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# Trucking Systems From Greece To America: *Metaphorai, The Bacchai,* and the Problem of Vision in the Contemporary Theatre

By
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Imagine my surprise as I walked around Athens in April of 1995, eagerly reading every word on every sign I saw, trying to digest my surroundings and intensify my encounter with the Greek language--imagine my surprise to see the same startling word painted on the side of one truck after another, the word *metaforai*.

> *It was a foreign land, a new culture for me. Maybe it would not be totally outrageous to find one truck full of metaphors, but two...three...a dozen? This is quite a business in Greece! Maybe when you have a culture that is three or four thousand years old you need a fleet of trucks to carry your metaphors around in.*

In modern Greek the word means something like our "transfer," or more crudely "trucking." In ancient Greek the word for "to bear" is foreign, for "beyond" is meta. Imagine, then, that these trucks have a somewhat transcendental purpose, and see them as transferring beyond, as bearing their burdens to somewhere we cannot see or know about. Imagine too that the load is not easy to bear, and requires some special strength or ability. Metaphor-ing, then, comes about its present connotations in English through a long journey in a very special truck. At least three thousand years of transformation (and transportation) have brought it to its present state, a rare earth in the very ordinary ore of language. This ore can be mined by anyone, but refined only by those who, something like the comic-strip Superman, can see what is hidden.

A metaphor goes beyond, carries beyond, identifies one thing in another, brings meaning to the unknown or unfamiliar by carrying another meaning from somewhere else and attaching that new meaning to it. In this way metaphor becomes embroiled in mystery, the large primal mystery of identity. What is the world, my life, nature, death? Who am I, who are you, and what is our fate? And who or what is God? Each of these requires a transfer

of meaning from one thing to another, one set of ideas or conceptions to another, to "mean" anything at all. By being the trucker, the transferer, the enzymic force that brings meaning from one thing and somehow catalyzes something else to receive it, to accept it, to wear it like a garment, to digest it through the skin, metaphoring makes knowing possible. What might be less obvious is that it makes mystery accessible, and makes vision a perquisite of life. Finally, it makes vision a carrier of value, of enduring values.

How? We say we "know" something when it enters our experience intimately, when we can "recognize" or "understand" it, when we can appreciate both its uniqueness and its connection to other things we know about. We can move around it, have an idea of where we are going in doing so, and appreciate it from different angles. Hence "under-standing" is appreciating something from its foundations up. And we can express that unique identity as a product of the connections we see. We call this "recognizing"--"re-cognizing," or, in other words, re-thinking, re-imag-ining, transfering meaning from one object to another: beyond-carrying, meta-phoring.

This might suggest that only by "carrying beyond," as metaphor does, can we have any meaning at all. It is not a stretch to suggest that all conceptual systems, all knowings, have this property. It is a commonplace, for instance, to suggest that mathematics is a collection of imaginary worlds in which mathematicians are the Magellans, discovering the ways and means by which they can navigate through these often very strange lands. The occasional capacity of a few mathematical systems to be very helpful with the task of describing physical reality turns out to be a rather startling, and somewhat unexpected bonus, connecting some parts of the mathematical world to the physical one--or, I should say, connecting our vision of the mathematical world (which seems to be nothing apart from our vision), to our vision of the physical world (which we usually imagine as having a reality independent of our visions of it). Apart from these happy events, the world of mathematics appears to be one of "pure" imagination, relating only to its own structures and its own rules, and to have no clear "meaning" beyond that. Music is sometimes seen in this same way, with no meaning beyond itself and its structures. It might be more surprising to assert that the sciences are entirely metaphorical constructions, whose visions, and the web of theoretical consistencies and empirical investigations that support them, are constantly being re-cognized, re-imagined, reshaped by the international trucking company we call the scientific community. And in this

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century, developments in physics have even led some to question the previously reliable idea that nature is sitting out there waiting for us to discover it--that is, that its reality is independent of our conception of it.

This view of the nature and power of metaphor gives us an immediate grasp of the power of fictions of all kinds. Metaphors testify to our power to imagine, to wind around what we did not previously know, to apprehend a construct previously unknown through meanings transported from what we do know. Knowing something (particularly something large and contextual, like a story) that we did not know before, it is possible that we might find ourselves with a vivid sense of what we still do not know. This may appear as the mystery of the unknown or simply as the conviction that are other views, other contexts, other things to be known. When an identity (say, the fictive "construct" just evoked) is revealed, it affirms the universe of things unknown that lie beyond it. What is seen and understood, seems to carry with it somehow what is not yet seen or understood, or even what is apparently invisible or unknowable.

Dramatic fictions are particularly vivid in this respect, because they embody the imaginative reality they construct. By physicalizing a play in the theatre we set before ourselves in the baldest manner the fact that the elements of the dramatic fiction--the characters, the plot, the setting, and the action that they express--are only emblems. They stand for something else. And the more vividly they appear to be themselves, the more strongly they stand for something else, and ask us to "understand" that. To make a crude analogy, fictions (stories) are more like math--the storyteller helps us navigate in that unique world. The drama, by contrast, is more like physics. Something about it is starkly "there," leaning on us to understand it as if it had a life beyond our conceptions of it. The more sharply we ache for the pain of Agave and Cadmus in *The Bacchai,* and the angrier we get at the deceptions and manipulations of Dionysus, the deeper we are driven into the world which Dionysus controls, a world of contradictory feeling and action, of huge elation and horrifying destruction, quite beyond our knowing if not our feeling. We have the shocking revelation of sacrificial divinity--the god dies that we may know he lives--and the equally shocking conviction of sacrificial worship--we swallow the hubris of our anger in the fear that we, too, may be being punished, even as we watch and weep. Attending the drama becomes a metaphor in experience (not merely in thought) for being possessed by the god. While we are

captivated by the theatre, the god has entered us and the sacrifice has taken place. Something has died (at least complacency and certainty) and something has been reborn. At its largest and most awesome, this rebirth is a sense that the universe lives, objective (like physics) in the divine vision, but obscure to us. At it's least, it is a personal a fear of the unknown and unpredictable. Convinced now that we must keep searching for vision, keep trying to get it right, we may never be the same again.

If we assume that whether or not we sought one, we had a vision of the world before we entered the theatre, what has happened is that what we saw, what we took for real has died and been replaced by another (larger, more ecstatic, more frightening) vision. Knowing so much, being able to envision so vividly what is not there, what is hidden, by means of what is there, what is seen and heard, puts us in direct contact with mystery. The unknown, in this framework, is a constant companion. Strong dramas are those which not only show us vividly the contours of the vision and sensibility, the shape of the lives we already have, but also, by carrying these beyond their immediate factuality, show us connections and implications, layers of meaning and experience we had not yet apprehended. They may also unleash the ecstatic reaches of our feelings, dreams and sensations beyond the bearable moderations of the everyday. Whether revelations of brilliant new understandings, or of the darkness of a tragic abyss, the tension between what we can safely understand and what is dark, forbidden, or closed off to us, is as organic to the drama as death is to life.

The deception some popular drama pulls on us is to convince us that the reality in front of us is not extraordinary at all, but very much what we acknowledge as our everyday experience. Nothing is dark, or ecstatic. On the contrary, matters of selection and emphasis notwithstanding, it seems to be what it is and very little more. *Barefoot in the Park*, or, for that matter, *The Perfect Ganesh* or *The Sisters Rosenzweig* scarcely mean to transcend. Their sentimentality embeds them firmly in ordinary expectation. Even the irony is gentle, familiar, comforting, and the mystery, deeper down, stays buried unnoticed. But even so, the sacrifice is exacted of us. The theatre freezes us--or at least threatens to freeze us--in the vision we came with. The truck gets stalled, and we go out of the theatre exactly as we came in. The sacrifice is that we do not know yet what we have lost.

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Let us look at a more complicated, and much more interesting example. Daniel Kiefer, writing about Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, criticizes the play for failing to keep us in its campy, mock-tragic world. "The greatest possibility for a new dramatic substitute for divine revelation is camp," he asserts.[1] "The mock-serious reaches deeper into the destitution of AIDS suffering than the real, because it speaks to a queer audience immersed in camp".[2] But Kieffer finds a deep failing in Part II of the play.

> *Angels in America* should conclude with its irreverent mixture of violence, delirium, and queer mockery. Instead, we get a fade-out ending, neither comic nor tragic, as rough irony is planed down into smooth good wishes. The question of how we might receive divine help has been presented theatrically, and we deserve a theatrical answer, not a declamatory one. It is not enough to decry the supernatural power represented before our eyes. The great works of Euripides, Shakespeare, Brecht, and Beckett do more than that. They provide understanding--in dramatic action--of how human beings recover from the loss of divine guidance, or how they do not.[3]

It might be argued on Kushner's behalf that he has shown how his characters do not recover by showing how they lapse into sentimental seriousness and declamation. Charles McNulty asks:

> [W]ere the almost unbearable scenes of Prior's illness, the pain of his and Harper's abandonment, and the punishing hypocrisy of Roy Cohn and his kind so overwhelming, so prolific of suffering, that they forced the playwright to seek the cover of angels?
>
> By the end of *Perestroika,* Kushner stops asking those pinnacle questions of our time, in order to dispense "answers" and bromides...[4]

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[1] Daniel Kiefer, "*Angels in America* and the Failure of Revelation," *American Drama* 4:1 (Fall, 1994), 35.

[2] Kiefer 37.

[3] Kiefer 37.

[4] Charles McNulty, "*Angels in America*: Tony Kushner's Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Modern Drama* 39 (1996), 95.

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These "bromides," like Prior's "more life," are the stuff of sentimentality and self-congratulation--the reward for having survived the plague. But it is just this kind of complacency, sentimentality and self-absorption that are marked by the Euripidian Dionysus as targets for destruction. Somehow, Kushner loses his sense of irony (as well as his sense of style) in his effort to bring the play to a hopeful conclusion. This he does in spite of Prior's discovery that God is on vacation and the angels are hollow. The final irony may be that Dionysus lives anyway, and the mistake was to seek him anywhere outside of the theatre. If this is so, and the audience is to draw some revelation from the experience, the arena of the drama must shift from the audience sharing the mockery inside the drama, to mocking the drama; and if the sentimentality and seriousness of the ending are not laughable, they are most assuredly deadly. Kushner's campy, delirious, romantic, bombastic, satirical truck got stuck on the tracks[5] of sentiment.

The deepest lesson is found in reconstructing Kushner's metaphors. As I see it in this play, mockery here stands for life, for resisting what Kiefer calls the "phallic" dominant paradigm,[6] for standing up to the absurdity of history, to the tyranny of sex roles and divine images, to the lullaby of willful delusion or drugged reverie, to the addictive rush of substituting theories about yourself and society for behavior that keeps your integrity and makes you happy, or the even stronger rush of using others for sex or position, of arrogating power. And mockery is the mode of choice for standing up, finally, to the causeless horror of the plague, to the "why me?" and "why now?" which wells up in us as we watch the reaper work. In *Angels in America,* the sit-com, the vicious political satire, the climb-to-the-top (or descend-to-the-bottom) melodrama, the wild fantasy and sock-o revelations all depend for their effect on the mockery of each of these forms. The tragedy emerges in the burlesque, in our understanding that these pat forms represent our ordinary expectations and understandings, and that in becoming aware of them and laughing at their narrow-nesses and absurdities, we open new possibilities for sympathy, understanding, disappointment and terror in ourselves. Dionysus lives in our ability to see in the trickery, savagery and mockery, the workings of what must be, of life as we see it in its fullness. What this provokes is the kind

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[5] Apologies for the use of this phrase to Janet Burroway and her superbly resonant and funny book (ostensibly for small children), *The Truck on the Track* (Indianapolis, 1970).

[6] Kiefer 35.

of outrageous laughter that splits our sides and breaks our hearts.[7] Translated into the terms of this discussion, Kieffer is arguing that Kushner did not go ahead and break our hearts, and this is at the root of his (and my) disappointment with the play.

It is also at the root of the whole metaphoring process of tragedy. It lives in irony and contradiction. Only by seeing a great soul fail can we experience the limits of human action, knowledge and sensibility that that soul could reach. Only by taking the experience of laughter, of love or pleasure to the outer limits of terrible, Dionysiac abandon, by finding the absurdity that finally breaks our hearts, can we discover our full capacity for knowing, loving, understanding. That is where the classical exaltation of tragedy came from--experiencing through the dramatic action a vision of human action and possibility one could not encounter any other way, that is not available in ordinary life. We are captivated, captured in the form of the drama and the experience of the action. Our vision is transformed (transported to a new view) and with it the life we see we live, or could live. With Dionysus we give up the life we had in order to take on the new one we see. And, hopefully, we keep truckin' on down.

When we do this, as we allow ourselves to be transported to meaning, we become an intimate part of the metaphoring process. That is, just as we transport meaning from the rose to the love, from the sun to Juliet, from the universe of knowable, predictable Newtonian billiard balls to the relativistic, quantumized field in which we now dwell, we are metaphored ourselves. In the drama as in no other art-form are we invited directly to experience the loss of ourselves that we might gain new vision. Those biblically minded will immediately think of Matthew 10:39: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." The spirit is similar. The action is an engagement in vision, in meaning, which is transporting--"transforming," as we more normally say. The devastation of tragedy or the reunion of comedy happens to us, too, in the transformations of our visions. Whoever thought we were really going to the theatre to get trucked? Getting caught up with the god, following Dionysus into this realm of action, where even its form can mock itself, must be something like that.

[7] Perhaps we need to regain the ironic sensibility from the Hebrew bible that shows Yahweh, dealing with Moses or Saul or David, as a trickster. Each of them gets his heart broken. We should look again at Raven in the American native traditions. See also Harold Bloom's, *The Book of J* (New York, 1990).

Thus when we talk of values that endure in the theatre, and of eternal verities, it seems to me that the first of these is that the dramatic form projects us, and our experience directly, organically, into metaphor. As we engage with the drama we engage everything that is most at stake--love, liberty, justice, knowledge, peace, understanding--unless, of course, we choose not to, to bury or ignore these trying and taxing matters. Any time we find our theatre talking of things at the edge of our experience, we are dealing with enduring values. The moral horror of the holocaust, the terror of the AIDS plague, and the battle to make a nation founded on a democratic, civil authority are recent examples. Any time we find ordinary questions pushed forward, demanding our attention in ways that challenge and upset us, we are dealing with enduring values. Plays that ask about our essence as men and women, as males and females, as lovers and beloved, are doing this. Plays that ask about our responses to conflicting demands from private needs and public responsibilities are doing this. Plays that ask us to laugh at the sacred and revere the ordinary are also doing this, probably more frequently than we realize. Most academics are fond of finding golden calves in everything from sit-coms and action cop-dramas, to MTV, Star Trek, soap operas, and celebrity interviews on talk shows. False gods are everywhere, but hidden in this experience is the god-of-many-names, ready to pop out anytime, to show us where we got it right or missed it. No one who has read and loved *The Bacchae* is going to try to tell us in advance how to find the right manifestation of the divine, or to distinguish with confidence holy ways of being and behaving from unholy. And there is no guarantee that it is not the holy as we may see it at the moment) who will be punished and unholy saved, as that same play reminds us. When that happens visions of Right and of morality tend to suffer cataclysm. The censors of pornography, no matter how vile, might stop to think about this as well. The typical form of this argument pits a redefinition of pornography as discrimination against women against a thesis that argues that such a redefinition makes women passive victims and, by denying them choice, infantilizes them. What would Dionysus say? Or, to move to a more contemporary form of the question, are there hidden imperatives we are missing here? What does it cost us to indulge such extruded fantasies, or, on the other hand, to put away our Bacchic visions? Who will step forward and tell us what is holy? In the action of a drama, we may work out a vision that will give us ground to stand on. Eurpides, who may have seen his world collapsing, showed us a society that could not tell brutality from holiness, or wisdom from righteousness and arrogance. In *The Bacchai* he chose to leave his audience reeling, stunned by the tragic vision of a whole city struck blind.

In America, one of our sentimental complaisances has been to rest assured that love is holy, and the preserving of it preserves everything worth saving, from the Family to the Free Market, from Doublemint to Democracy. Evolutionary biologists remind us, however, that love is just part of the fabric of being. Nothing obligates nature to mirror our ideas about love (or anything else) in any way whatsoever. It may be equal folly to attribute that to the divine presence, creating God in the image of humanity. Fifteen years ago[8] I criticized the fixation of American playwrights with romantic melodrama, at the cost of looking at the larger issues of society, at war, inequality, hunger, the structure of our order. It seemed to me then that our contemporary subtext was being blinkered, carefully reduced down to one interest--the fate of two people in a relationship. I reminded us of the contrast between even the best of the typical American romantic melodrama, like Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God*, and the plays of Barrie Stavis, particularly his play about George Washington, *The Raw Edge of Victory.* Stavis has said that his plays were written in response to Chekhov's exhortation that "Every playwright is responsible not only for what man is, but for what he can be," and to Artistophanes' effort to banish "the little man and woman affair" from the stage.[9] The palette from which American drama has been painted since the 60's has, until the last few years, been a shrinking one. I saw this shrinkage as an escape, a retreat to reliable trivialities and enduring, gossipy voyeurism. But I think now that there was, and is, something larger at stake. Our hunger has been to define what love might be, to see how relationships might hold together against a storm of forces trying to tear them apart. We needed nothing less than a new comic vision. Instead we had trivialized both form and content by repetition and predictability, simply leaving out that storm of forces, treating each precious relationship as a sentimentally cliché, in romantic isolation. Thus we maintained only a sentimental *triste*, rather than building a new vision of society--the comic vision of union that love (Eros?) really requires.

Now the drama has learned to speak of the love that could not be named, learned to talk of plague and holocaust, learned to visit the horrors of war and the addictions of violence.

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[8] Daniel Larner, "Prophet in a Passive Theatre," *Religion and Theatre* 5:1, (1981). Also, in a slightly altered version, as "What Should Theatre's Concerns be?" in *Dramatics* 52:5 (May 1981)

[9] Barrie Stavis, Comments on his own work and career [1973] in *Contemporary Dramatists,* fourth edition, ed. D.L. Kirkpatrick, 1988, 504-5.

From *Streamers* to *Angels in America,* from *Bent* to *Oleana,* we are learning to talk of the hidden and the denied. But revelation can sometimes come from unexpected places. In the film of *Carousel,* surely a typical example of sentimental romance, Billy keeps hitting people he cares about, even near the end when he is only a ghost. Amazingly, the women excuse him by sharing the startling perception that they have both felt a slap that didn't hurt at all. The clear implication of the action at this point is that the slap was the touch of love, and it has infused them with warmth. As repugnant as this conversion of knee-jerk violence (what we now call abuse) into care, love and respect may be, it is very Dionysian, and we should be warned. We never know from where feelings of love, attachment, or fear and hatred may spring. Wisdom tells us the places to look for one or the other, but wisdom is not always the truth, especially when we are stressed and stretched out to our fullest capacities. Now our popular sentimental dramas tell love stories that twenty or thirty years ago would be rejected out of hand as disgusting. So we can have some vision of what we lost back then. But what sacrifice are we making now? The drama seems to me to be a key to that vision, a repository of it, the sharpest mirror in which we can find our limitations, our stumblings, and our capacities, our greatest reaches of understanding.

My Dionysian prejudices by this time are abundantly clear. What is most confrontational, conflicting, out at the edge of our sensibilities, needs, capabilities, imaginings, what is most challenging in this way, is most likely to widen our vision, to enhance our experience, and to be attractive and exciting in the theatre. Others, of course, will disagree vehemently. They would argue that, whether serious or funny, tragic or comic, reverent or mocking, the drama does the most for us when it is closest to what we recognize, when it engages us most intimately in our own realities and enlarges us only by moving us slightly out of that context, pushing us one small step further. Why? The risk of incomprehension and rejection, so this voice says, is huge. If we are deeply shocked, upset, puzzled or hurt, we will fly from the experience rather than embrace it, and rapidly convert what we remember to what stereotype makes it most palatable. The popular theatre, this same voice asserts with the force of practical wisdom, can never afford to forget this. A most enduring value and eternal verity is entertainment. We are entertained by what delights us and makes us look for more of the same. We love entertainment because it is fun, and also because it is so absorbing it distracts us from whatever else we might be doing or thinking about. It does not have to be happy talk-

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-witness the occasional fashion of sad melodrama in theatre and movies--we can also enjoy watching things come out badly. But we need to be entertained.

Kushner's choices become more interesting in this context because he has chosen a set of flashy, campy, highly theatrical idioms in which to encase his social/political/spiritual melodrama. And like all melodrama, it is about a harsh conflict of values, of black evil and white virtue--fidelity and disloyalty, courage and cowardice, about love and the lust for power. These broad conflicts are made more realistic and digestible when they occur in complicated ways within one person. For instance, Joe wants to be loyal to Harper, but also to his emerging sexuality. Louis is endearing in his desire to be close and loving in spite of his (very funny) analytic excesses, but his cowardice steers him to desertion, then to infidelity. Belize, who is tolerance and understanding personified, is able to reject Roy Cohn's vileness and take care of him all at once, while she steals Roy's drugs for those who need them (she becomes a Robin Hood of the hospital). The result of these and other sticky conflations of good and evil, is that the traditional values are transfigured. Love and fidelity are still Good. Justice is still Good. Hatred, violence, malevolence and disease are still Evil. But the historical perspective suggested at the beginning of the play by the oldest living Bolshevik, and by the generations of Prior's ancestors, combines with the constant, tongue-in-cheek domestic mockery to urge us toward a properly comic tolerance for everyday misbehavior--for lying, for sexual confusion, for cowardly self-indulgence, for drug-induced escape and reverie, and even for abandonment of one's love in a crisis. Evil is confined to one devil (Cohn) and the plague that ravages both him and Prior. This is metaphorically extended to the self-aggrandizement, manipulation, power hunger, and inhumane politics Cohn represents. Through Kushner's mockery of the smugness of the Regan-Bush era, we are reminded that the politics of intolerance and greed continues to plague us.

To keep us securely domestic, our spiritual perceptions are mocked too, reducing them to Spielbergian angels descending in a sudden explosion, ten-foot-high Hebrew characters in flashing lights, ladders to heaven with super-bright internal lighting, and notes on conspicuous wires descending from the flies. We know this is an exaggerated stereotype of how we see these things, and know at the same time it cannot be true--a perfect object for wonderfully entertaining mockery. If God were to appear, wouldn't she be staging herself for effect? And in a way, she does, when her angel kisses the Mormon Mother Pitt on the mouth

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and fills her with ecstasy of an entirely unexpected kind. We get to have our cake and eat it too--see our limitations, accept them, wonder at them, be frightened by them, and laugh at them all the same time. Part I, *Millennium Approaches,* is, because of all this, a wonderful experience, using traditional forms to push out our boundaries of vision and prepare us to see new. Unfortunately, Part II, *Perestroika,* leaves us without the promised vision, staggering in the dark to find our comforting monuments (Bethesda) in a vain hope of healing, stuck in the ground of ordinary perception and platitude.

Other widely praised contemporary dramas deserve examination from this point of view. Do they use the ordinary means of drama, and some view of our daily realities to propel us to new vision, to transport us to a world somehow enlarged, enhanced, sharpened?

In Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women,* the structure of the play is a metaphor for the continuation of the generations. The first half shows two adult women, one middle aged and one young, paid to cope with the cantankerousness, bitterness, and the prejudiced, offensive, virulent meanness of an old woman. She gets the best of them. In the second half the two younger women play the older woman at earlier ages, and the three of them interact as if one could talk to oneself, at different ages, at any time in one's life. For the most part, the youngest one is projecting her own hopes, dreams and desires into her future and her two older counterparts are listening indulgently or trying to disillusion her, to wisen her up. Sometimes this is funny, sad, or upsetting, but mostly it is simply hackneyed, trying, boring, and trivial. Partly, this is because the character of the young women is predictable, sentimental, and somewhat selfish, without, for instance, any of the perspective or social awareness that made the peremptory young lawyer faintly interesting in the first half. Her self-absorption and narrowness get dull, and cease standing for anything. It would have been much funnier if the two older women had tried to reject her, to say, "that's not me," to attempt, contrary to all logic and expectation, to disown their own youth(s). That might have been funny and interesting, though it would have had almost as little to do with the first half as the existing second half does. In either case, the metaphor does not hold. The idea of seeing through one's youth and middle age what we come to as an old person, of seeing through the effort to cope with the old and decayed what we are and will continue to be, is deeply trivialized in the second half and emptied of significance. All we see is a feather-light cliché--the bitter, prejudiced old crone was once a pretty, idealistic girl. What do these lives stand for? Has anything at all been

gained or lost? What was the stake in those women's lives that could live on the stage and move across the footlights from them to me? As you can see, I have the strong feeling that the transfer simply has not taken place at all. There is a vision of the transformation of narrowly selfish and idealistic youth into narrowly selfish and nasty old age, but there is no resonance, no metaphorical juice to transform these facts into a significance beyond the cliché they represent.

In a British play, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, the environment of the play, the grounds of a country estate in Derbyshire, and the process of landscaping it, become a metaphor for the development of the mind, and the progress of our thought through history. It is an echo of the "ontology recapitulates phylogeny" principle in a historical setting. Transforming from rigid order to an order perceived within apparent natural chaos--this is what happens to the estate as it is re-landscaped, and what happens within the estate, to the mind of young Thomasina Coverly as she engages in her education and discovers the elements of fractal geometry and chaos theory. Here is a metaphor so deliberately set that we lick our lips in anticipation. What will we learn? How can chaos make us feel? The two contemporary scholars, Bernard and Hannah, searching this early nineteenth century landscape for the truth of what happened there, find murder, deception, retreat into hermitage--an old whodunit mystery--while they manage to fight with each other comically about what really happened, who did what, and who the hermit was. In the process they engage the interest of Valentine, the contemporary heir to the estate, a mathematician who is studying the patterns of the growth of the grouse population on his own lands. He runs Thomasina's mathematical series on his computer, and notes that these are the same as the contemporary iterated functions used to describe natural phenomena (in fractal geometry and chaos theory). However, he resists the idea that she really knew what she was doing, it spite of a note she left announcing that she has discovered a new "Geometry of Irregular Forms," a "method by which all forms of nature must give up their numerical secrets, and draw themselves through number alone."[10] He helps Bernard and Hannah to a little more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between science and truth, trying to convince them and himself that Thomasina really could not have understood the implications of her discovery. Intriguingly, he keeps a pet turtle, just like his counterpart

[10] Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (London and Boston, 1993) 43.

from 1810, Thomasina's young tutor, Septimus Hodge, who trained as a scientist at Cambridge. Hodge and Valentine are played by the same actor.

All of this, in traditional Stoppardian style, is a wonderfully entertaining riddle. But the metaphor stalls, this time on the track of cleverness. Then it withers as we anticipate a drama that never happens. Our fascination with the young girl and her tutor, our questions about their future, our wonder at what these new apperceptions of nature might tell us about the events in the play--all this is never put together. There is a lot of sexual activity off stage, and a lot of witty talk about it on stage, including Thomasina's opening line, a question to her tutor: "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" Back in 1810 the sexual pairings involve Thomasina's mother, Septimus, another woman on the estate, and possibly Lord Byron, and on the contemporary scene, Bernard and Chloë, the sister of Valentine. While most of this is funny, in the end it seems to connect with nothing, to be mere comic decoration, with one possible exception.

Thomasina is coming of age, and because of a combination of her insouciance and brilliance, Hodge is beginning to be attracted to her. However, instead of seeing the play, the dramatic action that might reveal this, the fates of Thomasina and Septimus are simply dumped into the dust of history's documents. Stoppard prefers the aching silence of the historical record and the cleverness of his detective story to the life he might have made of his metaphor. She dies in a fire, we are told, a day before her seventeenth birthday, just after her tutor, reading the latest essay she has written for him, may have come to understand what she has discovered. On what turns out to be her last night, she has, with her utterly innocent and irrepressible impetuosity, kissed him on the mouth in an effort to get him to teach her how to waltz, a skill she thinks will insure her sexual appeal and seductiveness as an adult. The dance lesson begins with full propriety between tutor and pupil. But then Septimus kisses Thomasina "in earnest." We are left to surmise that he has intuited her genius and fallen in love with her. We are told, in a last minute revelation from Valentine, the mathematician, that Thomasina also discovered, in essence if not in mathematical form, the concept of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. She knew the universe was running downhill. So, we surmise, her death in a fire that night will cause Septimus to retreat into hermitage, lapsing into insanity, writing "cabalistic tracts" about the end of the world. So we have solved the mystery of the identity of the hermit, which is confirmed when we remember a historical

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document that is quoted earlier, noting that the hermit had a pet turtle. We are left with the victory of Hannah, who was sure the hermit was Septimus, and the humorous defeat of Bernard (who gets caught up in a false thesis about Lord Byron and his involvement at the estate.)

Where have we been taken? If Hannah and Bernard are our surrogates, what has happened to them that has any significance? Has all this transported us to an understanding, an apperception of past and present, order and chaos, nature and love, that makes a new vision? Do the contemporaries' search for the truth of the past, and the fates of Thomasina and Septimus, come together into a single action, or even an ironic reflection about a terribly sad set of events where the huge promise of a brilliant mind and a budding romance were cut off by an accident? Is there any relationship in the drama between the transformation of the estate's landscape in 1810 and the remarkable discoveries of Thomasina? I think, as with the second half of *Three Tall Women,* and the second part of *Angels in America*, that the promised vision never materializes. Perhaps this can help us appreciate how difficult this is to do, and what it takes to do it.

We come to eternal verities and enduring values in mysterious ways, or at least ways that remind us that our previous visions of what must accompany the eternal and the true are as mutable as our visions of the eternal and true themselves. This makes it all the more interesting to look back at the huge variety of drama generated in the Golden Age of Greece, and note that it was all contrived in celebration of the god, and all performed at ritual celebrations that reminded the audience of the holiness of the occasion.

I doubt there is anything left of that sense of holiness. But there is a pale reflection of it in that feeling of necessity that can creep over those who have found themselves rooted in the bowels of a theatre, preferring the artificial light to the natural, sensing the power of what happens only in that very special place, that particular *oomphalos*.

In there, we can be transported. We can become living *metaforai*. But though we work inside, in a special incubator, our work is about what happens in the light, in the course of lives. The theatre disappoints when we let it be about itself, or let it be trapped in reductive triviality, in sentimental predictability, or fascinating games (or, as some have alleged, as

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illustrations of post-modern theory). It delights when it presents us with a vision of the ecstasies, horrors, losses and achievements that make the stuff of lives. When the form flows from the action rather than from an abstract scheme, when it moves from the math to the physics, then there is a chance that that action has been meta-phored, carried beyond our ordinary perceptions into a new vision. It is these visions, I think, working through the ancient, almost genetic, tragi-comic nexus of dramatic form, which evoke the god-of-many-names, shake and move us, and endure.

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