

Young Civilization

I want to make three points. Firstly, it ought to shock us that children's lives are now so dominated by electronic media: TV, films, DVDs, computer games. All these depend on exciting basic responses, on the instant gratification that comes from novelty and ceaselessly changing fashion. It is a children's prison. Imagine that at each football match the rules were changed to improve the game. The point is that the empty excitement depends on the rules never changing. Or think of a journey on a rollercoaster – there is no destination, the excitement is the ups and downs. The prison of consumption is like that. It promises the new but gives only the old.

The big corporations *bully* children into consuming. This is the white market. There is also a shadow market of drugs and the bravura of vandalism and violence. The white market and the shadow market are parasitic on each other. Each depends on the addiction to empty excitement stimulated by the other.

That is the first point. The second point concerns the “self”. Elsewhere I have described this at length, here I can summarise. Most understanding of the human self is reactionary and reductive. We inherit the basics of this understanding from religions and civil laws of the past. The self is seen as an isolated soul answerable to God – or, increasingly, an animal product of genes. Instead we should understand the self as a “self-and-society” – that there are “two societies”, one in us, in the “self-and-society”, and one external to us. Neither may exist without *being* also the other's existence. Yet each of us is a distinct individual – and paradoxically society is individual in each of us. Society has institutions but it also *thinks* in the self. The paradox is at the centre of the problem of humanness. It is why happiness is notoriously complex. It means that the goalposts run about in the game and get to kick the ball. This paradox is the origin of drama and its only subject.

How does the human problem come about? A baby isn't an untrained wild animal. It is born with the need to be at home in the world. The need is innate in the functioning of its body and brain. Its crying and laughing are extreme and yet astonishingly each may override the other almost in an instant. Imagine the two pans of the scales of justice. In an adult they stay in their place. In the infant they spin about wildly from side to side – but not illogically. They are logical because the infant is creating a “self”, which is its way of seeking to be at home in the world. It creates its self by interpreting its environment and learning to survive in it. It gives meaning to its first society.

Adult society is different and there the first aim will logically turn into the need to achieve justice, not just survival. This may even call for sacrifice (because by then the pans of the scales are rigidly in place). The meaning of justice will depend on the changing historical situation. But note that this aim, justice, is implicit even in the baby. It is the human imperative. So there is a conflict between something permanent and something always changing – or there would be, except that society is also in us and so

we are in conflict with ourselves as well as society. Or, the goalposts get to kick the ball. That is the human paradox. We make ourselves human only when we make our society more just. It is the logic of the human drama.

As all societies are unjust there is a conflict between the “two societies” – the one in us, and the “self-and-society”, and the one external to us. The first *must* seek justice, even in conflict with itself. It is the self-imperative. The ramifications of this are as complex as human psychology itself. It is like the eighty-eight keys of the piano: they can never run out of tunes. For instance, it is a tragic irony that the unjust can live with their injustice only by taking revenge on themselves. The infant instantiates the imperative in itself in the act of creating its self, so without the imperative we would not even be *self*-conscious. Drama is our only means of *enacting* humanness in the face of the necessary contrivances and compromises of culture and law. It is the agon of Antigone and Creon.

In history the “two societies” are slowly reconciled in greater justice, ultimately through the pressure of material reality. Humanness must always recreate itself in the meaning of changing situations. Obviously, the first point I have made above – roughly, about our present way of life – is in conflict with this second point, the creation of our humanness. We do not know this because we still live in a memory of the past. But the conflict threatens us with disaster. The past was confused and superstitious because its problems were urgent but its knowledge limited. History is in the lie-truth – truth is had only at the expense of some untruth. But at least the past sought understanding. We do not. Our society has begun to practice ignorance.

A child knows the *sense* of right and wrong before it knows its society’s definitions of them or its definition of justice. Nature is in evolution and has no moral sense, it just does things. We are in history because we have the sense of value. We force ourselves to make moral choices. Human value is summed up in the inherent imperative “seek justice”. But there is an alternative value. It is one that is useful in itself but destructive when it is followed obsessively. It is the mistake that lies in the first point I made above: money, capitalist consumption. When this is allied with our techno-scientific culture authority is given dangerous powers. Authority seeks to solve the increasing human problems of consumer society by techno-scientific means. As these problems become desperate the balance in the lie-truth will change. Then authority will treat us as things. First it would have to abort the human imperative. One way to do this would be to turn the imperative against itself, by turning justice into revenge. But there are other ways, more instrumental and insidious.

This is my third point. Put simply, we become too clever for our own good. The long term consequences if this would be inevitable: we would cease to be in history and return to evolution. We have no warranty to assume that we must remain in history – that is just human hubris. The new evolution would be a holistic technology from which there is no escape. At some time this crisis must face every autonomous species that has a technological metabolic relation with its environment. Perhaps in our galaxy there are many post-historical societies of dehumanized beings. If you lose your humanness by

definition you cannot know you have lost it. You destroy the sick and the unsocial as if they were useless tools.

There are no techno-scientific solutions to our basic problems. The problems impel us to be human, but technology could just erase them. Only drama can resolve them humanly. It is as if the tool must understand itself. Drama is the logic of this human creativity.

Society – in the subtle form of “two societies” – must seek to coerce adolescents into conformity. Otherwise the consumer society would collapse on all its fronts. Ironically in that society you consume in order to pay the bills. There to be at home in the world you pay the mortgage on the house. A bank balance replaces the human imperative. The social soap-opera of sentimentality and pathos replaces the drama of the self and justice. Some of these things are necessary, obviously others are not. Theatre can teach young people to survive in such a society with self-respect. It can teach the skills needed to prosper and how to balance rights with obligations. It anticipates adult obstacles and temptations. It gives young people confidence. But it is not drama.

Why not? I have explained how the child created a self by dramatising its experience so that it could be at home in the world. To do this it balanced its resources of intellect and affect. This *is* the self of which it is conscious. It created its humanness. Now let me surprise you: after the age of fourteen you can learn nothing, and by the age of fifteen you may even have forgotten what you had already learnt. But by that time each of us has lived all the tragedy, comedy, longing, despair, triumph and sublimity of being human. Later we acquire skills of mind and body and accumulate information – but we do not become *in-formed* in our humanness if we lose the creative power with which the self created itself. Our society seeks to destroy that creative power. That isn't my opinion, it's the consequence of the three points I have made and which are substantiated by common experience.

Drama is self creativity. It teaches nothing. Instead it confronts human creativity with its own needs. It does not prepare children to enter society, it prepares them to enter more fully into their humanness. It is not interested in citizenship but in the Promethean self, in the rightful discontent of being human. It is not involved in self-expression, which is a flabby cliché, but in the creation of shared humanness. How else can young people survive even the *memory* of what many of their elders did in the last century? Or leave a world more innocent than the one they entered? Perhaps those elders learnt to accept injustices and contradictions. Drama confronts young people with situations in which that injustice has seeped down into their own lives, or which they can easily foresee in the future. At that age such things are unacceptable. And if at that age drama ignites the self's creativity by respecting it and trusting its strength, then society will be less able to destroy it later. We will have given it for ever the indomitable power of youth. In time it may make civilization young again.

I have written of history, justice, the future and other important concepts. And yes, I have an intellectual terror at what we may be doing to the future. But you don't live on that level when you enter a school hall. Nor do you have to accept my arguments. You can

know at least the truth resulting from what I say just by meeting young people. You do not even have to enter the school hall, you can already hear it outside in the voices in the corridor. Drama is the voice of history and humanness and young people speak it if we listen to them. That is why I write plays for Big Brum.

Edward Bond

May 2007