Chapter II: Stoppard’s Intertextual World.

Stoppard’s plays are intellectually and philosophically demanding. Their apparent meanings are not the only ones which make them interesting. As works of literature these plays take on the pre-existent plays, texts or traditions, and attempt to critically respond to established notions of meaning, cultural codes and philosophical absolutes in a manner that resembles postmodernist. The postmodern is designated by Lyotard as a rejection of the modernist “metadiscourse” signifying “some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working Subject, or the creation of wealth.” He defines the spirit of the postmodern age as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”

The post-World War-II situations expose scientific progress, the laissez faire and free market economies, Salvationist faith, socialist ideals and the nuclear family as bedtime lullabies. The empty and illusory stabilities of these grand narratives do increasingly indicate the fact no text is uniquely placed to hold the absolute meaning.

It is a fact that Stoppard’s play is felt to be an intertext. The Stoppard reader feels thus obliged to consider the network of textual relations as well as their meaningful significances that arise out of such perspectives of intertextuality. As a poststructuralist thinker Julia Kristeva introduces the idea of intertextuality in her “The Bounded Text” as constructed out of already existing discourses. She lays bare her conviction that a text does not originate from the mind of an original author,
but rather it is compiled from already pre-existing texts and discourses in society; and hence, to her, a text is “a permutation of texts,” utterances, and traces which “intersect and neutralize one another” and produce “an intertextuality in the space of a given text.” ² In “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes too, without his use of the term intertextuality, has similarly conceived text as “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.” He has defined text to be “a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centers of culture.” ³ Stoppard’s plays Dogg’s Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Travesties, Jumpers, and Arcadia do elicit readings in the light of the above poststructuralist thought. For example, Stoppard’s intertextuality may be perceived from Arcadia:

If knowledge isn’t self-knowledge it isn’t doing much, mate. Is the universe expanding? Is it contracting? Is it standing on one leg and singing ‘When Father Painted the Parlour’? Leave me out. I can expand my universe without you. ‘She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.’ There you are he wrote it after coming home from a party. ⁴

Stoppard talks about knowledge and explores the nature of the world with questions that examine staple truths of science, religion and romanticism. He premises that no being is superior to the other and that one is always connected with the other. Plurality of life and freedom of the perception is being shown.
Intertextuality refers to far more than the ‘influences’ of writers on each other. Kristeva’s intertextuality also includes, as Graham Allen observes, “(d)esire and the psychological drives of the split subject” who is “split between the conscious and the unconscious, reason and desire, the rational and the irrational, the social and the presocial, the communicable and the incommunicable.” And in Stoppard’s *Jumpers*, when Dotty looks at a dying jumper in surprise as he crawls up her body and she looks around ‘in a bewildered way,’ later George shouts furiously at Dotty’s scream ‘(h)elp-rescue-fire’ as ‘childish nonsense’ and prepares for his lecture on moral philosophy.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard’s technique of extracting two minor characters from the famous Shakespeare play *Hamlet* enables the audience to gain unique and enlightening perspectives on the existential problems of the individual. Situated in a context that it is, the two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to comprehend their own identities and thus their own individualities, which prevents them from conceiving their own free will. The lack of making choices and taking control of their lives, ultimately leads to them falling into the contrivances of fate, which let them question the meaning of life. This is explicit in the opening scene where they discover probabilities. In this regard, they are conscious of a world that seems to be controlled around them. However, one could argue that their existence is already contrived by their previous existence in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, Stoppard deliberately chooses not only to manipulate two characters and their intertextual conditions, he also probes and questions the possibilities of individual heroism in a world imposed not from above, but of our own making. Guildenstern says, “life in a box is better than no life
at all.” The image of being trapped in a box becomes a metaphor for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s life, as if their “scripts are taken away, [they are] lost.” This may be perceived from:

   Lawyer: Naturally- we didn’t get paid, owing to circumstances ever so slightly beyond our control, and all the money we had lost betting on certainties. Life is a gamble, at terrible odds- if it was a bet you would not take it. Did you know that any number doubled is even?

Stoppard’s intertextual domain offers the reader some ironic reflections on verities and certainties of the *Hamlet* as a classic Renaissance tragedy. In the Stoppardian play the laymen are presented not as heroes, but as victims having inadequate knowledge about life and circumstances, whose foolish questions and conversations produce occasions of tragic humor and travesty on humanity’s absurdities and indeterminacies. Stoppard also parodies the source of language, whose denoted certainty the so-called philosophers of truth have claimed to have traced and hunted down:

   Dotty: As I recall, you talked animatedly for some time about language being the aniseed trail that draws the hounds of heaven when the metaphysical fox has gone to earth; he must have thought you were barmy.

   George (*hurt*): I resent that. My metaphor of the fox and the hounds was an allusion, as Russell well understood, to his Theory of Descriptions.
Saussure has emphasized that language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker. For structuralists and poststructuralists alike believe that our meanings are positioned by semiotic systems and most clearly by language. Contemporary theorists have referred to the subject as being spoken by language. Barthes declares that ‘it is language which speaks, not the author,’ to write is to reach the point where only language acts, performs, and not the traditional author. When writers write they are also written. Furthermore, in conforming to any of the conventions of our medium, we act as a medium for perpetuating such conventions.

The play *Travesties* has parodic relations with Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. While Dada and Lenin’s political art have collapsed, the permanence of Joyce’s art has affirmed the prevalence of art over life. The play reaffirms Wilde’s aesthetic that art should be responsible only to itself and that life should imitate art, not the other way round. As Max Beerbohm said about *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1902:

But the fun depends mainly on what the characters say, rather than on what they do. They speak a kind of beautiful nonsense—the language of high comedy, twisted into fantasy. Throughout the dialogue is the horse-play of a distinguished intellect and a distinguished imagination—a horse-play among words and ideas, conducted with poetic dignity.

Likewise, in Stoppard’s plays characters communicate a kind of beautiful nonsense. *Travesties* raises questions while displaying serious topics under the apparently trivial surface where characters utter serious things disguised as nonsense.
Considered from that perspective, Stoppard is joking in ‘earnest’; he is travestying and maybe satirizing, while also pretending to be playful. Depending on one’s perspective, the play appears both as a work of art divorced from reality and as a work of art that implicitly comments on life. Stoppard interacts with both sides of the problematic relationship between art, life, and politics. Fleming argues that his plays reflect both the ‘uncertainty’ of human life and the necessity of ‘order’ and ‘logic’ to provide stability amid this chaos. He states further that ‘the quality of Stoppard’s work allows him to cut across categories and to attract admirers from different critical, theoretical, and ideological backgrounds.’

In the heated argument about the function of art and the artist, *Travesties*, as a whole, seems to be echoing Algernon: ‘The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.’

It might seem to the audience of *Travesties* that Stoppard is teasing us with mischief in the play, which opens with silence later followed by a diverse and miscellaneous flow of languages. Tzara blabbers out his poem which happens to make sense in French, Joyce gabbles about from the earliest chapters of XIV of *Ulysses*, and Lenin’s wife drops a scrap of paper which Joyce reads out for the audience in English which makes no sense. Hunter finds Stoppard postulating three different revolutionaries and dismissing the play’s linear development towards fixed meanings, thereby signifying conflicting discourses to occupy the same space. Though the dramatist brings together “the political revolutionary Lenin; the literary revolutionary Joyce, dedicated to the great traditions of art and radical only in his methods; and the Dadaist Tzara, flirting with communist ideology but artistically anarchist,” the play does not develop in a linear mode towards any direct result as the final philosophical truth.
Stoppard’s play *Dogg’s Hamlet* is a metaplay where forth Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has been enacted on a stage by school boys. The Shakespearean lines of a ruthlessly abbreviated *Hamlet* that English schoolboys are about to perform is juxtaposed against the ‘Dogg’ language they use while preparing the stage for the performance; here the boys are busy testing the microphone and conversing in the ‘Dogg’ language:

Abel: (into the microphone) Breakfast, breakfast…sun—dock—trog…[* Testing, testing…one—two—three…*](he realizes the microphone is dead. He tries the switch a couple of times and then speaks again into the microphone.)

sun—dock—trog—pan—slack…[*one—two—three—four—five…*]

(The microphone is still dead. Abel calls to someone off-stage.)

Haddock priest! [* The mike is dead! *]

(Pause. Baker enters from the same direction. He is also a schoolboy similarly dressed.)

Baker: Eh? [*Eh?*]

Abel: Haddock priest.

Baker: Haddock?

Abel: Priest.

(Baker goes to the microphone, drops satchel centre on the way.)
The apparently nonsensical dialogue here would not however oscillate to the other extreme that the sound of words is the content, or that the speech is the presence and meaning privileged over the written language. Even without metaphor and other figures, as the above dialogue denotes, a neologism aids or devises communication; in other words, life is not exhausted by language or metaphorical expressions. It is Derrida who says in *Of Grammatology* commenting on traditional assumptions about language how “writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated; it is equal in dignity to the origin of value, to the voice of conscience as divine law, to the heart, to sentiment and so forth.” Stoppard dramatically presents what Derrida derides in the form of the conventionally ascribed metaphysics of presence or the authentic meaning of language, perhaps divinely decreed.

Hanna Scolnicov refers to the unintelligible language in Dogg’s *Hamlet* thus:

> Stoppard was intrigued by the idea of ‘writing a play which had to teach the audience the language the play was written in.’ In the play, he demands of his audience to learn a new language, a language made up largely of English words that have totally changed their grammatical and pragmatic functions. We are introduced into Dogg language playfully, without any kind of formal initiation or learning process. The reader, as well as the potential actor, are provided with an English translation in parentheses, at least at first. Not so the spectator, whose exposure to Dogg language comes as a total surprise and who must pick it up, unaided, from the dramatic situation and tone of voice.”
Why is ‘sun—dock—trog—pan—slack’ spoken? What is meant by ‘Haddock priest’? Do these not travesty that priest in ‘haddock priest’ is illusory echoing the restitution of the dead? It may also imply absurdity and childhood are close; it may imply the shortcomings of speech to reveal truth, and it may also mean that there is no fixed meaning as the only truth other than significances as worked out by signifiers and signifieds. Further, any language becomes acceptable when performed with gestures; gestures though silent speak meaning into the utterances. Stoppard thus states, “The appeal to me consisted in the possibility of writing a play which had to teach the audience the language the play was written in.” Importantly, (alien) speech is incomprehensible unless it is simultaneously transcribed or translated in some form –slab? (*okay?)- conforming to customary understanding. More importantly, a situation beyond any individual’s control points to the constructedness of language and its meaning through continuous use.

This kind of neologism serves, what Bakhtin would imply, the “centrifugal,” that is “de-normalizing,” conception of language. The Dogg language, which seems close to the absurdist notion of Beckett’s speech, would premise that otherness of a centripetally “homogenizing” or “hierarchizing force” of the internally differentiated individual consciousness as well as social life. On the whole, Stoppard’s predilection for a neologism could be akin to Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. Holquist explains:

In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism consciousness is
otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center.\textsuperscript{20}

For example, in \textit{Travesties}, Lenin harangues with great force and ferocity:

\begin{quote}
You talk about absolute freedom is sheer hypocrisy. There can be no real and effective freedom in a society based on the power of money…. The freedom of bourgeois writer, artist or actor is simply disguised dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Elsewhere, Carr would challenge Tzara:

\begin{quote}
All this dancing attendance on Marxism is sheer pretension. You’re an amiable bourgeois with a chit from Matron and if the revolution came you wouldn’t know what hit you. You’re nothing. You are an artist. And a multi-coloured micturition is no trick to those boys, they will have you pissing blood.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The above citations illustrate a range of provocations touching on the stereotypical positions of each ideologue in the play. What is relevant here is the nature of dialogue which is essentially social, and its paramount dialogism that incorporates all difficult and contesting ideas and ideals. This reflects the Stoppardian art of jigsaw involving various perceptions and avowed ideologies in society in play. The very nature of dialogism is intertextual, which flows dialogically with the dialectic participation among different views and consciousnesses. There seems no value for man to be permanently consistent about, and there is no absolute truth which can be
irrefutable. This may be clearly perceived from Stoppard’s novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*:

How can one be consistent about anything, since all the absolutes discredit one another? … I take both parts … leapfrogging myself along the great moral issues, refuting myself and rebutting the refutation towards a truth that must be a compound of two opposite half-truths. And you never reach it because there is always something more to say.23

There may be many and self-contradictory half-truths in life rather than a single absolute meaning, the fact of which Stoppard’s intertextualism consistently spins out. Further in his conversations he has a similar belief to advocate, “I write plays because writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself.” He continues, “none of us is tidy; none of us is classifiable. Even the facility to perceive and define two ideas such as the classical and the romantic in opposition to each other indicates that one shares a little bit of each.”24 The important import to Stoppard and to the reader is, there is no end to the dialogic process of such interbreeds of opposites, no singularity of privileging one value and dismissing the other. Thus Stoppard’s dramatic texts are steeped in these premises which can be lighted by Bhaktinian sociolinguistics. In dialogic discourse, as Bakhtin perceives, “(t)he direct word” that is monologic and elitist encounters for its signification “the fundamental and richly varied opposition of another’s word.”25 And this would reinvigorate the Saussurean insight into the meaning made by differences and Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence by difference.26 The
poststructuralists and critics have employed the term intertextuality “to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation.”\textsuperscript{27} This idea can also be validated with Stoppard’s example.

Dotty: That was the year of ‘The concept of Knowledge’, your masterpiece, and the last decent title left after Ryle bagged ‘The Concept of Mind’ and Archie bagged ‘The Problem of Mind’ and Ayer bagged ‘The Problem of Knowledge’—and ‘The Concept of Knowledge’ might have made you if you had written it, but we were still on the carpet when an American with an Italian name working in Melbourne bagged it for a rather bad book which sold four copies in London, three to unknown purchasers and the fourth to yourself.\textsuperscript{28}

The above lines would explain Stoppard parodying the postulates of knowledge firmly held by George Moore.

Further, Stoppard’s sense of parody plays a counter model to the dominant monologic discourse. In this he seems close to Bakhtin who emphasizes laughter (parody) and heteroglossia as two seminal aspects of the novelistic discourse, which constitutes an inter-generic and multi-voiced world. Bakhtin holds that “laughter and criticism” become corrective to “all existing straightforward genres.”\textsuperscript{29}

Stoppard parodies his characters to the extent that finally they become travesties of what they historically represent. None of the characters manages to escape Stoppard’s satiric twists played on the sincerity of their own creeds and convictions. In the second act, where Lenin is heard speaking in a paraphrase of
Algernon and Lady Bracknell, the travestying reaches a climax; it is both devastatingly ironic and absurd. Stoppard’s comedy, here, derives from the beauty of style and wit:

Lenin: Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example what on earth is the use of them?! They seem as a class to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility! To lose one revolution is unfortunate. To lose two would look like carelessness!  

The ironic effect in Lenin’s words develops from a travesty of Lady Bracknell, the Victorian upper-class matriarch, the ultimate embodiment of what the proletarian demagogue Lenin hates. Moreover, as Fleming aptly states, ‘Lenin’s sentiments on the lower classes are diametrically opposed to the words he seems to say.’ In a similar fashion, Stoppard offers his audience bits of self-contradiction in Tzara as well. In the first act, Tzara and Carr argue whether the meaning is objective or relative. Each sounds convincing in its forceful argument. After that they proceed in a heated argument over the politics of war (World War I). Carr says: “Wars are fought to make the world safe for artists,” to defend “civilized ideals are all about.” But ‘modern art’ demonstrates “the ingratitude of artists, indeed their hostility, not to mention the loss of nerve and failure of talent.” In response, Tzara uncovers the political and colonial reasons:

Wars are fought for oil wells and coaling stations; for control of the Dardanelles or the Suez Canal; for colonial pickings to buy cheap in and conquered markets to sell dear in. War is capitalism with the
gloves off and many who go to war know it but they go to war because they don’t want to be a hero.”

When Carr proudly says that going to war was his “duty, because (his) country needed (him), and that’s patriotism,” and that the less fortunate or the lazy are to be “defended from German militarism, and that’s love of freedom,” Tzara rebuts:

Quite right! You ended up in the trenches, because on the 28th of June 1900 the heir to the throne of Austro-Hungary married beneath him and found out that the wife he loved was never allowed to sit next to him on royal occasions, except! When he was acting in his military capacity as Inspector General of the Austro-Hungarian army—in which capacity he therefore decided to inspect the army in Bosnia, so that at least on their wedding anniversary, the 28th of June 1914, they might ride side by side in an open carriage through the streets of Sarajevo!

Both characters are unwavering in their opposite convictions and both views equally seem to be offering the slices of a complex whole or reality. In this scene, Tzara contradicts himself and his Dadaist views that are based on chance: ‘causality is no longer fashionable owing to the war’.

On the other hand, Carr claims that ‘war itself had causes’.

Carr: [...]The industrial revolution had crowded the people into slums and enslaved them into factories, but it had not yet begun to bring them the benefits of an industrialized society. Marx looked
about him and saw that the system depended on a wretched army of wage slaves. He drew the lesson that the wealth of the capitalist was the counterpart to the poverty of the worker and had in fact been stolen from the worker in the form of unpaid labour. He thought that was how the whole thing worked. That false assumption was itself added to a false premise. This premise was that people were a sensational kind of material object and would behave predictably in a material world. Marx predicted that they would behave according to their class.  

Although different from Carr’s reasons, Tzara ironically presents ‘causes’ for the war. Fleming interprets the scene as pointing ‘to a need to minimize the manipulation of language so that events can be seen as clearly as possible’ not as suggesting ‘anti-art and turning everything on its head’ as Tzara and his Dadaism declared. Another ironic and comic example provided by the inversion of intention is the words Tzara utters while evaluating Lenin’s folder of social critique, assuming wrongly that it is Joyce’s folder. He says to Joyce:

Furthermore, your book has much in common with your dress. As an arrangement of words it is graceless without being random; as a narrative it lacks charm or even vulgarity; as an experience it is like sharing a cell with a fanatic in search of a mania.

Tzara is unknowingly criticizing Lenin’s revolutionary views on social change that will be aided by the artist. Tzara’s biased thoughts and admiration of Lenin are brilliantly displayed through an ironic prism. Also, it shows Tzara’s
ignorance about Lenin’s views. In a much deeper sense, however, the conflation of Joyce’s manuscript of *Ulysses* and Lenin’s politics on art blurs the distinction between ‘political art’ and ‘art for art’s sake’ providing one of the major parodic scenes, as well as, the gist of the play. Reading the folder with the utmost seriousness and strong conviction that it belongs to Joyce, Tzara is deluded. Or, should we interpret it as even the most contradictory theories might contain some common assumptions? The play goes back to its initial postulation that in complicated matters as art, it is difficult to suggest any single solution. A much flexible and humorous perspective seems better than rigid views. In the argument about the function of art, which takes place between the four characters, Stoppard often stated that he was on Joyce’s side, at least he felt closer to him than Tzara. Hinting through the sympathy and admiration the play *Travesties* embodies for Joyce and Wilde and distaste for Tzara and Lenin, it centers around the doctrine of art for art’s sake, that art exists for the sake of its beauty and that it need not serve any political, didactic, or other purpose. Also, by travestying all these revolutionaries, Stoppard reflects his dislike for hegemonic ideals and seriousness. ‘He humorously undermines the earnestness of Lenin, Tzara, and Joyce’.

The entire play *Travesties* has been a testimony to the intertextual premises of the postmodern as understood in Lyotard’s term of incredulity towards the metadiscourse. Further, the play amounts to a playful autopsy of divergent ideologies and viewpoints that arise in the context of a post-war reality. Tzara’s language is not born in the absence or innocent ignorance of other’s discourses, and no discourse arises in a void of history, politics, power or other ideologies. *Travesties* is a carnival of inter-discursive discourses. Thus, the playwright
convinced of the absence of truth engages in parody and play, making allowances to
difference and divergence as the better option left for life. This shows, as
demagogues are both opposed to and complicit with war, Stoppard’s parody engages
the reader in “the intertextual ‘bouncing’ between complicity and distance” in
Hutcheon’s terms.

There is no final truth about life, no objectively verifiable absolute
meaning anywhere. To recall Barthes’s incisive criticism, postmodern text, as he
declares, does “not release a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-
God) but rather arranges and compiles the always already written, spoken and read
into a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original,
blend and clash.” And this notion of intertextuality or Kristeva’s notion of
‘transposition’ of transformed views and positions has been increasingly
reinforced in Stoppard’s parody-invigorated plays.
Works Cited


13 Ibid 257.


22 Ibid 83.


33 Ibid 40.
34Ibid 110.


36Ibid 77.


