

## “It’s wanting to know that makes us matter”: Scepticism or Affirmation in Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*. A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff\*

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Tom Stoppard’s plays teem with epistemological questions, attempts to reconstruct the past, puzzles to be solved, or, more generally, with the search for knowledge and truth. Since the quests of Stoppard’s protagonists meet only with varying success, critics argue whether Stoppard’s plays communicate a hope that truth and knowledge may eventually be retrieved, or whether scepticism and indeterminacy prevail. Burkhard Niederhoff’s article has made a further contribution to this debate. Focussing on the epistemological function of the juxtaposition of the arts and sciences in *Arcadia*, Niederhoff disagrees with Antor’s interpretation of the misunderstandings in Stoppard’s dialogue as “semantic entropy,”<sup>1</sup> and takes great pains to demonstrate that, quite on the contrary, these misunderstandings create meaning (44). In the first scene of the play, for example,

[t]he interruptions of Thomasina’s lesson do not cause pedagogical or cognitive entropy. They result in worthwhile lessons and insights, just as the misunderstandings that characterize the dialogue create interesting and relevant meanings. [...] In this play, meanings are found and discoveries are made when ‘the unpredictable and the predetermined *unfold together*,’ when a random or chaotic element finds its way into a rational, goal-oriented pursuit. (48-49)

Niederhoff then finds in Arthur Koestler’s idea of bisociative thinking<sup>2</sup> a tool to assess Thomasina’s and Hannah’s ability to ‘think aside’

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, “‘Fortuitous Wit’: Dialogue and Epistemology in Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*,” *Connotations* 11.1 (2001/2002): 42-59.

and to adopt, adapt and improve chance findings for their theories in order to gain new insights. He finally attempts to disprove the play's alleged scepticism by hinting at the structure of *Arcadia* which evolves on two time levels that not only endow the audience with advanced knowledge but also enable the characters to catch up in the end (55). According to Niederhoff, *Arcadia* suggests that a clear distinction of true and false is as much possible as a reconstruction of the past. Perceiving Stoppard's focus on the process of research rather than on its results, he concludes: "The acknowledgement of irregularity, unpredictability, and disorder does not lead to scepticism. On the contrary, it opens the door to a new research paradigm [in the case of *Arcadia*, this new research paradigm is chaos theory] that creates fresh possibilities and opportunities" (57).

While I wholeheartedly agree that *Arcadia* is primarily concerned with epistemological processes and that the misunderstandings in the play are creative rather than disruptive, I part company with Niederhoff when he tries to invalidate sceptical readings. I shall ground my response on three major aspects:

### 1. Intertextuality

*Arcadia* lends itself especially well to an intertextual reading which considers the various meanings that are grafted onto the text via allusions. For example, the allusions to *Arcadia*, landscape gardening, chaos theory or Lord Byron infuse the play with meanings which, by undermining notions of determinate knowledge, not only account for its wit but also for its uncertainties. As I have elaborated on this topic elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> one example may suffice:

In his thorough analysis of the first scene of Stoppard's comedy, Niederhoff perceives Sidley Park as "an *Arcadia* where exciting but hazardous discoveries can be made, an Eden where knowledge may be gained at the price of innocence" (47). Niederhoff apparently plays down the challenge to the pursuit of knowledge that generically resides in the allusion to Paradise—after all, eating from the tree of

knowledge was the sin which closed Eden to Adam and Eve.<sup>4</sup> If Stoppard's play is as optimistic about the pursuit of knowledge as Niederhoff's article suggests, the frame of reference renders this pursuit problematic. On the one hand, the allusion to Eden realigns knowledge with sin; on the other hand, the allusion to Arcadia evokes ambiguity, especially when characters quote the famous sentence "Et in Arcadia ego." In a seminal article on Nicolas Poussin's two versions of *The Arcadian Shepherds*, Erwin Panofsky discussed the ambiguity of this phrase implying either nostalgic longing or a *memento mori*.<sup>5</sup> Both readings also resonate in the first scene of Stoppard's *Arcadia*, when Lady Croom quotes the sentence in a nostalgic manner, whereupon Thomasina refers to the grammatically more accurate reference to death (13).<sup>6</sup> The paradisiacal and Arcadian subtext thus provides a setting by no means favourable for the advancement of unambiguous knowledge, a twist which Niederhoff's reading does not take into account.

## 2. Misprisions

Unravelling intertextual references is, of course, a question of method; and in choosing to focus on the dialogue and the structural elements of the play, Niederhoff perhaps necessarily puts aside intertextual considerations. This does not explain, however, the instances where he clearly misreads *Arcadia*.

Arguing that Thomasina makes important discoveries in the first scene through misunderstandings and interruptions, Niederhoff presupposes an innocent Thomasina who, through observing her seniors, quickly advances if not to experience, at least to a sound knowledge of life. We should not forget, however, that Thomasina is a precocious prodigy whose reactions to Septimus's evasive answers to her questions about carnal embrace very clearly indicate that she already knows what this expression signifies. Later on, her witty repartees are definitely no chance remarks but pointed comments on the dialogue.<sup>7</sup> When referring to the metaphor of the seed falling on

stony ground, for instance, Thomasina does *not* misunderstand Septimus's biblical allusion (cf. Niederhoff 48) but sees through it and, as Niederhoff himself points out, retorts with a reference to Onan.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, she reunites the biblical frame of reference with the sexual one, thus skilfully outmanoeuvring Septimus's evasive reply. There is a gradual increase of knowledge in the first scene of *Arcadia*, but this forms part of the exposition of the play, conveying information about its topic, setting, and protagonists to the readers or the audience who are actually the ones who gain new insights and 'learn' most in this scene. This enhancement of knowledge, however, is largely a matter of theatrical conventions.

The juxtaposition of Bernard and Hannah needs some qualification, too. If Bernard is not susceptible to evidence against his theory, Hannah's readiness to adapt to chance findings does not induce her to alter her opinion on the relationship of Enlightenment and Romanticism, either. Although she revises her interpretation of the Sidley Park hermit from a "mind in chaos suspected of genius" (*Arcadia* 27) to "[t]he Age of Enlightenment banished into the Romantic wilderness" (*Arcadia* 66), her aversion to Romanticism remains unchanged. This is the more remarkable because, as Niederhoff demonstrates, Hannah owes her evidence largely to twists in the plot that could be classified as (however loosely) "romantic" within the binary oppositions deployed in the play: random discoveries, (sexual) attraction, or conversations on chaos theory.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Bernard's comment on her book *Caro*, malicious as it may be, raises the suspicion that Hannah's scholarly work rests firmly within the matrix of feminist recovery studies blaming patriarchal society for condemning the works of female writers to oblivion.<sup>10</sup> Her new book project displays a similar revisionary rhetoric of a powerful, central, hegemonic force (Romanticism) suppressing a marginalized figure or idea (Enlightenment, embodied by the Sidley Park hermit).

I also doubt whether Hannah's and Thomasina's research methods exemplify bisociative thinking. Working on the interdisciplinary topic "landscape and literature 1750-1834" (*Arcadia* 25), Hannah does not

have to learn anything in order to look at other disciplines, and as has just been seen, Hannah is far less flexible in her research paradigms than Niederhoff suggests. Moreover, insights in *Arcadia* do not result from playing or daydreams (Niederhoff 50; I cannot find any example of a daydream in this play), but from accidental finds (e.g. envelopes, folders, or pictures) during an otherwise very systematic and methodical research.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, Thomasina's observations on rice pudding with jam ("You cannot stir things apart"; *Arcadia* 5) which catalyzes her later insights about the second law of thermodynamics neither result from "thinking aside" nor are they inspired by a "visual image," as Niederhoff suggests. They merely follow the old inductive principle of deriving a general rule from observations of everyday occurrences. Koestler and bisociation are by no means needed to explain this particular passage and other moments of discovery in the play.

A further misprision occurs with reference to the setting. Whereas Peter Paul Schnierer<sup>12</sup> considers *Arcadia* to be an elusive space, Niederhoff declares:

The *Arcadia* of the play is not located in an elusive elsewhere but right before the audience's eyes: in the schoolroom shared by Thomasina and Septimus. This is Thomasina's room of her own, a privileged and protected environment in which she can pursue her intellectual interests and make her discoveries in the company of a gifted and sympathetic teacher. (54-55)

This is altogether wrong because "[t]he *Arcadia* of the play" is first and foremost identified as and located in the garden of Sidley Park. This garden, in turn, is represented in a drawing in the gardener's sketchbook and in a number of verbal references in the dialogue, but it is not visualized right before the audience's eyes.<sup>13</sup> The schoolroom is far from being "Thomasina's room of her own," for people frequently intrude into it, even sending her out. As an institutionalized site for the perpetuation of conventional knowledge—Thomasina is taught traditional maths and Newtonian principles—a schoolroom epitomizes precisely the traditional matrix that would impede innova-

tive thought according to Koestler's bisociation (cf. Niederhoff 53). Finally, the room itself proves to be unstable, its props move through time, acquiring different meanings depending on the century and the scene of the play in which they are used. In sum, the temporally unstable setting of *Arcadia* can hardly serve to counter the idea of elusiveness.

### 3. Return to Scepticism (?)

Let me return to the question whether *Arcadia* professes a sceptical attitude towards the pursuit of knowledge or not. Niederhoff finds evidence for an anti-sceptical stance in resolved misunderstandings, learning processes, insights and verifications of theories. The examples he quotes indeed support an affirmative position, yet I believe one has to consider some further aspects in order to arrive at a balanced view of the play.

For one thing, it is crucial to distinguish between different levels of communication, because insight and knowledge are unevenly distributed in *Arcadia*. The nineteenth-century characters have the knowledge of past events for which the twentieth-century characters are craving. On the other hand, the twentieth-century scientists have an advanced technology and discoveries at their disposal which the nineteenth-century characters are still lacking. During their research, the scholars and scientists on both time levels gain on each other, but due to the time lag and the ensuing historical and scientific rift, they cannot catch up entirely. It has already been suggested that the meanings brought about by the misunderstandings which Niederhoff has analysed create above all insights in the *external* communicative system, i.e. among the audience who has access to the different frames of reference and thus can enjoy the comic effects produced in the play. When assessing insight and knowledge in *Arcadia* it is therefore vital to note *whose* advancement of knowledge is at stake.

It is equally important to realize that several uncertainties still remain unresolved at the end of the play for both characters and audi-

ence, who still do not know,<sup>14</sup> for instance, why Byron left England, or who shot the hare.<sup>15</sup> *Arcadia* also remains painstakingly vague about Septimus's precise motivations and occupations as hermit of Sidley Park. Whereas Burkhard Niederhoff is very confident about details concerning Septimus's eremitic life,<sup>16</sup> the play makes no explicit statement on why Septimus had decided to spend the rest of his life in the hermitage, what he did with the formula, whether he understood it, or whether he wanted to prove or disprove its implications. We do not even know whether Septimus was really insane or whether his contemporaries, not understanding Thomasina's algorithm and its implications, only believed him to be a lunatic. Val and Hannah refer to Septimus as mad, but their remarks are based on nineteenth-century documents and on Val's prejudice that only a madman would take the pains to plot an iterated algorithm with pencil and paper.<sup>17</sup> Before taking this remark at face value, we ought to remember that Val also believed a girl living at the beginning of the nineteenth century could not come up with the algorithm Thomasina discovers. And if Septimus is not mad—what about Hannah's theory on the significance of the mad Sidley Park hermit for the status of Romanticism? Burkhard Niederhoff asserts:

The outcome of the research or detective plot also precludes scepticism. [...] This plot contrasts Bernard's theory, which is wrong, with Hannah's theory, which is right, and both are *proved* to be so in the course of the play. [...] As I pointed out above, the final moment of *Arcadia* is about the discovery of the missing piece of evidence that establishes the truth of Hannah's theory. A sceptical play would end on a different note. (55, italics B. N.)

In view of the points made above, Niederhoff's alleged refutation becomes as valid as the claims for the play's scepticism he attempts to invalidate. Yet, instead of trying to prove or disprove the alleged scepticism or affirmative attitude in Stoppard's *Arcadia* I would rather highlight what I consider to be Niederhoff's most valuable insight: "Stoppard is less interested in truth than how it is found or missed; he is less interested in the result of research than in its process" (56). Although I am wary of speculating about authors' intentions, I can

wholeheartedly subscribe to Niederhoff's emphasis on epistemological *processes* in Stoppard's play. When one looks at *how* knowledge is achieved, scepticism ceases to be an important issue because a reading that looks at epistemological processes instead of gained insights can cope with multiple meanings and indeterminacy. What Stoppard's *Arcadia* witnesses is a serene variation of existentialism, of plodding on towards a self-set goal without knowing whether one is going to achieve it, or whether it even exists. This is the glory of Hannah's "It's wanting to know that makes us matter" (*Arcadia* 75). Stoppard's characters matter because they *want* to know. The problem with us scholars may be that we tend to be so hungry for results that we *pretend* to know, even if it may sometimes be "[b]etter to struggle on knowing that failure is final" (*Arcadia* 76).

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Heinz Antor, "The Arts, the Sciences, and the Making of Meaning: Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* as a Post-Structuralist Play," *Anglia* 116 (1998): 326-54. Antor uses the term "semantic entropy" in the sense of dissolving and disrupting meaning. Originally, semantic entropy is a term from translation theory, denoting "a measure of semantic ambiguity and uninformativeness" (I. Dan Melamed, "Measuring Semantic Entropy," *Proceedings of the SIGLEX Workshop on Tagging Text with Lexical Semantics, Washington, DC, 4-5 April, 1997*, <http://acl.ldc.upenn.edu/W/W97/W97-0207.pdf>, 17 Nov. 2003, 41-46). It occurs, for example, in words which are used in a multiplicity of contexts. Since the misunderstandings in Stoppard's *Arcadia* are not caused by overused words drained of meaning, but by the fusion of two competing frames of reference, the term "semantic entropy" is rather inappropriate in this context.

<sup>2</sup>According to Koestler, creativity and innovation emerge from bisociative thinking, i.e. associating hitherto unconnected frames of reference with each other. Koestler expounds on this theory in detail in his *The Act of Creation* (1964; London: Hutchinson, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>See my dissertation *Repräsentationen: Eine Studie des intertextuellen und intermedialen Spiels von Tom Stoppards Arcadia* (Trier: WVT, 2001).

<sup>4</sup>The exact type of knowledge gained through the fall is still a matter of theo-



logical debate. In a biblical context, "to know" implies both scientific or scholarly and sexual knowledge. For a critique of interpretations of Genesis 3 in merely sexual terms see Oswald Loretz, *Schöpfung und Mythos* (Stuttgart: Verlag katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968) 112-14 and Walther Zimmerli, *1. Mose 1-11: Die Urgeschichte* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1967) 161. Derek B. Alwes completely ignores the sexual connotation of "knowledge" in the biblical sense when he says: "[K]nowledge is not a 'sin' in the world of the play, in which the most attractive characters are highly educated, if not geniuses" (Derek B. Alwes, "'Oh, Phooey to Death!': Boethian Consolation in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 36 [2000]: 397). That the allusion to Eden is an important subtext to *Arcadia* was illustrated in the London and New York premieres of the play, when Nicolas Poussin's painting *Le printemps, ou Adam et Eve au paradis terrestre* was projected onto the curtain, establishing an allusion to paradise in a visual paratext to the performance.

<sup>5</sup>See Erwin Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (London: Penguin, 1993) 340-67. The article was initially published under the title "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau," *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1936) 223-54. See also Jean-Claude Berchet, "*Et in Arcadia Ego!*" *Romantisme* 15 (1986): 85-104. For a detailed interpretation of the allusion to this quotation in Stoppard's *Arcadia*, see Müller-Muth 206-08.

<sup>6</sup>All page numbers refer to the 1993 Faber and Faber edition of Stoppard's *Arcadia*.

<sup>7</sup>Thomasina does not re-enter the first scene with the question "What is the topic?" (Niederhoff 46), either; at least in my 1993 Faber and Faber edition of the play she is asking "May I return now?" (*Arcadia* 10). Nor does she enquire for the topic of the conversation—she need not do so because she is the only one on stage who can at once distinguish the two competing frames of reference that create the misunderstandings. In this scene, Thomasina takes the position of an observer who, not being directly involved in any of the affairs discussed in the conversation, can take a step back and look at, or rather listen to, the others from a distanced vantage point.

<sup>8</sup>Septimus initially refers to the parable of the Sower, Mark 4:3-20. The story of Onan is told in Gen. 38:8-10.

<sup>9</sup>I am listing chaos theory in this context not because of any intrinsic bonds between chaos theory and Romanticism but because of its association with romantic concepts in *Arcadia*. Unpredictability is one of the issues supporting this connection. In an interview with Katherine Kelly and William W. Demastes, Stoppard explained that he organized the allusions to science in *Arcadia* in a binary opposition between "Classicism" (represented by Newtonianism) and "Romanticism" (represented by chaos theory); see "The Playwright and the Professors: An Interview with Tom Stoppard," *South Central Review* 11.4 (1994): 5. This pattern is

largely indebted to Gleick's popular monograph *Chaos*, which Stoppard read and which fashions the heralds of chaos theory in terms of romantic rebels against the academic establishment. See James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1988; London: Abacus, 1993) e.g. 163 ff. and 186-87; see also Katherine Hayles's comment on Gleick's romanticization of chaos theory in her *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) 171-74. In the "Biographical Sketches" appended to his *Fractal Geometry*, Benoit Mandelbrot pursues a similar strategy, inscribing himself into a line of renegades of scientific thought; see Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (New York: Freeman, 1977) 391-404.

<sup>10</sup>Byron the spoil child promoted beyond his gifts by the spirit of the age! And Caroline the closet intellectual shafted by a male society! [...] You got them backwards darling. Caroline was Romantic waffle on wheels with no talent, and Byron was an eighteenth-century Rationalist touched by genius. And he killed Chater" (*Arcadia* 60). Despite the final sentence and Bernard's maliciousness, there is some truth in these statements insofar as Lady Caroline Lamb's literary merits are indeed disputable, and Lord Byron's attacks at the first generation Romantic poets as well as his preference for early eighteenth-century satirists partly undercut his role as an epitome of Romanticism.

<sup>11</sup>The picture of Septimus and Plautus, for instance, does not arrive "out of the blue" (Niederhoff 53), it was introduced previously in the play when Thomasina drew it. It is not the result of non-rational thought, either, for Gus knew that Hannah was looking for it.

<sup>12</sup>Peter Paul Schnierer, "In *Arcadia* Nemo: The Pastoral of Romanticism," *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester: Camden House, 1999) 152-61.

<sup>13</sup>I have extensively commented on the absentification of the garden in *Arcadia* and on Lady Croom's ekphrasis of Sidley Park in "Re-presenting Representations: The Landscape Garden as a Sight/Site of Difference in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*," *Word and Image* 15.1 (1999): 97-106 and in chapter 3.3 of *Repräsentationen*, esp. 223-26.

<sup>14</sup>I disagree with Alwes, who assigns a privileged perspective to the audience in all respects (Alwes 392 and 394). As I shall demonstrate in this paragraph, *Arcadia* leaves some questions unanswered even to the audience.

<sup>15</sup>Niederhoff does not hesitate to give Augustus the credit: "At this point [Bernard is giving his test lecture, quoting from a game book which attributes the dead hare to "Lord B."], the audience have already heard Septimus say that his friend is a poor shot (13), and their doubts about Byron's marksmanship are confirmed in a later scene when the Augustus mentioned in the game-book entry, Thomasina's brother, refers to the hunting episode: 'Lord Byron?!—he claimed my hare, although my shot was the earlier! He said I missed by a hare's breadth' (79)" (55). The play itself is far less lucid in this respect than Niederhoff. Septimus is envious of his more famous and successful friend, whereas Lord Byron and

Augustus are represented as boastful machos—none of the three is a truly reliable witness in the hare affair. Augustus's complaint only tells us who shot first, not who hit and who missed.

<sup>16</sup>Septimus goes mad, he says, "as a result of the death of his pupil [...] and spends the rest of his days in the hermitage" (43). Towards the end of the article, the explanation of Septimus's madness differs slightly: "This remark [Thomasina's marginal comment on her iterated algorithm, in imitation of Fermat] is more than a mere joke—in fact, it is the joke that makes Septimus mad; as a lunatic in the hermitage, he will cover thousands of pages with the iterations of Thomasina's algorithm" (57). A footnote adds: "This is only part of his work; he also tries to disprove Thomasina's anticipation of the second law of thermodynamics and its pessimistic implication" (59n12).

<sup>17</sup>Alwes equally trusts these filtered comments in the play as if they were indubitable facts (400).