

On Edward Bond's Dramaturgy of Crisis in *The Chair Plays*: The Dystopian Imagination and the Imagination in Dystopia

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Abstract

In this article I examine how Edward Bond realizes his dramaturgy of crisis through dystopian imagination in *The Chair Plays*. I argue that Bond's idea of 'crisis' refers to the 'logic of Auschwitz' in an Adornian sense, that is, the crisis of modernist instrumental rationality. His dystopia is a chronotope of the extreme form of such rationality that demarcates the limits of imagination and freedom. Then I move on to examine *The Chair Plays*, that is, *Chair* (2000), *Have I None* (2000) and *The Under Room* (2005), to demonstrate how different possibilities of freedom in the dystopian world are articulated. Based on the analysis, I conclude that the rationality of Bond's dystopia is closely associated with the legal sphere and one of the aims of Bond's dystopian drama is to reexamine the relation between human freedom and legal rationality.

I.

A dramatist who writes about society must write about the future. The present is too close to be written about knowingly. The future is the hidden purpose of drama, of all art. A dramatist has only two subjects: the future and the past which is the origin of the future. (Bond "Third Crisis" 14)

In 'The Third Crisis', the introduction to *The Chair Plays*, which was published to coincide with the production at the Lyric Ham-

mersmith in 2012, Edward Bond explicates the reason why he sets the three plays – *Chair*, *Have I None*, *The Under Room* – in the future. Since 2000 Bond has been writing plays imagined to take place in 2077 or the late twenty-first century. These apocalyptic future worlds are reminiscent of dystopian novels at the turn of the twentieth century, in which the ideal world is depicted more usually as a dystopia instead of a utopia (Claeys 107). For Bond, the futuristic imagination is closely related to the understanding of our present crisis, the roots of which are in the past. In the following I will first analyse Bond's idea of "the third crisis" and proceed to explore how he dramatises the crisis of the logic of Auschwitz through the dystopian imagination. Finally, I will demonstrate how he interrogates the possibility of the agency of the subject as realised in the power of imagination.

Bond conceives of the present crisis as "the third crisis". However, he does not offer a single definition of "the third crisis"; the crisis may refer to "Creon's ideal dystopia" (*Chair Plays* xxv), "a scientific Utopia" (xxvii), "Auschwitz-Gulag" (xxviii), or "capitalism and its market" (xxxix). That is, Bond's concerns are more with the rational logic at the heart of modernity than with any specific historical events or social phenomena. In this sense, Bond's idea of crisis can be related to Theodor Adorno's infamous assertion that it was barbarous to write poetry after Auschwitz; it is implied that any artwork made after Auschwitz must be evaluated according to its relation to the logic that was made manifest in Auschwitz. Although Bond's dramaturgy differs from Adorno's modernist aesthetics, Bond's theatre, as Karoline Gritzner argues, can be regarded as a response to the logic of a progressively homogenous world by imagining non-totalisable otherness (85). For Adorno, the progressive logic of rationality makes human beings as "fungible or replaceable" (*Can*

One Live: 434): the eradication of the self is grossly demonstrated in Auschwitz as well as in the totalising capitalist power of exchange value which liquidates the particularity of human beings (120). Likewise, for Bond, Auschwitz epitomises the logic of rationality characterised by Zygmunt Bauman as “the spirit of instrumental rationality” and the “bureaucratic form of institutionalization” that make the Holocaust entirely reasonable and plausible (18).

Regarding the dramatisation of Auschwitz, Bond states that “[...] Auschwitz is the fact that didn’t happen. You have to go to Auschwitz to allow it to happen” (“The Third Crisis”: 17). By “go to Auschwitz”, Bond does not mean that he intends to represent Auschwitz as a historical event. As Bond’s conception of Auschwitz is concerned with the unresolved problems of modernity, his dramaturgy is not *about* Auschwitz but is instead *reenactment* of the logic of Auschwitz. Auschwitz becomes a chronotope that can be located in the catastrophic future as the extreme extension of the logic of Auschwitz. If Adorno’s modernism “involves a turning against the progressive time consciousness of modernity” (Rothberg 21), Bond’s dramaturgical logic resides in the extreme point of the dystopian imagination of progressive modernity. L.T. Sargent defines the term ‘dystopia’ as follows:

[A] non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived. (9)

Sargent further specifies that dystopias are “self consciously warnings” that imply that choice and hope are still available (26). In this sense, the ‘dystopian imagination’ is an oxymoron-

ic term: if there is still imagination, there could never be total dystopia; likewise, if there indeed exists dystopia, it could only be the place where imagination is totally eradicated. As Ernst Bloch defines “imagination of the Utopian function” as that which “possesses an expectable not-yet-existence” and “anticipates a real potentiality in a psychical way” (105), Adorno also sees utopia as “essentially in the determined negation [...] of that which merely is” (Bloch 12). The utopian function implied in the faculty of imagination is also inherent in Bond’s distinction between reason and imagination. For Bond, “[t]he relation between reason and imagination is logical” (*Chair Plays*: xxix). Mere reason leads to totalising instrumental rationality, while mere imagination leads to pure fantasy. Only by constituting a logical link between reason and imagination can the consciousness function properly in accordance with the rule of society. In other words, while the utopian function of imagination challenges the status quo and presents the possibility of an alternative reality, dystopia is the dominance of reason that excludes any imaginative provocations.

However, how do we understand Bond’s futuristic dystopia dominated by rationality? Bond states that “[d]rama untangles the distortions between law and justice and releases them by using the forces that have bound them together. This is the purpose of *The Chair Plays* trilogy” (*Chair Plays*: xxxiii). Therefore, it is legal rationality that Bond regards as dominating in the dystopia. Regarding the relationship between law and history, it is not coincidental that Adorno analyses the implicit connection between the philosophy of history and the legal sphere in his critique of Hegel’s idea of ‘world spirit’. He proposes that it is in the legal sphere that the idea of ‘world spirit’ is ideally realised. The Hegelian ‘world spirit’ rationalises historical progress affirma-

tively and it is in the same way that the law systematically determines every specific being and experience. As Adorno observes, “[i]ts systematic forbids the admission of anything that eludes their closed circle” and turns into direct violence over those that cannot be properly covered (*Negative Dialectics*: 309). Adorno further states that when the individual finds himself in the wrong it is not his fault but “the fault of constituents of the legal sphere itself” (ibid.). In fact, Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian ‘world spirit’ and its relation to the legal sphere derives from his thinking about Auschwitz as “the catastrophe”, after which “it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it” (320). Similarly, Bond’s dystopian imagination aims to imagine the extreme situation of the catastrophe beyond which nothing can be imagined and everything will be governed by legal rationality.

II.

In his article ‘From the State of Law to the Security State’, published in *Le Monde* on 23 December 2015, Giorgio Agamben addresses the political implications of the declaration of a state of emergency by the French government in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015. Agamben relates the state of emergency to the regime of Nazi Germany, whose sovereign power and political operations were constitutionally legalised through a series of declarations of a state of emergency. Under the conditions of the state of exception, individuals are depoliticised and deprived of their liberties, whereas the power of the police substitutes that of the juridical institutions. As a result, the executive power absorbs legislative and judicial power in the name of defending the security of the state. In other words, wars on terror legitimise the state of security as the

normal form of contemporary governance, whose foundation is the collective fear of unforeseeable terrorism.

In *The State of Exception*, Agamben states that “[t]he state of exception is an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (39). That is, the decrees and actions of executive power replace the law legitimised by the legislative power and assume the force of law without being law. The law is suspended and what is not law becomes lawful. In other words, the application of the force of law is separated from the law itself. For Agamben, the police offer the best example of the embodiment of the force of law in a state of exception because the police force is endowed with power to decide what threatens the public security on a case-by-case basis, which blurs the distinction between violence and right (*Means*: 104). The execution of the police as the manifestation of the sovereign power is always what is right, even though it might have violated the law. In the following I will argue that the Bondian dystopian future in 2077 takes place in a totalitarian security state which has completed the normalisation of what Agamben terms the state of exception.

At the start of *Chair*, Alice is looking through the window at a soldier and a prisoner on the street while Billy is drawing pictures. Partly because Alice thinks she knows the prisoner and partly because Billy suggests that Alice should take a chair for the prisoner or the soldier, Alice decides to take a chair down to the street. The prisoner, however, is unable to communicate through words, although she can utter some meaningless sound. As Alice tries to decipher what the prisoner intends to convey, she bites Alice. Later, the soldier shoots the prisoner dead as she is about to chase Alice. Back in the house, Alice starts to tear up all of Billy’s pictures and burns them because she knows there will be a visit from the authority. After the welfare offi-

cer's investigation, Alice decides to commit suicide and leaves a note for Billy to follow. After Alice's death, Billy takes Alice's urn of ashes and follows her death note to throw the ashes in a car park. After crossing different urban areas, Billy is eventually shot dead in the car park.

Bond's dystopian imagination in *Chair* is best materialised in the deaths of the prisoner and Billy, as well as in the welfare officer's visit. Without any standard legal procedures, the prisoner and Billy are deprived of their lives by the sovereign power. We are given no explanations about why their actions should result in the death penalty since the execution, itself being always already legalised, needs no reason. Besides violence, the authority also exerts its power through strict surveillance. In the welfare officer's investigation, any tiny actions and even meaningless sounds have to be examined in accordance with the rationalised standards and procedures. What is more appalling is how the testimony is officially recognised. Although Alice disavows that her actions were out of pity and tells the officer that the prisoner "kissed" her instead of "biting" her, the officer insists that Alice's testimony is inconsistent with other evidence and decides to conduct further investigation. This forces Alice to fabricate a consistent testimony. Moreover, the welfare officer decides that for the sake of Alice's mental health, she has to move to a single room apartment near the Welfare Department to be kept under observation. As the soldier kills the prisoner in the name of security, in the name of welfare, the officer conducts the investigation, makes the decision of eviction, and strips Alice of her freedom of movement without the due process of law. In *Chair*, the soldier and the officer demonstrate the same logic of a state of exception in which the administrative application of force is always already legalised.

The world of *Have I None* is a totalitarian state similar to that of *Chair*, in which people are required to abolish their memories. Jams, a policeman, and Sara, his wife, are no exceptions. Despite their efforts to keep everything in order, Sara is annoyed by the incessant sound of the door knocking, and their life is further disturbed by a visitor, Grit. He claims that he is Sara's brother because he found a photo of their past, which restored his memory. Unable to bear Grit's existence in the house, Jams decides to kill Grit with poison, but eventually it is Sara who drinks the poisoned soup and dies.

Jams's and Sara's anxiety over Grit's intrusion into their domestic order is best demonstrated by their hysterical reaction to Grit's sitting on one of their chairs. As Bond explains, "[t]he characters are obsessed with the place of things because authority has abolished the past and this made society amnesiac" (Tuailon 161). The absurdity of their reactions highlights the absurd nature of order maintenance, as well as the fragility of any imposed authority. In contrast, the old woman who tried to hang a picture in a ruined house demonstrates another meaning of restoring an object to the right place. Unlike Jams and Sara, the old woman whom Jams saw when he was on patrol tried to rebuild her relationship with the ruined house by hanging a picture properly. Pictures are forbidden because, as the product of human imagination, they represent not only an alternative reality to the authoritarian state but also a useless fictional world that refuses to be incorporated into instrumental utilitarianism. In *Chair*, Alice tears all of Billy's pictures apart before the welfare officer's visit, whereas in *Have I None*, Sara goes to the ruined house and gazes at the picture before she decides to commit suicide. Both of them sense the power of imagination, but neither can be saved by it. Besides, the domination of the state

is demonstrated in the phenomena of mass suicide as part of the everyday life described by Jams and Grit. Bond reimagines the mass manufacture of death in the camp by constructing an indifferent world of mass suicide: in the peaceful future, there is no massacre but mass suicide.

If we read *The Chair Plays* as three plays envisaged to take place in the same world, it is plausible to assume that each of them represents one specific aspect of this world. In *Chair*, we see how the ostensibly peaceful domestic life can be destroyed by a tiny benevolent act. If the soldier and the welfare officer seem atrocious in *Chair*, in *Have I None* Bond offers a parodic picture of the domestic life of the police to reveal the absurd nature of the order which can be easily destabilised by an unexpected visitor. In *The Under Room*, meanwhile, Bond investigates further the problem of hospitality and the status of illegal immigrants.

The Under Room opens with the Dummy, an illegal immigrant, breaking into Joan's house to escape from soldiers. Bond makes a distinction here between the Dummy as a human effigy and the Dummy Actor who speaks the Dummy's words in order to foreground the foreignness of the Dummy (Tuailleon 96). The Dummy tells Joan that he has no papers and Joan asks him to stay for the sake of security. Later, Joan asks Jack to help them get the necessary documents for the Dummy to cross the border. However, the Dummy's money has been stolen, so he is unable to pay Jack. Joan promises that she will try to get the money, but when Jack returns, he brings the Dummy's pass. Jack reveals that he joined the army to get the pass for the Dummy, and he threatens Joan and the Dummy that they have become criminals under the control of the army. Despite this, eventually the Dummy decides to escape with Jack, while Joan kills the Dummy out

of fear. The play ends with the Dummy actor speaking his native language while the Dummy has been torn apart by Joan.

Like Grit, who has no travel documents, the Dummy as an illegal immigrant has no papers and could only live by shoplifting. As he says, “[t]he knife is my papers. You must have weapon when you live on street and have no papers” (Bond *Plays* 173). The knife as the Dummy’s papers has two meanings: it represents the violence required to resist the legal norm imposed by the authority, while it is also a reminder of how he was forced to kill his mother by the soldiers. In comparison with Billy’s pictures in *Chair*, which represent the ability to imagine an alternative reality, and the old woman’s picture in *Have I None* that symbolises the memory of the past, the Dummy’s knife suggests that imagination and memory can also involve violence and trauma.

Bond further subverts the relation between innocence and violence through Joan’s reaction to the unconscious Dummy. While the Dummy in his coma starts to speak his native language to articulate his inner anxiety, Joan dislodges the hatred of the Dummy that had been suppressed under her benevolent appearance. Once the suppressed anxiety is released, it turns into violence towards others; Bond describes Joan as one who “[...] contains in fact a lot of unexpressed aggression, probably based on fear” (Tuailon 95). After the Dummy is dead, Joan is uncertain about whether she should expose his body or hide it. She finally decides to hide it out of the fear of being punished. Joan’s apparent morality of hospitality is revealed to be based on the suppression of her fear and uncertainty, and, once undone, it turns into brutality. In other words, not only those who are endowed with the executive power can exercise violence, but normal citizens can also internalise fear and resort to violence.

By problematising the relationship between morality, violence and imagination, Bond encourages us to rethink the possibility of justice and the problem of agency in the totalitarian dystopia. In the following section I will evaluate how Bond conceives of the power of imagination and the meaning of justice.

III.

Bond dialecticises the relation between dystopia and imagination by imagining a dystopia in order to assess the potential power of imagination. To understand how Bond thinks of imagination as the basis of human agency, we need to examine his ideas of “radical innocence” and freedom. In ‘Freedom and Drama’ (2006), Bond evokes Kant’s idea of freedom and morality to explain his idea of the imperative of “radical innocence”. According to Kant, “the sole principle of morality consists in independence from all matter of law (namely, from a desired object) and at the same time in the determination of choice through the mere form of giving universal law” (30). That is, the Kantian practical reason is not determined by any “matter”, any specific desire and object, but by a mere “form” of universal law. Kant restricts his theory within the field of practical reason in the form of universal lawgiving and excludes any consideration of practical applications in empirical reality. Bond’s idea is Kantian in the sense that he refuses to explain the imperative through psychological motives; nevertheless, he acknowledges the discrepancy between practical reason and empirical actions by stating that “the imperative remains constant but the act changes” (*Plays* 217). As Kant’s idea of freedom is posited to guard against causal determinism and pathological determinants, Bond’s idea of the imperative as a constant without predetermined causality makes freedom possible. For Bond, the locus of freedom is that

of radical innocence as the psychic potential inherent in imagination. In Bond's theory, what Kant designates as determinism is considered to be "ideology", as he states that "ideology seeks to impose the determinism and necessity of nature on us, the human imperative seeks the freedom it does not have" (221-22).

In other words, Bondian radical innocence as the human imperative assumes that there exists psychic potentiality that is not determined by ideology. If we take ideology to be the source of legitimacy, Bondian radical innocence designates the possibility of defying the established legitimate order. The universal self-lawgiving form of the Kantian categorical imperative also entails that the self-lawgiving causality is free from the restraint of the empirical legal sphere. Therefore, Bondian radical innocence is close to the Kantian imperative, as both presuppose that the cause of self-determination is different from legality. However, Bondian radical innocence and the Kantian categorical imperative are not theoretical equivalents. While the Kantian categorical imperative presupposes a transcendental subject and requires that the imperative should be universally valid, the Bondian subject of radical innocence is situated in concrete material conditions and the decision activated by it is therefore in accordance with the particular situation. Through dramatising extreme situations in which characters are forced to make ethical decisions, Bond examines how radical innocence *qua* imagination as the foundation of agency is manifest in the singular reaction.

In *Chair*, both Alice's taking the chair down to the street and her final suicide are "Antigone moments" (Bond "Le Sens" 143) of rebellious gestures against the totalitarian authority. Alice's ethical act is her decision to take the chair down to the street. How do we understand Alice's decision? She denies that

she does it out of pity. What determines her action is an imperative without clear motives. In fact, this is not the first time that Alice has broken the rule of the state. Her adoption of Billy is illegal as she acknowledges that she did not hand him over to the authority because she was afraid of being questioned. Unlike Joan, Alice's actions are not a product of her moral rationalisations – she never says that what she does is right and the authority is wrong. She knows what the authority demands for the common good, but she never regards her action as an overt violation of the rule. Instead, she tries to secure a space in which the authority might cease to operate, the rule fails to apply, and authentic human relations are possible.

However, her action of taking the chair implicates her in the field of the operating sovereign power. For the welfare officer, the nature of Alice's action does not matter: Alice is a criminal if she acts out of pity, which is forbidden; if Alice does not act out of any motive, then she would be regarded as mentally deranged. Either way, judicially her action is illegal. In other words, as Agamben describes, the authority in a state of exception does not follow any predictable legal procedures but imposes its law through administrative decisions. Every administrative application is lawful and needs no further legitimacy. As a result, the regulation of one's physical acts and mental state is so complete that the possibility of acting out of freedom is cancelled – even motiveless benevolent acts are forbidden. This makes Alice choose death. For Bond, "Alice is a rebel. [...]" So she claims there is a part of her that they will never possess and this is a shared humanity" (Tuailon 189). Determining one's death as the resistance to being 'possessed' turns out to be the only possible way of acting out of self-lawgiving freedom against the totalising legal sphere. Alice's suicide, like her adop-

tion of Billy and her taking the chair for the prisoner, is an action that seeks the space of freedom beyond the sovereign power.

Like Alice, Sara also commits suicide, but what is the difference between their actions? It is never clear whether Sara is Grit's sister or not. Sara refuses to accept Grit's claim; however, in a mysterious interval Sara is able to share Grit's childhood memory. Bond's comment on the question of the relation between Sara and Grit is ambiguous: "He is real but he is also a figment of Sara's mind, she is inventing with various odds and ends, to create a human relationship which is forbidden by her society" (162). Sara's imagination is made manifest in her auditory hallucination of door knocking and her delusional encounter with Grit as sister and brother. The delusions, however, are real in the sense that they represent the non-totalisable working of imagination that makes Sara decide to commit suicide.

In this play, the act of suicide is described by Grit as a collective phenomenon, and Bond sees it as the symptom of human desire to live on (161). The desire to have the right to be is at the core of the Bondian imperative of radical innocence and this desire also determines the logic of imagination. Like Alice's suicide, which is possibly the last act of freedom conceivable by imagination, Sara's suicide can be categorized as one case among the mass suicide. Nevertheless, Sara could possibly commit suicide to save Grit. Sara's suicide thus indicates the possibility of self-sacrifice for others, and in this sense the ethical implication of her suicide is different from Alice's.

While *Chair* and *Have I None* reveal how the authoritarian law reduces the freedom of human beings to such an extent that only the elimination of bare life makes freedom possible, in *The Under Room* Bond proposes that freedom can only be obtained by violating the law and understanding the nature of crime. It is

important to note how Bond dramatises the point at which the Dummy decides to go with Jack: when he confesses that he was forced by the soldiers to kill his mother or father and he killed his mother, Joan responds with moralising horror; Jack, however, understands the aporetic nature of the involuntary choice and the atrocious crime committed by the Dummy (95). As Jack decides to escape with the Dummy but finds that he has been killed, he says: “I never turned t’ crime out a’ weakness. I ’ad a different reason. Hope” (Bond *Plays* 202). Unlike Joan, Jack has no consistent morality: he can be a comrade with the army but he can also be an outlaw who offers help to the Dummy. Like Alice and Sara, Jack understands the nature of the state as the totalised order; however, unlike Alice and Sara who commit suicide as the manifestation of radical innocence, Jack’s radical innocence takes the form of crime. The Dummy Actor’s final utterance in his native language is also a non-totalisable expression of his radical innocence: the language that makes him feel at home is always incomprehensible to others. Even though the body of the Dummy is killed, his native language remains a surplus that demands understanding. For Bond, language “originates in the speaker’s sense of his or her right to be, to exist, and that this right ought to be acknowledged by the listener” (*Hidden* 6). Joan kills the Dummy because she is unable to understand the Dummy’s language. By making the Dummy’s language persist on the stage, Bond positions the spectator as the listener who has to take up the task that Joan fails to fulfil.

Throughout *The Chair Plays*, Bond makes the characters seek justice in a world dominated by legal rationality – only what is lawful is rational and acceptable. By separating law from justice, Bond demonstrates that justice is not a pre-established legal or moral system for people to follow because it would be

identical with totalitarianism or morality based on suppression. In contrast, justice is always to be created by imagination and to be realised in every singular action that questions the lawfully enforced order.

IV.

[I]f Auschwitz did not happen in the past it must be happening now and is already happening in the future. What does this mean? How is it happening now? It is happening in the symptoms which are the return of the repressed. (Bond "Third Crisis" 16)

For Bond, Auschwitz as a *logic* of identity can be realised in the camp through the means of mass killing, which reduces human beings into disposable bodies. The same logic can also be realised both through the capitalist rationality that instrumentalises human labor in pursuit of profit and through the legal rationality in a state of exception that identifies the application of force with the law.

Adorno reminds us that "[t]he primacy of totality over phenomenality is to be grasped in phenomenality, which is ruled by what tradition takes for the world spirit" (*Negative Dialectics* 303). Only by grasping "the relentlessness of what happens" (305) in concrete instances is it possible to discern how the individual is instrumentalised as a tool in the course of historical progress and its legitimatisation. If the task of post-Auschwitz art for Adorno is to "recover a sensibility of subjective freedom from the ruins of a damaged civilisation" (Gritzner 16), Bond's dystopian plays achieve the aim by imagining those possible moments of escape from and violation of the legal order of the totalitarian world.

Following the declaration of a state of emergency by the French government in 2015, the Turkish government also declared a state of emergency after a failed *coup d'état* in July 2016. The European refugee crisis which began in 2015 testifies to the incompetence of the legal order of the nation-state to deal with human rights outside the status of the citizen (Agamben *Means* 20). Since 2011, there have been at least 144 Tibetan self-immolators in protest against the Chinese domination, a phenomenon that makes Bond's imagination of mass suicide in *Have I None* more palpable. "To be human, in the place of law there must be drama" (Bond "Third Crisis" 15). The aim of Bond's dramaturgy of crisis is to dramatise the moments of hope and failed hope when the law in a dystopian future is suspended, questioned, and violated. Moreover, by dramatising the dystopian future, Bond means to sensitise the spectator to the present crisis that may end up with a catastrophe and urges the spectator to rethink the relationship between the self, law, and the state.

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