

Absent Friends: Edward Bond's Corporeal Ghosts

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Abstract

This article provides a genealogy of Edward Bond's use of the ghost in his drama and interrogates the symbolic function which it performs in his political and aesthetic cosmology. It argues that Bond's deployment of the ghost is a signifier of a materialist aesthetic that counter-intuitively embeds these ethereal figures within the corporeal, attributing the same material properties to them as living characters and thereby locating them squarely within his own scheme of affective biopolitics that understands the body as a site upon which the operations of power are painfully inscribed. Using Bond's theoretical postulation of the late-capitalist world as a 'posthumous' society, the article reads Bond's ghosts as the distilled essences of the oppressively dead and dehumanising societies which he believes should be discarded or rejected, while particularly focusing on the unique materiality and specific corporeality that these spectres possess in his plays.

One of the most common tropes in the drama of Edward Bond, consistently deployed from his early works to the present day, is that of the ghost. At first glance the employment of the ethereal might be difficult to reconcile with a writer whose aesthetic and political style is originally derived from a materialist interpretation of the world, grounded in a non-denominational and undogmatic Marxism. Yet perhaps this should not be too surprising. Marx himself pursued many phantoms, fascinated by the vampiric power of dead capital to suck living labour for its own perpetuation, delving to uncover the hidden and elusive presence of surplus value and elucidating the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' of the commodity (Marx 163). In Bond's drama the ghost is a concrete stage image which frequently enables him to deal in abstractions much like the ones that Marx encountered; the figure of the living dead, either spectral or reanimated, becomes inhabited by metaphorical or emblematic significance and can be understood

as being representative of broader theoretical and philosophical notions in Bond's cosmology. In what follows I will provide an account of the various iterations of the ghost in Bond's *oeuvre* and extrapolate as to their aesthetic operability and political functioning. While much useful scholarship has recently emerged on the cultural relevance of ghosts in contemporary drama, here I shall largely restrict my observations to the importance of the spectral within the framework of Bond's own thought, though my interrogation will place particular focus on the unusually substantive, corporeal presence of the Bondian ghost.

As Stanton B. Garner writes, Bond's is 'a materialism that grounds the political and economic in human corporeality' (158). Throughout his work Bond conducts a consistent engagement with the body as a political unit, as a site upon which the operations of power are inscribed and as the focus of the contest for domination and subjection of the individual. Just as Marx describes in *Capital* how a commodity becomes a 'social hieroglyphic' carrying social relationships that exist between its producers as though 'stamped upon it' (167; 164), so that a material object takes on the significance of social relations, in Bond the human body becomes a commodity which, when exposed to acts of debasement or brutalisation, subsequently becomes a bearer of the stamp of the potential for power to inflict ruinous spoliation on the subject. Originating from his initial explorations of the causes and consequences of violence in society, Bond has developed and refined his political sensitivities and dramaturgical strategies into what Kate Katafiasz describes as 'post-structuralist radicalism' designed to supersede the binary quality of Brechtian hermeneutics, where particular narratives are suspended and abrogated in favour of no less prefabricated and ideological interpretations (237). The result is the calibration of a dramatic practice which displays at every turn appreciation of the importance of 'presence' within performance. This approach has been repeated and replayed in a variety of differentiated contexts across Bond's *oeuvre*, showing him to be a pioneering theoretician of the status of the body in performance and its function in generating meaning and affect.

In this scheme, Bond's use of the ghost posits a set of overlapping dualities which neither cancel out, nor invalidate each other, but rather uneasily coexist: a simultaneous state of being both

alive and dead, where immateriality and spectrality is represented as corporeal presence. It is highly significant to Bond's political scheme that the supplementary symbolic stratum afforded by his ghostly figures is one which generally replicates the preoccupations and presuppositions of the society from which it originates, rather than presenting transcendental or utopian social configurations as alternatives: in Bond's hands, things in the spirit world remain much the same as they are on the ground. Moreover, a curious property of Bond's ghosts is their uncanny corporeality and their stubborn materiality; this is apparent not only in the rudimentary sense of their basic representational status being signified by the body of a performer, but in their designation as physical matter inside the world of the play, being very often tangible, substantial, and susceptible to harm. While less radical, less figurative, less poetic dramatists might accept finitude in a relatively uncomplicated way, one of Bond's most elegant stage metaphors is that some characters both live and die twice: forced to exist, for a time, as spectral residue emblematic of the punitive effects of an unjust society. The word reification, therefore, in its strictest Marxian sense of describing the process whereby the social relations between people take on the form of relations between things, perfectly corresponds with Bond's use of the ghost, where these revenants function as theatricalised reifications of ideology, condensed (dis)embodiments of the corrupt and corrupting societies they inhabit given spectral dramatic shape.

Revealingly, Bond has characterised the contemporary late-capitalist world in terms coterminous with the notion of life being sustained after death. In a radio interview with John Tusa, he describes the superannuation of the postmodernist paradigm in an idiosyncratic yet uncompromising formulation, worth quoting in full:

What are the consequences about if we say that humanness is created [...] and what does that mean. Now I obviously don't believe in anybody called God or anything called God. Supposing however there were a manufacturer of all this, not interested in right and wrong, morality, just a manufacturer who put it together, and this manufacturer, he, she, it or they, are

up there looking down at us [...] and they look at our world, and they say, well the dogs seem to be doing alright, but there are these other people, human beings, and they have to create their humanness and they have ceased to do it, therefore they are dead, you are dead, I am dead, we live in a society of the dead, not a postmodern society, a posthumous society. We have ceased to create our humanness. Now it is possible for you to go to a hospital and die, and they will put you on a life support machine... What I am saying is that our society, our species, is on a life support thing called technology, it's a life support system. We are kept human at the moment although we are dead, that is we have ceased to create our humanity, by a life support system, and all really, the paraphernalia of modern consumerism are the wreaths we bring to our own funerals. (Bond, 'Interview with John Tusa')

Bond's conception of the late-capitalist world as a 'posthumous' society is very evocative. Capitalist society is able to operate as it does, Bond suggests, because it has an abundance of technology and vast productive capacity which compensates for our failure to organise ourselves rationally, democratically and justly. However, just because we are able to manufacture and produce seemingly *ad infinitum*, it does not necessarily mean that our society is flourishing; quite the opposite, in fact – it means that it has atrophied.

This notion is thoroughly explored throughout Bond's work, where the living can be dead and the dead can be alive. Bond's second play *Saved* (1965) contains no literal stage ghosts but many metaphorical ones. This is a notion articulated by the character of Arthur in *Early Morning* (1968), the play which immediately followed *Saved*, in a description which evokes the spiritual condition of the south London working class of the preceding play in very precise terms:

Bodies are supposed to die and souls go on living. That's not true. Souls die first and bodies live. They wander round like ghosts, they bump into each other, tread on each other, haunt each other. (209)

The social stalemate of the family in *Saved*, trapped in a permanent state of resentment and hostility, is comparable to the eternity of mutual laceration experienced by the dead trio of souls in Sartre's *No Exit* (1944), except while Sartre's is a thesis play which elucidates the calcifying effect of bad faith on the human subject, Bond's play is an account of the social paralysis engendered through the cultural deprivation of the working class and the accompanying lack of self-determination of their political lives. Of the play's notorious baby-stoning incident, Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts write that 'the child in the pram is dead long before scene six [...] a dead thing being assaulted by other dead things' (51). The characters that stone the baby to death are emotionally and culturally dead, unable to connect with the baby as a human being; the baby itself is a dead thing, destined to grow up culturally deprived and into a total absence of prospects: it is, in effect, 'saved' from its own life. Near the end of the play, where Harry visits Len in his bedroom in scene twelve, he is actually dressed as a ghost, wearing white clothes and with a white bandage on his head, a living ghost, with Len implicitly the only living person in the play at that point. Though Harry's gentle encouragement convinces Len to stay with the family, the ghostly intervention Bond mounts here is not a panacea, couched as it is in the reactionary sentiment that Len lacks proper perspective because 'yer never killed yer man' (*Saved* 128).*

In Bond's next play, *Early Morning*, the dead Albert rises from his grave and tells Arthur that 'the living haunt the dead' (167), urging him to avenge his death in a parody of the scene in *Hamlet* where Hamlet meets his father's ghost. While the ghosts of *Saved* were metaphorical, *Early Morning* literalises the notion of a dead society by creating a world populated by ghosts who are, ironically, haunted by the living Arthur. The society in *Early Morning* is astonishingly depraved but regulated according to what Bond described at this stage in his career as 'social morality'.

* Harry, though alive, is given the most superficially obvious and immediately recognisable supernatural signification of all of Bond's ghost characters as a deliberate echo of the Jacobean stage ghost, a figure of great importance to Bond in the history of drama since it mediates between fiction and reality.

This, for Bond, is the means used to maintain the social metabolism of capitalist culture, which works by harnessing and institutionalising the violence its own injustices perpetuate:

An unjust society causes and defines crime; and an aggressive social structure which is unjust and must create aggressive social disruption, receives the moral sanction of being 'law and order'. Law and order is one of the steps taken to maintain injustice. (*Lear* 5)

In Bond's diagnosis, this is the sanctioning of hierarchical domination, class oppression and competitive capitalism under the alibi of law and order designed to curb and control the supposedly negative and virulent danger that 'human nature' poses to civilisation. In *Early Morning* these coercive ideologies of the ruling class are articulated through an anachronistic confection of Victorian era personages presiding over an absurd society where queue jumpers for the cinema are summarily eaten and the culprits are models of docility in submitting to their execution by hanging.

When Arthur pursues this society's demented, ouroboros-like logic to its absolute conclusions he manages to orchestrate the death of the inhabitants of the entire world. However, in an image which is umbilical to Arthur's own status as a conjoined twin, even as he celebrates his success of setting everyone 'free', the ghosts of the people that he has killed slowly rise up: '*The ghosts move apart. They are joined together like a row of paper cut-out men*' (*Early Morning* 195-96, original emphasis). There has been no victory, no release and the dead remain shackled to their corrosive ideology. In scene sixteen, Arthur is admitted into heaven and absorbed into the ethereal collective, forced again to live in the society he tried to destroy. In a grotesque twist he finds that the competitive ideals of the former society have become horribly universalised. Heaven is imaged as a place of cannibalism where the dead consume each other, and yet those still beholden to Victorian social morality see it as a place of inexhaustible plenitude and endless satiety. It is a concrete figuration of Bond's notion of a 'posthumous' society, one where a superabundance of sustenance and ostensible material comfort occludes and elides humane compunction and rational consideration. Nonetheless, the cannibalistic ghosts

may only ever achieve temporary respite from hunger and with the final act of the play being Victoria working out a schedule by which the inhabitants of heaven are to eat each other, the image is of a society, as in *Saved*, of stasis rather than progress. The ghosts in *Early Morning* are the vicious mores of 'social morality' given concrete manifestation, dead ideas embodied in material form. Indeed, the title of the play is itself a pun on pronouncing death prematurely, of life going on beyond its prescribed boundaries, with Bond implicitly drawing equivalence between lived experience according to the competitive demands of capitalist society and the cannibalistic mutual parasitism of the ghosts in the play.

In the 'Author's Preface' to *Lear*, Bond again castigates the lifelessness and inertia of an irrational society that saw its problems only in terms of symptoms rather than causes: 'Like ghosts we teach a dead religion, build a few more prisons to worship Caesar in, and leave it at that' (11). In the play, Bond again employs a ghost as a phantasmagorical semblance of social pressures produced by particular ideologies. In this instance the ghost is the Gravedigger's Boy who is killed by soldiers fighting for Lear's daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, in the aftermath of the civil war that ousts the autocratic, eponymous king from the throne. The ghost first appears to Lear in the cell to which he is consigned by his daughters while Lear is undergoing a significant mental collapse. He is a figure who evokes Edgar in the guise of Poor Tom from Shakespeare's original *King Lear*, establishing a rapport with Lear based on mutual consolation of their accumulated woes, the pathos in the bond which develops becoming an indication of Lear's burgeoning apprehension of human awareness and capacity for empathy.

When alive, the Gravedigger's Boy had dealt with Lear with humanity and compassion, sheltering and feeding the fugitive king and asking nothing in return. In death, however, he becomes progressively immature and infantilised, increasingly emotionally dependent on the former king in a way which echoes Shakespeare's Lear's pathetic and childlike supplications to Cordelia to withdraw together from the depredations of the world: 'Come, let's away to prison. / We two alone will sing like birds i'the' cage' (V:III 8-9). Significantly, the apparition describes his state of existence in terms of its corporeality:

When I died I went somewhere. I don't know where it was. And then I started to rot, like a body in the ground. 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 hair's turned white. Look at my arms! Feel how thin I am! (LEAR *doesn't move.*) Are you afraid to touch me? (56)

Lear is able to touch the ghost, who appears to be afflicted with the symptoms of old age. As the play progresses, stage directions indicate that he is to become progressively more emaciated and dishevelled.

The ghost accompanies Lear on his release from prison, but even in his spectral form he is not immune to the effects of the social cataclysm that Lear has unleashed. Bond figures the ghost as Lear's phantasmagorical double and sets them on the same path; yet while Lear's journey is the gradual adagio of the apprehension of insight, emotional maturity and enhanced political consciousness, the Gravedigger's Boy flinches from such things. The ghost is an incarnation of Lear's escapist temptations to secede from an active engagement with the political and social world and retreat into seclusion and nostalgia. Thereafter, however, Lear's journey is one towards the reclamation of his humanity and part of this is the necessary repudiation of the ghost's retrograde and pessimistic entreaties.

The Gravedigger's Boy's ghost is another of Bond's dead characters, like the occupants of the society of *Saved* or the dead of *Early Morning*, that embody acceptance and passivity, without a concept of the future, pathologically incapable of planning or projecting beyond their present immanent moment. When protagonists like Arthur or Lear attempt to live authentically or in a politically effective fashion, the dead that accompany these live characters function as apologists for the status quo, endorse redundant courses of (in)action and, in short, deny the necessity of and possibility for remedial social change. At the moment that Lear commits himself to active resistance and emancipatory action against the reactionary folly of Cordelia, the resistance leader, to rebuild the wall he himself had ordered the construction of, the ghost dies horribly, gored to death by his own pigs.

The most radical affirmation of Bond's 'Author's Preface' to *Lear* is not merely that capitalism's sanctioning of certain forms of violence actually saturates society and metastasises into other forms of social aggression, but the more commonplace observation that the permanent threat of nuclear destruction as 'deterrent' postulates an immediate threat to the survival of the species:

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 writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence. (*Lear* 3)

Bond's extrapolation that humankind has no future is not intended figuratively. It is an acknowledgement of the immediate, ineluctable and omnipresent threat that the use of nuclear weapons could instantly extirpate human life from the face of the planet. In *The War Plays* and its surrounding commentary, this theme of a society having foreclosed on its future reaches a critical mass in Bond's *oeuvre*. In this trilogy, the recrudescence of the figure of the ghost allows Bond not just to serve the *beaujolais nouveaux* within an existing supply of bottles, but to continue to use forceful aesthetic means to articulate the idea that urgent action and change is required because the contradictions inherent in capitalism's brutalising tendencies, shackled to the instruments of apocalypse, have already presented us with a *fait accompli*. In inscribing antagonism and threat into fundamental human relations, the nuclear deterrent actually creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where annihilation can be the only possible result, as Bond argued in a piece he wrote for *The Guardian* just prior to the 1987 general election, revealingly entitled 'A Vote for the Living':

Even if for a while nuclear deterrence worked, it would still be a defeat. We would have taught our children a form of politics that must end in disaster. Our chance is unique. If we fail to get rid of nuclear bombs, we make it far harder for them to do so. And if, long after we are dead, millions of them are killed by nuclear bombs, we will have pressed the button in our graves. (19)

The character of the Monster, the central protagonist of the first part of the trilogy, *Red Black and Ignorant*, embodies this image of thwarted potential perfectly, an individual who never had a chance so aptly commensurate with a society blindly fixated on self-destruction. He is the charred and blackened adult ghost of an unborn child destroyed while in the womb by the nuclear blast of a future apocalypse. Thus, he has been both killed and never born and yet still he has had a life. An incinerated foetus, he is a temporal and ontological paradox; he is, according to Bond, 'a man who has never been born recount[ing] the life he did not lead' (*War Plays* 343). In another *Guardian* article in which Bond castigated the Social Democrat Party (SDP) leader David Owen for his pusillanimous stance on nuclear weapons, Bond also took the opportunity to refer to the Monster, adducing the character's experience within the play as an argument against the retention and development of nuclear weapons:

His 'ghost' comments on the people who, to preserve freedom condemned him and millions of others to the perpetual imprisonment of death. He argues that a society that invests and labours to make that possible, and gambles on having to do it, ought not be called civilization. That would be the greatest double-think. It should be given its proper name: barbarism. (Bond, 'Imagine Owen' 9)

In the play the Monster narrates the action and provides an authorial perspective, making the audience aware that he has not survived the nuclear apocalypse that he describes, and that as a result the events they are to witness are 'scenes from the life I did not live' (*War Plays* 5). Again, the evocation is of an ontological order liminally balanced between existence and non-existence, another application of the simultaneity of life and death within the 'posthumous' society. At the end of a nine-section piece that presents a series of iterations modelled in a repeated structure of exposition, enactment and reflection, the Monster is killed by his own son, a soldier, who has returned home with orders to kill one person on his street to reduce the population enough to alleviate hunger and prevent food rioting. As with the Gravedigger's Boy

in *Lear*, it is the second time that the Monster has died in the play. The Monster then makes a posthumous speech in which he gives his endorsement to the parricide, exhorting the audience to praise his son 'as you would the first wheel' (*War Plays* 38). Where the Gravedigger's Boy, though vulnerable and pathetic, was a figure that came to espouse a cynical and defeatist view of the world, the Monster is a character whom Bond allows dignity and quiet authority. He is the first of Bond's ghost figures that evokes empathy: the first with a conception of temporality and finitude and the first with genuine moral consciousness. Indeed, he is perhaps the closest to a *raisonneur* figure to appear in all of Bond's plays.

In *Born*, first performed in 2006, Bond mounted perhaps his most ambitious engagement with the trope of the living dead. *Born* is set in an authoritarian future society where riot police are engaged in taking people from their homes and loading them onto trucks for transportation to an unspecified destination. Donna and Peter are Luke's parents who initially try to help him escape the rounding up, only to discover that he is part of the operation and a member of the police. Luke, dehumanised to the point of disavowing his familial ties and in a condition of total identification with the nihilistic dictates of his role, effects the seizure and removal of his parents from their home and then, with his unit, murders a mother and her baby who are apprehended when trying to abscond from the convoy. Subsequently separated from his squad, he is carried by his father back to the family home. Here the audience encounter Donna in the act of spoon-feeding a large number of dead bodies that carpet the floor of the ruined house, caring for, fussing over and addressing the dead as if they are alive, walking amongst them with a ladle and bowl. When Donna brings the corpse of the woman that Luke previously killed into the room, she speaks to Luke and slowly the dead return to life, standing up as one collective entity and gradually assembling the woman's baby from its constituent body parts. Luke appeals to the crowd of the dead to tell him, 'somethin that makes sense a' the life I 'ave t' live!' (*Born* 61), but the dead do not respond. Suddenly the scene devolves into a depiction of horrific carnage as Peter returns in full riot gear and begins beating the dead remorselessly, forcing them to move the table and chair back to the position near the window that they had originally occupied in the first scene twenty

years before. When Peter kicks out at the dead, Bond's stage directions indicate: '*They rise slowly to their feet. They have become KZ Muselmänner. They move with age-old weariness*' (Born 63). Bond's dead are envisaged as inmates of Nazi concentration camps, a category of person reduced to inhumanity, the 'living dead', deprived of the capacity for human engagement, resigned to their death. Stage directions describe the table as '*as heavy as if the world stood on it*' (63) and the dead that collapse from exhaustion are beaten with rods by other *Muselmänner* corpses until the scene collapses into frenzy as the dead collectively engage in an orgy of self-destruction. The dead fall and are killed again; as they inexorably accomplish the task of moving the table there appears to be no distinction between those that do the work and those that punish the others. When it is over, Peter and Donna escape, but Luke stays with the dead. He is executed by his former squad mates, who, in the last act of the play, open up their guns and fire on the dead: 'Shootin the dead's fulfillin' (67).

In this extraordinary *coup de théâtre*, Bond's use of the figure of the *Muselmann* foregrounds the conjunction between the constantly redeployed trope of the living dead in his plays and the nuclei of ideas in his theoretical writings associated with the difficulty of producing what he terms 'humanness' or 'human values' in a 'posthumous' society, with the absolute condition that these human values must be collectively realised if the species is to survive. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, conditions in the Nazi concentration camps were generative of a determinative methodology for identification of the human and inhuman, as, since the *Muselmänner* had evacuated all trace of their personality and were resigned to extermination by the Nazis, they were therefore held in disdain within the camps and became pariahs. Reflecting on Jean Amery's definition of the *Muselmann* as 'the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, [who] no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual' (41), Agamben states that the *Muselmänner* had 'marked the moving threshold in which man passed into non-man' (47). For Agamben, the *Muselmann* is the 'complete witness' (47) of the camps who occupies an interstitial realm between the human and inhuman.

In *Born* the *Muselmänner* provide a strict corollary to

the figure of Luke, who, though an inhuman enforcer of the state administered brutality, struggles throughout the play to open up the minimal fraction of psychic distance between himself and his acts, to assert the latent kernel of residual humanity inside him which resists the role of unquestioning authority. Like Len, Lear and Arthur, he strives to assert this humanity in the face of tremendous pressure to conform. Of course, the corporeal dead in *Born* are brutalised and suffer, but the enigmatic employment of the figure of the *Muselmann* presents us with a similar irresolvable problem: neither alive nor dead, human nor inhuman, they are in this play neither wholly blameless nor absolute victims. They batter, bludgeon and shoot each other, like all of Bond's other ghosts, dying again and again, figures of abjection, devoid of hope, their humanity utterly extinguished. Again, as with *Early Morning*, the society of the dead preys on itself. Nonetheless, this vivid scene perhaps best illustrates one of Bond's most oft-repeated definitions of drama: that it fundamentally concerns, to equal degree, 'the kitchen table and the edge of the universe' (Bond 'Notebook'). In this play it is the *Muselmänner*, those at the 'extreme situation' (Agamben 48), that perform the task of moving the kitchen table; it is only the dead, metaphorical and supposedly incorporeal, that manage to do what none of the living characters are able to accomplish themselves.

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