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Modern Drama, Volume 49, Number 2, Summer 2006, pp. 223-237 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2006.0064*

Allegories from the Past: Stoppard's Uses of History

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The surprising thing about Tom Stoppard is that – for all his reputation as a "cutting edge" dramatist, dealing with highly contemporary issues, tackling immediately relevant themes – in his whole dramatic output there are only four full-length stage plays actually set in the present. These are *Night and Day* and *Jumpers* and *Hapgood*, along with his ironically titled, semi-autobiographical *The Real Thing* and his very first play, *Enter a Free Man* – although Stoppard has dismissed this as an amalgam of other people's plays. Eighteen of his remaining nineteen full-length plays are set wholly or at least partially in the past, qualifying him for the title "historical playwright," a fact that makes him quite unusual among major twentieth-century British playwrights. There are, of course, others who have turned to historical subjects, among them Edward Bond and Caryl Churchill. Yet neither of these has set more than one in three of their dramas in the past, and Churchill, for example, moves away from the historical, with most of her history plays being clustered in her early career. Perhaps the only playwright who has anything approaching the same weight of historical drama in his total output is Peter Barnes, whose plays are set in eras so distant and different from our own that the effect is estranging.

While his dramaturgy and political stance are, of course, very different from Stoppard's, the way Barnes handles history offers instructive insights for defining Stoppard's approach. The periods Barnes chooses are generally ones about which an English-speaking public would have little if any knowledge: Carlos II of Spain (*The Bewitched*, 1974), the medieval era of the Black Death (*Red Noses*, 1985), or the short reign of the hermit pope Saint Celestine (*Sunsets and Glories*, 1990). This gives him the opportunity to create a grotesque dramatic universe without losing the sense of reality, to create symbolic images of present-day society in pursuit of creating a form of "drama that ma[kes] the surreal real, that [… goes] to the limit, then further" and has the

potential to "fuse telephone wires and have a direct impact on reality" (Barnes viii). Clearly, Barnes is not intending to inform audiences about the past but is displaying universalized images in which spectators may see their own distorted faces. Barnes's plays are open allegories. Stoppard's historical drama is equally allegorical, but far subtler in its approach, characteristically overlapping past and present, with a generally naturalistic slice of fairly recent history either inter-cut with or mirroring present-day action. In both, past events or social situations are used to provide perspective on today's world. But Stoppard's main effect is one of multiplying intellectual complexity in a very postmodern way, whereas Barnes's tone is one of savage farce, which relates back to Artaud's concept of theatre.

The few plays of Stoppard's specifically set in the contemporary world have a very direct relationship to current issues. So *Night and Day* – which deals with postcolonial African dictatorships and the news business – was performed in 1978, when the excesses of Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda were of growing public concern. Similarly, in 1972, *Jumpers* – which imagined British astronauts reaching the moon (and abandoning one of their team-mates to die up there) – was produced less than a year after the second American moon landing, which transformed Neil Armstrong's "giant step for mankind" into the next step in what promised (before the Challenger shuttle disaster) to be a series of moon landings. At the same time, *Jumpers* also dealt with the latest trend in philosophy: logical positivism. It touched such a nerve, indeed, that the Oxford philosopher, A.J. Ayer, the leader of the logical positivist movement in England, carried on a long public correspondence with Stoppard about the play that was published in the *Times* in 1974. In the same way, the 1988 play *Hapgood*, with its convoluted plot of double agents and defecting Russian scientists, not only capitalized on the fame of John le Carré spy stories but also anticipated the collapse of Communism, which came just one year later. Then, too, *Hapgood* was the first play to deal in a serious way with modern physics, discussing the wave–particle theory of light and Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle exactly ten years before Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* reached the stage. The only other plays set in the present are a small group of directly political one-act plays – *Every Good Boy Deserves a Favour* (reflecting the 1977 arrest of Václav Havel for petitioning the Czech government to follow the Helsinki agreement on Human Rights), plus a couple of double bills: *Dirty Linen / New-Found-Land* (reflecting the political sex scandals that dogged Westminster in the 1970s) and *Dogg's Hamlet / Cahoot's Macbeth* (combining Wittgenstein's language theory with pointed references to one of the major Czech subversives of the day – Pavel Kahout – and to the Communist dictatorships so dominant in Eastern Europe at the time). At the same time, counterbalancing the politics, all these shorter pieces are to some degree allegorical: *Dogg's Hamlet / Cahoot's Macbeth* explores political oppression versus free expression (an opposition encapsulated in

Wittgensteinian linguistic games), and *Every Good Boy Deserves a Favour* presents musical analogues.

Otherwise, Stoppard's whole output is geared to historical consciousness. Even in *Arcadia* – for all its computers and high-tech science – fully half the action is set almost two centuries back in the past. And cutting-edge style is no guarantee of contemporary context either. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested, intertextual ironies that call attention to the representational process point to the postmodern condition of contradiction (95). And this is precisely the type of irony we find in plays like *Travesties*. There, the street in Zurich where Lenin, Tzara, and Joyce intersect – Spiegelgasse (literally "mirror lane" or, in a standard English expression, "down memory lane" in Old Carr's mind) – is a metaphor for the hall of mirrors in which art and politics are interchangeable and become translated into the artifice of Oscar Wilde's classic *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Yet for all its postmodern stylistics, *Travesties* has only the most tenuous connection to the present in its story – the erratic memory of its ancient narrator, "Carr of the Consulate" (which, in turn, echoes the sort of names given to the fictional heroes of empire by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists in such escapist, *Boys' Own*–style fantasies as Edgar Wallace's *Sanders of the River*). So the references are all to the past – but to a literary or aestheticized history. And within the frame of Carr's uncertain memory, the whole action of the play takes place in 1915/16 – in the middle of World War I – all of sixty years before the opening performance of *Travesties*.

In addition to this focus on the past, an analysis of Stoppard's work across forty-five years, from the time of his first professionally produced play in 1966, shows a general and increasing bias towards the historical. In all, up to now, Stoppard has written twenty-four full-length plays. Nine of these are adaptations; and almost all of these are documents from the early twentieth century – so they are historical for Stoppard, even if, when originally written, they were contemporary, depicting their own time of the 1920s or 1930s. (Apart from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the only exceptions are two adaptations of plays from the 1960s: Havel's *Largo Desolata* and Mrożek's *Tango*, although the latter is itself a history play.) And all four of his full-length original plays set in the contemporary world were performed back in the 1970s, over twenty-five years ago – a strong indication of the way that his focus has changed over time. What this pattern of distribution shows is an increasing focus on history, to the point that, since the early 1990s, every single one of Stoppard's plays has been set, at least partly, in the past.

In this sequence, starting with *Travesties* (1974), the first three plays each have a double time-frame: *Arcadia* is divided between 1809 – the height of the English Romantic period – and the 1990s when it was first performed; *Indian Ink* (1995) cuts back and forth from the Indian Raj of 1930 to England in the 1990s. *The Invention of Love* (1997) has a double time scheme as well,

although in this case neither period is the present. Indeed, the closest we get to today is the date of Houseman's death in 1936, while the opposite pole here is the high Victorian era of the 1870s. Then, in the three plays that make up Stoppard's trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*, the whole action is set in the nineteenth century, with the time sequence being entirely chronological – from summer 1833 to August 1868 – and although, in the opening play (*Voyage*), the action switches back and forth between two locations (as it does in *Arcadia*), the locations here are geographical not temporal: an estate in the Russian countryside versus the metropolitan centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Notably – like *Travesties* – *Arcadia*, *Indian Ink*, and *The Invention of Love* all focus on art, as does Stoppard's 1998 Oscar award–winning film *Shakespeare in Love* (again, of course, historical; it is set in Elizabethan London and ends in the new colony of Virginia, so called after "the Virgin Queen"). In addition to these, there are also some of Stoppard' s earlier short pieces that focus on history – or rather, not so much history as art history. *Artist Descending a Staircase* and *After Magritte* both illustrate a particular facet of Stoppard's use of the past. While *After Magritte* takes place in the present, the set draws on *L'assassin menacé* (1926) by Magritte – a painting of a bare room, framed by two bowler-hatted figures who lurk on either side of the doorway with club and net, where a woman bleeding from the mouth lies naked on a couch while a man listens soulfully to an oversized phonograph, watched by three voyeuristic heads peering through a window in the rear wall. Characteristically, Stoppard complicates even this famously ambiguous picture. In what was to become one of his standard techniques, Stoppard's play reverses the perspective of the painting. In addition, Stoppard makes the original situation even more bizarre. As in the painting, the opening tableau in the play shows us a bare room with a prostrate woman – except that, as described in the preliminary list of characters, she is "a little old, tough, querulous lady" (7). She wears a black bathing cap, with a bowler hat perched on her stomach, and instead of being on a couch, she is lying on an ironing board. A girl in a ball gown is kneeling nose down on the floor, while a bare-chested man in thigh-length rubber wading boots is blowing on a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The two policemen from Magritte's painting peer in through the window – instead of lurking in the hallway, as they do in *L'assassin menacé*, invisible to the occupants of the room and closest to the viewer. The rest of the play then goes about providing perfectly ordinary explanations for each of the apparently absurd positions. The mother is stretched out on the ironing board to help her bad back; the girl is picking up the beads of a broken necklace; her husband is stripped to the waist because his shirt is about to be ironed. He has put on rubber boots to avoid being electrocuted while he plugs the iron into the light socket, and he is blowing on the bulb because it's too hot to unscrew, and so on.

As well as copying this particular – and iconically recognizable painting – the play is also "after Magritte" in the sense that it follows a surrealist

approach by challenging the way we see things. The characters argue over an incident they have observed, trying to find a sensible explanation for a man in striped clothing (pyjamas, or a football jersey, or prison garb) with a white beard (or shaving cream on his face) who has been standing in the street, brandishing a white cane (or a cricket bat) and carrying a object (which might be a football, or a tortoise, or bagpipes, or an alligator handbag); and the explanations they put forward become increasingly "outlandish embellishments," as one of the characters insists, that are ever more "gratuitous and strain the credulity" (21). When there is a knock on the door, they hurry to set the furniture, which had been piled against it, to rights, so that, when the policemen (satirically named Inspector Foot and PC Holmes) rush in demanding to know "the meaning of this bizarre spectacle" they have observed from looking in the window, they are faced with a completely ordinary living room (24). The inspector's attempts to make sense of what he has seen inside the room lead him to suggest this is a brothel where they have been carrying out illegal surgery "on a bald nigger minstrel" – and he reveals that he has come in pursuit of a bizarre blackface criminal who stole the box-office takings from a theatre "stuffed into [a] crocodile boot" (31, 34). Of course, there are completely reasonable explanations for everything (and each arcane "reconstruction has proved false in every particular"), explanations that the play elaborately details, although the effect is to make rationality itself seem absurd in a context where events of "a mundane and domestic nature bordering on cliché" appear surreal (43, 44).

Similarly, the radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* is a variation on Marcel Duchamps' painting called *Nude Descending a Staircase*, although here it is not the visual image so much as the dramatic structure that echoes Duchamps' Cubism: the scenes move back through time from the present to 1914, the date of the original painting, and up again from then to now, "in the sequence ABCDEFEDCBA," as Stoppard puts it (*Artist* 11). *Artist Descending a Staircase* was produced just a year before *Travesties*, which returns to the same period and showcases Dadaism, in the figure of Tristan Tzara, together with the apostle of high modernism, James Joyce. And it is hardly a coincidence that, in the course of these three plays, all written in the same five-year period, Stoppard covers the whole range of modernist art: Cubism (*Artist Descending a Staircase*), Dada (*Travesties*), and surrealism (*After Magritte*). Only futurism is absent, reflecting its association with Fascism.[1]

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In all these plays, aesthetics are of central ethical importance, formalizing and allegorizing the historical content. So, in *Travesties*, style is what gives coherence to chaos, even when the disruption and destruction is as extreme as that of World War I. Tristan Tzara, the most flamboyant of the new Dada anti-art movement, and Joyce, then at work on his stream-of-consciousness master-

piece, *Ulysses*, are joined through a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that actually did take place in Zurich, in 1917. They are contrasted with Lenin (also in Zurich before being transported, courtesy of the German High Command, to the Finland Station and also a writer of a sort, since he was drafting his polemic on "Imperialism"). The artistic positions of each are clearly represented. Tzara, the iconoclast, rejects Joyce's art as traditionalist, as creating an impassable disjunction between art and life, and insists, "[W]e need vandals and desecrators, simple-minded demolition men to smash centuries of baroque subtlety, to bring down the temple, and thus finally to reconcile the shame and the necessity for being an artist! Dada! *Dada! Dada!!* (*He starts to smash whatever crockery is to hand* […])" (*Travesties* 62). Picking up explicitly on that smashed crockery with the term "broken pots," Joyce stands for the absolutely opposing view of art as a temple and artists as divinely inspired myth makers:

> An artist is the magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality. […] from Troy to the fields of Flanders. If there is any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art […] What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust. A forgotten expedition prompted by Greek merchants looking for new markets. A minor redistribution of broken pots. But it is we who stand enriched, by a tale of heroes, of a golden apple, a wooden horse, a face that launched a thousand ships […] (62)

The modernist style of Joyce's work, of course, was no less revolutionary than that of Tzara, or indeed on the political level, Lenin; and in the play, the writings of all three are interchangeable, with their texts swapped around in identical folders, just as in Wilde's comedy a handbag carrying a baby is switched for one containing (in Lady Bracknell's inimitable words), "the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality" (Wilde 284).

The way reality is distorted by subjective perception is a central theme. Joyce is making the point that facts – whether present-day events or historical – have no meaning until they are shaped by art into pre-existing cultural forms. And despite his apparent opposition, Tzara complements Joyce's point by arguing that art should have the immediacy of current events; indeed, that art itself should be an event, determining how people experience their lives. But representing reality then depends on the artist's capacity to see what reality is. And Stoppard underlines that Joyce is almost blind, needing heavy spectacles for his astigmatism, that Tzara sports a monocle, and that Carr's memory is particularly unreliable. Then again, supposedly documentary history is no less questionable – after all, who decides what historical facts are? For example, as Lenin lectures on the necessity of subordinating art to ideology, he stands "*as though leaning into a gale, his chin jutting, his hands grip-*

ping the edge of the rostrum which is waist-high, the right hand at the same time gripping a cloth cap ... a justly famous image"; and Stoppard is careful to note that "*[t]his is the photo, incidentally, which Stalin had re-touched so as to expunge Kamenev and Trotsky who featured prominently in the original*" (*Travesties* 84). Such historical revisionism is essentially no different from the way the historical characters are parodied by the egocentric distortion of Stoppard's narrator, Carr of the Consulate, who turns out never to have been consul at all.

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The question of perception – of how we see things or rather of how we are taught to interpret what we see – is crucial. Stoppard may claim (as he specifically does through his semi-autobiographical playwright–protagonist in *The Real Thing*) that words are "innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other […]" (54). Yet this style of objectivity itself carries political weight, and facts are never neutral. History (as Walter Benjamin has argued) is written by the victors, who expunge the opposing versions of events espoused by the vanquished and even erase their images (as Stalin did with Trotsky). Still more to the point, because of the links between history and art, there is, as Hayden White asserts, no such thing as a stable and unified historical record but only competing, pluralistic "histories." White points out that these "histories" are literally "stories," using rhetorical tropes and constructed on fictional lines in order to offer specific moral explanations for events. In particular, the founders of modern history – the "great" nineteenth-century historians (Michelet, Tocqueville, Burckhardt) as well as the nineteenth-century philosophers of history (Nietzsche, Marx, Hegel) – all shaped historical fact according to the literary forms of their day. They might well have been doing this unconsciously (see White, *Metahistory*). Yet the effect, as White has shown, is very little different from that of histories that consciously and explicitly copy fictional models, such as Simon Schama's 1989 book about the French Revolution *Citizens*, which (as the reviewers remarked) "brings to life the excitement – and harrowing terror – of an epochal human event […] like the great nineteenth-century narratives it emulates,"[2] the closest model being *Les Misérables*. Schama calls his epic tale a "chronicle"; but, for White, a chronicle is specifically an unedited conglomeration of facts, whereas Schama's "national bestseller" begins (as one review mentioned) "with a dramatic burst of poetic imagination" (Stone) and revels in chapter headings like "Fathers and Sons" (borrowed, of course, from the title of Ivan Turgenev's famous novel), or "The Adventures of M. Guillaume" (echoing the title of a Jules Verne story). So, if historical facts can never be told straight, then it is essential to interrogate the historian.

This is, of course, an exact equivalent of the old literary problem of "the unreliable narrator" – as epitomized by Stoppard's forgetful and senile Carr.

And although it is not possible to prove Stoppard was influenced by *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, where White first outlined his theory of historiography, White's book *was* published in 1973, at the exact time when Stoppard was writing *Travesties*, a title that, of course, points to the misrepresentation of reality. And whether Stoppard read the book or not, the play serves as a wickedly imaginative evocation of White's thesis – which White went on to extend in a later book, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, published in 1987, right at the time when Schama was working on *Citizens*.

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Artists operate on reality just as historians do on recorded fact; and in his plays about art, Stoppard deals specifically with the modernists: writers and painters who consciously set out to challenge accepted conventions of realism and whose take on representations of life was openly ideological – hence the "isms": Cubism, surrealism, Dadaism. Revolutionary at the beginning of the last century, by now they have become part of the way we interpret our contemporary world. But, of course, these are not the only factors determining how we evaluate events. The other major determinants are politics, philosophy, and science and (on a more personal level) emotional relationships. And in his plays over the last decade, Stoppard has taken on each of these in turn: science in *Arcadia*; the evolving of passion in *The Invention of Love*; philosophies of politics in *The Coast of Utopia*.

In each of these plays, Stoppard returns to the nineteenth century: the era that established the conceptual frame for our modern world. This, *Arcadia* suggests, was the time when Newtonian physics was first called into question, laying the groundwork for Einstein's relativity and quantum mechanics. This was also the century when the European states developed global empires and when Marx's socialist ideology and Darwin's theory of evolution were first formulated, sowing the seeds for the mass movements of the twentieth century and creating the rationales for both Communism and Capitalism . In addition, it was the era when England evolved a repressive sexual morality that only began to be challenged in the "flower-child" generation of the 1960s.

In a sense, this last category (the views determining personal relationships) is really a subset of Stoppard's analysis of art, since the starting point of *The Invention of Love* is that the modern ideal of romantic passion could not be conceived until the Roman poet Catullus created the first-ever love poems just over two-thousand years ago. And, as the cover to the published text of the play suggests (with its daguerreotype portrait superimposed on the handwritten text of *A Shropshire Lad*), this is history as literature, revolving around the figure of the poet John Housman, who survives through his best-known poem, the poem illustrated on the cover and incorporated into the dialogue, a poem that has been learned by generations of British schoolchildren. But the play

also has Oscar Wilde as one of its characters, in his last days in France after his imprisonment for sodomy, who remarks that he "lived at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new – the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman" (96–97). And it is from Wilde's one openly political book, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* that Stoppard takes the title for his trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias" (Wilde, *Soul* 141).

As well as providing the title for the trilogy as a whole, this quotation was explicitly picked up in the National Theatre program, which featured a painting by the German Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich. The picture shows a couple on a sailing ship approaching St. Petersburg in the early light of dawn – the first glimmers of the bright new day promised by the Enlightenment – doubly appropriate since Stoppard is dealing with the roots of modern socialism in nineteenth-century Russia.

His cast includes all the major lines of radicalism – the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Karl Marx himself, and Alexander Herzen (who might be seen as the originator of social democracy), together with their families and disciples – plus the leading literary figures of the time in Russia, Alexander Pushkin (killed, of course, in a duel, which is memorialized in the first play) and Turgenev (who becomes the literary voice of revolution). However, in tracing the political development of this band of idealists, Stoppard reverses Wilde's optimism. The titles become openly allegorical. This is a *Voyage* (title of the first play) that is *Shipwreck*[ed] (title of the second play) on the rocks of egoism and extremism; and even though some human feeling is finally *Salvage*[d] (title of the last play), passionate appeals by the dying Herzen are ignored not only by Bakunin but also by Herzen's one-time allies Turgenev and Marx – who walk onward, arm-in-arm, with Marx declaiming,

> Every stage leads to a higher stage in the permanent conflict which is the march of history happily anticipating the final titanic struggle, the last turn of the great wheel of progress beneath which generations of toiling masses perished for the ultimate victory. And relishing the thought of the Neva lit by flames and running red, the coconut palms hung with corpses all along the shining strand from Kronstadt to the Nevsky Prospekt … (*Salvage* 117)

This, of course, was written several years after the dismantling of the Iron Curtain and the fall of all the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and even Russia – which gives emphasis to Herzen's last speech: "We have to open men's eyes and not tear them out … and if we see differently, it's all right, we don't have to kill the myopic in our myopia …" (118).

From the audience's point of view, the revolutionaries' hopes have all proved empty, their messianic ideals have been exposed as brutal inhumanity, and the rhetoric of a pointless apocalypse has been revealed as short-sighted indeed. Yet the strength of Herzen's position – the call for comprehending diversity, including the revolutionary vision – is also its weakness, since he is short-sighted in tolerating the revolutionaries' own brand of short-sightedness, a short-sightedness intolerant of any divergence or plurality, including Herzen's. At the same time, it is Herzen's ideals that are seen to have ultimately triumphed with the disappearance of Communism, and the aim of the trilogy has clearly been to open the eyes of the audience.

Significantly, the emphasis on distorted vision in this speech restates the theme of *Travesties*, now in solely political terms. But Herzen's final English words in *Salvage* relate to art, presenting the vandalizing of the artistic achievement and culture of the past as the ultimate crime of the Communist revolutionaries – a sentiment clearly designed to echo in the minds of the audience because of its place in the trilogy: "I imagine myself the future custodian of a broken statue, a blank wall, a desecrated grave, telling everyone who passes by, 'Yes – yes, all this was destroyed by the revolution'" (*Salvage* 118). And in *Shipwreck* – the central play of the trilogy – politics mingles explicitly with art in a park scene that is both an ironic echo of a painting that was shockingly revolutionary for its time and a deliberate break in the chronological progress of the play: an obvious anachronism. As the stage direction to June 1849 specifies,

> *"Déjeuner sur l'herbe" … There is a tableau which anticipates – by fourteen years – the painting by Manet. Natalie [Herzen's wife] is the undressed woman sitting on the grass in the company of two fully clothed men […] Emma, stooping to pick a flower, is the woman in the background. The broader composition includes Turgenev, who is at first glance sketching Natalie but is in fact sketching Emma. The tableau, however, is an overlapping of two locations, Natalie and George being in one, while Herzen, Emma and Turgenev are together elsewhere.* (*Shipwreck* 73–74)

Because of its open theatricality in the doubling of locations and the overlapping images of art and stage – so much the hallmark of Stoppard's work but completely absent from the rest of the trilogy – this scene forms the conceptual core of the whole examination of radical politics. It insists (reversing a standard claim of both Marxists and modern feminists) that the political is – ultimately – personal; that it is individuals and their intimate relationships that are significant, not the inhuman abstraction of universal ideas; that it is art that codifies and transmits the meaning of events, not the recording of facts.

And the date of the scene – June 1849 – is important. It is set exactly one year after the uprising in Paris. 1848 became known as the "Year of Revolutions." From Paris, where in February 1848 King Louis Philippe had been

forced to abdicate and the Second Republic was proclaimed, popular unrest spread to Prague, Budapest, and Vienna. Chancellor Metternich of Austria was forced to flee, and Hungary won virtual independence. Street fighting in Berlin led the king of Prussia to promise a parliamentary constitution, while an insurrection in Milan forced the withdrawal of Austrian troops and in Venice a republic was proclaimed. It looked as if the Revolution had triumphed. However, already by June 1848 – just four months later – an Austrian general had bombarded Prague and imposed martial law in Bohemia; the Paris Commune was crushed in vicious street battles (illustrated in the National Theatre program by a contemporary photograph – significantly for Stoppard's artistic focus, one of the very earliest daguerreotypes), and the Italian armies of liberation had been defeated. By 1849, the forces of reaction had triumphed everywhere: Vienna had been retaken from the radicals; and in June, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph accepted aid from Tsar Nicholas of Russia in suppressing the Hungarian revolt, while "order" was imposed in Paris by French troops.

There are, of course, modern analogues in the 1956 Hungarian peoples' uprising against the hegemony of the U.S.S.R. and in the 1968 "Prague Spring," where Dubček (the reformist first secretary of the Czech Communist Party) attempted to create "socialism with a human face," both historical moments having significance for earlier works by Stoppard. Labelled "counter-revolutions" by the Russians, each was ruthlessly put down by Warsaw Pact tanks and guns, with tens of thousands of Hungarians killed and a completely repressive regime being installed in Czechoslovakia. Both the nineteenth-century and the modern events have the same significance as popular revolts against authoritarian and repressive regimes, but the latter can also be seen as a reversal, since (as Stoppard's trilogy shows) it was the ideology of the earlier revolutionary period that spawned the dictatorships of the Cold-War period.

However, significantly, what Stoppard's scene affirms is that, despite the total collapse of the 1848 revolution, life goes on for individuals, and art – the later Manet painting of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* – puts it into a meaningful conceptual frame. "History itself is the main character of the drama, and also its author. We are all in the story, which ends with universal bliss. Perhaps not for you. Perhaps not for your children. But universal bliss, you can put your shirt on it" (*Shipwreck* 51).

On the surface, the action is a straight retelling of a thirty-five-year period of intellectual and political ferment, dealing with events largely unknown to a contemporary audience. But, in fact, the continual questioning of the characters turns the whole trilogy into an analysis of the way history is constructed. So, at first glance, Herzen's words here are a standard formulation of history as fate, an invisible and universal force, driving towards an inevitable future. At the same time, his words are heavily ironized because he is speaking to a

Russian workman whose blue peasant shirt is in tatters (so he has nothing left to bet with). Yet in contradiction to this ironic juxtaposition, since the key phrase is also given extra emphasis by being reprinted in the program, his speech raises questions about the way history is being presented – as a dram a in itself and through the framing of this drama as a classical three-part tragedy.

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This old-fashioned format makes Stoppard's *Coast of Utopia* seem, on the surface, retrospective in its subject and focus. But there is reassurance in the familiarity of such conventional tropes. After the collapse of the totalitarian regimes that dominated the twentieth century, Herzen's understanding of the self-deceiving but passionately sincere hope that led true idealists to put their faith in and promote ideological abstractions as well as his perception of the terrible human cost exacted in the name of such absolute ideals can finally be accepted. And Stoppard is also, perhaps, deliberately deploying this traditional tragic form to signal his support for the unrevolutionary hero of his trilogy. As the last play *Salvage* shows, to his contemporaries, Herzen had come to seem irrelevant: as Turgenev wrote after Herzen's death, "[E]veryone in Russia will say that he should have died sooner, before he could have outlived his fame" (qtd. in Kelley 35). But for Stoppard, Herzen's views are ideas whose time has come: our time.

And, indeed, what Stoppard suggests through his plays is that history does not just inform the present, it merges with it. His particular interest in the nineteenth century may be because that was the period that formed the values that infused the whole modern world. But as one of his characters in *Arcadia* proclaims, "The procession [of history] 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" (38).

Nothing human ever completely vanishes; ideas never die. It is a radical assertion, which not only makes irrelevant the chronological distinctions on which all history is based but also assumes the superiority of the mind over physical facts. This implies that, beneath the apparent variable flows of history, there is an unchanging human totality – yet Stoppard's formulation of that perception also corresponds to the views of White, since Stoppard too denies the significance of historical "fact" and calls on the power of imagination. In doing so, he implies that artistic vision trumps historical records. And this unity of human experience, past to present, is literally embodied in the structure of *Arcadia*.

It is a commonplace to note that the scenes switch between 1809 and the

present day (1993 in the play's first performance), while the action in each half to some extent mirrors that in the other – as water reflects a neo-classical landscape on the cover of the printed text for the play – with the setting for both times being the same country house. But what carries Stoppard's meaning is the exact way the two time-frames are fitted together. They replicate each other, in much the same way as the fractals Thomasina (the young mathematical heroine of the 1809 story) is said to have discovered, where repeating (or in mathematical terms, iterating) an equation, with each solution being fed back into the next calculation, produces a constant geometrical pattern. In the simplest terms (as explained by the computer expert in the contemporary scenes), the numbers translate into graphs, each graph being identical but formed from "a small section of the previous one, blown up. Like you'd blow up a detail of a photograph, and then a detail of the detail, and so on, forever" (43). In a precisely analogous way, although both halves of the play occupy the same stage time, the 1809 scenes cover four years, while the present-day scenes occupy a single day. In addition, the same patterning recurs from scene to scene in the historical and contemporary frames, with the stage directions to one explicitly stating that it is a "*reprise*," while the description of the previous scene reminds us that "*[w]e have seen this composition before*" (67, 35). At the same time – mimicking the expanding graph of fractals – whenever characters from either era put anything on the table, it remains there, whatever the period of the scene, in a multiplying collection of objects.

One of these objects is a heavily allegorical apple, offered to one of the present-day characters, then picked up by Thomasina in 1809, who uses a leaf from it to plot an equation that will demonstrate how "nature is written in numbers" (37); it is used again in the present to explain how a "picture of this leaf" could be made by iterating the right algorithm on a computer (47). The apple, of course, is simultaneously emblematic of Newtonian physics (an apple falling on Newton's head while he was sleeping in an orchard led to his discovering the law of gravity) and of Eve's seduction of Adam in Eden: as one of Stoppard's characters puts it, love is "[t]he attraction that Newton left out. All the way back to the apple in the garden" (74). And the biblical Garden of Eden or its classical equivalent, Arcadia, is picked up in the landscape of the country house – its original, formal, Italianate 1730s garden is described as having been "Paradise in the age of reason" (27), and the picturesque naturalism of Capability Brown's garden that has replaced it is also described as being "[h]ere […] in Arcadia" – a phrase that leads Thomasina to recall the title of Poussin's famous painting (reproduced in the National Theatre program), where the "I" of "*Et in Arcadia ego!*" refers to death (12).[3] Indeed, this reminder of mortality – also inherent in the biblical story, where Eve's apple is a symbol of both sex and death – is reflected in the fate of Thomasina, burnt to death on the verge of sexual awakening, which can be seen as a sort of perverse rendering of the "Heat–Death" theory of the Third

Law of Thermodynamics,[4] the very theory that Thomasina is shown as deducing.

In a 1978 collection of essays called *Tropics of Discourse*, White called on historians to discard the obsolete forms of the nineteenth-century novel and, instead, adopt styles of narrative more suited to present-day consciousness – postmodern ironies, cinematic montage, citation, the juxtaposition of conflicting levels of narration, and so on. Francis Fukuyama effectively answered this challenge when he famously asked whether we had reached "The End of History?" (the title of his 1989 article); so too has Stoppard responded to White's call. The structure and patterning of *Arcadia* is modelled on the principles of fractal geometry and chaos theory, aligning it with contemporary science. Similarly, *The Invention of Love* is truly postmodern, with the structure of its action mirroring what the character of the protagonist, Houseman, in his manifestation as a long-dead literary icon revisiting his past life, describes as his own mental state: "archaism, anachronism, the wayward inconsequence that only hindsight can acquit of *non-sequitur* … and the unities out of the window, without a window to be out of …" (100).

Historians like Niall Ferguson may continue to cast their pictures of the past in the traditional rhetoric of the nineteenth-century. However, as the character Oscar Wilde asserts in *The Invention of Love*, "Truth […] is the work of the imagination" (93). Wilde, in many ways, becomes Stoppard's spokesman in *The Invention of Love*; and Wilde's final words in the play are, "One should always be a little improbable. /And /Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance" (102).

NOTES

1 The movement was primarily located in Italy, and many of the futurists gravitated toward Fascism, the most signal example being one of the main originators, Marinetti, who became Mussolini's minister for culture.

2 *Newsweek*, cited as advertising on the back cover of Schama. See also Stone.

3 This well-known painting, *Arcadian Shepherd*, shows a goat-footed satyr, accompanied by bucolic shepherds, in an idealized sylvan landscape, discovering a slab of stone inscribed with the ambiguous motto, *Et in Arcadia ego* [I too am in Arcadia].

4 The Laws of Thermodynamics can be summarized as stating that because heat (which is assumed to be a constant sum) can only pass from a hotter to a cooler body, the whole universe will eventually all become the same temperature, which will be too low to sustain life as we know it. The Third Law specifies that as temperature approaches zero all processes cease and the entropy of a system approaches a constant.

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