Charlie Simons

ENGL1500E

Professor Sarah Alexander

The Inevitable Bathos in Arcadia

In Sidley Park, hefty and all encompassing aesthetic claims about the garden are passed around as though they are cigarettes amongst freshmen on the steps of Howe library. If the garden is made rugged, and made to embody the 'Picturesque' intentional roughness of the Romantic aesthetic, then it cannot possess the pastoral calm required to be 'Beautiful'. And if the garden is too neat and orderly—too pastoral, it lacks the wildness of the 'Sublime'. The constant fight of the characters, channeling their arbitrary preferences into these frameworks attempting to prove which can be used to define transcendent form, is blatant. In both timelines, characters such as Bernard, Lady Croom, Noakes, even Septimus attempt to map their values onto the material world: dirt, weather, grouse, death, sex. Regardless of what natural element they weave together some cartogram of, their maps inevitably are exposed to be laughable and brittle. Through Bathos, Arcadia deflates aesthetic frameworks as superficial impositions, and proves their collapse when confronted with natural disorder.

Lady Croom's commitment to classical beauty becomes the first example of how an aesthetic framework collapses the moment the material world intrudes on it. She explicitly notes her love of the "green and gentle"(Stoppard 19) slopes, and praises the ha-ha that "makes no assertion to interrupt our Arcadia"(Stoppard 19.) How could a ha-ha not make an assertion in spite of being a literal barrier? This statement demonstrates that Lady Croom values the visual aesthetic and orderliness, not the landscape itself as Arcadia. It demonstrates her notion that a properly tended estate should demonstrate a world aligned with its ideal form, the Beautiful. She

speaks of the ha-ha as though its seamless appearance proves the Beautiful is already at work in the landscape. And yet, the ha-ha only functions if it remains invisible. Noakes casually mentions it has “a little brown dirt in it,” (Stoppard 11) and the entire vision collapses in an instant. The dirt brings the structure back into view, and its visual presence disrupts Croom's Arcadia. The difference in tone, between Croom and Noakes is comedic. Bathos operates here as the sudden fall from her elevated discourse of Arcadia to the casual and inane fact of dirt, a shift so slight yet so literal that the entire classical framework she had built shatters.

This collapse is not unique to the Beautiful; Noakes and Bernard each attempt to stage the Romantic Sublime, and still, the mundane undermines their grandiose dramas. Noakes proposes “a ruin, set among gloomy trees,” (Stoppard 18) and treats Sidley Park as though it is a canvas to be painted on. He suggests the decorative hermit. The Sublime he imagines is a manufactured one, built out of an imported gloom and theatrical decay. Even the hermit he inserts into this vision is meant to stand as a figure of wild isolation, further pushing that Romantic aesthetic. And yet this too sees it's reduction through bathos. Hannah states that the hermit was simply “a bloke who liked the view,” (Stoppard 23) a description so blunt and literal it drags Noakes’s sublime architecture back into the realm of the ordinary. Bernard repeats the same mistake a century later. His theory that Byron killed Chater in a duel and fled England is delivered with the same Romantic intensity Noakes attempts to enforce into the landscape. Bernard wants the archive to behave like the literature he admires, and it's figures to die like the characters he admires. In some dramatic and climactic duel; Hannah notes that Chater died of a monkey bite, a fact comically resistant to Bernard’s grandeur that it carries the same tonal collapse as that of the bloke who liked the view. In both cases, Stoppard uses a stubborn detail to puncture the aesthetic. These small facts undo the aesthetic built around them. The Sublime, as

Noakes and Bernard stage it, cannot survive contact with nature because it demands order nature and history do not supply.

Thomasina and Valentine introduce a model of nature grounded in disorder, and their clarity exposes the limits of every aesthetic system the other characters try to impose. Thomasina notices how things move before anyone has the chance to arrange them into a pattern. Nothing in her pudding bowl settles long enough to resemble a view. When Septimus tries to turn his unfinished proof into a philosophical gesture, calling its absence "no matter (Stoppard 4)," Thomasina answers with a simple correction, saying "It does matter to the proof (Stoppard 4)." Once again, elevated philosophical discourse is brought down by gravity. Valentine does similar work in the later period. Bernard performs his Byron theory with the energy of someone staging a Romantic revelation. He spoke as though history obeys dramatic form, and Valentine broke the performance. Flatly, he explained that it was all in the data. Bernard tries again, insisting that his theory stands on intuition alone, and Valentine repeats the same idea, just as flatly. The bathos lands in the bluntness. Bernard and Septimus reach for heightened significance whereas Valentine and Thomasina are grounded. Notably, Valentine does not treat data as a reductive framework the way that the aesthetic obsessed residents of Sidley Park did; instead, data is proof of chaos. Stoppard uses Thomasina and Valentine to demonstrate that aesthetic frameworks collapse not just when mundane facts intrude, but when confronted with a model of nature that accepts disorder as fundamental rather than something to be arranged into Beautiful slopes or Sublime ruins. The aesthetic frameworks do not fail because they are badly constructed, they fail because they are constructed.

Stoppard uses bathos systematically throughout Arcadia to expose aesthetic frameworks as human constructs that cannot withstand contact with natural disorder. Whether Lady Croom's

Beautiful ha-ha is disrupted by dirt, Bernard's Romantic drama is deflated by a monkey bite, or Noakes Romantic symbol is reduced to a man; elevated discourse collapses when confronted with material reality. Through bathos, Arcadia proves that aesthetic frameworks cannot contain the fundamental disorder they attempt to organize. The same tonal shift seen in bathos—shattering the sublime to reveal the mundane— is seen in the shattering of aesthetic masks to reveal the chaos of nature.