Pathos and pity, overpoweringly present in Shakespeare's last act, are associated, in Bond's last act, with the increasingly spectral and parasitical figure of the gravedigger's boy and are seen as debilitating and harmful emotions. Finally, instead of a reconciliation with Cordelia, there is a confrontation between her, as the new head of a people's government, and the old autocratic ruler, in which Lear decisively rejects her.

Consider first the gravedigger's boy. "I can stay with you now you need me," murmurs the ghost insidiously when Lear has been blinded; and his sinister presence remains with Lear for much of Act III encouraging him to despairing and destructive acts: "Get rid of the lot of them, then we'll be safe. . . . Let me poison the well. . . ." At the same time, the ghost is a figure of genuine pathos, wasting away, frightened of dying a second time, haunting the scenes of his happy early life. The beauty of that pastoral existence that Lear briefly glimpsed has its persuasive appeal, and the ghost is there to remind him of it. Through the gravedigger's boy, he has seen a vision of a golden age which his own political activities have helped to destroy. But, as Bond puts it, "he has also to recognise that its loss is irrevocable . . . there are great dangers in romanticising." And so, "it's very important for Lear that he should get rid of this other figure; he has to disown something of himself, this instinctive thing he calls the Gravedigger's boy. . . . Some things are dead—but they die with difficulty" (TQ, 8). That difficult death Bond accomplishes in another striking "coup de théâtre," which eerily brings the wheel full circle, linking past to present. At the moment Lear formulates his plan of action and rejects Cordelia, there is heard off-stage "the distant squealing of angry pigs, further off than at the end of Act One, scene seven."

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ghost stumbles in. It is covered with blood. The pig squeals slowly die out.” The ghost, gored and trampled by the pigs, makes a final, anguished appeal to Lear: “Help me! Help me! . . . Lear! Hold me!” But Lear can say nothing but: “No, too late! It's far too late! . . . You were killed long ago! . . . Die, for your own sake, die.” As the boy drops dead at Lear's feet, the pig squealing finally stops. And Lear's brief and moving valediction is full of the imagery of light, of clear vision, and of an understanding that goes beyond grief:

I see my life, a black tree by a pool. The branches are covered with tears. The tears are shining with light. The wind blows the tears in the sky. And my tears fall down on me.

Cordelia, in Shakespeare's play, aroused a strong and hostile reaction in Bond: “One of the very important things in the play was to re-define the relationship between Cordelia and Lear. I don't want to make this seem easy or slick, but Cordelia in Shakespeare's play is an absolute menace. I mean she's a very dangerous type of person . . .” (TQ, 8). Bond's Cordelia is, of course, not one of Lear's daughters. But, like Shakespeare's Cordelia, she is an idealist; she puts her ideals (in Bond's play, political ones) above human needs (condemning a would-be recruit to death because “we can't trust a man unless he hates,” and prepared to have Lear killed if he will not cease from preaching to the disaffected); and, just as Cordelia in Shakespeare's play is perhaps most like Lear in a certain uncompromising forthrightness, reckless of consequences, so Bond's Cordelia becomes most like the Lear of Act I. She insists, as he once did, that building the wall is an essential part of the power game; she has the same conviction that she is the saviour of her people. And though Bond is careful to give her respectable liberal arguments in Scene 3, as befits her more enlightened government, those arguments, as Lear recognises, perpetuate violence and the suppression of truth:

You sacrifice truth to destroy lies, and you sacrifice life to destroy death. . . . Your Law always does more harm than crime, and your morality is a form of violence.

This confrontation with Cordelia is for Lear the crucial turning point. We have seen him in the early scenes of Act III as a Tiresias-like figure, an elderly blind sage, preaching in parables to the crowds who come to hear him. But it is a form of withdrawal from the world that he is practising. No leadership is
offered, no action suggested: there is simply the detached wisdom of a man at the end of his life, waiting for death. But now Lear knows that this phase of resignation, of ripe wisdom, is over. He has a journey to go on, and an act to perform. In a brief ending, but one splendidly dramatic in its gathering together of the play's meaning into a final symbolic action, Lear sets to work with bare hands and a shovel to tear down the wall that it has been his life's work to build, the wall that Cordelia wishes to perpetuate. The wall has from the beginning imposed its dark shadow over the action. But Bond reserves its actual physical presence for the last scene. When it looms up, filling the stage, it is a moment of great dramatic effect. And the struggle of the frail old man to demolish it is the inevitable climactic moment towards which everything in the play has been leading. It is a heroic gesture. It is also a tragic gesture, for it costs Lear his life. He is shot by one of the junior officers in charge of operations. But it is not a futile gesture. Bond, in a final stage-direction that reveals his understanding of how dramatic action can sometimes speak louder than words, specifies that, as the workers on the wall move away from the body, at their officer's command, "one of them looks back." In that looking back with its suggestion that the lesson of Lear's death will not be forgotten, lies a frail but real and important hope for the future.

Thus Bond completes a play which, I would argue, does not suffer by comparison with Shakespeare's great original. In the romantic and post-romantic period, critics and writers placed too much stress on the artist's originality. Latterly we have been more willing to concede the artist's right to use another man's themes and subjects as the springboard for his own invention. A writer's originality is often best seen in his individual variation on a traditional theme. One must, of course, discriminate. Nahum Tate, when he decided to "improve" Shakespeare for Restoration taste by giving Lear a happy ending and arranging a marriage between Cordelia and Edgar, merely showed how deep his incomprehension of the original was. By contrast, Bond sets up in his play a real, creative dialogue with the original, out of which comes a theatrical experience of impressive power, a Lear as seen by one of the most original and versatile dramatists of our time.

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NOTES


8 Gregory Dark, “Production Casebook, No. 5: Edward Bond’s Lear at the Royal Court,” Theatre Quarterly, 2 (January-March 1972), 28.

9 Worth, Revolutions in Modern British Drama, p. 180.

10 Dark, “Production Casebook, No. 5,” p. 22.