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ZDEŇKA BRANDEJSKÁ

DEVISING CONSOLATION: THE MENTAL LANDSCAPES OF STOPPARD'S *ARCADIA*

Yes, they'll forget us. Such is our fate, there is no help for it. What seems to us serious, significant, very important, will one day be forgotten or will seem unimportant [*a pause*]. And it's curious that we can't possibly tell what exactly will be considered great and important, and what will seem petty and ridiculous. Didn't the discoveries of Copernicus of Columbus, let's say, seem useless and ridiculous at first, while the nonsensical writings of some fool seemed true? And it may be that our present life, which we accept so readily, will in time seem strange, inconvenient, stupid, not clean enough, perhaps even sinful...

Vershinin in *The Three Sisters* by A. P. Chekhov

In 1993, Tom Stoppard finished a full-length play entitled *Arcadia*; in April that year it opened at the National Theatre to become one of Stoppard's most popular plays. Paul Delaney describes the event as 'a triumph with audiences' (Delaney 265). Reviews of *Arcadia*, however, 'ranged from denunciations of "the play's central vacuum: its fatal lack of living contact between ideas and people" to celebrations of an "unusually moving" play in which Stoppard's ideas and emotions seamlessly coincide' (Delaney 265). By introducing the new play, Stoppard seems to have succeeded in forestalling the kind of uncomprehending criticism he had received for *Happgood*. While *Arcadia* can be viewed as in many ways indebted to Stoppard's previous play—especially in the scope of the subject matter it incorporates, often concerned with highly specialized issues—at the same time it revises and transforms the mostly ineffective strategies for reading (let us say *reading*, even in theatre) offered by *Happgood*.

As a matter of fact *Arcadia*—in its choice and combination of topics—goes far beyond expectation. It proved capable of embracing topics as diverse as English landscape gardening, chaos theory, mathematics, (post-)Newtonian physics, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, English Romantic poetry, scholarship, population biology or the nature of time. The richness and number of themes, which are introduced with encyclopaedic precision in *Arcadia*, are hard

to be ignored. Unusually for a play, it seems to inspire the readers and spectators and urge them to take up and research subjects they find appealing. On the other hand, it embodies a whole series of uncertainties, minor secrets, or even global mysteries, and these refer to queries of no less importance than whether there is order in the world and in history or just chaos, or whether entropy is inevitable. Various topics occur and are picked up by the characters as the plot unfolds; the process is apparently brought about chiefly by several characters' professions, or at least preoccupations. Strictly speaking, five of the play's *dramatis personae* are either scholars or students, in short they are eager to know, and their activities provided Stoppard with the principal thrust of the play. Therefore, they are able not only to propose answers and solutions, but they can also pose questions and problems.

Generally speaking, if we allow for the tension between theatrical and literary elements in theatre, Stoppard's plays insist on stressing or referring back to the literary. Sometimes, since they are first presented in stage productions, dramatic works provoke their audiences to fall back on the actual texts of the plays. There are several instances of this fairly singular kind of reaction to a dramatic text: there are several websites presenting information on the play's ideas from various fields, as well as offering links to other resources. After *Arcadia* had been produced in London and in New York, a high demand for the script was reported. In her review of the play, Anne Barton suggests metaphorically that going 'once around the garden is not enough', and points out that a spectator's desire to take the play in fully may result in his or her 'return to the theater, or a second experience with the printed page' (Barton). This would happen not so much for the sake of clarity, as one would perhaps expect in the case of *Hapgood*, but rather to ensure a more profound enjoyment of the play, which is a clear sign of interest exceeding normal levels on the part of Stoppard's audiences. They can thus 'savor nuances and details invisible on the first occasion' (Barton).

The basic setting of the play is extremely complicated, as it shifts its focus back and forth between the early nineteenth century (1809 and 1812) and the present.¹ Characters from the earlier period not only become the personified objects of study for scholars in the later period, but they also come up with ideas that run as a thread across the centuries. The internal rhythm of *Arcadia* rests on its fairly regular alternating of the two types of scenes until their different time levels blend in the climactic Scene Seven. Also, the academic research carried out by Hannah Jarvis, the author of a popular book on Byron's mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb, and Bernard Nightingale, a strikingly arrogant Sussex don, progresses little by little and despite difficulties, misled or lost as they sometimes get.

The play's contradictions, if not conflicts, arise partially from the juxtaposition of two perspectives—one showing in fragments how the events in question really took place, the other examining what aspects of the past are preserved and

¹ Stoppard used the technique of combining two periods of time for example in *Where Are They Now?*, *Indian Ink* and *The Invention of Love*.

in what ways they are accessible to contemporary readers—and partially from power struggles developing between the two archaeologists of the past. The present-day line of the story begins with Nightingale's arrival at Sidley Park, 'a very large country house in Derbyshire. Nowadays, the house would be called a stately home' (*Arcadia* I.i.1). From the very start, Stoppard is subtly implying to his audiences on whose side their sympathy should be. Nightingale's sudden appearance at Sidley Park, with his red Mazda parked outside the house, somehow disturbs the Arcadian serenity of the estate occupied by the present Lord and Lady Croom, from what is said about them by their children (they remain offstage) a very English, tradition-abiding couple. What is more, when he learns that 'Hannah Jarvis the author', whose book is reviled by Byronian scholars, of whom Nightingale is one, is on the premises, he assumes an alias, Peacock, so as not to be immediately recognized by her (I.ii.16). Although he does not succeed in getting away with the lie, he succeeds in spreading a competitive atmosphere among the inhabitants of the house, altogether a source of numerous sharp verbal interchanges. Also, there is only one person willing to side with him—Chloe, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the house, a frivolous young lady whose belief in 'sexual determinism' makes her easily available to Bernard.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the two researchers is not one of complete animosity. In a sense, their efforts complement each other; they encounter the same kind of problems: scarcity, contingency and incompleteness of sources, relics and direct evidence for their respective theses. As they work in the same depository of long-forgotten information, the needed piece of evidence can be provided practically by anybody living in the house. Bernard is apparently aware of the possibility, so he pragmatically asks Hannah for her co-operation in this matter. Several moments in the play confirm the scholars' mutual dependence; on several occasions Hannah or Valentine, the Croom son, actually give Bernard the missing pieces of the puzzle: Septimus Hodge was Lord Byron's fellow student at university, Byron *did* visit Sidley Park for he is once mentioned in game books, Mrs Chater *had been* a widow before she was able to marry Captain Brice etc. In return, but only when his stay in the house is approaching its end, Bernard presents Hannah with a copy of a book containing some momentous clues to the mysterious existence of the Sidley hermit.

Yet there are other aspects of the two contrasting characters which make Bernard come out as the definitely less likeable figure of the two: the choice of topics for their research, as well as methods they use, and the reasons behind their endeavours. Clearly, she lives in a symbiotic relationship with the locale and its inhabitants, whereas he intrudes on the tranquillity of 'Arcadia'. While Hannah is trying to learn more about the enigmatic hermit who lived on the estate, having found refuge in a hermitage, which was newly designed in the fashionable picturesque style of the period, Bernard is eager to uncover a scandal—a duel in which Byron is supposed to have killed the minor poet Ezra Chater, which might have been the reason for Byron's sudden flight to the Continent where he stayed for two years. 'Probably the most sensational literary discovery of the century,' Bernard *forésee*s the event (II.v.58). Whereas Hannah

first finds it hard to define her object of study by naming it (she wants to use the hermit as a symbol of 'the whole Romantic sham'), Bernard unsuccessfully masks Byron's name by substituting him with fashionably marginal subject matter: Ezra Chater, a second-rate poet of uncertain fate (I.ii.27). Ironically, their topics turn out to be virtually the same in the end, embodied as they are by one and only person, i.e. Septimus Hodge: he had been both the hermit and author of most of the things Bernard so prematurely ascribed to Byron.

For Hannah the final disclosure is a happy occasion: it is the third Croom offspring named Gus who brings a drawing by Thomasina Coverly called 'Septimus holding Plautus' to her, wordless.² Not entirely surprised, she responds: 'I was looking for that. Thank you' (II.vii.97). As if the hunt for all sorts of evidence had stopped, the unexpected arrival of the information elicits no sign of sensation. What it does affect is not her thesis, but rather it intensifies her sentiments towards the previous inhabitants of the house—for she has familiarized herself with fragments of their lives, thoughts and doings during her stay at Sidley Park—especially as two representatives of the past are present on stage at that moment (Thomasina waltzing with Septimus), and yet irrevocably absent. The moment functions similarly for the audience. Nonetheless, their gaze is all-embracing, capable of synthesizing the whole number of themes that echoed throughout the text. There is an element of wish-fulfilment in the final scene: it is possible to feel gratification for Hannah's eventual significant progress in her efforts to know more, i.e. to equal the spectators' level of knowledge.

On the contrary, Bernard's egotistic interest in Byron takes a radically different course. When he enters the house his hypothesis is all but confirmed. He fabricated a story out of three letters found in Byron's library (concerning Septimus Hodge, not Byron; readers of *Arcadia* are aware of the fact long before Nightingale even appears on stage) that neatly fits into Byron's biography. Moreover, the revelation should explain a specific, as yet unresolved, blank spot in the biography. However, Bernard's mental construct soon proves to be a particularly shaky structure.

As a literary character, Bernard continuously resembles his namesake from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, who imposes plot on a particularly unaccountable matter: the story was never there. Stoppard's Bernard assumes Byron's journey to Europe must have had a reason, or even must have been an outcome of a cause-and-effect narrative. On the contrary, Lady Croom, worrying that Byron will leave (her), suggests obscurity in his behaviour, quite suitable for a man of genius:

LADY CROOM: He says he is determined on the Malta packet sailing out of Falmouth! His head is full of Lisbon and Lesbos, and his portmanteau of pistols, and I have told him it is not to be thought of. ... He says

² 'Plautus' is a turtle. Together with frequently mentioned rabbits it reminds one of the philosophical animals from *Jumpers*.

his aim is poetry. One does not aim at poetry with pistols. At poets, perhaps.

(I.iii.41)

Bernard of the lyrical modernist fiction, who is rather a subjective voice, found his appropriate physical, dramatically 'objective' representation in Stoppard's play. Instead of verifying his evidence, Stoppard's Bernard hurries on to publish his findings before they can be refuted. And they are, eventually, if only to a certain extent. Partly recalling *Hapgood's* concerns, reality comes out as a paradox in *Arcadia*. Bernard's thesis is grounded on the presumption that one can possess only one kind of identity. Since nothing is known about Ezra Chater after 1809 ('he disappears completely'), he is literally *dead*, though not as the result of any duel (I.ii.31). As the readers might be informed, having themselves acquainted with the play *Hapgood*, a person can consist of several, often mutually contradictory, personalities. Bernard's presupposition is profoundly wrong: the poet transformed himself into a botanist and lived on to describe the dwarf dahlia in Martinique, get credit for it and die there of a monkey bite (I.ii.22).

BERNARD: (*Wildly*) Ezra wasn't a botanist! He was a poet!

HANNAH: He was not much of either, but he was both.

(II.vii.89)

When Bernard is faced with the truth, as pronounced by Hannah, he exclaims:

BERNARD: Of course it's a disaster! I was on 'The Breakfast Hour'!

VALENTINE: It doesn't mean Byron hadn't fought a duel, it only means Chater wasn't killed in it.

BERNARD: Oh, pull yourself together!—do you think I'd have been on 'The Breakfast Hour' if Byron had *missed*!

HANNAH: Calm down, Bernard. Valentine's right.

BERNARD: (*Grasping at straws*) Do you think so? You mean the *Piccadilly* reviews? Yes, two completely unknown Byron essays—and my discovery of the lines he added to 'English Bards'. That counts for something.

(II.vii.89)

What is ironic about Bernard's self-consolation is the fact that his 'last resort' (his fatally diminished discovery) is finally exposed as altogether incorrect. While the readers immediately see Bernard's error owing to the perspective they are granted by the playwright, the character leaves the stage consigned to ignorance. In a way, Bernard's extreme pragmatic approach is reminiscent of *Hapgood's* 'You get what you interrogate for', and critical of it, too. Seemingly, Bernard's 'defeat' is only a question of linear time; inevitably he is bound to leave the house with a paper bag over his head, as Hannah warns him. Therefore, the viewers' attention is not directed solely at his 'punishment'. The world

in which his blunder could occasion serious consequences is sufficiently distant from that of Sidley Park.

After his arrival Bernard did not keep his real objectives and incentives secret for long. Early on, he had stated them quite bluntly to Hannah:

BERNARD: Hannah, *this is fame*. Somewhere in the Croom papers there will be *something*—

HANNAH: There isn't, I've looked.

BERNARD: But you were looking for something else!

(I.ii.31)

Encouraged by initial promising progress in his colonization of the past, he cries out frenetically: 'And there'll be more. There is always more. We can find it!' (I.iv.50). But this was not the last time the reader encounters the pronouncement of Bernard's conviction: later in the play it even seems to be moderately adopted by Hannah. Following a devastating argument with Bernard in Scene Five, when she already suspects that there is a crucial connection between the hermit and Septimus, she echoes Bernard's own words, saying: 'Somewhere there will be *something* ... if only I can find it' (II.v.66). Although nothing much is revealed of Hannah's motives for the research—she is a professional in every respect, but awkward regarding emotions—Stoppard seems to be in favour of those able to use their intuition. As characters they get rewarded: verging on the metaphysical, things give out their mysteries, silences speak out. That Hannah receives her final comforting 'absolution' from the hands of Gus, himself mute and autistic, is a fine example.

Critics were particularly disturbed by Gus, linking him with Thomasina or his nineteenth century mirror image, the eloquent Augustus, Thomasina's brother; these two male characters were actually played by one actor both in the London and New York productions. Gus's inability to gain access to discourse, or possibly his purposeful refusal to use it (he spoke until he was five) qualifies him as a peculiar kind of relic from the past. However, he occupies a firm and tenable position within the contemporary Sidley Park household, as well as in Stoppard's dramatic layout. As opposed to Henry from *The Real Thing*, a character whose dramatic existence was based on holding onto the 'real', steady and pronounceable, Gus is the embodiment of an enigma, an incarnation of the invisible, a guardian of the lost: not only does he produce the drawing out of the blue, which was, as we learn in the final scene of *Arcadia*, in the possession of Augustus Coverly, but also he was able to identify the foundations of an old boat-house in the garden when no one else could. That is why his mother calls him a 'genius' (Gus could, after all, be an abbreviation of both Augustus and genius).

Occupying an area beyond language, Gus is playing the piano offstage while Hannah and Val are striving to grasp what it was that Thomasina did or did not

discover almost two hundred years ago. Val goes as far as to explain to Hannah that what the girl was doing now looks like the rudiments of iterated algorithms. Still there are a number of phenomena which seem to be fairly unpredictable, irreducible to mathematical theory:

VALENTINE: We can't even predict the next drip from a dripping tap when it gets irregular. Each drip sets up the conditions for the next, the smallest variation blows prediction apart, and the weather is unpredictable. When you push the numbers through the computer you can see it on the screen. The future is disorder.

(I.iv.48)

Inadvertently, Gus provides a non-verbal comment on the subject:

HANNAH: What is he playing?

VALENTINE: I don't know. He makes it up.

(I.iv.48)

In his improvised play it is impossible to 'guess the tune'—which is roughly what Val's research is about, as he is trying to detect a mathematical rule behind the changing population of grouse—each tone in a way 'sets up the conditions for the next'. At a larger level, Gus plays an important role in Stoppard's intriguing juxtaposition in this scene, as well as serving as a many-layered metaphor throughout the whole play. It is he who presents Hannah with an apple, out of empathy, at the end of the second scene, the first 'contemporary' scene. The object is a part of the decoration; it is left on the table as a prop (Septimus nibbles at it in the following scene, while Thomasina—and later Hannah as well—ponders the apple leaf) and as an intentionally all too multifunctional symbol. Barton mentions the fruit as 'an object that gradually comes to symbolize Newton's discovery of the law of gravity, the late twentieth-century geometry of natural forms, the perils of sexuality, any paradise that is lost, and the introduction of death into the world after the Fall' (Barton). In a recent analysis of the play, Derek B. Alwes objects to taking the apple symbolism 'as serious theological or moral allusions' because the context works against it (Alwes 397). The introduction of the conspicuously ambivalent apple should in fact warn against theories made out of nothing, the type that Bernard is practising in front of the audience's very eyes.

Anne Barton points to a certain muted quality discernible in *Arcadia*. In contrast with Stoppard's other plays, which—apart from being verbally exquisite—also explored the theatrical, *Arcadia* possibly makes a decisive step towards what we imagine under the concept of the 'play or comedy of ideas'. 'Not only do two of the most important guests at Sidley Park, Lord Byron and the lascivi-

ous Mrs. Chater, remain tantalizingly offstage; all the really arresting events are invisible' (Barton). Nonetheless, I am far from saying the play is distanced from the material world of theatre. Although some of the play's elements can be enjoyed only if read more than once (especially the numerous, subtle paradoxes well-developed in the plot structure), the text appears to be heavily dependent on the possibility of being staged. If the alternating between the two different epochs is to make an impression on the audience, it has to be materialized on stage, it needs to present real people, both 'living' and 'dead', yet all actually present. This becomes all the more obvious as we hear Bernard relativize the accessibility of truth, shouting: 'Proof? *Proof?* You'd have to be there, you silly bitch!' (I.iv.49).

Only through a world of fiction is Stoppard able to manipulate time at his own will, the structure of the play thus undermines and reverses the prominent issue *Arcadia* raises, which is the arrow of time, the natural order of things we are all familiar with. By placing the two periods into the same room, and even making it crowded with individuals living out 'the same sort of morning' (the two groups of people representing characters separated by time closely coexist on stage, especially in the last scene), Stoppard celebrates the theatrical, the unmediated presence of actors (I.ii.15). The irreversibility of time remains a persistent theme throughout the whole play.

From the very beginning Thomasina feels enthralled by the mystery, rightly observing that if she stirs her rice pudding backward, 'the jam will not come together again' (I.i.5). The occasion foreshadows her prefiguration of the law of entropy she fabricates, using an enigmatic diagram, towards the end of the play. Val, who elucidates most of the play's science, both past and present, notes that:

VALENTINE: There's an order things can't happen in. You can't open a door till there's a house.

HANNAH: I thought that's what genius was.

VALENTINE: Only for lunatics and poets.

(II.vii.79)

To oppose Val's scepticism, Hannah quotes Byron's poem, in which he envisaged, in poetical terms, a kind of entropy. By implication, one belongs most probably to either of these categories if s/he is gifted enough to be capable of transgressing the reasonable order things happen in, to have the future and the past run in both directions.³ But the assumption can be misleading, such as when Hannah immediately notices logical inconsistencies in Bernard's hypotheses:

HANNAH: Nobody would kill a man and then pan his book. I mean, not in that order. So he must have borrowed the book, written the review, *posted it*, seduced Mrs Chater, fought a duel and departed, all in the space of two or three days. Who would do that?

³ Implicitly, the two categories include Stoppard as well.

BERNARD: Byron.

(II.v.59)

Stoppard's brilliant heroine, Thomasina, can be counted among the unruly spirits. Both the nineteenth-century scenes and Hannah and Val's investigations imply that if Thomasina hadn't exactly flung the door (of chaos theory and of the Second Law of Thermodynamics) open, she must have at least peeked through it. By analogy, she also violates the 'natural' order in the first scene, which she opens with her question: 'Septimus, what is carnal embrace?' (I.i.1). When she forces the answer out of her tutor after a while, she becomes aware not only of her minor transgression, but also of the system underlying it. In front of her mother, she plays ignorant:

THOMASINA: It is plain that there are some things a girl is allowed to understand, and these include the whole of algebra, but there are others, such as embracing a side of beef, that must be kept from her until she has a carcass of her own.

(I.i.11)

Nevertheless, the system she has just discovered by infringing upon it is a social one and far from natural. Despite the fact that the play—mainly for its verbal playfulness—was clearly influenced by the comedy of manners, it is rather the natural 'manners' ruling the world that constitute Stoppard's prime interest. In the end, Hannah and Val are close to acknowledging that, from what they know, Thomasina was a genius after all. But while Byron is a marginal (and yet in a way, the central) figure of *Arcadia*—never truly appearing—and at the same time a major poet and a leading spirit of the era, Thomasina as the chief figure and the clairvoyant thinker of the play is swept away from historicity, along with her experiments and discoveries, when she is burnt to death on the eve of her seventeenth birthday.

VALENTINE: ...she'd be famous.

HANNAH: No, she wouldn't. She was dead before she had time to be famous . . .

VALENTINE: She died?

HANNAH: ...burned to death.

VALENTINE: (*Realizing*) Oh ... the girl who died in the fire!

(II.vii.76)

Nonetheless, Hannah's intuitive conclusion is nothing new when compared to the fact that it was Septimus who first realized the genius in the girl, back then in 1812, when he calls her a prophet (II.vii.81). Furthermore, Thomasina herself implies the possibility, explicitly drawing the parallel: 'You will be famous for being my tutor when Lord Byron is dead and forgotten' (I.iii.37). But since she couldn't, being a character in a play, cross the boundaries of the fictitious world,

to the readers she becomes an epitome of all that has been lost and wasted, an embodiment of grief.

Although time cannot run backwards—a phenomenon naturally understood, but not quite scientifically explained until today—*Arcadia*'s elaborate shifting between the two time periods seems to suggest that the law is not unconditional: purely hypothetically, one can trespass the time boundary to and fro. However, this is not an absolute privilege: it is available only to the subjects outside the play, in other words the spectators.

It is a common feature of dramatic literature that individual characters are deprived of a total, unifying perspective usually possessed by the audience. The overall sum of information flowing from the stage to the spectators witnessing the performance is often built on, and at the same time fragmented into, soliloquies, asides, or comments of a chorus, as mentioned by Derek B. Alwes (Alwes 392). While traditionally, viewers enjoyed a position of either superiority (with comedy) or anxiety (with tragedy), Alwes recognizes a third aspect applicable to the audience's experience of *Arcadia*—that of consolation (Alwes 392). He is right to notice that whereas every play is bound to solve, if unwittingly, its relation to those who are to perceive it, few do so in such a degree as Stoppard's *Arcadia*, self-admittedly and by reflecting some of the viewers'/readers' interpretative activities in the very texture of the plot. According to Alwes, who refers to ideas of the sixth-century Roman philosopher Boethius, we adopt a timeless, godlike perspective while watching *Arcadia*. 'Like God, we see the two historical moments as a single moment on stage—an eternal present' (Alwes 394). His main argument is that the play is less about the inaccessibility of the past than about its accessibility. Consolation arises from among various examples; it is primarily the recognition that 'we can recover much of what has been lost' (Alwes 398). Against the 'ultimate heat death of the universe' caused by entropy, Alwes hails other fairly optimistic aspects of the play—however time-bound and at the same time oblivious of time—the human imagination and sexuality (Alwes 399).

The first scene of *Arcadia* can be taken as an allusion to *The Real Thing* and its opening scene, which tested the audience's capacity to surrender to illusion. In *Arcadia*, the communicative potential of the play is less deceptive, although the viewers' relation to the stage action radically changes when the second scene begins to unfold. Whereas in the earlier play, the opening scene turns out to be a kind of text within a larger text, commented on, even mocked at, entirely locked in the metatextual framework of the play, the first scene of *Arcadia* presents action which becomes an object of interest for the characters in the second scene, and by extension for the viewers as well. '*Arcadia* entices, intrigues, and only gradually mystifies its audience with the sense that there is more to be known' (Delaney 266). Besides the fact that the second scene does not concern the same people, it soon proves to have a life of its own so that the two direc-

tions of the plot, substantially interwoven, appear as more or less equal, i.e. equally conceivable to the audience.

The position of the audience as defined by *Arcadia* is indeed a crucial condition affecting the way the text is read and understood. The consequences it brings about are reflected in various elements by which the play functions; for example the communicability of its humour and frequent paradoxes is utterly determined by the viewers' capacity to see the two kinds of action as a whole, and almost simultaneously. The two time periods are not merely set up against each other in juxtaposition, but they illuminate each other, a complex web of communication develops between them. Interestingly, and quite contrary to the above-stated linearity of time, it is a give-and-take relationship, not one-way traffic. Not only do the contemporary characters speculate on past events, but the nineteenth-century characters often ponder over the distant future, and frequently they succeed, without intending to, in predicting their own destinies.

Towards the end of the play, without foretelling the exact circumstances of his becoming a hermit, Septimus begins to understand that his pupil's equations will eventually drive him mad. 'It will make me mad as you promised,' he confides in Thomasina on the eve of her tragic death (II.vii.92). Not only does she make a hermit of him, but she actually *makes* the hermit when she draws what she imagines under the notion into the architect's 'picturesque' sketch book: 'I will put in a hermit, for what is a hermitage without a hermit?' (I.i.13). The drawing later becomes 'the only known likeness of the Sidley hermit', 'drawn in by a later hand, of course' (I.ii.25).

The alternating scenes are in constant mutual dialogue; what is more, its general rules are substantially undermined: the viewers often know the answers even before they are given the status of answers, i.e. before the questions are formulated. In Scene One, Thomasina makes a witty remark, in which she practically confirms Val's late-twentieth-century thesis that patterns are detectable from the chaos of game books: her father 'has no need of a recording angel, his life is written in the game book' (I.i.13). It is entirely the playwright's doing that the characters, separated by historical time, deal with surprisingly similar topics and parallel experiences, sometimes even uttering the same lines (the subject matter of the modern-time researchers is partly limited by the activities of the past savants). Thus, an area of themes common to both the periods—literally placed among the walls of the same room—is created.

Within the confines of this specific area paradoxes, consisting of two opposite statements that are both true at the same time, can thrive particularly well (Vaněk 280). It can be said that on the one hand, Thomasina and Septimus are right in what they claim to be true (indeed, as we are allowed to know, they often are), and on the other hand, both Hannah and Bernard are right as well, in the two groups' fatally separated contexts; Bernard, when he realizes his hypothesis was wrong for the most part, and Hannah, when she finds out hers was not.

It is beyond Bernard's competence to recognize fully the extent of his failure: Byron neither fought the duel, nor wrote the *Picadilly* reviews. A number of paradoxical accounts can be inferred from the turbulent circumstances that

formed and formed around Bernard's research. He gives Byron credit for the reviews, falsely, but he also claims that he discovered a few lines the poet added in pencil to Lady Croom's copy of Byron's satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. A minor thing in itself, but he is right in this. 'I've proved Byron was here and as far as I'm concerned he wrote those lines as sure as he shot that hare,' he defends himself, not knowing what the audience knows, which is that the hare was actually shot by Lord Augustus, only Byron claimed it, showing self-assurance not unlike Bernard's (II.vii.79). There is another similarity that relates Bernard to Byron: the reasons for their expulsion from the peaceful calm of 'Arcadia'. The true cause of Byron's sudden fleeing the Croom estate, which Bernard tried so arduously to find, is echoed peculiarly in Bernard's own behaviour before he leaves the house. Both men—the poet and his biographer—are caught red-handed by Lady Croom, the present and the past: while Thomasina's mother, enamoured of Lord Byron, encountered the promiscuous Mrs Chater 'on the threshold of Lord Byron's room', Bernard is caught with Chloe by her mother in the hermitage (II.vi.68). Yet the final paradox concerning Bernard remains implicit: there is shown to be a grain of truth in his assumptions about the famous poet. Lord Byron did play a decisive role in the duel between Septimus and Mr Chater. In fact, he both helped to bring the duel about, as well as prevent it. Thanks to Thomasina's account of one breakfast at Sidley Park, we learn that it was through Byron that Chater learned of Septimus's derisive review of his (Chater's) book.

THOMASINA: He said you were a witty fellow, and he had almost by heart an article you wrote about—well, I forget what, but it concerned a book called 'The Maid of Turkey' and how you would not give it to your dog for dinner.

SEPTIMUS: Ah. Mr Chater was at breakfast, of course.

THOMASINA: He was, not like certain lazybones.

(I.iii.36)

Although Septimus Hodge contrives—with his masterful use of discourse—to avert the threat of a duel when it first emerges, the second time, as it is about to take place inescapably, it is cancelled because of Byron's (and Chater's) departure.

Since the play is closer to comedy as a genre, the humour it continually employs seems to be inextricably intertwined with its numerous paradoxical mirror images. One should not forget that a paradox can sometimes turn into the grotesque (Vaněk 284). Surely, as Bernard observes, looking for signs of Byron's presence at Sidley Park, 'it's not going to jump out at you like "Lord Byron remarked wittily at breakfast"' (I.ii.31-32). Nevertheless, one of the first explicit things said of Byron in the play is included in Thomasina's comment: 'Lord Byron was amusing at breakfast' (I.iii.36). It is our only privilege and duty—as that of spectators—to acknowledge the multiple subtle discrepancies of the text. In *Arcadia*, Stoppard managed to dramatize the birth of paradox.

This principle culminates in the last scene of the play, in which the different time levels intermingle so that at several points they are compressed enough to create a sense of a dialogic relationship between them. All the characters move about the stage, undisturbed by the presence of another era. Their reflections on the future of the universe mix to produce a complementary sequence of lines:

(He [Septimus] extends his hand for the lesson book. She [Thomasina] returns it to him.)

THOMASINA: I have not room to extend it.

(SEPTIMUS and HANNAH turn the pages doubled by time. AUGUSTUS indolently starts to draw the models.)

HANNAH: Do you mean the world is saved after all?

VALENTINE: No, it's still doomed. But if this is how it started, perhaps it's how the next one will come.

HANNAH: From good English algebra?

SEPTIMUS: It will go to infinity or zero, or nonsense.

THOMASINA: No, if you set apart the minus roots they square back to sense.

(II.vii.78)

The technique reappears at the very end of the play when both Septimus and Hannah with Val are contemplating Thomasina's pioneering diagram, doubled by time, with the half-drunk Val admitting for the first time that 'she must have been doing something' after all (I.iv.47). While the three characters are held in awe by what she was able to anticipate, Thomasina is completely enthralled by the possibilities of an adult life, which is just opening before her: she yearns to learn how to waltz ('the most fashionable and gayest and boldest invention conceivable') and she is also in love with her tutor Septimus (II.vii.80).

The moment she finds out that he has been studying her old primer, she waves it aside: 'It was a joke', recalling her own 'solution' of Fermat's last theorem (II.vii.92). Apparently, Thomasina—despite the beliefs inscribed in her diagram—adopted Septimus's earlier optimistic view of the universe: one is not to grieve for the works lost in the fire of the library of Alexandria; 'what we let fall will be picked up by those behind' (I.iii.38). Against her past conviction that scientific progress is a great deal more important than matters of love ('let them elope, they cannot turn back the advancement of knowledge'), she would now prefer to elope with Septimus, letting knowledge take its own course (I.iii.37). Septimus, on the other hand, has already started to revise his former standpoint—as he is faced with Thomasina's calculations—and shall do so in the hermitage till the end of his life.

SEPTIMUS: When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.

THOMASINA: Then, we will dance.

(II.vii.94)

Gradually, however, the intellectual disputes, as if conducted in accordance with Thomasina's wishes, give way to the non-verbal, to the theatrical reality: on the stage two couples (Thomasina and Septimus; Hannah and Gus) are waltzing to the distant sound of piano.

The feelings viewers might be charged with while watching the final dance, I would argue, are not of mere consolation, as Alwes suggested. The play itself, as well as its message, is rather similar to an iterated algorithm (Delaney 265). It is questionable whether we can think of the *Arcadia* as open-ended. Our knowledge of the characters from the past exceeds far beyond the moment the curtain closes on them, though we do not know what to make of the other couple's awkward dance. Here, time indeed runs both ways, which makes the dance a death-defying device. The hopeful can, however, be justified only by our concurrent awareness of what is tragic and lost. Thomasina, though she is to die within hours, is infinitely happy, and from Val we learn that the heat is not quite gone, 'it goes into the mix. ... And everything is mixing the same way, all the time, irreversibly...' (II.vii.94). In a way he paraphrases Septimus's old assertion:

SEPTIMUS: We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. Ancient cures for diseases will reveal themselves once more. Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again.

(I.iii.38)

The lines and especially the ambivalent atmosphere of the final scene of *Arcadia* may even remind drama enthusiasts of the bitter-sweet speech delivered by Olga at the end of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*:

OLGA: (*embraces both her sisters*) The music is so happy, so confident, and you long for life! O my God! Time will pass, and we shall go away forever, and we shall be forgotten, our faces will be forgotten, our voices, and how many there were of us; but our sufferings will pass into joy for those who will live after us, happiness and peace will be established upon earth, and they will remember kindly and bless those who have lived before. Oh, dear sisters, our life is not ended yet. We shall live! The music is so happy, so joyful, and it seems as though in a little while we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering ... If we only knew—if we only knew!

(*The Three Sisters* IV)

Even in Chekhov's drama, Olga's speech could not function as consolation, immediately after they learned Irina's only potential future husband had been

killed in a duel; it was rather a highly ironic, tragicomic coda, resolving nothing. Altogether, *Arcadia* can be read as an idiosyncratic, almost experimental exploration of the topics that pervaded *The Three Sisters* a century earlier. As a matter of fact, *Arcadia* brings up and probes in general terms what *The Three Sisters* seemed to be haunted by: Vershinin's obsessive dreaming of 'the life that will come after us, in two or three hundred years' (*The Three Sisters* II). Stoppard develops the character's idle thoughts into a completely new dramatic text, exploring the possibility of two time periods existing on one stage almost simultaneously, and interweaving them closely through the plot.

Despite the considerable complexity of its plot structure, *Arcadia* retains its mysteries, if fairly strictly delimited. Phenomena stripped to the core, which science is unable to comprehend, a character excluded from discourse, or the place where the playwright refuses to control the action any longer, such things represent poetry to Stoppard. Yet even this kind of knowledge has to be verbalized:

VALENTINE: The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. It's how nature creates itself, on every scale, the snowflake and the snowstorm. It makes me so happy. To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing. People were talking about the end of physics. Relativity and quantum looked as if they were going to clean out the whole problem between them. A theory of everything. But they only explained the very big and the very small. The universe, the elementary particles. The ordinary-sized stuff which is our lives, the things people write poetry about—clouds—daffodils—waterfalls and what happens in a cup of coffee when the cream goes in—these things are full of mystery, as mysterious to us as the heavens were to the Greeks.

(I.iv.47-48)

Between the snowflake and the snowstorm, it is still snowing. Or to quote Chekhov's play once more: 'Meaning ... Here it's snowing. What meaning is there in that?' (*The Three Sisters* II). To encounter *Arcadia* and come across the metaphysical at work is exactly the sort of incomprehensibility the audience can bear and not feel dumbfounded by. However, the portion of nostalgia Stoppard managed to include in this play is carefully controlled: it is already present in the universal themes the text embraces. The characters are finding, rather than seeking explanations; a prominent agent (the author himself) can be felt beyond the surface of the text. It is the agent who orders the information the 'readers' will receive and who openly prefers one of the researchers to the other (eventually, the Fuseli painting turns out to be a genuine depiction of Byron). All in all, *Arcadia*—with its traditional focus on language and elaborate form—makes an island of order 'in an ocean of ashes' (II.vii.76).

The kind of consolation available to the spectators of Stoppard's play comes only from their constant awareness of a deep-embedded contradiction, an insuperable split in the heart of the play: its two time-periods, its opposing and

shifting views and its countless paradoxes. They can thus 'see it all', which is an extremely effective position, and flattering. A schizoid one, and very contemporary, at that.

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