History Played Back:
In Defense of Stoppard’s Coast of Utopia

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There sometimes turn out to be valuable objects cast away in the rubbish-can of history—things that have to be retrieved later on.

—Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station

A critic does double duty here. If something true can be understood about art, something will be understood about liberty too.

—Vissarion Belinsky, in Voyage

TWO AND A HALF YEARS ago Tom Stoppard’s expensive, rewarding trilogy The Coast of Utopia concluded, at the National Theatre in London under Trevor Nunn’s direction, an initial run that must be regarded as definitive. Demanding dozens of actors in scores of roles, elaborate period costumes by the gross, and a range of settings from Russian country house to West End slum and from Baltic to Mediterranean vistas, this strongly knit three-part script will not travel easily to other venues. Nor will it often find audiences as willing as London’s proved—and even there at none of my three visits was the house filled—to sit out the nine hours’ playing time and absorb the radical nineteenth-century Russian thought that Stoppard has placed, with honorable insistence, at the center of interest. New Yorkers will get to see this work in a somewhat adapted version, as a production has been announced for this year at Lincoln Center, directed by Jack O’Brien. While the invigorating quality of the political debate in Stoppard’s trilogy makes production in Washington or Moscow an event devoutly to be wished, the dreary quality of the political debate now evident in both capitals militates pretty decisively against it.
The Coast of Utopia is likeliest, then, to be accessible to the playwright's many admirers in the book format it assumed concurrently with the National Theatre opening in midsummer 2002. Critical intelligence has been magnetized by Stoppard since the great early success of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966), and the extensive body of criticism that has accumulated around his oeuvre attests its appeal to readers as well as theatergoers. While critics have made more than merely rote allowance for Stoppard's profound theatricality, nevertheless the verbally dazzling, metaphysically intrepid, morally engaged character of his writing makes his plays yield well to analysis in literary terms alone. Stoppard can so fill the mind with ideas that the staged enactment of those ideas can receive treatment that feels casual rather than essential. This condition recurs in aggravated form with The Coast of Utopia, where the ideas at play are foreign to the anglophone mind in a way that the intellectual matter of The Invention of Love (1997) or Arcadia (1993) or even Travesties (1974) was not. The principal concepts of the new work are a century and a half old at the latest, and are Russian or German at the nearest. Besides, The Coast of Utopia dispenses with the mediating present-day framework that in each of those earlier plays helped audiences grasp the relevance of the past.

Yet despite its unfamiliarity, this body of nineteenth-century East European thought becomes, in Stoppard’s hands, equipment for survival at the political dead end where we in the West find ourselves today. Having picked these exiled and half-forgotten ideas out of the wreck of more than one world-transforming revolution in social relations, he exhibits them in as full a representation of their historical circumstance as the best current stagecraft permits, for critical assessment and practical adaptation in our time. More on that theme presently. The point to stress just now is that both the characteristic brilliance and the unwonted strangeness of its intellectual cargo will open Stoppard's newest work to what the manifest obstacles to production must already encourage, namely its appropriation as contemporary closet drama: top-drawer stuff, but filed away for good. This essay was written, on the closing of the London production, to draw
attention to some primary values that risk being lost when such a
script exits the stage and enters the library.

Salvage operations might begin along the paper trail left by
London's drama critics. Reviews of the National Theatre production
have been plentiful; they have also been mixed. Collectively the crit-
ics hail the work, with a respect that passes in the unsentimental
currency of London journalism for reverence, as Britain's premier
playwright's *sumnum opus*; individually almost all the critics have
doubts about what Stoppard has just put them through. The mixed
reviews in the mainstream media course, as streams mainly do,
through well-worn channels: plot line, characterization and dia-
logue, scenic realization. The last of these elicits nearly unanimous
applause for what a team headed by William Dudley and Stephen
Rayne achieved with panoramic backdrop projections that swept the
eye through scores of scene changes, liberally computer-assisted into
an animated third dimension behind a stage-wide double revolve
that orbited actors and furniture around the stage, sometimes in diz-
zying clockwise counterpoint.

It's what was done and said on stage between times, the narra-
tive and intellectual substance of the script, that prompts misgiv-
ings. Few reviewers come out and rue the commitment of nine hours
as such. Complaint over longueurs rather takes the form of an ob-
servation that the narrative line of this already obscure history drama
is garbled. Now it's kinked up by pointless flashbacks and replays,
now it's hustled elliptically ahead through vignettes too frequent
and sketchy to form a bond with earlier scenes or plant a memory
trace on later ones. Reviewers feeling lost amid the events of a plot-
becalmed *Coast* have usually felt, in consequence, even more lost
amid its ideas. Only staunch partisans let pass the opportunity to
decry the plays' conceptual top-heaviness. Accustomed as they must
be to Stoppard's hallmark arias and fugues of thought, and com-
mending the lead actors for the imaginative tact with which these set
pieces are performed, the drama critics nevertheless balk at the
effect these devices have when they occur within a work of such
enlarged scope. The expounding of ideas, blocking the exposition of
action, retards the sweeping historical pace that the mise-en-scène keeps promising to sustain.

Not too long then, runs the opening-night consensus, but too long on ideas. Or in other words, too short on narrative continuity, and thus on the sheer human interest that such continuity supports, and that Stoppard evidently courts by showcasing, as an undertheme possessing Chekhovian resonance, his leading figures’ unorthodox and often agonizing personal and family lives. (The playwright’s research into memoirs and letters was anchored by E. H. Carr’s 1933 book *The Romantic Exiles*, which the published scripts specifically acknowledge.) Even reviewers happy in principle with *The Coast of Utopia*’s undisguised major aim—to honor the intensity of the philosophical and political thinking that Stoppard has embedded in private contexts—demur sometimes at a certain dialectical deficiency of conception. Thus Karl Marx, the one intellectual among Stoppard’s dozens who most palpably influenced the twentieth century, gets a bit part and half a buffoon’s at that, which casts him, like the much more fully rendered but still two-dimensional anarchist Michael Bakunin, as foil to our epic hero-of-the-mind Alexander Herzen. Yet neither Herzen’s thought nor anybody else’s, these critics complain, ever really proves itself in dramatized debate. What we expect in a drama of ideas—thoughts evoking rival thoughts, to wrangle in a contention whose sharpened result brings us closer to the truth—doesn’t ordinarily happen here. Instead of dialectics, Stoppard’s intellectual drama assumes a more stubbornly contextual shape: the concepts flash forth in a brilliant moment only to subside into the circumstances that engender and reflect them. Too publicly wind-swept for the drama of hearts, too intimately berthed for the forensic drama of ideas, Stoppard’s ambitious vision has awakened among even largely respectful reviewers a lingering suspicion that the theatrical vessel, having shaken out full sail, remains somehow adrift, all dressed up with nowhere to go.

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Nowhere is exactly where a first-run spectator like me will get who, much admiring *The Coast of Utopia*, attempts to rebut these critical reactions by contradicting them. As a record of audience response, they are incontrovertible. Stoppard's narrative course is indeed subject to arbitrary change: it does at times rush ahead with short notice, does eddy and pool without obvious justification, does bend backward to reprise moments long foregone. His characters don't dependably open and deepen on us the way traditional psychology, and the stagecraft that has grown up with it, say they should. Not only that, but this is a play that affronts received ideas about how ideas themselves develop: its major intellectual content fails to unfold according to a smooth genealogy that, correlating logic with history, derives new and improved notions from older ones.

All this makes summary a discouraging prospect, yet an overview may convey something of the plot's expanse and knotty grain. The trilogy of *Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage* spans the period 1833–1868 in seventy-odd scenes, dated by season and year, which are organized into two acts per play and range from wordless vignettes to complex dialogues half an hour long. The action moves for the most part forward on the calendar and westward on the map, although as it advances Stoppard practices increasingly liberal experiments in historical-dramatic exposition. Act 1 of the first play, *Voyage*, set entirely on the Bakunin family estate at Premukhino, heads straight across eight years. During this time the anarchist-to-be breaks with his aristocratic-liberal father after browsing in the delicatessen of imported German idealism and hosting a sequence of comrades who, en route to celebrity within the intelligentsia, flirt awkwardly with his bevy of bookish sisters. Act 2 backs up half a year into 1841, then a few years more into 1835, moving among Russian locales that center on Moscow, and providing retrospective answers to some riddles of personal relationship that act 1 has mooted. Here the stage admits a wider range of literati (including a walk-on by Pushkin), while for the rising generation of intellectuals including Bakunin, Herzen, and Vissarion Belinsky the provincial and derivative character of Russian culture becomes an intolerable
manifestation of tsarist despotism. Revolution seems the only morally honest response.

The second play, Shipwreck, extends the concerns of the first, at an accelerated pace and in a more elaborated dramaturgical mode that parleys family rupture into political exile and personal development into historical change. Shipwreck, like Voyage, begins (as in flashback it ends) on a Russian nobleman's estate, this time Herzen's Sokolovo, in 1846. But all the rest is displacement, as the circulation of Herzen's family and friends among German, Parisian, and Italian settings gives focus to revolutionary hopes mounting toward the great Continental watershed of 1848, then falling off through disappointment into a redefinition of their utopian aims. Consumptive Belinsky dies having repudiated the philosophy of Hegel; and, ominously, in the scene right after Belinsky's last appearance, the great Hegelian revisionist Marx makes his first. Bakunin, marching from philosophical flamboyance to incendiary practice, exits and enters the stage on his way into and out of police custody. The plot's dispersive arc intersects the careers of several artists, chiefly, in act 1, the neutral confidant Ivan Turgenev and, in act 2, the dashing partisan poet George Herwegh, who fails at revolution in Germany but succeeds at seducing Natalie Herzen in Paris. All the while babies are born, children loved and reared and lost, households maimed and healed. In this most complex portion of the trilogy the dialectic of loss and recovery is marked by a motif of scenic reprise. In what becomes a dramatic figure for key ideas about the theatrical appropriation of history, Stoppard replays moments from the Herzens' domestic life in Russia or France for fresh understanding. The chronologically final scene places Herzen in 1852 on a Channel steamer conducting him into a new phase of exile in England and, in effect, into the next and final play, Salvage. That play's thematics of vision take preliminary shape here in Herzen's dream dialogue with the incarcerated Bakunin about the Russian revolution that is to be.

The London action of Salvage rides on the crest, then drifts on the ebb, of the large influence exerted from afar on Russian affairs by Herzen's radical journal The Bell. The plot is complicated locally by
the needs of growing children (Natalie Herzen has died between
plays) and also of a shifting network of émigré hangers-on. The
momentum of exile impels the family ménage through a series of
suburban and seaside lodgings to settle at last in Geneva. During the
1850s Herzen's negotiation with a devoted governess and reunion
with his first best friend Nicholas Ogarev keep education and her-
tage to the fore as twin subthemes of the meditation on history that
*The Coast of Utopia* enacts. When the alcoholic Ogarev takes a Lon-
don prostitute for a mistress and Ogarev's sexually ardent wife bears
Herzen a new child, crossed marital purposes anticipate the ambigu-
ity of the play's chief political event: a young tsar's long-awaited
emancipation of the serfs in 1861, along with its sequel of violence
and new state repression. This crushing blow to Herzen's hopes
seems a vindication of the positions his old companions continue to
embrace: Turgenev's aesthetic nonchalance, the firebrand anarchism
of Bakunin. Herzen rejects the comforts of these opposed and com-
plementary stances, at the cost of finding himself, as the staging re-
peatedly shows him, alone. By the end, in 1868, Stoppard's hero is a
grandfather two years from death and, in the merciless view of the
younger radical intelligentsia, a light that has failed. Beleaguered and
isolated yet resilient, Herzen, in strong curtain speeches, bequeaths
to the future his demanding vision of a revolutionary political strug-
gle—one that will be unsustained by utopian promise but sweetened
instead by the beauty of life in its mortal passage, "the summer light-
ning of personal happiness."

As this plot overview may suggest, in *The Coast of Utopia* histo-
ry just happens: events arise, concur, and diverge in adventitious pat-
terns. On this matter the jury of London reviewers are entirely right,
and their verdict defines a basis from which any subsequent work on
*The Coast of Utopia* must begin. For their verdict against Stoppard's
haphazard manner summons a larger question: Why did the play-
wright adopt so apparently scattershot a strategy? An answer to this
question must begin with the book that Stoppard identifies as his
work's chief provocation and resource. Isaiah Berlin's Russian Thinkers (a 1978 collection of essays dating from as early as 1950) stands to the epic dramaturgy here in a relation like that borne by Epicurus's teachings to the De Rerum Natura of Lucretius or by Aquinas's philosophy to the theological architecture of The Divine Comedy. So large a claim is not excessive, provided we bear in mind the difference between dramaturgy and narrative. Great poems, we say, enact their meaning performatively. In saying so we have made a little poem of our own—as becomes apparent the moment we compare the written deed, no matter how brilliant, with the theatrically performed one.

Luckily this is a comparison thrust upon us by the major premise of Berlin's distillation of what was distinctive, complex, and permanently daring in the thought of the Russian émigré intelligentsia. Those thinkers who most deserve attention after the passage of over a century, Berlin passionately maintains, are those whose idealism had passed through the ordeal of a skepticism as unforgiving as any the modern West has known, to emerge undestroyed yet purged of faith in anything that wore the shape of a system for explaining events or a program for controlling them. This fire-tempered idealism was reached, from different origins and by different routes, by each member in Berlin's intellectual troika of Belinsky, Herzen, and Tolstoy, of whom the first two are Stoppard's leading men. (In his absence from the plays Tolstoy is as broodingly conspicuous as is Chekhov's complementary dramaturgy; both writers are partially bespoken by another protagonist, the noncommittally appealing aesthete Turgenev.) All Berlin's heroes of the Russian intelligentsia were led, by the accidents of national circumstance and the repeatedly, fiercely disappointing course of political events in their lifetime, to versions of much the same radical position. This was a stance of remarkable attunement to the multiplexity of the moment—the moment as it is actually lived in any present, and therefore also the moment as it is responsibly imagined in any historical past—with a corresponding openness to the unpredictability of the future. Here was a tradition of restless intellect that, being permanently
revolutionary, breathed perennial reproach to any Revolution that should become an established institution, and most particularly to the Soviet communism that claimed direct descent from this tradition while monumentally betraying it.

Writing as the Cold War froze over at midcentury, Berlin undertook as a labor of liberal scholarship to recover the vitality of this radical tradition of openness, which its later-nineteenth-century heirs had sidelined and the ideologues of Revolutionary Russia had engorged and distorted. Writing now in the wake of 1991—including the Velvet Revolution in his native Czechoslovakia, the discrediting of programmatic Sovietism, and the grotesque bankruptcy of much that has occurred in the name of free-market democracy within the former Soviet bloc—Tom Stoppard undertakes as a labor of liberal dramaturgy to resume Berlin's bequest in a newly theatrical key. Indeed, one sign of his success is the uncanny way that ideas about history from Russian Thinkers look, to an eye seasoned by The Coast of Utopia, like nothing so much as meditations on the nature of dramatic representation: its presentness, its emergent realization in the performative moment, its opportune tension between accumulating destinies and fresh chances.

"There is no libretto . . . History is all improvisation, all will, all extempore . . . . [It] simultaneously knocks upon a thousand doors . . . doors which may open . . . who knows?" When these phrases, which Alexander Herzen wrote during the 1850s in From the Other Shore, crown a speech that Stoppard has stitched and fitted for Herzen's final moments on stage in Salveage, their new setting is richly earned. It's not just that Herzen's doorways metaphor has been imaginatively realized by the National Theatre production in scores of entrances and exits via dozens of built and projected stage doors. It's that the essential creativity of Herzen's vision of history—the art, if you like, of political imagination—has been newly revealed. As Berlin summarizes Herzen on the direction of historical change, and thus on the crucial relation between ends and means in any revolutionary intervention: "To ask always for 'ultimate' purposes was not to know what a purpose is; to ask for the ultimate goal of the singer
in singing was to be interested in something other than songs or music.” This musical analogy for history meets the theatrical analogy of the “libretto” on the shared ground of improvisation. Both analogies plead for “the laborer’s wage, or pleasure in work performed,” as Herzen writes, words that appear verbatim in Salvage. Both tell against sacrificing living values to abstract end results—the sacrifice that utopianism as such exacts, and exacts the more ruthlessly the more high-minded it reckons its ultimate aims to be.

Smitten though all Berlin’s émigré heroes were at some point by the dream of utopia, each eventually came to consider the utopian rationale morally wrong in its sacrificial cruelty, and also intellectually wrong in its mistaken premises. To “think of what occurs as a thick, opaque, inextricably complex web of events, objects, characteristics, connected and divided by literally innumerable unidentifiable links—and gaps and sudden discontinuities too, visible and invisible”—to think (with Tolstoy) of history as a knotted, fraying fabric of linked and torn complexities entails renouncing any such confident purchase on the future as might justify invoking the promise of utopia in extenuation of measures morally repugnant. To ask with Herzen, “Who knows?”—and to answer honestly that nobody can know—is to repudiate the Hegelian apotheosis of the history-crowning Idea, its materialist shadow in prophetic Marxism, and also the lesser reckless expediencies of Bakunin’s anarchism and Nicholas Chernyshevsky’s nihilism. Each of these nineteenth-century thinkers struts his hour on Stoppard’s stage (and in more or less the chronological order in which I have just mentioned them). But the playwright’s real achievement consists in creating—from such events as the Decembrist uprising of 1825, the Continental revolutions of 1848, and the freeing of the Russian serfs in 1861—a theatrical equivalent for the “thick, opaque, inextricably complex web” that Berlin called history.

The apparent inconsistency and indecisiveness of Stoppard’s plot serve his larger aim of rendering the thickness, opacity, and many-speededness of history, as human beings actually have to live it. If we accept Berlin’s endorsement of Herzen’s “central principle—
that the goal of life is life itself”— and if we recall as clearly as the theater reviewers do Stoppard's fine adaptation of this concept in Shipwreck to Herzen's ongoing experience as a father (“A child's purpose is to be a child”)— then as auditors we can worry less at the end about what the trilogy has all added up to. Even more to the theatrical point, we can look less fretfully toward the end while we are surrounded by the rich diversity of the middle: several hours' immersion in the historical thick of things where each moment, being both a graveyard and a nursery, is never really either of those endpoints but is uniquely, irreproducibly itself. The vagrantly becalmed or chaotically precipitated quality that reviewers complained about in assessing The Coast of Utopia is all of a piece with the trilogy's sustained vision of change. That vision is not one of teleological evolution or dialectical progression, although Stoppard, like his protagonists, is well acquainted with these leading nineteenth-century models of historical purpose and law. Rather, the modus operandi here is a theatrical poetics of complex determinations and extemporized results.

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One element of this poetics that is well known to Stoppard fans but put to new purposes here is the comic device of the other shoe falling. I mean the cognitive or recognizable joy we taste when some initially free-floating phrase comes back with a difference minutes later to become the punch line of a joke we had no way of knowing was being set up to begin with. The link can be as arbitrary as a pun like Bakunin's in Voyage when he dismisses a family matter on the ground that “Kant says relations are mental concepts,” which makes comic capital of a long speech on Kantian philosophical “relations” that Bakunin's mentor du jour Nicholas Stankevich has delivered a calendar year, and a dozen pages, before. Likewise in Shipwreck Natalie Herzen's riposte “only a countess,” waspishly ribbing her husband on his infidelity in years past, depends for effect on her opening banter with Ogarev, which has seeded the joke thirty pages in advance. Witty wrinkles like these are classically Stoppardian, and
audiences at the National Theatre rose to the bait with an avidity that attested years of collective practice. In a sense the arbitrariness of such scene-basting correspondences is the point. They need not mean much in order to do the important dramaturgical work of disclosing an unsuspected pattern in trivial events, and in the process letting the laughing audience prove—to itself, also to the actors—how close and how long its span of attention and retention can be.

At such moments "Words are become deeds," in a different sense of course from Herzen’s when he says this, in Voyage, about revolutionary discourse in an era of censorship, yet a sense that has its own pertinence to Stoppard’s design of miming the oddly improvised consistency of historical time. The sheer duration of the trilogy permits the playwright longer-range effects in this line than ever before. A nostalgic throwaway line of Herzen’s in Salvage, "Ah, the zig and the zag," risks bewildering auditors who don’t recall how he has brandished the phrase in Shipwreck, and earlier still in Voyage, when bidding defiance to the consolation of history-totalizing theories. But the risk is worth it. Those who do make the link, and who remember how that false consolation is named in all three plays a "Moloch that eats his children," have collaborated in nourishing an ad hoc narrative model that resists the seductions of totalization. These devices as such are no more exceptional in Stoppard’s oeuvre than is his recourse to unifying images, a short list of which in The Coast of Utopia would include imagery of the child, of encroaching darkness, of death by water, and of unmatched gloves—all of which converge in the trilogy’s most poignant event, the drowning of little Kolya Herzen in a shipwreck at night. My point about these fortuitous recurrences is that, in the context of reflection on what history may and may not mean, the sort of unforeseen design that they stage constitutes an enactment of unpredictability itself.

Even so standard a trick as the running gag can contribute to this effect. The renewable bewilderment with which Herzen’s aristocratic mother Madame Haag, in Shipwreck, reacts to the forwardness of two successive French servants, and then much later an Italian one, not only marks the family’s transit from Moscow to Paris.
to Nice, but also figures, through that domestic mobility, a range of coexisting nineteenth-century class relations that, if it could include at once feudal serfdom and revolution on the barricades, might well go anywhere next. The effect is sharper yet when the gag is Bakunin’s cadging of funds on the promise—delivered with identical, evidently heartfelt intonation half a dozen times across the plays—that each request is the last he’ll ever make. The risible urgency here epitomizes, in the key of farce, the same flagrantly romantic reflex of mind that allows Bakunin routinely to justify exploitative violence by appealing to a revolution that, always just around the corner of history, will very soon settle all scores. When the last of Bakunin’s importunities is followed almost directly, in the closing minutes of the trilogy, by Marx’s assurance about “the final titanic struggle, the last turn of the great wheel of progress,” the larger ironic parallel cannot be missed. One demurs at the poetic injustice this talking-head finale does to Marx’s entire body of thought, as at Douglas Henshall’s bullishly giddy portrayal of Bakunin at the National Theatre: measured against the trilogy at its best, both these cheap shots have the feel of a tax Stoppard has paid for too ready a deference to the biases of his mentor Berlin. Still, even to watch these scenes under mild protest, as I did, is to appreciate Stoppard’s resilience in fighting the drama of grand historical narrative with guerrilla theater.

He carries this struggle forward with a set of allied tactics, less familiar to students of his earlier plays than those just discussed, that are put here to fresh and consistent use. The dialogue of Shipwreck in particular furnishes a veritable sideshow of devices for enacting, within the flow of conversational recitative, theses about historical complexity that are expressly spotlighted in the major arias. Several are devices of concurrency, where scenic juxtaposition counterpoints two or more independently occurring dialogues. This happens most schematically in a “June 1849” duet from suburban Paris that jump-cuts-and-pastes between two simultaneous scenes occupying the same theatrical time-space: Natalie Herzen’s offer of her (idealisti- cally infatuated, quite nude) self to the dashing Herwegh; and, out of sight and earshot but not far off, some small talk between her
husband and Turgenev while the latter sketches Herwegh’s (very pregnant, fully clothed) wife Emma. When Stoppard fits these mutually inaudible scraps of conversation together like puzzle pieces, we feel how the multistrandedness of events may owe more to serendipity than to any inner historical logic—a sense reinforced by the scene’s being visually posed as a thirteen-years’ anticipation of Manet’s “Déjeuner sur l’herbe.” This oddly imagined interval feels as right as it does in performance because much of the first act of Shipwreck has rehearsed the audience in arts of double and even multiple parallel uptake. A long scene dated “September 1847” begins with several simultaneous conversations that are “separate” yet “continuous,” then advances into dialogues “written to be wasted” and “spoken on top of each other, to make a continuum of word-noise.” Mounting from babble toward a babel of three concurrent languages—German, French, and the English that stands for Russian throughout the trilogy—Stoppard’s continuum of tongues at last breaks into sudden dumb show when the deaf child Kolya enters and the cast, without ceasing to converse, all fall silent. This phono-negative moment pictures the ineluctable uncomprehendedness with which life unfolds and ramifies, before our eyes yet beneath our notice.

What neither we nor Stoppard’s characters can grasp in its instantaneous emergence we all can and do strive to capture after the fact, in the mode of knowledge that is called historical and that The Coast of Utopia strives to reclaim from schematic falsification. To this end the work repeatedly stages scenes of history in the making (and then remaking): scenes in which somebody undertakes to put a record in place or set one straight. Such behavior may be definitively human; it is at all events central to the theme of Stoppard’s trilogy, where it assumes forms both broadly apparent and almost subliminally minute. While the minutiae defy quick illustration here, they are everywhere in the plays and may in their accumulation have the most theatrical impact. No single characterization from the National Theatre production was more affecting than Will Keen’s of Belinsky, which seemed to grow organically and with great subtlety from a
passage late in his first long speech, in Voyage, a disquisition on the elusive yet essential "moment of creation":

Yes—I’ve got off my track, hell and damnation... excuse me... it’s always happening to me!... I forget what I’m trying to say—
I’m sorry, I’m sorry... (Belinsky makes to leave, but turns back.)
Every work of art is the breath of a single eternal idea. That’s it.
Forget the rest.

With an excitable, staccato delivery poised on the verge of stammer, Keen’s rendition of Belinsky made brilliantly consistent theatrical sense of what this passage is all about: that the embarrassment of ellipsis, where second thoughts break in to revise first impulses, is as close as the earnest intellect is likely to come to truth—closer, in fact, than the romantic idealism to which Belinsky here pays lip service but which he will soon reject for socially sterner ideas. (Stoppard follows Berlin in sharply contrasting Belinsky’s restless repudiations with the endless sophomorics of Bakunin, who during a lifetime of ideological conversions never changes his mind, just enlarges it.) What matters most in this passage is the syntactical and vocal rehearsal of self-critical thought itself, the gasp of the quickened mind as it fights for life against asphyxiation by formulas. The revisionist motion that makes to leave, but turns back, that exchanges for early dreams of salvation the livable and forgiving realities of salvage, is one that The Coast of Utopia cherishes many dozen times over. Micromoments of mistake and recovery like Belinsky’s so season the work as to constitute its chief flavoring—and its principal calisthenic in those practices of historical recovery and reassessment that Stoppard means to encourage.

Belinsky’s infectious self-editing suits a man who was (like several of the play’s intelligentsia) by profession an editor whose job demanded that he revise things on a regular basis. By staging numerous acts of literal revision, Stoppard strengthens by exercise the mind’s grasp of alternatives to the misleadingly solid appearance of whatever may have happened to blow in with the first draft. The
funniest extended run of literal revisionism occurs in Shipwreck, when tone-deaf Marx asks sleek Turgenev for help ("You're a writer") in finding the mot juste with which to open his new Communist Manifesto. Should it be a "ghost" that is haunting Europe, a "phantom," a "spook," a "spirit"? After several false starts Turgenev triumphantly produces the worst synonym of all: "hobgoblin." This big-laugh howler, driving from Turgenev's mind the now familiar "spectre," and underscoring the arbitrariness with which a single translation has implanted that word in our collective memory of the Manifesto, shows how far from inevitable the deeds and the phrases of history can be.

Stoppard wants to make of us, too, the revisionary editors of our intellectual heritage rather than its passive reciters; to take us back, and back again, to the mutable passing moment where history gets made. What great acting like Keen's and Simon Day's (as Ogarev) elicits by art—to wit, our faith that the scripted and oft-rehearsed scene is spontaneously arising before us for the first time and without benefit of libretto—can equip us in reality to grasp with a freer hand the histories that we have inherited and that we shall transmit in our turn. Writing "To an Old Comrade," Herzen might have been admonishing a stage actor on his relation to the script: "Our paths are not unalterable at all. On the contrary, they change with circumstances, with understanding, with personal energy. The individual is made by... events, but events are also made by individuals and bear their stamp upon them—there is perpetual interaction."

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To revise is to revisit a scene we only half saw the first time around and behold it afresh, with a focus clarified by time's passage and whetted by the new needs of the present. Such redoubled awareness is at once the privilege of historical understanding and its curse, and The Coast of Utopia makes it cut both ways by building revisionism into the large dramatic structure. Act 1 of Voyage and both acts of Shipwreck move forward in time until a final scene reprises one that, played out a minute or an hour before on stage, takes the
action back months or years in the characters' lives. Each reprise features a figure of innocence whose death has occurred in the inter-
im: Bakunin's brilliant consumptive sister Liubov, Herzen's deaf son Kolya. Each character is a beloved family fixture, and with neither does Stoppard angle after the easy pathos of the neglected; their handicaps if anything win them the respect that audiences are always prepared to pay an unusually good observer. By the same token, the momentary prominence given these minor characters by Stoppard's structure of reprise illuminates the poignant heedlessness of the big-
ger, busier lives they orbit and witness. On revisiting the scene we notice something missed in the hubbub before (Kolya's speaking his own name at long last), or we notice everybody's distracted failure to appreciate a transient beauty (Liubov's radiant gratitude) that now looks virtually paradisal in theatrical second sight.

In a sense these reprises are structurally equivalent to the nar-
native device of the flashback, yet to say as much is to realize how dif-
ferent are the workings of temporal recurrence in the pages of a novel and on the scripted stage. In a novel a former event is recalled and recounted, under the aegis of memory; but in a play the dead indeed revive in the actor's body, repossessing all the representational force that the theatrical medium can bestow on the living. This difference between narrative flashback and theatrical playback is in itself neither a virtue nor a liability. But it exerts signal power in a work aspiring like Stoppard's to summon the past and the present to mutual reckoning. The historical past comes to this encounter fraught with a great unrealized promise, even as the spectatorial present stoops beneath an unforgiving knowledge of how little and how much, for good and for ill, this great promise actually affected. Widely dis-
missed in their own day as visionary, Stoppard's émigré intelligentsia are no less widely discredited in ours as obsolete. Their twentieth-
century future has decayed, it seems, into the wasted chances of what has become our twentieth-century past. The whole labor of The Coast of Utopia is to confront our day with theirs, and vice versa, exposing their ideals to our hindsight and our cynicism to their hope. It's no mere coincidence that this mutual exposure should parallel
what is the very basis of theatrical representation, the reciprocation of cast and audience in live performance, where each brings to the transaction a need that only the other can satisfy.

So each time Stoppard rewinds the finale of an act to look over the scene of a former overlooking, he epitomizes his trilogy's largest design: a fresh exposure that shows the ostensibly familiar to be something we scarcely knew at all. Christopher Hitchens, commenting on Herzen by way of Stoppard's trilogy, in the December 2002 Atlantic Monthly, registers with precision the evocative effect of the plays themselves: "It is impossible to reflect on his life and prose without a piercing sense of a missed opportunity, of the engagement or encounter that might have made all the difference." The structure of reprise in The Coast of Utopia constitutes a kind of dramaturgical reprisal, taking vengeance for the disregarded by holding the audience hostage to its own inevitable failure to see. This pattern of reprise gives way in Salvage to the allied device of reverie, an idiosyncratic, spontaneous species of revisionism whose locus is, increasingly, the mind of Herzen as he copes with middle life and with the prospect of his own supersession by his children and disciples. Stoppard's hero must accept, first, that his Western exile is to be a lifelong condition and, eventually, that disaffection with his ideas among the rising generation of radicals will exile him in thought as well as in body from the activist influence he once dreamed of wielding. Dream and waking form a leitmotiv in this last, most inward-turned of the three plays, and the shiftingly furnished ménage of what one stage direction calls the "Herzen interior" makes us realize how much of the trilogy has hitherto taken place outdoors, extorting the mind into companionship and exchange. Here in Salvage, though, imagery of sleep foreshadows the nightmare of history into which the world will be cast by cadres of younger extremists: Chernyshevsky, Sleptsov, plus a figure straight out of Conrad, "Doctor" the nihilist. It is from their determinist nightmare that Herzen foresees himself endeavoring, through his writings, to rouse the world to a consciousness of options, however few and bleak: "the future custodian of a broken statue, a blank wall, a desecrated
grave”—last-minute metaphors that evidently articulate the commemoratory mission of the trilogy as a whole.

Throughout Salvage children slumber, the middle-aged nap, the aged nod off; and the whole is framed by the staging of Herzen's dreams near the start of act 1 and the end of act 2. These dreams splice and distort the past in ways both funny and affecting, commingling as the entire trilogy has done episodes from family life with cruxes in the life of the mind, projecting again Stoppard's preoccupation with historical recovery. It is right that his last mode of dramaturgical reprise should be kaleidoscopic rather than summary, and also that it should bristle with the energies of debate. The National Theatre production made this point early in Salvage with a vivid computer animation of kites that were also national flags, jostling in the wind over Parliament Hill to usher in the contention among radical exiles from all Europe that fills not just Herzen's dream, but much of his waking attention in the play that follows. The closing reverie in act 2, correspondingly austere, sets dégagé Turgenev against gung-ho Marx, two isosceles angles who triangulate Herzen's humane position of disenchanted liberalism—set it off, and corner it too, since both characters ignore the eloquent final call Herzen issues for a political commitment unpropped by teleological illusion. The balance the play carries forward, into a future that merges with our own, concerns debates that are anything but settled, problems that are far from solved. Herzen's quarrelsome dreaming at the finale confirms the inconclusive disputatiousness of the whole work. Argument itself has been the argument of this trilogy, with nary a triadic Hegelian synthesis in sight. Stoppard thus models an approach that apprehends the past as a question involving us and requiring, from within that acknowledged involvement, the dignity of a reply. “The idea will not perish. The young people will come of age,” Herzen declares, in Salvage, on waking up for the last time. By those “young people” he means us, wise in our generation. By “the idea” he means no one concept, but rather an intellectual commitment that will best serve the common good when, devising programs for practical action, it remembers that devices are all they are.
Such a commitment “will not perish” so long as each rising generation grasps that a living idea is never passively received but must be fought for.

Washed up by history, stranded on the shingle of the present, with flotsam for shelter and scraps of a map that might just be a blueprint: desolate prospects, but where else did we expect to be left by the playwright who burst on the scene in *Rosencrantz* with a game that’s won by producing questions and lost by lapsing into propositions? “More than the ideas themselves, the real legacy of Herzen and his friends is the concept of the power of ideas.” The conservative reviewer Mark Steyn, writing in the September 2002 *New Criterion*, nearly gets it right here. But by reducing the power of ideas to a “concept”—that is, to an idea about ideas—he puts back into the box, or onto the library shelf, what Stoppard’s stage should open out into moral and political life, under the discipline of action. For when all is said Herzen was more than a liberal and human apostle of the extemporaneous. Though the trilogy seldom mentions the half-romantic, certainly visionary faith with which Herzen held that Russian peasant communes constituted the nursery of a grassroots socialist order, this activist faith marked him as distinctly as the trenchant skepticism that flanked it in his mind. Alexander Herzen, too, established a beachhead on Utopia. No matter how flimsy, how long since licked flat, this utopianism of Herzen’s is something we must know if we mean to grapple, in anything like his seriousness, with our own historical situation. We cannot truly hear the question history poses until we have understood that we must answer it in our turn, in our time, and in the full knowledge that the currency of our answer will be stamped by the needs and beliefs that define us.

Nor is this responsibility one that a play can discharge for us by proxy. The ludic space of theater, itself noncommittal, elicits commitment nevertheless. In fact, within the major tradition of Shaw and Brecht that Stoppard here joins, eliciting commitment is exactly what theater is supposed to do. Rehearsing “the idea” that inspired and eventually defeated the best minds of a pivotal nineteenth-century generation, *The Coast of Utopia* takes us back to their crossroads. It
unpaves the determinist highway once thought to lead straight from there to here, and asks not what went wrong, not even what went on, but how what went on came to pass—where in the world and the soul it came from, and where its exemplary energies went. Stoppard's theme is not an idea like anarchism or socialism or nihilism, but the force that ideas of freedom and justice possess to sustain and scatter movements devoted to radical change. Rather than the power of thought and its unrepresentable ideological summons, Stoppard's stage embodies the power to think, the play of creative ingenuity at work in time, in place, and in company. The Coast of Utopia depicts this power as both a historically perishable resource and a historically renewable one. And in this respect, once more, it uncannily resembles the arts of the theater. That most fleeting yet persistent of media is suited ideally, because it is committed practically and materially, to showing—all day long, if that's what it takes—that history is not over yet and never has been.