

## THE TRAP: INSPECTOR HOUND'S ILLUSION GAME

Irene Ferreira de Sousa Eisenberg-UFMG

In his popular play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) Tom Stoppard's character remarks: "A Chinaman of the T'ang Dynasty - and, by which definition, a philosopher - dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment he was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher."<sup>1</sup> Such is Stoppard's literary universe: illogical, perplexing, inquiring, uneasy. A trap.

Tom Stoppard, one of the most intriguing of the British dramatists of the so-called "second wave"<sup>2</sup> may be considered a reformer of modern English stage, together with John Osborne, Harold Pinter and John Arden. Of his four important plays *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1975) and *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) we have chosen the last one for an analysis of the illusion game.<sup>3</sup>

The plot of *The Real Inspector Hound* is simple: two theater critics, Moon and Birdboot, watch a thriller being performed. Early in the play we realize that Moon is frustrated at being Higg's stand-in, the "permanent critic," who, for some reason, is absent today. Moon's own substitute is Puckeridge, whose name is often mentioned but he never appears. As to Birdboot, he is a plump, middle-aged man, whose interest lies much more in the actresses who perform than in the play itself.

The inside thriller that the critics are watching is laden with the typical detective story clichés, with an added absurdist twist: in the country residence of the Muldoons "the body of a

man lies sprawled face down on the floor,"<sup>4</sup> but the characters seem to miss that conspicuous being up to the end of the play. The action starts with Mrs. Drudge, "the helper," turning on and dusting the radio as if expecting something. In one of a series of absurdist coincidences the radio quickly announces that an escaped madman is on the run near the house, Muldoon Manor, and that Inspector Hound is taking up the case. We hear from Mrs. Drudge, in her zanny diction, that the house owner, Lord Albert Muldoon, lost his memory and disappeared mysteriously ten years before. Cynthia, his beautiful wife, naturally still expects his return as fits a "whodunnit" beautiful wife. She kills her time by playing games with her houseguests, including her friend Felicity.

A man, Simon Gascoyne, who obviously knows Cynthia and Felicity well, enters the house very suspiciously and in two different scenes talks to each one of the women. In a hilarious scene the "wheelchair-ridden" character, Major Magnus, knocks Simon over with his chair as he catches Simon kissing Cynthia, who is the Major's sister-in-law. After another very unrealistically timed and worded radio message the first Inspector Hound arrives, the corpse is discovered, and Simon is mysteriously shot to death. "Curtain. Applause. Exeunt."

All actors leave the internal play area and the phone rings. Moon abandons his seat of critic to answer the phone in the thriller space and hands the receiver to Birdboot, for his wife is calling. But Birdboot is unable to leave the stage area since the actresses soon return and resume the dramatic action repeating their previous lines, as if time had stopped and nothing had changed. While Birdboot flirts with the actresses Moon tries unsuccessfully to save him by taking him out of the thriller, but he refuses to, especially after he discovers that the corpse

lying there is Higgs', Moon's first string. Moon then runs into the thriller and Birdboot is shot to death. At this moment the actors playing Simon and Inspector Hound run to take Birdboot's and Simon's seats. To save his skin Moon starts playing the role of Inspector Hound, and his several attempts at explaining the murders are a "fiasco." He falters here and is caught inside the trap by Magnus - who reveals himself as the *real* Inspector Hound and Albert, Cynthia's husband, who has just recovered his memory. And (at the level of the critics play) as Moon discovers that the actor playing Magnus is his substitute Puckeridge (who had killed Higgs and Birdboot), he is also shot to death. Here the two plays intermingle and end.

Stoppard's concern with the overall pattern of his plays is well-known to scholars. In *The Real Inspector Hound* the events are grouped neatly into a tight form of metaplay: its spiral shape moves from the internal "whodunnit," picks up the level of the theater critics as first audience, involves us, the second audience (reflected in the mirror on the stage), and as a last layer of interpretation, tries to explain the meaning of man's existence. In this complex, labyrinthine structure, equating reality with imagination may prove fatal. In his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* Lionel Abel states that the metaphor of the play-within-a-play "explores dramatically our inability to distinguish between reality and illusion"<sup>5</sup> and he comments that "metatheatre, from the point of view of tragedy, is as real as our dreams."<sup>6</sup>

Though Stoppard does not innovate by employing metatheater, his is a very special usage of it; the interplay of the semic categories "reality vs illusion" forms the core of the play and the basis of the characters' motivations, reinforcing the

dichotomy present in the structure of the play itself. In Stoppard's works these categories (reality and illusion) are not fixed as with Pirandello, for whom illusion defines the limits of human subjectivity. Indeed, this is a different universe, one where time stops, and the actors seem to have a will of their own, beyond that of the text, where games are played whose rules we ignore, and order is improvised by man; we must add that if tragedy mediates between man and the world, here the only world is the one created by human imagination.<sup>7</sup>

The conventions of detective stories are relevant in this work, since the inner play deals with an unsolved crime. The first audience, composed of the critics Birdboot and Moon, aim at reviewing the thriller, only to be caught inside it and be eliminated. The inner and outer layers of the play interrelate and clarify its message. The articulation of both levels is organized around a governing metaphor, that of the dreamlike, alpha state of consciousness. Here a person is unable to define with accuracy what are created images and what is real. It is difficult to categorize or conceptualize about reality and imagination without first adapting oneself to them in a metamorphic way. Since the boundaries of the plays are so fluid, the critics must reach the threshold of one to perceive their merging areas and their limits.

Puckeridge knows this well; being a "substitute critic," a third string, he views the possibility of becoming a permanent critic and the one and only man in the lives of the actresses. He prepares his trap. He must get rid of Higgs and Moon, his professional rivals and of Birdboot, his personal rival. As a second audience of a thriller we are not presented with these facts but rather are to deduce their meaning from the narrative situation. The elimination process involves a sub-plot, which is

the "whodunnit." The dramatic narrative opens at this point with the inner play already in motion, since a real corpse (Higgs) is present. Maybe the thriller had run once before, attracted Higgs inside it, eliminated him, and it is now triggered for the next, and the next. This would explain the "rerun" of the thriller in order to catch Birdboot and Moon. Besides, in the beginning of the narrative Moon tells the newly-arrived Birdboot that the thriller had already started and that they were watching a pause. Birdboot replies, following a logic train of thought, that "you can't start with a *pause!*"<sup>8</sup> The final scene, in which Puckeridge becomes the almighty character, closes the circle.

Having gotten rid of Higgs, Birdboot, and Moon, Puckeridge accomplishes the task proposed and throws out his masks. The inner and outer layers of the play merge into each other and once again reality and illusion can be juxtaposed.

Puckeridge is the omnipotent creator of the device, and he is the only character who has complete control over the categories "reality vs illusion," which he shuffles by using several masks, as we will see.

Moon and Birdboot are, in one sense, an imitation of the spectators in the real audience, of one of us; throughout the play we feel that they cannot help merging into the inner play, taking off their mask of critics and reacting. Reaction, though, is not accepted in this universe. The impassive, artificial, and inhuman society (represented here by the organized and routine-like life at Muldoon Manor) cannot accept dreamers, outlaws, interpreters inside its borders. Four times the outside reality and the world of the thriller are confused through the same device: the ringing telephone, answered in turn by Mrs. Drudge, Simon, Mrs. Drudge again, and Moon.<sup>10</sup> The first three calls were answered with this

declaration: "There is no one of that name here." The fourth one is crucial, for Birdboot gets entangled in the inner play after talking to his wife over the phone on the stage. Having stepped into the separate world of the thriller which has its own laws and probability rules, Birdboot is caught in the spinning wheel that will soon destroy him. After invading the inner play, he replaces the deceased Simon: as he flirts with the actresses as such, they adopt the pretence available to them through their roles and lure him into action. But Birdboot, a solipsist, is unable to perceive the game. In a way he is playing a game (a recurrent metaphor in the play) whose rules he is unaware of. It seems that for him actors are transparent, even when acting; he lacks the trace of imagination/illusion necessary for survival. While the actresses go on reenacting their roles, he plays the only role he knows well, that of the wolf, the Don Juan.

It was Søren Kierkegaard who affirmed in *Repetition* that "there is no young man *with any imagination* who has not at one time been captivated by the enchantment of the theater, and desired to be himself carried away into the midst of that fictitious reality in order to see and hear himself as an 'alter ego'...."<sup>9</sup> Birdboot however intends to be a real man in that Alice-in-the-wonderland realm, as he demands instant meaning at the level of *his* reality. He is finally destroyed for solving the enigma of the thriller and, after playing his own part in his own rerun of the "whodunnit," he is caught because he discovers the dead man's identity. It is Higgs, and the killer is Puckeridge, who plays Magnus.

Here we are presented with the reversal of the myth of the sphinx, for in this cosmos, unlike ours, those who solve the enigma are destroyed. Understanding the riddle is the real menace. The play is *not* to be understood, let alone interpreted Inasmuch as a play

is a metaphor for life itself, the analogy still holds true. The absurdity, in Camus' and Sartre's sense, arises from the fact that the outsiders Higgs, Moon, Simon, and Birdboot are faced with an insensitive society (represented by life in the inner play) which crushes them mostly because they fail to gather its meaning. It is clear that asking the question "why?" may be a means of catalyzing one's own destruction.

If for Pirandello the reality of today is the illusion of tomorrow, in Stoppard the reality of one minute is established only to be negated the next minute. There is no foundation on reality, no links in the chain, and all categories are negated. In this sense this universe presents a certain similarity with the Zen Buddhist stance, which apparently negates all, in an absolute attitude of nihilism and iconoclasm, aimed at teaching through negation. For Zen "'ignorance' is another name for logical dualism."<sup>11</sup> That is the reason why the famous verse of Zen thought sounds irrational and illogical.<sup>12</sup>

We are dealing here with the notion of the process of perception, with Wallace Stevens' "difference that we make in what we see,"<sup>13</sup> that elusive feeling one feels that what *seems to be* is not what *is*.

The profession of Higgs, Birdboot, and Moon depicts their yearning for meaning, their desire to interpret art (itself a mirror held up to life): they are drama critics. But we see these men watching an unrealistic story on the inner stage, and talking nonsense; their means of expression are clichés, esoteric opinions, contradictory statements, parenthetical expressions, and sentences of double meaning. Sometimes a Pinteresque<sup>14</sup> touch may be felt, and absurdist enumerations appear now and then. In short, Moon and Birdboot are as unreal as the characters in the thriller. Stoppard satirizes the modern critics of theater, and the theater conventions

as well.<sup>15</sup>

The obsessions of the critics (the private envy of Moon, Higgs, and Puckeridge, and Birdboot's lechery) set off the mechanism prepared by the clever Puckeridge. Maybe Birdboot is alienated from his wife as a result of the institutionalized world of routine and the daily habits imposed on him by his social necessities. He watches cliché-plays, which he responds to in a clichéd way, in a language devoid of meaning and characterization - a cliché-language. He is, then, a cliché-man, whose only non-clichéd act turns out to be his death.

Moon is pulled inside the thriller by the death of Birdboot. One must first analyze Moon's motivations, to explain how this relates to previous facts. According to Camus "everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it."<sup>16</sup> So if we live out of the experience of somebody else or anything outside our own experience, we live in illusion. It is clear that Moon is a mere satellite of Higgs; he belongs to Higgs' "second string." The significance of the name Moon, aside from its recurrence in Stoppard's works, may be connected with the idea that the Moon could only be the second, never the first, in any medieval hierarchy. In the same way there is a professional hierarchy in the play, which goes from Higgs through Moon to Puckeridge.

Moon is a dreamer; his monologues (for his lines could hardly be called answers to Birdboot, or vice-versa) reveal the dream motif in several ways. He dreams of the complete reversal of the established order, of a "revolution, a bloody coup d'état by the second rank...." which ends up as a call for "revolution," distorted by his personal needs. "Stand-ins of the world, stand up,"<sup>17</sup> he calls. In this declaration there is a pun on the word "stand;" this is also a parody of the famous Marxist slogan. The



irony here is that Puckeridge, his own substitute, had rebelled in the same way, with one important difference: he did so in the level of reality, while Moon was in the sheer level of illusion; that is why Puckeridge was bound to win.

Moon is obsessed with his position as part of the "second string," and he makes it clear that he wants to eliminate Higgs. On the other hand, he wonders whether Puckeridge ever dreamed about him, Moon. He would like Puckeridge to envy him, in the same way that he envies Higgs. Higgs' presence enerves Moon to such an extent that he dreams that he had killed him. Moon's definition of identity stems from his awareness that he is the continuation and complement of Higgs. His obsession with the removal of Higgs emanates from his struggle to find his real self. When Moon says that "perhaps he (Higgs) is dead at last,"<sup>18</sup> we detect some lucidity on Moon's part. He wishes only to regain his own identity, because his fusion with Higgs turned into overidentification, provoking pain and loss of identity. He needs to arrive at a definition of his identity by projecting his ego image on Puckeridge. In this way he could observe the reflections of his identity (as in a mirror) on another being, and have his image gradually clarified. The moon needs light, though, and Moon cannot live without Higgs. The image of Higgs "succumbed with amnesia" depicts the need to bury the past, but dialectically, there is no place in the world for a Moon (whose fate is to be the second) if he, even in his dreams, destroys his source of life and reason for living. Dream and reality become one; Moon does not really know whether he is mad or not. By entering into the thriller he is marked for death. When he reveals that he had only "dreamed," he is accused of being "The madman! The Killer! The stranger in our midst!"<sup>19</sup> Thus, he probably does not know whether he is the killer or not and whether he is alive or not. He has been living in the

realm of illusion so intensely that he cannot disentangle the two categories any more. While Birdboot could not make use of imagination, Moon overused it.

From this explanation it is obvious that Moon's motivation is the same as Puckeridge's. But while Puckeridge had already eliminated Higgs, Moon still swore that he had not done it.

After Birdboot's death, there comes Moon's turn to react, entering the world of illusion when Birdboot reveals that the dead man on the stage is Higgs. From Moon's point of view this is an improvement, since he has been trying to eliminate Higgs' shadow from his life through his dreams. This is an undeserved improvement, though, because it is obtained through illusion. This is the reason why Moon will be killed at the end of the play. After the identity of the corpse is disclosed, Moon reflects very plainly: "So it's me and Puckeridge now."<sup>20</sup> His intentions are to go on using his only means of reacting that is, fantasizing.

However he will not be able to use his fantasy in that trap made of illusion, with which Puckeridge knows how to deal very well. Moon surely perceives this when the play begins "his rerun," and he tries to get out of it. At this point the fusion of both levels (the "whodunnit" and the critics story) is so perfect that the detective story cliché gets new vigour by the unexpected turn of events; the conventions of the theater are somewhat destroyed since Simon, who had died in the detective story, sits in a critic's chair. The first Inspector Hound disappears from the inner plot without any explanation, other than the desire of the author to make of him another critic. Perhaps the actors of the thriller are placed at the critics' places only to show the inadequacy of their criticism; neither the critics nor the actors add much to the meaning of the thriller, and the key words "élan" and "éclat" are employed by all

of them.

It might be a reinforcement of the motif of the identity crisis. The crystallization of man's concept of himself is violated in the play by a quick suspension of man's idea about his role in life, with a sudden change of role-playing.

The contrasting points of view of the characters may be analyzed from the perspectives of improvement and degradation. Naturally, the only one to achieve improvement is Puckeridge; the other characters are trapped by him in the inner play and destroyed. From the structure of the play we deduce that Puckeridge is bound to achieve his goal because he is the only character who covers both categories, reality and illusion, in their totality. The actors of the inner play are his allies, so they also are able to deal with both levels, as observed in the thriller, though they are not creators. Moon's world is on the level of illusion only. Birdboot lives on the level of reality, being unable to interpret illusion. Let us add that for a critic this is unacceptable.

The relationship of the two structuring elements "reality and illusion" may be seen very clearly in the trap (the inner play) prepared by Puckeridge.

Birdboot is warned by Moon several times when he invades the inner play. But he ignores Moon's advice. It is as if a mechanism had been set in motion, stopping only after having eliminated all the obstacles to Puckeridge's goal.

When Moon realizes that Higgs is dead, he knows the combat will be between him and Puckeridge. This is clear from two statements expressed by Moon: "My presence defines his (Higgs') absence... his presence precludes mine"<sup>21</sup> and at the end of the play: "So it's me and Puckeridge now" (p. 53). This creates a homology of the type:

presence of Higgs = presence of Moon  
absence of Moon      absence of Puckeridge

The importance of this homology is that it sets the basis for Puckeridge's method of attack. He knows that the presence of Higgs implies Moon's absence. So he dissimulates Higgs' presence by making him (or his corpse) an actor and actant in the inner play. The trap prepared by Puckeridge is based on deception. He has to dissimulate his intention to kill his rivals, and seduce them by simulating an artistic, professional, and personal reason for their presence in the audience.

Birdboot's error (his inability to separate actors from roles) and that of Moon (inability to separate reality from illusion) lead both to fall into the trap prepared by the clever archiactant Puckeridge (he plays three roles and several actants in the thriller). It seems that the one who plays more roles and wears more masks is bound to succeed. Puckeridge acts as a helper to Moon, by destroying Higgs, only to become Moon's opponent and destroy him later on. If we could have a "flash-forward," we might discover with surprise that Puckeridge will pay for wearing so many masks at the same time.

As stressed throughout this paper, the structural symbolism of the play illustrates the interplay between reality and illusion. The critics, confusing actants, characters, and actors, end up by being eliminated. They could not separate dream from life, reality from illusion. But the dénouement leaves a question-mark in the air: we have been all the time expecting a "deus ex machina," a *real* inspector, something to bring some order into the chaos. But the sense of entropy remains with us at the end of the play; we feel uneasy, when the "whodunnit" is over, because the suspense is maintained by the unsolved mystery of Simon's murder.

Like Pinter, Stoppard deprives us of our detachment and

security by taking us inside the pattern of the play. When the action begins for us, we realize that there is no clear beginning - there are the room, Moon, and silence. And there is no real ending either, since the circle may close again. Let's suppose that Simon decides to act again. The fact that he is "dead" does not mean much.

At the beginning of the play the total effect is one of illusion and recurrence: "the audience appear to be confronted by their own reflections in a huge mirror," Stoppard writes. Mirrors reflect mirrors, forever. The technical solution of the "alter-ego" concept was generally the use of a mirror whose reflections the Author could control; thus he reveals not only the protagonist's state of mind but the disparity of the surrounding world as well. Stoppard tries to employ this same device, including the audience as the "real" protagonist, watching their reflection in the mirror, in the critics who attempt to explain the mystery of the "whodunnit," and in the very actors of the inner play (the thriller). The radio says: "The public is advised to stick together and make sure none of their number is missing."<sup>22</sup> We feel trapped: can we separate the realms of reality and illusion in this play? What are we? Actors, audience, object, subject? A Chinese philosopher? Or a butterfly?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> The expression was coined by John Russell Taylor in his book *The Second Wave: New British Drama for the Seventies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), with reference to the post-Osborne dramatists.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound* (New York: Grove Press, 1969). All subsequent references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Abel, p. 113. For Abel, "tragedy, from the point of view of metatheatre, is our dream of the real " p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> We are here borrowing Lionel Abel's contrast stated in *Metatheatre*. Unlike Hegel, Abel believes that after *Hamlet*, tragedies did not become "tragedies of the intellectual," but rather metatheater (p. 112).

<sup>8</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) trans. Walter Lowrie p. 54. My italics.

<sup>10</sup> There is a clear division between the inside and the outside orders. The outside order often disturbs the life in the "Muldoon Manor." The outsiders (Higgs, Simon, Birdboot, and Moon) are eliminated. The telephone is a disturbing element, which tries to get hold of some outsider; Mrs. Drudge says on the telephone that

they were "cut off from the world." The radio comes from the outside world and gives information about the dangers which threaten the house. The police seemed to be coming from the outside but the "real" Inspector happened to be *inside* the house, it was the insider-creator Puckeridge.

<sup>11</sup> Daisetz Teitato Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. For C.G. Jung (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 52 and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction*, p. 58. The famous gatha goes:  
 "Empty-handed I go, and behold the spade is  
   in my hands;  
 I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox  
   I am riding;  
 When I pass over the bridge,  
 Lo, the water floweth not, but the bridge doth  
   flow."

<sup>13</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Description without Place," *Transport to Summer*, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopp, 1973), p. 244. Of course I am aware that Stevens is propounding a theory of levels of perception and that he views "description" as the difference made by the subject in the object. For a fuller description, see "Metamorphosis in Wallace Stevens" by M. Bernetta Quin in *Wallace Stevens*, ed. Marie Baroff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> The dialogue on the kinds of chocolate carries the "Pinteresque" element of playing with words, as does the absurdity of mixing up several games and inventing non-existing terms and rules (pp. 49-50) for bridge, chess, poker, bingo, and roulette where one is always bound to lose.

<sup>15</sup> Stoppard satirizes the conventions of realism by adopting a very realistic setting; and by using the absurdity of applying a set of fixed patterns to a play full of jokes and absurd comments, he emphasizes his use of the unexpected element. Since an exposition is needed in the realistic convention, Mrs. Drudge, "the Helper," says the stage directions in the most unnatural way, on the telephone. Her diction is also quite artificial and funny.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 9

<sup>22</sup> Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 34.