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*La voix dans tous ses états*

## Ethical Engagement with/through voice in Edward Bond's *The Under Room*

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**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article étudie les diverses façons dont *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond interroge la voix de façon éthique. L'utilisation explicite de la ventriloquie dans la pièce, qui résulte de la division entre le corps et la voix du personnage immigré, met en scène l'impossibilité de situer l'Autre. Simultanément, Bond aborde implicitement la notion de ventriloquisme idéologique et montre comment la voix d'un personnage peut être exprimée à travers le recours à des clichés et des codes d'expression classiques. Également, l'introduction d'un langage inventé et incompréhensible parvient à représenter le caractère perturbateur de la voix du traumatisme, défiant toute compréhension et toute identification. Cet article cherche à montrer comment ces trois stratégies, tout comme l'impossibilité de toute responsabilité éthique de *The Under Room*, obligent les spectateurs à accepter l'incertitude et faire l'expérience de la « capacité négative ».

**ABSTRACT.** *This article examines several ways that Edward Bond's The Under Room addresses the question of how to engage ethically with/through the voice. The play's explicit use of ventriloquism, achieved through the splitting of the immigrant character into body and voice, dramatizes the impossibility of locating the Other. At the same time, Bond implicitly addresses the notion of ideological ventriloquism by demonstrating how a character's voice can be taken over by clichés and conventional codes of expression. Last but not least, the introduction of an unintelligible made-up language effectively represents the disruptive aspect of the voice of trauma which defies comprehension and identification. It is my contention that all three strategies in The Under Room constitute an unsettling experience in which the audience is encouraged to embrace uncertainty and suspend judgment, as a way to develop their "negative capability" when faced with the impossibility of ethical responsibility.*

**MOTS-CLÉS :** capacité négative, cliché, responsabilité éthique, trauma, ventriloquie

**KEYWORDS:** *cliché, ethical responsibility, negative capability, trauma, ventriloquism*

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*The Under Room*, first staged in 2005 by Big Brum at Roade School, Northampton, belongs to a trilogy known as the *Chair* plays, all of which are set in the year 2077. Like *Have I None* and *Chair*, *The Under Room* introduces the audience to a totalitarian state where humanity is severely put to the test and the characters are forced to make impossible choices to preserve their humanness. The play revolves around three characters: an immigrant, Joan, and Jack. Joan comes home to discover that an immigrant has broken into her apartment in his attempt to evade the army's pursuit. Rather than denouncing him, however, Joan decides to keep him hidden in the cellar and help him find a way to cross the border to the North by contacting Jack, a fixer. Tension arises as the money the immigrant brought with him mysteriously disappears and Jack threatens to turn both Joan and the immigrant over to the army. It is now revealed that Jack is a swindler, who works for both the resistance and the army. Unexpectedly, the immigrant finds himself drawn to this "evil," seemingly immoral character, more than to the charitable Joan and expresses his wish to run away with Jack. Joan kills the immigrant in an outburst of rage.

It is not difficult to discern the many Pinteresque aspects present in *The Under Room*, such as the menace brought about by the intrusion of a stranger, the bare setting pointing toward an oppressive society in which people have to make do with whatever the situation presents them with, as well as the volatility and elusiveness of the past. Yet, what renders this piece particularly Bondian is the split of the immigrant character into body and voice. Furthermore, the unexpected ending, in which the mother figure Joan suddenly turns into a monster and commits a hideous crime, while disturbing the audience, also prompts us to contemplate our own attitude and responsibility to the victim of trauma. In this article, I will argue that Bond's exploitation of ventriloquism through formal representation and clichéd speech, as well as his use of a made-up language of trauma, have invested *The Under Room* and its audience with a "negative capability" – understood as the ability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason," of "remaining content with half knowledge" (Keats 193-4). An influential, complex, but vaguely defined concept, negative capability is simultaneously disruptive and generative in terms of ethical engagement.

### Ventriloquism and the Other

In his stage direction, Edward Bond explains in a detailed note the split of the immigrant character:

The Dummy Actor speaks the Dummy's words. Usually he stands upstage left. He wears blue jeans, brown suede shoes and a bright, deep-red shirt buttoned at collar and cuffs. The Dummy is a basic human effigy: trunk, arms, legs, head. It has no other features. It suggests stuffed white pillowslips or bolsters. It is about half the size of the Dummy Actor. (Bond 38)

The appearance of a Dummy and an actor speaking its words instantly conjures up the art of ventriloquism. Nevertheless, against expectation, the Dummy resists its role as instrument for the illusion forming process, as its lack of facial features and its idleness throughout the whole play prevent it from “coming to life.” In addition, the distance between the Dummy and the Dummy Actor as well as their minimal interaction deny the necessary conditions for a conventional ventriloquist performance. If ventriloquism is “illusion without deception,” according to David Goldblatt’s succinct definition (37), such an apparent lack of illusion raises concern as to whether what transpires in *The Under Room* qualifies as ventriloquism at all.

When asked how the Dummy Actor is supposed to act, Bond replies: “The actor has to be like the Dummy: impassive. He gestures only rarely and usually speaks without emotion. The emotion is in the Dummy” (qtd in Tuaille 96). In other words, the faceless, nameless Dummy is the vent that speaks through the actor, who is effectively transformed into its mouthpiece. Ventriloquism in *The Under Room*, as such, is further complicated, for it is not simply the matter of giving voice to an inanimate object but of returning the human voice to a subject who has been reduced to a mere thing. For it is clear that in the eyes of Joan, the immigrant, as a victim of trauma and violence, is but an impassive object for sympathy. Not only so, the immigrant himself is acutely aware of his dummy status, claiming “I am nothing. I make myself nothing. It is better. Since a long time. I am not real. I listen to myself and I say who is that who is speaking those stupid things” (Bond 43). As the play progresses, we witness the immigrant’s ongoing negotiation between the materiality of his body and the immateriality of his voice in a quest to regain his subjectivity – a process symbolised in the act of exchanging clothes between the Dummy Actor and the Dummy.

Faced with the impossible challenge of representing trauma and Otherness, Bond resorts to embodiment. However, the embodiment of the voice through the Dummy Actor is not meant to facilitate the process of identifying the locus of the voice, trauma, or the Other. On the contrary, it is a strategy aimed at heightening the confusion the audience will experience when encountering the acousmatic voice. According to Mladen Dolar, the acousmatic voice is

a voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place. It is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn’t quite work, the voice doesn’t stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn’t match the body. (Dolar 60-61)

Even though it is true that as audience, we have no trouble locating the apparent source of the voice, the ontological status of the Dummy Actor essentially transforms this tangible, embodied voice into an acousmatic one. The Dummy Actor does not occupy the same theatrical space as Jack, Joan, or even the Dummy, nor does he belong to the world of the spectators, even though he is seen and heard by them. Thus, the locus of his ontology is a space of in-betweenness that resists definition and representation, which explains why his presence assumes

a spectral quality. It also explains why the acousmatic voice associated with the Dummy Actor produces an uncanny, haunting effect on its listener. The uncanny lies not in the superficial resemblance of the Dummy figure to man, as in the case of a doll, but in the transformation of a human being into an inert thing to the extent that the Dummy is imbued with humanness.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the immigrant character being split into two, the gaze of the audience is constantly forced to oscillate between the Dummy, with which the other two characters interact, and the Dummy Actor, who is but the embodiment of the immigrant's voice, and whose physical presence is too substantial to be simply ignored. This desynchronisation between the visible and the audible keeps the audience in a state of confusion and uncertainty, which paradoxically brings them closer to meeting with the immigrant. The immigrant is neither the Dummy nor the Dummy Actor, not even the combination of the two. He is simultaneously present and absent, a figure the audience constantly searches and constantly fails to locate: in short, an emblem of the Other. Like Derrida's spectre, the immigrant in *The Under Room* is a subversive force that defies knowledge and threatens to undermine the audience's certainty in sensory perception as well as rationality.<sup>2</sup> The use of such unusual artificial device that is the Dummy recalls the two dummies in evening dress in Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* (1975), and can be said to be Bond's appropriation of the Brechtian defamiliarization or estrangement technique. Presenting the voice as a separate entity that is theatrically embodied, Bond strives to make clear the strangeness and discontinuities of the human voice while encouraging the audience to actively get involved in the experience with the Other, no matter how disorienting it can be. However, as we shall soon discover, Bond's engagement with ventriloquism in *The Under Room* is not limited to formal representation through a dummy and a dummy actor. In the following section, I will proceed to discuss the ventriloquism that animates Joan and demonstrate how this metaphor for the structural violence of language is related to a subject's "authentic inability to think" (Arendt 1971, 417).

### The Cliché as a Mode of Ventriloquism

It has been pointed out by Gideon Hausner that in her analysis of Eichmann's crime, Hannah Arendt assigns a central role to language, and that her coining of the phrase "the banality of evil" is used to address this specific character of his crime in relation to language. She writes:

[...] officialese became his language because he was incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché [...] The longer one listened to him, the more

<sup>1</sup> Bond characterizes the Dummy as "an image of humanness with its own central dynamics" (qtd in Tuaillon 95).

<sup>2</sup> Defining the spectre, Derrida writes: « C'est quelque chose qu'on ne sait pas, justement, et on ne sait pas si précisément cela est, si ça existe, si ça répond à un nom et correspond à une essence. On ne le sait pas : non par ignorance, mais parce que ce non-objet, ce présent non-présent, cet être-là d'un absent ou d'un disparu ne relève pas du savoir. Du moins plus de ce qu'on croit savoir sous le nom de savoir. On ne sait pas si c'est vivant ou si c'est mort. » (Derrida 25-26)

obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such. (Arendt 1963a, 48-49)

Arendt identifies Eichmann's adherence to clichés, stock phrases, conventional codes of expression and conduct as demonstration of his "authentic inability to think" (Arendt 1971, 417). Eichmann does not speak the Nazi language but is rather spoken by it. His continued impersonation – in other words, his autistic ventriloquism – of technocratic Nazi language is, for Arendt, the utmost moral scandal.<sup>3</sup>

Placed next to Eichmann's crime, Joan's transgression in *The Under Room* certainly is incomparable. Yet, in essence, they both illustrate what Arendt theorises as the banality of evil. The notion has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted as proclaiming that evil is common to everybody, or that there is an Eichmann in each one of us. The "banality" that Arendt mentioned, however, refers to the rootlessness of evil, the absence of evil motives. She further explains:

Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think, that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely will he be to yield to evil. An indication of such superficiality is the use of clichés, and Eichmann [...] was a perfect example. (Arendt 1963b, 7)

Throughout the play, Joan has continuously demonstrated her superficiality, not only in her submission to clichés but also in her reluctance to engage with contradiction. From the beginning, Joan is presented as a character highly susceptible to influence. In their first encounter, Joan asks the immigrant how long he has been in the country, to which he replies: "It is better I dont say that. It is better to know nothing. Then when you are asked it is easier to be silent" (Bond 42). Later, when it is her turn to be questioned by Jack, she parrots almost to the letter the immigrant's utterance: "It's better to know nothing isnt it. Then if we're questioned we cant say anything" (Bond 48). This early example foretells Joan's tendency to abandon her own thinking capacity in favour of ready-made statements that will emerge more prominently towards the end of the play. Right before she repeatedly, violently stabs and dismembers the Dummy in his sleep, using the very knife that killed his parents, Joan lets out a stream of accusations:

Immigrants. (*Stops.*) That's why they come here. Aliens. They want to take my house. Take our land. Loot the food from our stores [...] You killed your father and mother. That's easy! It's an offence against nature! It's harder to kill strangers! That's an offence against their community! They stick together! I'm alive after all

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<sup>3</sup> see Hausner 332.

your plots and schemings! [...] He's a suicide bomber [...] They're terrorists. He's keeping me hostage! [...] they used to be our streets. (Bond 70-71)

Just like Eichmann is spoken by the Nazi language, Joan is ventriloquising all the xenophobic sentiment, stereotypes and hatred that are perpetuated in the totalitarian world she lives in. At this moment, Joan's voice, far from being her own and the symbol of her subjectivity, is hijacked by ideology. Some of the spectators may be surprised to realise how familiar these accusations sound, especially if they follow the news or right-wing tabloid headlines during the political crisis leading to Brexit and Trump. These clichés, circulating in political discourse surrounding the immigration crisis of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, are voiced through Joan. Yet, she is far from being the only participant in the process. As cliché implies a common ground, the act of recognising a cliché already attests to one's involvement, one's identification with it. The concept is, therefore, both intriguing and problematic: while cliché is usually employed as an instrument for critique by both the general public and experts, denouncing something as a cliché simultaneously reinforces and reaffirms the conformity and consensus that are supposed to be the target of criticism. Entering the realm of the cliché, the audience enters another space of uncertainty and instability, not only because they are urged to re-evaluate their intellectual high ground compared to the cliché's direct mouthpiece but also because of the ethical complication that derives from outright rejecting things they deem as clichéd.

The absence of useful information in a clichéd utterance makes it a logical reaction to reject it. Norberg contends that a clichéd statement

[...] provides no novel information, neither on the semantic nor on the stylistic level, and its easy intelligibility provokes an impression of flatness and hollowness; it requires no active engagement on the part of the listener or reader, who is already in full possession of its meaning. There is nothing in the statement that resists immediate absorption, or nothing in it to digest. (Norberg 77)

From an epistemological perspective, it is true that there is nothing to be gained from listening to a cliché. Regardless, there is a danger in immediately refusing to engage further with the cliché-speaker or to take into account the circumstances that led to the utterance. In the case of Joan, for instance, it is easy to interpret her hateful comments about immigrants in general as a poor attempt at justifying her violence against a specific individual of the group. It will be more difficult, however, to suspend judgment and try to understand her situation, to question her yielding to prejudice. Describing the character Joan, Bond says:

At the beginning of the play, when she discovered the alien, she feared he could put her into trouble with the police. So she acted like the police herself and began by asking *him* a lot of questions. But the longer he stayed the more questions she had to ask herself about *herself* and what she is doing. Those questions are too much for her to ask, she cannot face them. Joan has found the alien in herself, which is very destructive if it gets frustrated. (qtd in Tuaille 95)

In other words, as the immigrant works through his trauma, Joan also goes through a journey of self-discovery and what she finds threatens her sense of security and integrity. If the social function of clichés, stock phrases, standardised codes of expression and conduct is to protect one against reality, then, it is only understandable that Joan resorts to these practices, considering the kind of brutal world she finds herself in. With the arrival of the immigrant, however, her shield starts to dissolve little by little, which is frightening but somehow momentarily motivates her to react differently:

I know that now. When you're not free you lose everything. I'm an immigrant in my own country. This house is my prison. This is the last night I'll spend in it. I was so proud of my little flat. Now I long to leave. I was proud of my job. Yet I was afraid to read the papers that passed through my hands. The things you told me haunt me. I can't get the pictures out of my head. (Bond 60)

Although it is possible to claim that Joan murders the immigrant because she feels betrayed by his decision to run away with Jack rather than with her, I would argue that her transgression results from fear rather than anger – the fear of having to face the reality of her world being turned upside down. The final clichés she lets out before committing the act of murder prove how deeply indoctrinated she is, to the extent of being incapable of breaking free from the ideological constraint of her society. Despite moments of clarity, her desire for sameness and stability prevails. As much as she is a perpetrator or a victim of her own making, Joan is also the victim of the structural violence of language.

In *The Under Room*, Bond dramatizes this violence in its most palpable manifestation, which is the cliché. Yet, in reality, the domination of ideology through language can be found in each and every utterance escaping from people's mouths. This explains why Mladen Dolar goes as far as to claim that ventriloquism is ubiquitous in our social interactions, that “every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism” (Dolar 70). Consequently, being conscious of the ventriloquist aspect inherent in every voice is the first step to steer away from the banality of evil, the kind of evil that is committed in thoughtlessness. As pointed out by Cooren, acknowledging our dummy status does not foreclose the question of responsibility; on the contrary, “it enjoins us to be watchful and pay attention to what we are participating in” (Cooren 27).

### **The Voice of Trauma**

Describing the immigrant character, Bond writes:

Normally he is logical, pragmatic and cold-blooded – because he is in a situation where he thinks only of how to survive. Even when he tells Joan about his most traumatic experiences he isn't demonstrating that he is a poor wounded human being. Only later, when he is asleep and relives his experiences of terror in his dream, do all his emotions, fears, indignation, all he represses, come out in this

language that the others can't understand. It is like verbal bleeding. (qtd in Tuailleon 96)

The traumatic experience mentioned here is one in which as a child, the immigrant was made not only to kill one of his parents but also to choose which one to be his victim. He was then forced to become a child soldier for seven years. The language that seeps out in his sleep is unintelligible, not as an unintelligible foreign language that may become intelligible once it has been mastered, but as the language of trauma that is never meant to be understood or interpreted. His somniloquy can be interpreted as the symptom that bridges the Symbolic and the Real. According to Žižek, the Real, which is disguised in its symptoms, is “an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation” (Žižek 75). In their senselessness and meaninglessness, the immigrant's repetitive screams “Brach! Brach! Brach!” or his unpronounceable lines such as “Mnches. Mnches. Vczxq bzcvcx” rupture the materiality of language and illuminate the Real of trauma. These utterances can also be characterised as the “signifier-in-isolation,” to borrow from Tom Eyers – such signifier referring to “a material mark, isolated from networks of relational meaning” (5). The significance of the signifier-in-isolation, according to Eyers, is “to hold the subject together” when functioning as the fourth of the Borromean rings that links the three registers of psychoanalytic experience – the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In other words, it is through this unintelligible language of the immigrant that one can approach the Real of his subjectivity, his trauma.

Joan claims to understand what the immigrant has been through, yet, her engagement with his trauma has never left the surface. For instance, when the immigrant reveals that he is haunted by the people he killed during his years of being a soldier, Joan readily commiserates: “I think I understand. I have nightmares about the changes. The new laws. Soldiers instead of police” (Bond 47). For someone who has never been forced to make impossible choices such as Joan, the most terrible things she could imagine are new laws, to which the immigrant replies, perhaps sarcastically, “O really? That is nice” (*Ibid.*). Time and again, Joan identifies herself as an immigrant: “I don't understand the world. These things have been going on round me all these years and I didnt see them. The streets arent real any more. I'm helpless. I feel like an immigrant” (Bond 50), or “I'm an immigrant in my own country” (Bond 60). While her sympathy for the alien should not be a subject of reproach, her going to great lengths to create a common ground between them does at times appear ludicrous. Joan's attitude is liberal and compassionate, which derives from her moral standards and her conviction that she is a good person who can perform good deeds and manage to live in decency. Unfortunately, since she is trying too hard to convince herself and others, what one can hear even in her most sincere expressions of sympathy is clichéd, dogmatic and hectoring.

Another concern raised by Joan's approach to the other one's trauma lies in her tendency to further victimise the immigrant in the name of kindness and compassion. Joan views the immigrant's traumatic past as the underlying cause of

everything that goes wrong with him. When they figure out that the money has disappeared, she tells Jack “[t]here never was any money. He didnt deceive you. He deceived himself. Think how terrible that is for him!” (Bond 52) and adds “[h]e groans in his sleep” (*Ibid.*) to further highlight the immigrant’s suffering, in the hope that Jack would be moved to help him without the money. Joan even goes as far as to consider the immigrant her possession when she tells Jack to go torment other people and leave the immigrant alone: “Hurt them. I dont care about them. Yes I’m a bitch! I only care for what I can see. For what’s mine. Give him to me and let me care for him” (Bond 66). These examples show how in her preoccupation with proving herself a good person, Joan once again refuses the immigrant the agency and autonomy that were taken from him when he was forced to kill his parent and become a child soldier. Kindness done in the wrong way can turn into violence, albeit unintentionally.

In contrast to Joan, Jack never shows any sign of compassion for the immigrant and he himself admits, “I ain understand what a nasty time ’e’s bin through!” (Bond 53). Some may say that Jack’s reaction is too inhuman, which is erroneous, for it is not a moral failure in recognising the inevitability of choice. Edward Bond makes a rather virulent comment on the purpose of having Jack and Joan as two opposing characters:

My play is actually written against all these normal left-wing propaganda plays, those awful vulgarized Brechtian tracks, where someone comes on stage to tell you what is politically obvious or say: ‘How terrible!’ Here, I make it a job for the audience to put all these things together so that they can understand the alien *as* his situation. (qtd in Tuailon 96)

If Joan, according to Bond, represents the left-wing mode of thinking, with her superficial sympathy and her unshakable conviction in moral righteousness, Jack is situated at the other extreme, as someone who seems indifferent to suffering and does not care what sort of immoral behaviour he has as long as it helps him survive. As a playwright known for his skilful use of language, Bond successfully uses different styles of speech to reveal the two characters’ contrasting social and moral attitude. Joan’s rather stylised speech is imbued with a rhetorical, pompous tone, while Jack’s sociolect is on the verge of the vulgar: “‘E’s lucky. I ’elp people ’oo cant groan when they’re awake! They ’ad their tongue cut out. ’N their limbs saw off. It’s a merry ol’ world ain it” (Bond 52). The peculiar spelling of contractions, which has featured in many of Bond’s earlier plays, serves as a distancing device to help the audience reflect on the reality of social stratification.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Jack’s language is less pleasant to the ear already points toward a common ground between his voice and the traumatised voice of the immigrant.

Joan’s and Jack’s different attitude to the immigrant’s unintelligible language, in short, elucidates the extent to which the voice of trauma resists identification. Joan,

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<sup>4</sup> See Klein 93-101.

in her obsession with the *content* of the immigrant's screams, is deaf to the materiality of his voice, which calls for distance rather than clear identification. Joan's mistake in her engagement with the traumatised voice of the other one creates an undesirable situation in which she subjects the immigrant to further dispossession by treating him as a child whom she needs to defend, care, and make decisions for. Jack, despite his offensive way of speaking, paradoxically gets closer to making real contact with the immigrant. Towards the end of the play, it is Jack who gains the ability to perceive the Dummy Actor, who has, up until that point, remained invisible: "He raises an arm and then points at him. He is going to speak. Instead he goes out up the stairs" (Bond 68). His reluctance to voice this discovery embodies Jack's resistance to linguistic meaning in his experience with the other's trauma, which proves to be much more ethical compared to Joan's emphasis on audible, understandable language.

Furthermore, the fact that the immigrant draws closer to Jack than to Joan serves as an instrument for "empathic unsettlement," in the sense that it "poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit" (LaCapra 41). Joan's "unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility" (*Ibid.*) is destroyed. Nevertheless, such a destruction is ethically generative, for it entices the audience to contemplate the impossibility to understand the other one's trauma. Bond highlights this impossibility, in the same way that he underlines the impossibility to locate the voice of the immigrant, not because he wishes to negate all attempts at encountering trauma; on the contrary, I believe that his goal is simply to resist the easy closure in interpretation to enable a form of negative capability in ethical engagement.

### **Negative Capability in Engaging with the Voice**

The phrase "Negative Capability" coined by John Keats in 1817 refers to the ability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason," of "remaining content with half knowledge" (Keats 193-194). Against the conventional understanding of "capability" as a product of intentionality, action, and movement, Keats' oxymoronic "negative capability" is "achieved" through passivity and surrender of one's will for complete knowledge. It is tempting to interpret the term as an expression of the apophatic tradition of mysticism, which promises transcendence in the act of negation. Nevertheless, it is my contention that "negative capability" does not entail the transcendental impulse of going *beyond*; on the contrary, it should be understood as a mode of being that operates *in between* frontiers of opposing concepts. This "refusal of transcendence"

(92),<sup>5</sup> to borrow from Hardt and Negri, constitutes the ethical dimension of “negative capability.”

In *The Under Room*, the character that demonstrates his negative capability most prominently is none other than Jack. His situation creates much ambiguity: being both the resistance and the army, Jack serves as the subversive force that undermines the hegemony while working with the authorities to reinforce it. In Joan’s opinion, the uncertainty in Jack’s political and ethical position is not only incomprehensible but also unacceptable, which explains why she must characterise him as evil and immoral. Jack’s indifference to the distinction of good and evil does not necessarily mean that he has given up on humanity. It simply shows that he is pragmatic and capable of perceiving the contradictions surrounding him without any irritability reaching after reconciliation. He is far from being innocent. Yet, he does not turn to crime out of weakness but out of hope (Bond 73). It is this hope that has motivated him to seriously consider leaving with the immigrant, despite having derided the proposition at first. In his relationship with the immigrant, Jack never claims to understand what the other has been through, and paradoxically, his negative capability has a certain therapeutic effect which helps the alien face his trauma and unearth his suppressed memory.

In reviewing the theatrical and textual devices used to stage the voice in *The Under Room*, it is clear that Bond’s intention has always been to encourage the audience develop a similar kind of negative capability. First, the split of the immigrant makes it possible to represent the paradox of the human voice, of being too inside and too outside: “too inside because it erupts out of the viscous depths of corporeality, [...] but also too outside because the voice ventriloquizes the body rather than belonging to it” (Ellman 387). The audience’s inability to locate the immigrant and the source of his voice may be perceived as frustration in the beginning but as the play progresses, this initial dissatisfaction can be transformed into heightened awareness of his precarious ontology. In the same way, one’s judgment of Joan’s thoughtlessness is suspended when one comes to the realisation that her submission to clichés, rather than being an exception, presents the shared condition of all human beings in the face of ideology. Certainly, such realisation is not meant to incite us to completely commiserate with the character, for the consequences of unproblematic identification are evident in Joan’s treatment of the immigrant. Her failure to engage with the voice of trauma can be said to be a bad example which the audience is urged to avoid. Instead, by embracing the incomprehensibility of the immigrant’s “verbal bleeding,” by being content with half-knowledge, the audience may steer away from the conventional reaction to the victim of trauma and adopt a different perspective in their reflection on the question of responsibility. Writing on literary trauma, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega remark:

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<sup>5</sup> While transcendence “leads quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination,” the refusal of transcendence “is a condition of the possibility of thinking this immanent power, an anarchic basis of philosophy” (Hardt & Negri 92).

As with the sublime, then, literary trauma, concerned as it is with the experience of limits and the destabilisation of the accepted, might be considered as an emotional experience that strikes at the roots of identity and durably displaces certainties. Trauma would, thus, be compatible with a conjectural mode that would throw us subjects, in our capacity as readers and critics, into a complex ethical state of disquieted “negative capability”. (19)

Considering the play’s three strategies which strive to destabilise the accepted and displace certainties in relation to the Other and trauma, it will be more than appropriate to identify the staging of the voice in *The Under Room* as the conjectural mode that throws us into the complex ethical state of disquieted negative capability.

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