

Faithful or Rebellious: Bond's Historical View in *Early Morning*

XIA Yanhua^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate professor. School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

* Corresponding author.

Received 5 September 2013; accepted 12 November 2013

Abstract

Edward Bond's *Early Morning* is set in the Victorian period of British history which is usually acknowledged as the most prominent days of the British Empire. The subjects of royal conspiracy, murder and cannibalism of the play make it controversial. Being confused about Bond's comment that "the events of this play are true" in the preface, the truth he revealed in the play is too exaggerated and too bloody to be grasped and accepted by the majority of audience. Through analyzing the play from the perspective of new historicism, Bond's view of history is revealed in this paper. His distortion of history is rebelliously faithful, which calls upon audience of *Early Morning* to concentrate on the movement of history rather than history itself. With such a historical view, the laws governing political life is lucidly portrayed in *Early Morning*.

Key words: Edward Bond; *Early Morning*; New historicism; History; Victoria

XIA Yanhua (2013). Faithful or Rebellious: Bond's Historical View in *Early Morning*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(3), 29-33. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130703.2914>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130703.2914>

1. MIXED RECEPTION OF *EARLY MORNING*

Born in 1934, Edward Bond's emergence as a playwright is in accordance with the "New Wave of British Theatre" catalyzed by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. Bond is often mentioned in the same breath as John

Osborne (1929-1994), Harold Pinter (1930-2008) and Arnold Wesker (1932-). In his childhood, Bond came across World War II in which he was evacuated to the countryside for safety. However, when he was sent back to London, he witnessed the disasters brought by the German bombings on London. Themes such as violence, social alienation and terror of war are common in his plays. This is probably related to the experience of the evacuation. Bond left school very early at fifteen with very basic and poor education. He started working much earlier than his peers. Because of this, he got a deep sense of social exclusion that led directly to his political orientation.

Edward Bond is a self-made playwright. In the years following his dropout from school, he not only did various jobs in many different places and fields, completed his national service in the national army occupation forces quartered in Vienna between 1953 and 1955, but also learned on his own with an impressive eagerness for knowledge and writing. His service in the army offered him the opportunity to attest the cruel violence incubated under normal social order and decided to be a writer. After the service, he found a job in a London theater and found himself hooked by everything there from the script to the stage. The performances of the Berliner Ensemble during the summer time of 1956 impressed him deeply and made him start writing drama sketches. His first works, *The Fiery Tree* and *Klaxon in Atreus' Place*, were completed in June 1958 and submitted to the Royal Court Theatre. Since then, he joined the newly formed writing group of the Royal Court. His success, like that of his peers, owes much to the determination of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theater to foster new talents.

In the 1960s, The Theatres Act 1843 of Britain was still in force and required any script to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office for approval. Among Bond's early plays, *Saved* and *Early Morning* were banned by Lord Chamberlain. *Saved* looks into the lives of a group of suppressed lower class youths in Southern London-

as Bond describes the play—by an unfair social and economic system and incapable of inputting meaning into their lives, who eventually fall into barbarous violence toward each other. The hero of the play, Len, tries to mend the harms caused by people tearing each other violently into pieces intentionally and successfully. The play communicates the root causes of social violence and the reasons by which individual freedom was deplored. *Saved* contains the bloody violence of a group of young men stoning a baby into death in the pram. *Early Morning* was suspected of parodying the Victorian historical figures including Queen Victoria, her husband Albert, Prime Minister Disraeli, Prime Minister Gladstone and Florence Nightingale. However, Bond and Royal Court Theater strived so hard to put the plays on the stage and finally succeeded in defying the censor.

His historical play *Early Morning*, first directed by William Gaskill, was presented at the Royal Court Theatre in London on March 31, 1968 in 21 scenes with breaks after Scene 5 and Scene 15. The play sets its historical background of the Victorian England ruled by Queen Victoria. Most of the names of the play are identical with the Victorian historical figures. As a historical play of tragicomic style, *Early Morning* was based on Bond's knowledge of Queen Victoria. Like his former play *Saved*, *Early Morning* was also first banned by the Lord Chamberlain due to its surreal portrayal of history.

The play can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Victoria and her husband Prince Albert have brought up a pair of Siamese twins, George and Arthur. As the country was in the state of decaying, Victoria arranges a marriage between George and Nurse Florence Nightingale in hope that the marriage can distract people's hostile attitude towards the government as well as pacify them. However, the couple is not in good terms with each other. So Albert plots a coup with the Prime Minister Disraeli against the Queen and a lesbian relationship between Queen Victoria and her daughter-in-law Florence Nightingale is also revealed. In order to make their coup looks legal, Albert seeks support from Arthur. Arthur keeps his neutral attitude. Albert and Disraeli hire Len, a death criminal killed and ate a man guilty of jumping a cinema queue, to be the assassin to kill Victoria in a picnic. However, they fail and Albert is poisoned to death by Nightingale; George is seriously wounded by his mother due to her misuse of a rifle. Being in the danger of getting cut apart by Disraeli, the twins flee away. They reach their father's grave and see Albert's ghost image. Albert kills George and urges Arthur to revenge for him. After a series of tortures which include Arthur's rescue of Len from an execution party led by Joyce, Len's former girlfriend, and William Gladstone, Len's revealing of the twins' whereabouts to the Queen, Arthur is brought back to his mother and George is revived accidentally. When Disraeli plans to kill the twins, he is shot dead by his own men won by Gladstone who dies of a heart attack. Disappointed with

all the evils, George commits suicide by shooting himself. The second death of George makes Arthur become mad. He thinks that the ultimate goal of human civilization is the total destruction of mankind. Then he uses treachery learnt from his mother to destroy both armies by holding a tug-of-war beside a loose beach cliff where all of them fall off. Arthur kills himself when his goal is realized.

In the second part, the scene is set in heaven which is also ruled by Queen Victoria. The whole dramatis personae get reunited in a cannibalistic heaven after falling off Beachy Head. George appears again among the ghosts and reattaches himself to Arthur. Everybody eats each other and no pain is felt because the eaten part quickly grows fit again. Arthur is repulsed by cannibalism and refuses to eat, which makes George starve. The twins drag each other. The site lets the heavenly mob suspects the flesh is poisoned and plans to revolt the Queen. In order to put down the rebellion, the Queen's family members agree to eat Arthur and lock up his skeleton in the coffin. While the whole family sit together to enjoy cannibalism again, the ghost image of Arthur rises from the coffin like that of Jesus' resurrection, without being noticed by the rest.

Due to its extreme distortion of historical facts, *Early Morning* drew a lot of debate so that it "functioned more as a media event and a rallying point for 1960s progressives than a memorable theatrical entertainment in itself" (Poore, 2011, p.26) before being discussed seriously. Critics such as Irving Wardle, Jeremy Kingston and J. C. Trewin gave negative comments to *Early Morning*. For Wardle (1969), *Early Morning* was a "solipsistic muddle; confusingly plotted and projecting a wrathfully infantile view of existence." Most other critics were equally dismissive, regarding it as blaspheme to the widely respected Queen Victoria and her husband Albert. Its combination of humor and "agro-effects" evoked quite unfavorable mixed reception. Although Ronald Bryden and Martin Esslin did support it, Methuen balked at its publication, fearing law suit stemming from Bond's comment that "the events of this play are true" (Bond, 2001b, p.315) in the preface. In order to justify this comment and give the play a positive assessment it deserves, it's desirable to apply new historicism to examine the subjects of conspiracy, murder and cannibalism of this play.

2. NEW HISTORICISM AND ITS PRACTICE

New historicism emerges as a theory first in USA in the late 1970s and early 1980. It is an approach of critical interpretation which takes power relations as the most basic context the study of all kinds of texts. "As a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible" (Brannigan, 1998, p.6). To some degree, this means that new historicist critics should not only be interested in uncovering the historical contexts

in which literary works are rooted and embraced but also be interested in understanding the importance of the past for the present, especially the power forms which were of dominating roles in the past and how they are removed and replaced in the present.

To fully comprehend the theory and practice of new historicism, it is necessary to consider that this school of thought has emerged in reaction to the practice of traditional historicism. Traditional historicism insists on “the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds” (Hamilton, 1996, p.2). Both historicism and new historicism refer to the return of history in literary criticism. Historicists return to history to find a dramatic vision through which they study the past in terms of the past. On the contrary, new historicists return to history to form a dramatic vision by which they examine the past in terms of the present, showing their vision of reality is the truth. So, what distinguishes historicism from new historicism is that the latter draw connections between the past and the present.

New historicism is a product of postmodernism. With the arrival of postmodernism, a school of new historicists turn to construct the present in terms of the past by revisiting and renewing our images of the past. To observe the sharp contrast between new historicism and traditional historicism, F. R. Ankersmit advises us to compare history and literary to a tree:

Compare history to a tree. ...With the postmodernist historiography...the choice no longer falls on the trunk or on the branches, but on the leaves of the tree. ...It is characteristic of leaves that they are relatively loosely attached to the tree and when autumn or winter comes, they are blown away by the wind. ...What remains now of Western historiography is to gather the leaves that have been blown away blown away and to study them independently of their origins. This means that our historical consciousness has, so to speak, been turned inside out. (Ankersmit, 1997, p.290)

That is to say, the traditional historians attract our attention to the trunk and the branches to that tree to highlight what happened in the past as a phenomenon independent of the present. In a sense, traditional historicists illustrate the past in terms of the past; new historicist writers focus on the leaves of the tree which are blown off in autumn and winter. However, they recollect these leaves in relation to the social and political questions of the present, studying them independently of their origins. This process helps them release their historical senses from the dominance of the past. In this regard, new historicism is characterized by a movement from the past to the present. This movement vindicates that the past can be best analyzed and understood in the light of the present. Through “retexting the already texted past” (Denning, 1992, p.5), new historicists seek to reconstruct history to reflect the present.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot writes:

The historical sense involves a perception, not only for the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that...the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

That is to say, artistic novelty does not arise from vacuum, but it depends on the “pastness of the past” as well as the existence of the past in the present. To put it in Steven Greenblatt’s terms, the aesthetic interaction between literature and history indicates that the basic task of writers is to establish an aesthetic negotiation between literature and history. So, in practice writers can rethink and reconstruct history to dramatize the present, composing a sort of extratextual reality, which is what Greenblatt calls “a negotiation with the dead”.

3. NEW HISTORICAL VISION IN *EARLY MORNING*

As we know, from after the war to the late 1960s, the crisis of modernity in Britain had begun to take hold that led to an on-growing questioning and misreading of the past, especially the Victorians. The brave indictments of modernity brought the notion that the Victorian history was undoubtedly the bad old days. In *Early Morning*, Edward Bond rebelliously presented the Victorians as a ‘black number’ that prevents society and human beings from making progress.

To speak with the dead, Bond considers that the scientific comprehension of history is not the outcome of hearing a single voice. Rather, the reasonable interpretation of history hinges on various voices. According to Harold Bloom, misprision is perverse and willful revisionism. It is the process by which a strong writer misreads or misinterprets his predecessors so as to clear enough space for himself to produce his own original works. Holding that history has no golden ages or absolute truths, Bond shows a considerable literary talent of misreading in *Early Morning*.

The play deals with a sheer historical distortion in which Bond portrays the cruelty and inhumanity of Victorian political system. This portrait is best illustrated through the tragedy of the royal family. In the play, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert is not a harmonious couple, as remembered by us. They never give up conspiring against each other. They have bred a pair of Siamese twins¹ named as George and Arthur. Victoria does her best to protect her throne and popularity by arranging a royal marriage

¹ Also known as conjoined twins, referring to identical twins joined in utero. It is a rare phenomenon with the estimated occurrence ranging from 1 in 50,000 births to 1 in 200,000 births, with a somewhat higher incidence in Southwest Asia and Africa

between George and Florence Nightingale, a young nurse. She believes such royal marriage will certainly increase her popularity and pacify people at the same time. Albert and the prime minister Disraeli conspired together to overthrow Victoria from the throne. Hoping their coup wearing the appearance of legality, they force Arthur to join them:

ALBERT: It's my sons. Not George-when we kill Victoria he'll come to heel, he's just her tool-it's Arthur. I want him to join us.

DISRAELI: I hope he would. He's heir after Prince George. It would have given our coup the appearance of legality. But there's no more time.
(Bond, 2001b, p.319)

By falsely charging against Victoria abusing her power for her opinion that prison is the best place for the people who are brave and dream of building up the British Empire, Albert deceives Arthur into believing their coup is necessary and righteous. In comparing Albert's persuasion to Arthur with the textbooks of history, it is easily found that Bond has distorted the historical facts. This distortion leads us to perceive it as an absurd fact in the light of Victoria's adoration Albert— "I love him more than I can say, and I shall do everything in my power to render the sacrifice he has made" (Victoria, 2013). Nevertheless, it's doubtless that Victoria is the maker of British Great Empire. But it seems Bond has given her a parody in *Early Morning*.

To truly understand Bond's intention, we must remember a fact that the prominence of Victoria's reign doesn't mean she has no obstacles. She did encounter hard times during her reign. "Opponents stir up roit, attempting to murder the Queen, once in 1840 and twice in 1841" (Browne, 2006, p.10). During the reign of Victoria, William Gladstone became the Prime Minister in 1868 and 1880. His government disturbs the Queen in many reforms, including reducing the authority of the House of Lords, elections by secret ballot and the extension of the franchise (Arnstein, 2005, p.4). Victoria's lesbianism in the play reminds of John Brown², her Highland servant. After the death of Albert, Brown becomes her close advisor. People mocked that King John Brown was their real ruler. Gossip spreads all over the country that Her Majesty remarried to John Brown. From these leaves/events in Victorian history, it can be concluded that corruption lay behind the prominence of Victorian Britain. So, in the last scene, Bond elaborates "the notion of two worlds, taking place first of all on earth and then in the

² John Brown (1826–1883), a Scottish servant and favorite of Queen Victoria for many years. He was appreciated by the Queen for his competence and companionship, but resented by some other politicians for his influence of politics. The exact nature of his relationship with Victoria was the subject of great speculation by contemporary scholars, and continues to be controversial today.

heaven, where all the characters meet again after they die" (Mangan, 2010, p.18). In heaven, each character becomes a cannibal.

Cannibalism is *Early Morning's* dominant image, complemented by the repeated event (once on earth, once in heaven) of a poisoned picnic. The endless consumption of human flesh and poisoned wine and cake suggests the deadly pattern of consumption in which British society is locked. (Poore, 2011, p.27)

They eat each other and the eaten parts grow anew in a short time. Nobody feels pain or resentment. Their indulgence in cannibalism in heaven is just a representation of man eating man on the earth and the boring life style driven by commercialism of the post-war economy, which is objected by the young generation who long for changing and creative life and work.

Through misreading, Bond approaches history of Victorian England in terms of imaginative structure to erase Aristotle's notion that "plausibility has been the measure of dramatic truth" (Spencer, 1992, p.43). His surreal treatment of the Victorian history discloses new possibilities for treating history, which evinces that the purpose of the new historical theatre is to dramatize the past. The imaginative structure enables Bond to approach history as reflected in the inner world of the characters. Through his absolute imagination, Bond secures the opportunity to dramatize the realities of the past in one single play. In light of new historicism, this dramatization of the past can generate empathy in present audience since the harsh political infighting, secret plots and corrupted sex indulgence of the royal house are revealed constantly in the political life of today. The past and the present negotiate best in the audience.

4. HISTORICAL VIEW COMMUNICATED THROUGH *EARLY MORNING*

Comparing with Bond's *Early Morning*, many other plays containing Victorian settings or characters staged at around the same period were far less rebellious and controversial, such as Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* and Leopold Lewis's *The Bells*, both produced in January, 1968. Political playwright William Douglas-Home (1912-1992) was as productive as Bond. His Victorian drama *The Queen's Highland Servant* didn't trouble the Lord Chamberlain when it was submitted one year earlier than *Early Morning*. Peter Barnes' *The Ruling Class* originally staged at the Nottingham Playhouse in November 1968 provides a valuable point of similarity with *Early Morning* with respect to its representations of the conservatism of the Victorians in the theatre. Both plays address the Victorian history with similar reverence towards the historical figures, but *The*

Ruling Class went much more commercially successful than *Early Morning* and was further performed in the Piccadilly Theatre later on and was finally filmed. However, a true classic will never be ignored or totally forgotten. *Early Morning* finally got the recognition it deserves. At the turning point of the Millennium, The Methuen Drama produces *The Methuen Book of Sixties Drama* which only consists of five plays in 2000. *Early Morning* is just one of them³. In the new century, it has been repeatedly brought onto the stages of different countries which include China, etc.

“History is not the prerogative of the historian... it is, rather, a social form of knowledge: the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands” (Samuel, 1994, p.8). In order to understand history better, Bond states that he writes a series of historical plays to deal with the important turning points in history in “Notes on Acting the Woman”. By means of using surrealistic theatrical style in *Early Morning*, the horrors of Victorian imperialism are fully reflected. Edward Bond’s historical view becomes clear through illuminating the historical present by uniting the past and the present, composing a dialectical relationship between the real and the fictional. His understanding of history does not rest on recording historical events as they are. Instead, he tends to discover the laws governing the movement of history, called as “ideological patterns” by Bond. In “A Manifesto for Other People”, he says,

History differs from evolution. In evolution animals adapt to change in their environment, in their site. In history, we change the site (which is our technological power) but do not adapt to it because society’s rulers (and owners) resist change. That is the structural origin of injustice. (Bond, 2001a, p.309)

In *Early Morning*, Edward Bond has indicted his understanding of the contemporary history which has been distorted by the upper class and lost its voice in reality. The archetype of monarchy and repression of the upper class since the Victorian period have personified the social culture of our age. The rebellion created by oppression and the corruption of those who try to sustain a corruptive system. Judging from our own experience, the events described in the play are true, as said by Bond in the preface. “Indeed, Bond’s work develops a reasoning man’s fable of our times” (Castillo, 1986, p.78). These “ideological patterns” highlight how history has gone wrong and how we can correct them by analyzing the events in history. This new historicist vision can also help us find out the mistakes of the past that prevent us from comprehending the essence of our “living present” emphasized by both Husserl and Derrida.

Bond’s dramatic strategy in *Early Morning* indicates that we should release the past from the old fashions of traditional historicism which handcuffs writers’ creativity. In releasing such imagination, Bond vindicates that the primary obligation of a new historicist playwright is not to reproduce historical events but to misread such events to amend history in abandoning the mythologies of the past. Such misreading is not either totally faithful or completely rebellious to historical facts, but it is rebelliously faithful, which enables Bond to call upon his audience to concentrate on the movement of history rather than history itself. That is why Bond dares to say at the beginning of *Early Morning* that “the events in the whole play are true” (Bond, 2001b, p.315).

REFERENCES

- Ankersmit, F. R. (1997). Historiography and postmodernism. In K. Jenkins (Ed.), *The postmodern history reader*. London: Routledge.
- Arnstein, W. (2005). *Queen Victoria*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bond, E. (2001a). A manifesto for other people. In G. Whybrow (Ed.), *The Methuen book of sixties drama*. London: Methuen.
- Brannigan, J. (1998). *New historicism and cultural materialism*. London: Macmillan.
- Browne, G. (2006). *Queen Victoria*. London: Methuen.
- Castillo, D. A. (1986). Dehumanized or inhuman: Doubles in Edward Bond. *South Central Review*, 3(2), 78-89.
- Denning, G. (1992). *Mr. Bright’s bad language: Passion, power and theatre on the bounty*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Early morning. (2001b). In G. Whybrow (Ed.), *The Methuen book of sixties drama*. London: Methuen.
- Eliot, T. S. (2013, June 15). Tradition and the individual talent. Retrieved from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237868?page=1>
- Hamilton, Paul (1996). *Historicism*. London: Routledge.
- Mangan, M. (2010). *Edward Bond*. Plymouth: North Cote House.
- Poore, Benjamin (2011). *Heritage, nostalgia and modern British theatre: Staging the Victorians*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Samuel, R. (1994). *Theatres of memory: Past and present in contemporary culture*. London: Verso.
- Spencer, J. S. (1992). *Dramatic strategies in the plays of Edward Bond*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Victoria, A. (2013, June 18). Historic royal speeches and writings. Retrieved from <http://www.royal.gov.uk/pdf/victoria.pdf>
- Wardle, I. (1969, March 14). Upsetting our idols. *The Times*.

³ The rest four are *Roots* by Arnold Wesker, *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* by John Arden, *Loot* by Joe Orton and *The Ruling Class* by Peter Barnes.