
Order and Disorder in Tom Stoppard's 'Arcadia'

In *Arcadia*, Tom Stoppard presents a dynamic interplay of order and disorder that exists 'eternally and creatively' (Demastes 91). Order is generally associated with laws, structure, control, and in the play, it is exemplified by the Classical temperament, corresponding also to Newtonian science. Its antithesis is Romanticism, which is exemplified by disorder, emotions and intuition, as well as deterministic chaos. Through the dialectic of order and disorder, Stoppard suggests that 'life can be chaotic, but also stable, and within chaos there are windows of order' (Fleming 67). Thus, although we may not ultimately attain knowledge, it is still worthy to pursue knowledge, as the very pursuit of knowledge is justified and worthy in itself. The incompleteness and chaos of unknowing is a state that we must come to embrace, as it is necessary to provide impetus for change and life itself.

The jam pudding that Thomasina stirs, is reflective of the natural progress from order to disorder. As the jam is stirred, the trails of jam move towards a larger disorder that cannot be stirred back together by going the other direction, as she 'cannot stir them apart' (8). This is contradictory to the Newtonian laws, which 'go forwards and backwards' (119) Consequently, Thomasina intuits the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that heat 'goes only one way' (119), from hotter to colder, 'as a wooden stove that must consume itself until ash and stove are as one, and heat is gone from the earth' (89).

Her modern relative, Valentine, also believes that randomness, disorder and chaos is as much a part of reality as order, and that far from being infinitely reversible as Newtonian physics, suggested, the system is gradually running down: the jam indeed cannot be unstirred. A similar observation by Valentine also suggests the inevitable one-way progression of heat and by its implication, general disorder in the universe, 'Your tea gets cold by itself, it doesn't get hot by itself.' (106) He goes on further to elucidate, 'What's happening to your tea is happening to everything everywhere' (106).

In a later scene, Thomasina complains that the geometry she has been taught confines itself to simple shapes, 'as if the world of forms were nothing but arcs and angles' and this leads her to tackle shapes which seem random and irregular, believing that 'nature is written in numbers' (51). This subsequently leads to the creation of the 'New Geometry of Irregular Forms' (59). In doing so, Thomasina understood the possibility of applying Classical science into nature, giving rise to a new way of appreciating beauty. In response, her tutor, Septimus is initially adamant in accepting her revolutionary idea, rationalizing that explaining nature by man's geometry is impossible, a task that leads into 'infinities where we cannot follow' (52).

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Valentine, as a modern day chaos theory expert, understands Thomasina's intentions of her invented Geometry, in that the understanding of science, maths, arts, nature and chaos are by no means mutually exclusive. He refers to chaos theory as 'turning out to be the mathematics of the natural world' (61). He explains to Hannah that order and disorder co-exist naturally, that 'the unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is' (64). Yet, he also admits that 'these things are full of mystery' and that 'The future is disorder' (65). Although, he concludes optimistically that 'It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong' (65). Such a statement encapsulates the importance of knowledge, or at least the pursuit of it, that even though more knowledge subverts and contradicts prior knowledge, it is the very progress that we should be satisfied and be content with.

Indeed, Hannah has an epiphany that captures the essence of Valentine's attitude towards the knowledge of chaos and order, in saying 'It's wanting to know that makes us matter', indicating that paradoxically, the achieving of knowledge is 'trivial' (102), but 'Better to struggle on knowing that failure is final' (103). Thus, in accepting that things can be 'full of mysteries' (65), and that facts 'can't prove to be true' (101), we are able to transcend beyond uncertainty and disorder, embracing it as as simply part of life and the nature of knowledge itself.

While Thomasina's and Valentine's perspectives encourage a widening view of the idea of order in existence, the actual cultural perspective of her contemporaries argues that God is indeed Newtonian. Lady Croom's ideal of Sidley Park reflects her perspective that Nature should be ordered: 'trees are companionably grouped at intervals', 'the lake peaceably contained by meadows on which the right amount of sheep are tastefully arranged' (19). In fact, she even goes so far as to say that Man has the moral right to order Nature, as suggested in 'nature as God intended' (19). Her idea of nature, is one that is 'regularised to conform to a human vision of what God's creation should be: orderly, linear, geometrically symmetrical' (Demastes 88).

While Lady Croom's ideal of Sidley Park is one that is ordered and dictated by careful design, Mr Noakes himself is of the view that 'Irregularity is one of the chiefest principles of the picturesque style' (19), thus his idea of beauty is one that imitates Salvator Rosa: wild, untamed, Gothic. Nonetheless, as much as the design that Noakes undertakes for the reconstruction of Sidley Park is meant to imitate nature, true nature is one that exists without the interference of man's design. As Hannah puts it, 'English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were invoking classical authors', hardly natural or indicative of Bernard's idea of 'real England' (36). In fact, Hannah sees the Park as a metaphor for 'what happened to the Enlightenment', which ultimately resulted in 'the decline from thinking to feeling', one that is characterized by 'cheap thrills and false emotions' (39).

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Thomasina does not accept her mother's Arcadia, looking instead for an expanded version and encouraging nature to reveal its own order through irregular design. She admires Noakes, calling him 'The Emperor of Irregularity' (116) and sees his landscaping work as an inspiration for her 'New Geometry of Irregular Forms' (59). The differing ideals on the subjective beauty of Sidley Park ultimately reveals the characters' inclinations towards Romanticism or Classicism.

The dynamics of the relationship between Bernard and Hannah display the tension between Romanticism and Classicism. Both are characters that have fixed ideas on how to pursue knowledge. To Hannah, she sees the world in binary terms and privileges thought over emotion. To her, the Romantic movement was a 'sham', while the ordered classical gardens represented 'paradise in the age of reason' (39). Yet, ironically, to prove her idea that 'The Age of Enlightenment [was] banished into the Romantic wilderness' (90), Hannah must rely on instinct and intuition. She embodies Stoppard's notion that classical and romantic temperaments are not mutually exclusive, but rather coexist in people. In contrast, Bernard embodies the romantic temperament, being energetic, 'bouncy on his feet' (46), passionate and prone to intuition. He wears a 'peacock-coloured display handkerchief' (23) suggesting his flamboyant and ostentatious personality. He conducts his research through intuition - 'By which I mean a visceral belief in yourself. Gut instinct. The part of you that doesn't reason.' (68) Fixated on the idea that Byron killed Chater in a duel, he 'left out everything which doesn't fit', for which Hannah calls him 'arrogant, greedy and reckless' (80). Through Bernard's downfall, Stoppard warns against the perils of stubborn ambition, especially when the pursuit of knowledge is ultimately for fame and recognition. Despite his failure, Bernard perceptively points out the relevance of the arts and humanities, arguing that it is impossible to measure or restrict arts by the quantitative terms of 'scientific progress' and 'parameters', claiming that 'You can't stick Byron's head in your laptop' (82). He thus champions the value of artistic knowledge as opposed to science, suggesting that the purpose of arts is more personal, and if 'knowledge isn't self-knowledge, it isn't doing much' (84). In Bernard's failure and Hannah's success in attaining knowledge, Stoppard makes a provoking argument that science and intuition are equally important, as it is necessary that one needs to be simultaneously curious about the mysteries of what we cannot know, while accepting uncertainties in knowledge that science cannot explain, in order to move forward in attaining knowledge.

Septimus aptly summarizes our understanding of balancing chaos and order in the pursuit of knowledge, 'When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone' (128). In this hypothetical future where all knowledge is fully achieved, the tension between order and chaos will finally be reduced to nothing, yet this is the time when everything 'must cease and grow cold' (128). There lies the message that Stoppard intends, that it is only through the constant dialectic and tension between chaos and order, reason and emotion, knowing and unknowing, that provides meaning and gives purpose to existence.

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