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Bakalářská práce

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„v ne-, pod- nebo nadpřirozených silách“: Ustanovení světa hry Toma Stopparda *Rosencrantz  
a Guildenstern jsou mrtvi*

“within un-, sub- or supernatural forces”: Establishing the World of Tom Stoppard’s  
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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Words, words. They're all we have to go on.<sup>1</sup>

But don't you see that the whole trouble lies here? In words, words. [...]  
We think we understand each other, but we never really do.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Definition of the Problems: The Problems of Definition

### 1.1. Coining a BA Thesis

What Guildenstern does at the beginning of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (henceforward referred to as *Rosencrantz*) is an example *par excellence* of interpretation. When he takes the spin of a (material) coin as indicative of abstract forces in control of existence, he invests it with meaning – he interprets it. In this sense, every text is a coin and every interpretation its spin. Interpretation is an attempt to assure that there is a meaningful force at work in the text; that the text is not an ever-spinning coin never yielding to any understanding. In this sense, also, the present thesis is both an interpretation and an analysis of the poetics of the text. It is an attempt to answer the question *what?* and *how?* *Rosencrantz* means. Embracing the ethics/poetics of the text, the image of the spinning coin, it is rather an analysis: poetics acknowledges the two sides of a coin, interpretation chooses one of them. Therefore, interpretation is a tricky business – it is a matter of point of view: heads or tails?

The play has been often considered a result of the following equation:

*Hamlet + Waiting for Godot = Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

For example, in his monograph on *Hamlet*, Paul Cantor, dealing with the legacy of Shakespeare's tragedy, writes that in Stoppard's play "*Hamlet* meets *Waiting for Godot*, and *Waiting for Godot* wins."<sup>3</sup> The equation is a simplistic schematization of Stoppard's intricate text that shows richness and variation of hypotexts and an imaginative way of "incorporating" them. My aim here is to closely analyse the interaction of these texts. I say interaction, because the relation between Stoppard's play and its chronological predecessors is not that of a one-way influence, but rather of a dialogic character which retrospectively affects the reading of each. Drawing on theories of intertextuality, especially on Gérard Genette's concept of hypertextuality, the meaning exchanges among the texts can be explored. Each chapter explores Stoppard's text in relation to one of its hypotexts. However, this is only a stepping stone to the analysis of the text on its own in each chapter. As Genette says, "[e]very

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967) 31.

<sup>2</sup> Luigi Pirandello, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," trans. Edward Storer, *Norton Introduction to Literature: Combined Shorter Edition*, eds. Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973) 947.

<sup>3</sup> Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 88.

hypertext, even a pastiche, can be read for itself [...] with a meaning that is autonomous and thus in some manner sufficient.”<sup>4</sup> The only exception is chapter 3 which discusses the relationship between *Rosencrantz* and *Hamlet*, and relies equally on both texts.

The main goal is to focus on Stoppard’s play and to assess its strategies of working with other texts. Part of this will be also to challenge some “stereotypical” notions that critics managed to attach to the play and propose a more detailed and closer assessment that the play deserves. One of the commonplaces that have been accepted as expressing the core of Stoppard’s entrée on the British dramatic scene is that it “turns the most famous English tragedy inside out.”<sup>5</sup> This can serve as an example of a critical attachment that is accepted rather due to its “bombastic” rhetoric of superlative (the most famous) and surprise, or shock (turns inside out). Speaking about the text itself, there is actually nothing inherently contradicting or overturning *Hamlet*. The accuracy with which Stoppard’s drama follows Shakespeare’s tragedy is striking in view of what effect it has produced according to the challenged quote. I see this notion as unsatisfactory and problematic due to the complexity of the text and the peculiar world of the play. A closer look at the relationship between *Rosencrantz* and *Hamlet* will be provided to formulate a better expression of their interaction.

## 1.2. Drama as Text

A closer look at Stoppard’s drama will be based on the semiotic theory of drama. There is a difference in opinions on the status, or nature, of the dramatic text. Since this thesis is concerned with a literary/textual analysis it takes as its position the opinion that allows for an independence of the dramatic text. It especially draws on Jiří Veltruský’s exploration of drama as “a poetic genre”.<sup>6</sup> The dual nature of the dramatic text described by Miroslav Procházka as “a text which is fixed in a literary way, but which is predominantly intended for a non-literary existence”<sup>7</sup> is a sound argument which gives autonomy to the dramatic text, but primacy to the theatrical performance.<sup>8</sup> In the present view, the dramatic text distinguishes itself by a strong “pragmatic focus” for a theatrical adaptation. However, this is nothing

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<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 397.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Graver, *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 93.

<sup>6</sup> Jiří Veltruský, *Drama jako básnické dílo*, ed. Ivo Osolsobě (Brno: Host, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> “Případ dramatu – tj. textu, jenž je fixován literárně, avšak převážně určen k existenci neliterární – je tedy specifický v tom, že jeho interpretace musí počítat s dvojným možným zaměřením.” Miroslav Procházka, “O povaze dramatického textu,” *Znaky dramatu a divadla. Studie k teorii a metateorii dramatu a divadla* (Praha: Panorama, 1988) 22. Author’s translation. For a similar observation see Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 75; or Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 187.

<sup>8</sup> In their semiotic analysis of theatre, Aston and Savona clearly state the autonomy of the dramatic text: “The dramatic text must be read on its own terms.” Aston and Savona 72.

distinctive, since novels, poetry and even films are also subject to theatrical adaptation. Drama has stronger pragmatic focus and is, therefore, more “ready” for a theatrical adaptation.<sup>9</sup> This, necessarily, leads to another clarification. Interested in and concerned with a text, this paper uses *drama* and *dramatic* in reference to the text; it uses *theatre* and *theatrical* in reference to the performance (enactment of drama), the medium or the cultural institution.<sup>10</sup>

One aspect of the dramatic text that needs a brief commentary is the stage directions. Veltruský, in his exploration of drama as “a poetic genre” overcomes the traditional distinction between drama as an unmediated genre and prose (narrative) and poetry (lyric) as genres mediated by narrator and lyrical subject respectively. Drawing on Mukařovský’s principle of semantic gesture, Veltruský sees stage directions as an inherent part of the dramatic text as “a semantic unification of dialogue”<sup>11</sup> having its source in a single subject that he calls firstly “the poet” and later says that “we have found a unity in the subject of drama that distinguishes the subject of epic (narrator).”<sup>12</sup> Procházka criticises several of Veltruský’s ideas that do not allow him to accept his thesis in its entirety. Procházka argues with Veltruský primarily about the stylistic value of stage directions and their existence as an authorial intention. Authorial intention is irrelevant here as well as the stylistic value. However, Procházka, in his polemic, turns from axiological critique to ontological: “In drama – if it does not count with reading directly – stage directions are not usually an autonomous literary device of the world-making of the work.”<sup>13</sup> Whether the stage directions are or are not autonomous, they are always a device of world-making – they provide a minimal context for dialogues. Whether they are necessary for understanding or not, they fill in the gaps in the

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting case, in this context, presents Philip Roth’s experimental novel *Deception* whose (re)presentation is even more “fragmentary”, a characteristic feature of drama stressed by Procházka (see Procházka 21), than that of any drama due to its structure consisting of individual utterances lacking name tags and the minimalist intervention of the narrator. With the supplement of the name tags, this novel presents as strong a pragmatic focus for theatrical enactment as any drama.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Elam’s distinction: “‘Theatre’ is taken to refer here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By ‘drama’, on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular (‘dramatic’) conventions. The epithet ‘theatrical’, then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet ‘dramatic’ indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction.” Elam 2.

<sup>11</sup> “Bez poznámek se ovšem neobejde žádné drama, protože pomocí poznámek je splňován již základní předpoklad významového sjednocení dialogu: určení, kdo z účastníků kterou repliku pronáší [...]” Veltruský 50. Author’s translation.

<sup>12</sup> “Vedle toho jsme u subjektu dramatu zjistili jednotnost, která vyznačuje subjekt epiky (vypravovatele) [...]” Ibid 94. Author’s translation. This Veltruský’s early conclusion (the study was published originally in 1942) has been developed by narratology to establish a narratology of drama. Keir Elam argues against narratology of drama as a reductive approach; see Elam 129.

<sup>13</sup> “V dramatu – pokud toto se čtením přímo nepočítá – nejsou často poznámky svébytným literárním prostředkem tvorby světa díla.” Procházka 20. Author’s translation.

structure of the world of the work. In the present analysis they have the same status as the dialogues themselves.<sup>14</sup>

The ongoing debate about the status of the dramatic text has been already mentioned. Veltruský gives several distinguishing elements between drama and theatre.<sup>15</sup> The only one I will mention here is the difference of reception. Drama is neutrally perceived in the form of a silent reading, it is the perception of a fixed text on a page. Theatre's reception, on the other hand, is a social event ranging in quality from relatively neutral (attentive focus and applause at the end) to much more dynamic relation represented, for example, by the famous riots accompanying and following the staging of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at The Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1907. The point is that drama represents an invariable of the work which is used for various performances, either as a strict guide or "merely" an inspiration, that are each singular, variables.<sup>16</sup> Elam aptly describes the relationship as "not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful intertextuality."<sup>17</sup> To use the famous linguistic distinction, the relation between drama and its theatrical enactment might be metaphorically expressed as the relation of *langue* and *parole*. This does not clash with Elam's observation since individual instances of *parole* are ruled by *langue* whose rules are in turn constituted by individual instances of *parole*. Therefore, an analysis of drama is not only revealing about the text, but might be usefully employed in a theatrical performance.

### 1.3. The Poetics of Hypertextuality

Since the outset of intertextual approach to literature, the essentiality of intertextual nature of texts has been stressed repeatedly. "In a nutshell," as Michael Riffaterre puts it, "the very idea of textuality is inseparable from and founded upon intertextuality."<sup>18</sup> Riffaterre, a distinguished theorist of intertextuality, goes as far as to equal intertextuality with literariness

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<sup>14</sup> The usefulness and importance of stage directions in an analysis of a dramatic text have been shown by Aston and Savona – see chapters 5 and 7.

<sup>15</sup> See Veltruský 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Distinguishing two types of stage directions contained by the dramatic text, "extra-dialogic" and "intra-dialogic" (inherent to the dialogues), Aston and Savona observe that "[t]he text itself, on this view, states the terms of its own staging." Aston and Savona 76.

<sup>17</sup> Elam 188.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Riffaterre, "Syllepsis," *Critical Inquiry* Summer 1980: 625. On this matter, Heinrich Plett remarks the following: "All intertexts are texts – that is what the latter half of the term suggests. Yet the reversal of this equation does not automatically imply that all texts are intertexts. In such a case, text and intertext would be identical and there would be no need for a distinguishing 'inter'." Heinrich F. Plett, "Intertextualities," *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 5. However, Plett's remark is somewhat confusing since the following argument shows that this statement points to the "twofold coherence" of texts: intratextual and intertextual (Plett 5). This, of course, is a problem of perception or of choice – cf. Genette's remark on the way of reading hypertexts above and the discussion of intertextuality below.

which “must be sought at the level where texts combine.”<sup>19</sup> In his study *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Gérard Genette states that “the subject of poetics is *transtextuality*.”<sup>20</sup> Transtextuality, defined by Genette as “the textual transcendence of the text [...] all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts”<sup>21</sup> is an overarching term for textual relationships that can be equated with the usual use of “intertextuality,” at least in Riffaterre’s definition as “the web of functions that constitutes and regulates the relationships between text and intertext.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, the problem is that the term is not used consistently by various critics.<sup>23</sup> Genette’s as well as Riffaterre’s uses are at variance especially with the tradition of Kristeva and Barthes whose use of intertextuality, to use Jonathan Culler’s words, “becomes less a name for a work’s relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture.”<sup>24</sup>

The inconsistencies in the use of the term are one of the reasons why Genette wrote his book. Genette, always trying to clear the theoretical field in his focus from confusion in terminology, a task he has successfully completed concerning several important points in the field of narratology,<sup>25</sup> defines five types of transtextual relations among texts. He lists them “in order of increasing abstraction, implication, and comprehensiveness”<sup>26</sup>: firstly, intertextuality is “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts”<sup>27</sup>; secondly, paratextuality which “provide[s] a text with a (variable) setting and sometimes a commentary, official or not”<sup>28</sup>; thirdly, metatextuality that “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it”<sup>29</sup>; next comes hypertextuality (see below); last but not least is architextuality which means “the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Riffaterre, “Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive,” *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 56. For a similar statement see Riffaterre, “Syllepsis” 626.

<sup>20</sup> Genette 1.

<sup>21</sup> Genette 1.

<sup>22</sup> Riffaterre, “Compulsory Reader Response” 57.

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the various theories of intertextuality see Graham Allan, *Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006); or, approached from a different point of view, Plett.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Presupposition and Intertextuality,” *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 114.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

<sup>26</sup> Genette 1.

<sup>27</sup> Genette 1.

<sup>28</sup> Genette 3. Examples are “a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals.” Genette 3.

<sup>29</sup> Genette 4. As Genette notes, “this is the *critical* relationship par excellence.” Genette 4.

<sup>30</sup> Genette 1.

Genette defines hypertextuality which is the subject of his study as follows:

By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary. [...] To view things differently, let us posit the general notion of a text in the second degree [...] i.e., a text derived from another preexistent text [...] such as text B not speaking of text A at all but being unable to exist, as such, without A, from which it originates through a process I shall provisionally call *transformation*, and which it consequently evokes more or less perceptibly without necessarily speaking of it or citing it.<sup>31</sup>

The main reason Genette comes up with this concept is to account for a relationship of texts where one text, or texts, relate to another as “to the work considered as a structural whole.”<sup>32</sup> He puts this definition explicitly in contrast with Riffaterre’s definition of intertextuality. Genette observes that intertextuality as examined by Riffaterre and other critics “always concern[s] semantic-semiotic microstructures, observed at the level of a sentence, a fragment, or a short, generally poetic, text.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, “[t]he intertextual ‘trace’ according to Riffaterre is therefore more akin (like the allusion) to the limited figure (to the pictorial detail).”<sup>34</sup> Such a practice of intertextuality is, obviously, inappropriate for analysis of works like J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, J. L. Borges’s “Death and the Compass,” or, indeed, Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz*.<sup>35</sup> For Genette, intertextuality is thus represented “typically as the actual presence of one text within another” which takes the form of quotation, plagiarism or allusion.<sup>36</sup>

Though hypertextuality is, in one sense, radically different from the general notion of intertextuality, it shares with it several important features. This is partly due to the fact that the general use of the term subsumes Genette’s hypertextuality. The most important fact is that “[i]ntertextuality is a modality of perception, the deciphering of the text by the reader in such a way that he identifies the structures to which the text owes its quality of work of art.”<sup>37</sup> While leaving out the question how much intertextuality has a bearing on the “quality of work of art,” it is important, as Owen Miller points out, that “[i]t is the reader, then, who establishes a relationship between a focused text and its intertext, and forges its intertextual identity.”<sup>38</sup> Miller also draws the line between source-influence studies that are “an author-oriented

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<sup>31</sup> Genette 5.

<sup>32</sup> Genette 3.

<sup>33</sup> Genette 2.

<sup>34</sup> Genette 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> Genette’s particular view of *R&GAD* will be discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> Genette 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Riffaterre, “Syllepsis” 625.

<sup>38</sup> Owen Miller, “Intertextual Identity,” *Identity of the Literary Text*, edited by Mario J. Valdés and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) 21.

enterprise” and intertextual studies that “are, above all, reader-oriented.”<sup>39</sup> Two important conclusions should be drawn. Firstly, since the reader’s observation of intertextuality, or hypertextuality, relies on his “cultural level,”<sup>40</sup> the present observations, informed by the author’s cultural level, are necessarily limited. Secondly, hypertextuality sides with intertextuality in its reader orientation and the rejection of authorial intention: the consideration of authorial intentions is dismissed concerning the hypotexts discussed.<sup>41</sup> To conclude, one may paraphrase: “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed,” but since the present author is a reader with “history, biography, psychology” some of the quotations are lost on him.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Miller 21. On this point, Culler observes the following: “The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts.” Culler 114.

<sup>40</sup> Riffaterre, “Syllepsis” 626.

<sup>41</sup> This statement needs a clarification. Authorial intentions are inherent to *Rosencrantz* in the sense that the author wrote a text “rewriting” *Hamlet*, gave it a particular title creating the link to its hypotext etc. What I mean by dismissing the authorial intentions from my consideration of the hypotexts concerns two points. Firstly, one might attack the present reader-oriented approach on the basis that *Hamlet*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* are all hypotexts Stoppard intended to evoke by his text and, therefore, the reader’s perception of them is guided by the authorial intention. However, another hypotext, or (hypo)textual practice will be discussed which, as far as my knowledge goes, has never been mentioned in relation to Stoppard’s play. Secondly, though the major hypotexts discussed are intended by Stoppard, the way they interact with his text and the way they mean in the text are seen from my perspective.

<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 148.

[...] of course, the comic is only the tragic seen from behind.<sup>43</sup>

POLONIUS: The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited.<sup>44</sup>

## 2. Tossing the Coin: Affinities

In their efforts to place Tom Stoppard and his play into the canon of the Theatre of the Absurd and seduced by the similarity between Vladimir and Estragon and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the critics have sometimes been too quick in announcing the opening scene as the proof that this play is essentially absurdist. The game of coin tossing, “[t]his nonsensical game [which] defies the rules of chance and causes bewilderment,”<sup>45</sup> this “absurd game of coin-tossing”<sup>46</sup> “which defies all the rules of chance”<sup>47</sup> is a proof “that Godot will never come, nothing will ever change.”<sup>48</sup> Such opinions fail to recognize two things: firstly, the game does not defy rules of chance or possibility; secondly, the game does not constitute a *status quo* – there is a progress, a change: finally, tails falls.

In the opening scene of coin tossing, including the presence of the players, there are 100 tosses in total. Commonsensically, having two alternatives for a possible outcome, the chance for the two alternatives is 50:50 suggesting the most probable outcome as 50 heads and 50 tails. According to this assumption, the result of the game seems almost impossible. However, according to the rules of probability, “[i]f  $n$  throws are carried out with a coin [...] [w]ith  $n = 100$  there are  $2^{100}$  (a 31-digit number) different possible outcomes of the game. If we assume that the probability  $p$  of throwing ‘heads’ is equal to  $\frac{1}{2}$  for each single throw, then all  $2^{100}$  combinations of results must be considered as ‘equally likely’ cases.”<sup>49</sup> One should conclude that the outcome of the opening game is not “*impossible*” as described in the stage direction (*R&GAD* 9), but, if anything, improbable, at most.<sup>50</sup> The choice of words makes all the difference: improbability does not have any immediate claim on absurdity.

Thus, from the very beginning, the play does not involve only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as actors in its world, but also involves actively the audience by challenging its

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<sup>43</sup> Genette 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Hamlet* II, ii, 387-390. The text used for the quotations from *Hamlet* is William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Manfred Draudt, “Two sides of the same coin, or the same side of two coins’: An Analysis of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,” *English Studies* Aug. 1981: 348.

<sup>46</sup> Helene Keyssar-Franke, “The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,” *Educational Theatre Journal* Mar. 1975: 88.

<sup>47</sup> John Russell Taylor, *The Second Wave: British Drama for the Seventies* (London: Methuen, 1971) 100.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor 100.

<sup>49</sup> Richard von Mises, *Probability, Statistics and Truth* (New York: Dover, 1981) 107.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. John Fleming, *Stoppard’s Theatre: Finding Order amid Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 54.

perceptions of and expectations about the phenomena of this world. My concern in the present chapter is to investigate affinities of Stoppard's drama with the Theatre of the Absurd and with its prominent example and an important hypotext of the drama, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The attention will be focused on the resemblances of the two pairs of protagonists, on the "universe" of the two plays and the game of coin tossing as an expression of a key poetic principle of the play.

## 2.1. Waiting for Hamlet?

### 2.1.1. Puppets Dallying<sup>51</sup>

Unquestionably, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are modelled on Vladimir and Estragon from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The resemblance has been recognized by critics<sup>52</sup> since there are many parallels to the play in *Rosencrantz*. Starting at the beginning, there is a difference in the setting of the two plays. The setting in *Rosencrantz*, being "a place without any visible character" (*Rosencrantz* 9), is even less distinct than in *Waiting for Godot* where the items of setting, "a country road" and "a tree,"<sup>53</sup> gradually accumulate symbolic meanings.<sup>54</sup> Vladimir describes the setting most vividly: "It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing. There's a tree" (*Waiting for Godot* 99). Except for the last descriptive statement, the description fits the setting of *Rosencrantz*: there is, indeed, nothing. The apparent void of the stage, or the world, conveyed by the setting is stressed when Guildenstern considers "his environment or lack of it" (*Rosencrantz* 10). On the other hand, the two protagonists are specifically determined as "[t]wo Elizabethans" (*Rosencrantz* 9) with further character notes distinguishing Rosencrantz as being the one who feels and Guildenstern the one who thinks (*Rosencrantz* 9).

The scene of tossing the coins characterizes the two protagonists as opposites, as heads and tails<sup>55</sup>: Guildenstern is heads since he is the thinker, whereas Rosencrantz, as follows, is tails. The oppositeness of the two is suggestively evident in their consideration on the cause of the row of heads. For Rosencrantz, the matter is very simple: "You spun them yourself" (*Rosencrantz* 11), says he to Guildenstern. Rosencrantz is "prepared to go" (*Rosencrantz* 11),

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<sup>51</sup> *Hamlet* III, ii, 237.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Anthony Jenkins, *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 40-41 or Lawrence Graver, *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004) 92.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1981) 1. All citations are from this edition; page numbers are hereafter cited parenthetically within the text accompanied by the title of the play.

<sup>54</sup> For the various symbolic meanings of the tree see Michael Worton, "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Theatre as Text," *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, edited by John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 76-77.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Jenkins 39 and Draudt 349.

as Guildenstern says, to search for ultimate causes only to the realm of the visible. As Helen Keyssar-Franke puts it, “[f]or Rosencrantz, the playing of the game, of the role, is its only meaning; for Guildenstern the possibility of meaning beyond the doing is a menacing source of concern.”<sup>56</sup> A later example of the difference between the two shows Guildenstern’s characteristic trait most expressively. When Guildenstern tries to establish some direction according to the position of the sun, Rosencrantz suggests that he should “go and have a look” (*Rosencrantz* 42) upon which Guildenstern, the thinker, answers “Pragmatism?! – is that all you have to offer?” (*Rosencrantz* 42). Guildenstern’s answer “suggests a rejection of sensory experiences as the definitive source of knowledge.”<sup>57</sup>

The reaction to the “problem” of the row of heads as defining identity is a parallel to the problem of four evangelists and the two thieves in *Waiting for Godot*. When Vladimir tries to figure out the profound implications of the disagreement between the evangelists, Estragon is ready to sum the problem, like Rosencrantz, by stating the obvious: “Well? They don’t agree and that’s all there is to it” (*Waiting for Godot* 7). Guildenstern suggests that the difference in reaction is the difference of “the redistribution of wealth” (*Rosencrantz* 12) between the two: had Rosencrantz been the one losing, he would have been bothered like Guildenstern. However, Rosencrantz’s reaction confirms the difference of characters prompting Guildenstern to comment that “at least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor” (*Rosencrantz* 11). If the implications of the coin tossing are uncertain, the activity establishes character traits with certainty.

It is, indeed, due to Guildenstern’s contemplativeness that the full tragic intensity of the situation is allowed to be felt. Both plays, Stoppard’s and Beckett’s, spring very much from character, or personality; yet, there is a difference. In the case of *Rosencrantz*, the character allows to convey the tragic plight of the two protagonists who are swayed along the current. In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, the whole action of the play stems from character. There is, of course, the predicament of “waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ...waiting” (*Waiting for Godot* 88), but Vladimir and Estragon are, unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, responsible for the action. Bound together with natures as different to constitute opposites, they have to invent something to pass the time. As each of them is unable to be involved in the interests of the other, which is evident already in Estragon’s disinterest to listen to the story of the two thieves which preoccupies the mind of Vladimir (*Waiting for Godot* 6), they necessarily have to pretend their involvement, that is, they have to perform

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<sup>56</sup> Keyssar-Franke 88-89.

<sup>57</sup> Fleming 56.

their roles. Performed plays and games are the only means two beings with opposite personalities can pass the time with.

Guildenstern is, of course, also capable of emotions, but his emotional anguish is stimulated by his intellectual anguish. He is defeated by the row of heads reported monotonously by Rosencrantz: “The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear” (*Rosencrantz* 13). Guildenstern’s remark suggests that he uses intellect to suspend emotion, as a defence mechanism against emotion; or, specifically, that the syllogistic reasoning and scientific discourse generally is a defence against palpable angst. It vindicates the obvious human attempt to explain the unexplainable: to grasp with reason the unknown. Guildenstern’s trait of reasoning is so strong that it supplants even memory for him. When he and Rosencrantz try to establish who received the letter from the King, instead of remembering, Guildenstern logically infers from the fact that Rosencrantz does not have it, that the King gave it to him and where he has put it (*Rosencrantz* 78). The other way around, Rosencrantz is so unable to think that he is unable to come up with an original line, as he admits (*Rosencrantz* 76). His inability to think like Guildenstern is marvellously shown in his inability to express satisfactorily his notion of death as a lying a box:

I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead* ... which should make a difference ... shouldn’t it? I mean, you’d never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box. Not that I’d like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air – you’d wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box.<sup>58</sup>  
(*R&GAD* 51)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a complementary pair like Vladimir and Estragon<sup>59</sup>; though their complementariness is dictated more immediately by the metaphoric image of the two sides of a coin.<sup>60</sup> They are affected by the same memory loss that haunts Vladimir and Estragon visible, for example, in their effort to evoke “[w]hat’s the first thing you remember” (*Rosencrantz* 13). The continual repetition of the encounter with the messenger serves as a stance against oblivion: reminding oneself of the beginning, of the ultimate cause. In both plays, as Vladimir says, it is really “[e]xtraordinary the tricks that memory plays” (*Waiting for Godot* 54). In both plays the couples “act on scraps of information ... sifting half-remembered directions that [they] can hardly separate from instinct” (*Rosencrantz* 75). After all, the reason

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<sup>58</sup> Rosencrantz pursues his idea in this strain on and on until Guildenstern cannot take it anymore: “GUIL: (*Jumps up savagely*) You don’t have to flog it to death!” (*Rosencrantz* 52).

<sup>59</sup> For characterization of Vladimir and Estragon see, for example, Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980) 47.

<sup>60</sup> Guildenstern’s remark that the King “wouldn’t discriminate between us” (*Rosencrantz* 75), concerning the money they received from him, sounds especially funny since the King is totally unable to discriminate between the two, or, in other words, “[h]e couldn’t even be sure of mixing us up” (*Rosencrantz* 75).

why Vladimir and Estragon have to wait for Godot every day is, partly, because they have forgotten the instructions they obtained from him.

The short term memory that haunts the two couples might also explain the reason for their uncertainty about their own names. The interchangeability of names in the two couples challenges the question of identity, but only to a certain point. The fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are continually mistaken and that they themselves are able to be uncertain about their own names, has, on one hand, a comic effect. However, this has no claim on a confusion of their identities.<sup>61</sup> After all, their identities, as those of Vladimir and Estragon, create a pointed contrast, two sides of a coin: Guildenstern is persistently characterized by his rationalism and he is consistent in expressing his notion of death three times (*Rosencrantz* 62, 79, 91-92) and concludes by acting out his death according to his theory.

In one sense, the interchangeability raises the question of the role of name in connection to identity: is name all there is to one's identity? More relevantly to the play, nevertheless, their name exchanges show that "two of them make a pair. Twelve of them would make a dozen. They are essentially inseparable."<sup>62</sup> The point is the same with Vladimir and Estragon<sup>63</sup>; yet, there is a difference. With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the stress lies on their insignificance, whereas with Vladimir and Estragon the stress lies on their universality: as Vladimir puts it, expressing their condition, "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not" (*Waiting for Godot* 90). This connects with the essential difference between the statuses of the two pairs. Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Vladimir and Estragon "are no subsidiary characters, they appear as central figures in the middle of nowhere."<sup>64</sup>

The similarity of characters that has been observed leads, necessarily, to similarity of action. As Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot with "nothing to be done" (*Waiting for Godot* 2), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also passive as the only reason for their presence is that they "were sent for" (*Rosencrantz* 13). However, the similarity of action extends to adoption of "copious motifs, characteristic figures and symptomatic situations from Beckett's *Godot*,"<sup>65</sup> as Peter Egri notes. One of them, connected with the notion of the protagonists as two halves of one whole, is the exchange of speeches in dialogue. In *Waiting for Godot*, there are numerous instances; an example is the following exchange from the beginning of the play:

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Keyssar-Franke 93.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Egri, *Playing Games with Renaissance Forms: From Leonardo and Shakespeare to Warhol and Stoppard* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1996) 44.

<sup>63</sup> Cf., for example, Graver 31.

<sup>64</sup> Egri 47.

<sup>65</sup> Egri 73.

VLADIMIR: It hurts?  
 ESTRAGON: (*angrily*). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!  
 VLADIMIR: (*angrily*). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.  
 ESTRAGON: It hurts?  
 VLADIMIR: (*angrily*). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!  
 (*Waiting For Godot 3*)

In *Rosencrantz* this type of exchange of speeches occurs also repeatedly; the best example is probably two exchanges from Act III on the matter of England as “a conspiracy of cartographers” (*Rosencrantz 78*). *Rosencrantz* expresses his idea that he cannot imagine England and what will happen when they arrive there (*Rosencrantz 78-80*). The same exchange is repeated later with the difference that the speeches are swapped along with the gestures following the reading of the letter from the king (*Rosencrantz 89*). Another example is the scene where *Rosencrantz* and *Guildestern* try to catch *Hamlet* with the help of their belts reminding of the “hanging” scene from *Waiting for Godot*. While waiting for *Hamlet* to come into their trap, *Rosencrantz*’s trousers slide down like *Estragon*’s. When *Rosencrantz* is about to repeat the trap, in case *Hamlet* enters again, *Guildestern* reproaches him “[n]o, no, no! – if we can’t learn by experience, what else have we got?” (*Rosencrantz 66*) suggesting that *Waiting for Godot*, where nothing is learned by experience (*Vladimir* and *Estragon* forget to bring the rope the next day), is not merely imitated, but rather parodied.<sup>66</sup>

### 2.1.2. God ... Godot ... Dot

*Rosencrantz* is not a simple copy of *Waiting for Godot*: it shares several features with the Theatre of the Absurd, but it is different from its cosmology and, hence, from the universe of *Godot*. In his classical study *The Theatre of the Absurd*, *Martin Esslin* takes *Beckett*’s play as a paragon of the Theatre of the Absurd and observes that the keynote of *Beckett*’s work is a “deep existential anguish.”<sup>67</sup> Such an observation perfectly fits *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz* as well. Nonetheless, things are different in the two plays. *Michael Worton* gives several possible meanings of *Godot* and closes his list with the conclusion that *Godot* “is whatever fiction we want him to be.”<sup>68</sup> Caution is in place when approaching the play: the meaning of *Godot* is elusive. His most significant trait is his absence; and if *Godot* is absent, so is his meaning: “*Godot* remains an empty signifier, always in excess of itself, subject to indefinite interpretations and displacements.”<sup>69</sup> He is everything and nothing.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Draudt 354* and *Egri 76*.

<sup>67</sup> *Esslin 30*.

<sup>68</sup> *Worton 71*.

<sup>69</sup> *Yuan Yuan*, “Representation and Absence: Paradoxical Structure in Postmodern Texts,” *Symposium* Summer 1997: 130.

Interpretations of Beckett's play usually unfold from the interpretation of Godot. I will consider Godot from two points of view. In his monograph on the play, Lawrence Graver lists several connotations and possible meanings of the name, one of them being "a minor god."<sup>70</sup> This meaning is most pertinent to Esslin's observation and one that is most ostensibly at hand since Godot includes God in his name. Graver observes that at the beginning of the play Godot functions as God only on an epistemological level, he "exists entirely as a creature perceived in all earnestness by Vladimir and Estragon" who "associate him with concrete images of authority and with less concrete but nonetheless provocative images suggesting divinity."<sup>71</sup> When Estragon tries to find out what did they ask from Godot, Vladimir confirms his estimate that it was "[a] kind of prayer," "[a] vague supplication" (*Waiting for Godot* 14). As Pozzo later observes, the very fact that they are waiting for Godot means that "this Godet Godot Godin anyhow you see who I mean" has their "future in his hands" (*Waiting for Godot* 27).

However, the perception of Godot as God shifts from epistemological to ontological; at least, the possibility opens. This happens when the boy comes with a message from Godot. The questioning of the boy to which Vladimir subordinates him is Vladimir's attempt to ascertain who is Godot and whether his coming will mean the bestowal of grace (*Waiting for Godot* 55-56). Vladimir is preoccupied with the idea since the discussion of the two thieves; unlike Estragon who doesn't care and is, thus, able to damn Lucky without remorse: "To hell with him!" (*Waiting for Godot* 48). What Vladimir reveals is, as Esslin points out, that "Godot himself is unpredictable in bestowing kindness and punishment"<sup>72</sup> since the information from the boy identify Godot with God by the parallel of the two brothers minding goats and sheep for Godot and Cain and Abel: in both cases, "kindness is bestowed fortuitously."<sup>73</sup>

Since Godot's meaning is beyond grasp, critics usually interpret the play's central theme as being "more about waiting than about whatever it may be that the tramps are waiting for."<sup>74</sup> And, in Vladimir's words echoing Hamlet's most famous question,<sup>75</sup> the act of waiting, indeed, seems to be the only certainty: "What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense

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<sup>70</sup> Graver 42.

<sup>71</sup> Graver 39.

<sup>72</sup> Esslin 54.

<sup>73</sup> Esslin 54.

<sup>74</sup> Karl S. Guthke, "A Stage for the Anti-Hero: Metaphysical Farce in the Modern Theatre," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* Spring 1976: 127. See also Esslin 49-50 and Graver 40-41.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Hapgood observes that "Vladimir's remark in the course of 'raising Pozzo' helps to confirm that the whole sequence parodies Hamlet's rhythm of arrested action." Robert Hapgood, "Hamlet Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy of Delay," *The Tulane Drama Review* Summer 1965: 144.

confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come-” (*Waiting for Godot* 91). The interpretation stressing the theological dimension of the play is based on the play with the title where waiting for “Godot” is changed into waiting for “God(ot).” By the same logic, however, the title can be interpreted as waiting for “(Go)dot,” a textual marker denoting an end. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for a closure, be it what it may; not least the end of the performance marked by the fall of the curtain while “[i]n the meantime nothing happens” (*Waiting for Godot* 40).

The point is that the play is both about waiting and about Godot since there cannot be one without the other: Godot’s absence is the reason for waiting and waiting posits Godot as “the unknowable that represents hope [and] justifies our life-as-waiting.”<sup>76</sup> In this sense, the “refrain” of Lucky’s speech becomes essential to the play: “for reasons unknown but time will tell” (*Waiting for Godot* 45). Reasons are unknown because of the absence of “Godot who exerts a determining influence on everything they [Vladimir and Estragon] feel and think.”<sup>77</sup> Time will not tell contrary to the promise of the speech, because to do so time would have to progress. Esslin points out that “[w]aiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change” and he continues to observe that in Beckett’s drama “that change is in itself an illusion.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, at one point, Vladimir, impatient for the night finally to come, observes that “[t]ime has stopped” (*Waiting for Godot* 37). But the temporal structure of the drama is different, it does not constitute “a static situation.”<sup>79</sup>

“Nothing does happen, at least twice,”<sup>80</sup> in this play, as Graver comments. Godot does not come in the second act and the implication is that he will not come ever. The similarity of the (in)action in the two acts implies an infinite repetition and, as Esslin comments, “variations merely serve to emphasize the essential sameness of the situation.”<sup>81</sup> The structure of the play is cyclical. The song about the dog at the beginning of Act II epitomizes the situation of the two protagonists:

A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread.  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead.  
[...]  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
And wrote upon the tombstone  
For the eyes of dogs to come:

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<sup>76</sup> Worton 71. Cf. Yuan 129.

<sup>77</sup> Guthke 127.

<sup>78</sup> Esslin 51-52.

<sup>79</sup> Esslin 45

<sup>80</sup> Graver 54.

<sup>81</sup> Esslin 45.

A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread.  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead.  
(*Waiting For Godot* 62-63)

The repetitive pattern of the song reflects the everyday waiting of Vladimir and Estragon: their existence unfolds in an infinite regress. The song constitutes an infinite regress in several ways: the structure comes to its point of departure every eight lines; it constitutes *mise en abyme*, by embedding the narrative of the song at still further diegetic level; it also constitutes *mise en abyme* by its very occurrence in the play whose structure it reflects, placed, moreover, fairly in the middle. As the “basic structural unit of the play, then, is a self-contained routine or ritual,”<sup>82</sup> the basic rhythm of the play is that of a barrel-organ tune. Thus, “the structure of the play consists of self-cancellation,”<sup>83</sup> as Yuan Yuan comments: the purpose of waiting is its closure, but because of the infinite regress, closure is impossible. The existence of Vladimir and Estragon repeats itself *ad absurdum*.<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, Vladimir and Estragon defy the infinite regress of their being – their games are designed to pass the time:

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.  
ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.  
VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.  
(*Waiting for Godot* 51)

They devise action to defy the time loop they are stuck in. Action is the filling of the emptiness of the passing time, but their short term memory is a hindrance:

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?  
VLADIMIR: (*impatiently*). Yes yes, we're magicians. But let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget.”  
(*Waiting for Godot* 77)

When the repetitiveness of their existence becomes too palpable in their word games, the sense of uneasiness and despair spreads over them:

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.  
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.  
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.  
VLADIMIR: Like sand.  
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.  
*Silence.*  
(*Waiting for Godot* 69)

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<sup>82</sup> Graver 32.

<sup>83</sup> Yuan 131.

<sup>84</sup> This, however, is not necessarily a negative aspect since “[a]s far as there is absence, there exists infinite hope.” Yuan 130. Due to the uncertainty of Godot’s bestowal of grace, this might be a better outcome.

Everything has to be original and new to keep the sense of progression to counteract the temporal structure of their lives. The situation of Vladimir and Estragon is paralleled by Lucky's dance which he calls "The Net. He thinks he's entangled in a net" (*Waiting for Godot* 42). Both are performances of men in dire circumstances from which they do not see a way out. In the words of the play, "[t]here's no lack of void" (*Waiting for Godot* 73) in the world of the play. The void of the universe caused by Godot who does not come is paralleled, among other things, grotesquely in the emptiness of Vladimir's hat and Estragon's boots (*Waiting for Godot* 4). Due to this void, chance is the "order" of the day – as Pozzo puts it when he comments on his relation to Lucky: "Remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due" (*Waiting for Godot* 31). Beckett's play expresses the "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition"<sup>85</sup> by ultimate absence and inescapability of the situation. Stoppard's play does the same by precisely opposite means: an ostensible presence and a definite progress.<sup>86</sup> After all, they are "two sides of the same coin" (*Rosencrantz* 18) and, therefore, "'equally likely' cases."<sup>87</sup>

## 2.2. Orderly Disorder: Playing a Coin/Coining a Play

The last observation of the previous section points to the essential problem of approaching Stoppard's drama. If one embraces the poetics of the text, the spinning coin, one can never safely set down to one particular judgment. If the essential condition of our existence is relativism, or perspectivism, expressed in the image of the coin, then any decision is just one side of the coin that can always be turned once more. Despite this basic problem, I will try to argue that one side of the play, is more "equally likely case" than the other.

The outcome of Stoppard's drama is known from the beginning: we know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Actually, the outcome is known even before the beginning: the title, by its intertextual reference, defers the beginning at least to the beginning of *Hamlet*. Things are predetermined, but not entirely. Guildenstern's description of being on a boat fits perfectly not only his situation, but also the situation of the whole play: "We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current" (*Rosencrantz* 90). Stoppard has to follow certain rules: to let Rosencrantz and Guildenstern survive would be unacceptable. We know *what* happens and we know *how*. Concerning the second point, at

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<sup>85</sup> Esslin 23-24.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Jenkins 40-41.

<sup>87</sup> Von Mises 107.

least we thought so. Within the limited movement, Stoppard manoeuvres with skill and he shows a new view on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as well as on both *Hamlet* and Hamlet. How is it then that their situation is absurd?

Firstly, the drama uses several features central to the Theatre of the Absurd. Several affinities between the play and *Waiting for Godot* and, thus, the Theatre of the Absurd have been observed. One of the most important ones in *Rosencrantz* is the breakdown of language. As Esslin puts it, a “yawning gulf has opened between language and reality.”<sup>88</sup> One of the best examples is the following exchange. Failing to elicit the proper response, it manifests the fact that in the Theatre of the Absurd “what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters”<sup>89</sup>:

ROS: Fire!

(GUIL *jumps up.*)

GUIL: Where?

ROS: It’s all right – I’m demonstrating the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists. (*He regards the audience, that is the direction, with contempt – and other directions, then front again.*) Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes.

(*Rosencrantz 44*)

On its own, these kinds of exchanges are largely the source of the comic. The problem is that in this state of communication, as Vladimir puts it, words are all they have to go on (*Rosencrantz 31*) stating explicitly what in *Waiting for Godot* is present implicitly.<sup>90</sup> This is manifested in the many repetitions of Claudius’s, Gertrude’s or Hamlet’s words by both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In this world, information, consisting of language and words, is precarious if given at all. As John Fleming puts it in his book on Stoppard’s theatre, “[f]or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knowledge has no essence.”<sup>91</sup> This touches upon what I am “playing at” (*Rosencrantz 31*). The world of *Rosencrantz* is not one where God is absent or dead, but one where “they’ll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscure instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us about from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong” (*Rosencrantz 63*). The behaviour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is no more “absurd” than that of the other characters, at least for them. The absurdity of this world is epistemological, whereas the absurdity of *Waiting for Godot* is created in the collaboration of the epistemological and the ontological.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Esslin 399.

<sup>89</sup> Esslin 26.

<sup>90</sup> VLADIMIR: Damn it can't you see the man is blind!

ESTRAGON: Damn it so he is. (*Pause.*) So he says.

(*Waiting for Godot 97*)

<sup>91</sup> Fleming 58.

<sup>92</sup> Guthke views the play as seen from a “‘metaphysical’ point of view: from Godot’s!” Guthke 127.

As the quotation in the above paragraph suggests, reminding of Vladimir's exclamation "[w]e're surrounded" (*Waiting for Godot* 83), the "absurdity" of this world springs not from an ultimate absence, but from an ultimate presence. *Hamlet* is established as the "deity" giving sense to the world: "The whole thing's pointless without him" (*Rosencrantz* 88). In the same way Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot to bestow grace, wait for him as for salvation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wait for Hamlet: "We need Hamlet for our release" (*Rosencrantz* 88). The script of *Hamlet* becomes the scripture of *Hamlet*. Since the absence of Godot is connected with the temporal structure of waiting and infinite regress, the presence of *Hamlet*<sup>93</sup> in *Rosencrantz* carries implications for the structure of the drama. There lies the fundamental difference in the sense of the tragic of the two dramas intertwined with their structure: whereas Vladimir and Estragon are tragic in their eternal waiting, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tragic in the finite end they cannot escape:

GUIL: Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are ... condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one – that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost.  
(*Rosencrantz* 43-44)

The text is loaded with references to the inability of the two protagonists to understand "[w]hat in God's name is going on" (*Rosencrantz* 32) and critics observed, in various words, that "the protagonists do not know they are doomed functionaries in a play called *Hamlet*."<sup>94</sup> As Rosencrantz puts it in an appropriately metafictional comment, their state is one of "confusion owing to certain nuances outside our appreciation" (*Rosencrantz* 81). Two of the most important questions, put alternately by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are "[w]hat's the game?" and "[w]hat are the rules?" (*Rosencrantz* 33-34). The Player tries to calm Guildenstern down by informing him that "[u]ncertainty is the normal state" and advising him that "[y]ou can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn" (*Rosencrantz* 48). The problem is that Guildenstern has something of Hamlet in him: he is able to weigh different points of view on a matter, he is the one to understand best the profound torment, but only on the intellectual level, of Hamlet's "[t]o be or not to be" (*Hamlet* III, i, 56). As it has

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<sup>93</sup> I could, of course, add that it is also the presence of Hamlet, that is, the eponymous protagonist of the play. I choose to refer only to the play, since it contains its character. Nevertheless, every time this kind of observation occurs, the reference should be understood in its double denotation to both the play and its protagonist. The presence works on two levels – textual and that of the world created by the text. No need to say that Hamlet is the primal agent who is responsible for the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For more on this topic see the following chapter.

<sup>94</sup> Graver 93. Cf., for example, Cantor 88, Keyssar-Franke 96, Jenkins 39 or Katherine E. Kelly, *Tom Stoppard and the Craft of Comedy: Medium and Genre at Play* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991) 72-73.

been observed earlier, his character permits to understand the tragic position of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

### 2.2.1. Figuring out the Figure of the Coin: “some cock and bull story”<sup>95</sup>

The initial scene of coin tossing is “one of the principal keys to an understanding of Stoppard’s play.”<sup>96</sup> Critics have recognized the importance of “one of the most memorable opening scenes in twentieth-century theatre.”<sup>97</sup> In words of Guildenstern’s comment on one of Hamlet’s entries “[t]hat’s an opening if ever there was one” (*Rosencrantz* 65). The principle of the coin, that is, “the dichotomy and identity of two opposites”<sup>98</sup> and its metaphoric expression of relativism and perspectivism and its implication of *mise en abyme* when tossed, takes over the text and by creating a distinct poetic principle subsumes also aspects that are parts of structures from outside of the play. It is not only such dualities as fiction/reality, chance/fate, the role of actor/spectator etc., but also, as Draudt points out, expression of the uncertainty of communication since “words, too, are items easily interchanged.”<sup>99</sup>

The scene sticks out during the whole play as a memento that “nothing is certain” (*Waiting for Godot* 59). Like the appearance of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, a most obvious memento – “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me” (*Hamlet* I, v, 91) finishes the Ghost –, the initial scene of Stoppard’s play indicates “some foul play” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 256).<sup>100</sup> As has been said, the title assures the outcome of the drama. However, what follows the title is the initial scene that destabilizes things. Helene Keyssar-Franke, using Rosencrantz’s words, observes that the initial scene indicates “that in this world, almost ‘anything can happen next’”<sup>101</sup> and that until Act III there is the possibility that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “may be free to escape the deaths implied by their Shakespearean roles.”<sup>102</sup> By creating the spectacle of the falling heads, Stoppard coins his own rules: describing the play in terms of its two hypotexts, Katherine Kelly says that “this is *Godot* with a difference”<sup>103</sup> and that “[w]e are now in *Hamlet*, but with a difference.”<sup>104</sup>

Commenting on the initial scene, Daniel Jernigan says that “[t]he artificiality of the environment explains the anomaly better than any of the theories put forward by Rosencrantz

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<sup>95</sup> *Rosencrantz* 89.

<sup>96</sup> Draudt 349.

<sup>97</sup> Fleming 54.

<sup>98</sup> Draudt 349.

<sup>99</sup> Draudt 356.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Egri 39

<sup>101</sup> Keyssar-Franke 88.

<sup>102</sup> Keyssar-Franke 87.

<sup>103</sup> Kelly 73.

<sup>104</sup> Kelly 77.

[sic!] and directs our attention from the play's characters to its creators instead."<sup>105</sup> Indeed, as a spectacle of fiction, the scene draws attention to its fictional and theatrical nature. It is a spectre, like the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, Guildenstern's theories are worthy of comment for several reasons. Firstly, they show, like nothing else in the drama, his ability to consider phenomena from different perspectives. Secondly, all his theories are relevant to the themes of the play. Lastly, considering the observation made at the beginning of this chapter, Guildenstern's fourth explanation is the best one possible, at least, in terms of science. The number of outcomes and their equal possibility confirms Guildenstern's scientific observation, one closest to his rationalism: "A spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually (*He spins one*) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does" (*Rosencrantz* 13).

Guildenstern's third theory is the second most pertinent to the play: "Divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife" (*Rosencrantz* 12-13). In his classical study *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga observes about play in connection with divine will the following: "'Fate' may be known by eliciting some pronouncement from it. An oracular decision of this kind is arrived at by trying out the uncertain prospects of success. You draw sticks, or cast stones, or prick between the page of the Holy Book, and the oracle will respond."<sup>106</sup> Tossing of coins is just another example of this attempt to elicit a response from "fate". Since Guildenstern himself presupposes an abstract level of existence,<sup>107</sup> for him, this row of heads is a response. As a response from fate, each following toss can be predicted to be the same. Knowing this and still betting against the odds, is betting against oneself, that is, against one's fate. Another implication of Guildenstern's explanation is the theme of the two sides of the same coin: what is winning for one is losing for another. The suggestion of this explanation juxtaposing the children of Israel and Lot's wife is that in this play "the dramatic emphasis is not on the ultimate justice Hamlet has done, but on the doubtful injustice Ros and Guil have suffered."<sup>108</sup>

Guildenstern's first explanation is existential and connects the play to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It also connects to his third theory recognizing the implications of his continued betting against the odds: "I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the

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<sup>105</sup> Daniel K. Jernigan, "Tom Stoppard as Trickster in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*," *The Trickster*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2010) 163-164. Note the interesting mistake of the critic confusing Rosencrantz with Guildenstern.

<sup>106</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 79.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Fleming 54

<sup>108</sup> Egri 43.

essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past” (*Rosencrantz* 12). Guildenstern’s second explanation also evokes Beckett’s play, specifically its temporal structure in the suggestion of some sort of warps in the space-time continuum: “Time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times” (*Rosencrantz* 12). All these theories show that Guildenstern is able to look at things from different angles. The result is the uncertainty which perspective is the right one.

This is introduced already in Guildenstern’s first words in the text. His first speech commenting on the outcome of the tossing – “There is an art to the building of suspense” (*Rosencrantz* 9) – establishes the action, in a sense, as a waiting: the building of suspense is the waiting for the suspense to break. This utterance embraces the deterministic vision since art is an intentional and supposedly meaningful design. However, in his second utterance, Guildenstern considers the other side of the coin: “Though it can be done by luck alone” (*Rosencrantz* 10). This observation suggests that what is at work is an arbitrary fortune whose operation is meaningless, ludic, random and, therefore, absurd. Guildenstern’s third utterance, then, establishes the problem of doubt and the uncertainty of interpretation: “If that’s the word I’m after” (*Rosencrantz* 10). This uncertainty leads to a fluctuation between perspectives on their situation which ultimately contributes to the tragedy.

What is certain for Hamlet – “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet* V, ii, 4-11) –, is the subject of doubt for Guildenstern. He gives the grounds for his disbelieving reasoning prompted by the row of heads. He says that the more or less equal distribution of heads and tails in the game of coin tossing “related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature” (*Rosencrantz* 14). Since the outcome has been unilateral, the dissociation of nature follows and the question remains which “force,” whether “the fortuitous” or “the ordained,” is to be ascribed to heads, and, consequently, which to tails. Guildenstern’s syllogistic reasoning is self-defeating. Fleming aptly observes that he “proceeds to use logic to cancel out everything he has logically assumed, with one possible implication being that belief in supernatural forces as the controlling mechanism of life does not depend on logic and reasoning.”<sup>109</sup> For Rosencrantz the situation of uncertainty results in a submissive acceptance of his lot without questioning it, that is, without thinking about it:

ROS: I wish I was dead. (*Considers the drop.*) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.

GUIL: Unless they’re counting on it.

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<sup>109</sup> Fleming 54.

ROS: I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel. (*The futility of it, fury.*) All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform. But a line must be drawn somewhere, and I would like to put it on record that I have no confidence in England.  
(*Rosencrantz* 79)

The uncertainty stems from the lack of grounds. Rosencrantz complains: "Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!" (*Rosencrantz* 86). This incidental nature of their situation stems from their limited perspective. As supporting characters in *Hamlet* they have only a limited access to its plot. For them as well as for the audience, *Hamlet*, as presented in the drama, results to "some cock and bull story" (*Rosencrantz* 89). They are certain only of several incidents, since they continually remind themselves of them: "Our names shouted in a certain dawn ... a message ... a summons" (*Rosencrantz* 92). Guildenstern complains "[w]e are entitled to some direction ... I would have thought" (*Rosencrantz* 16). His effort to establish where is south, the position of the sun and the time of the day (*Rosencrantz* 42) "might be seen as emblematic of this quest for epistemological directionality."<sup>110</sup>

As the ominously knowing Player observes, "[i]t is *written*," there is "no *choice* involved" (*R&GAD* 59). Guildenstern understands the fatality of his situation as well: "At least we are presented with alternatives. [...] But not choice" (*Rosencrantz* 30). Nevertheless, he is unable to relate this to the outcome of the game of coin tossing. The two following games with coins, where Rosencrantz has no coin in either of his hands and where he has coins in both of his hands (*Rosencrantz* 44-45 and 75), are variants of the initial tossing of coins. The way Rosencrantz cheats Guildenstern is by offering him alternatives, but with no choice since the outcome is always the same. Retrospectively, these plays illuminate the first scene which, in the light of these two games, is a manifestation of fate that gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern no choice. One of the many implications of the first scene is that heads will fall; not ninety-nine, but two. Stoppard creates a technique of orderly disorder where however random things might appear, there is an underlying structure of order.

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<sup>110</sup> Fleming 56.

‘In life,’ he said, ‘there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. *Hamlet* could be told from Polonius’s point of view and called *The Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark*. He didn’t think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay.’<sup>111</sup>

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Poetic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.<sup>112</sup>

### 3. Within Hyper-, Inter- or Metatextual Forces

In the previous chapter, I have considered the affinities mainly with *Waiting for Godot*. I have suggested that while there is a resemblance between the two protagonists of Stoppard’s drama and Vladimir and Estragon, and action ensuing from character, the structure and the world of the two plays are different. I have observed that the determining presence is the presence of *Hamlet* as well as Hamlet. In this chapter, I will consider the affinities with William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Shakespearean tragedy. My point in this chapter is that although written in the 1960s and performed for the first time in 1966, that is, in the era “after Beckett” and the Theatre of the Absurd, *Rosencrantz* can be seen as closer to Shakespeare’s Renaissance tragedy than to Beckett’s tragicomedy in various aspects.

I will start with the consideration of the textual level of *Rosencrantz*. On this level, Stoppard’s play is definitely closer to *Hamlet*. *Waiting for Godot* is echoed: there are allusions, parallels, similar situations and partially shared sense of absurdity. *Hamlet*, on the other hand, is there, put simply: the plot is that of *Hamlet*, since besides it “nothing happens”; despite their similarity to Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; and whole passages of the text of *Hamlet* appear unchanged.<sup>113</sup> The last enumerated item is the subject of the following section. Though there are parts of

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<sup>111</sup> John Barth, *The End of the Road* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969) 88.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, 1963) 7.

<sup>113</sup> The passages are substantial. The following is a list of all the passages of *Hamlet* that occur in *Rosencrantz* in an unchanged form: *Rosencrantz* 27-29 – *Hamlet* II, ii, 1-49; *Rosencrantz* 39 – *Hamlet* II, ii, 211-222; *Rosencrantz* 40 – *Hamlet*, II, ii, 356-374 and 380-384; *Rosencrantz* 45 – *Hamlet* II, ii, 518-531; *Rosencrantz* 53-54 – *Hamlet* III, i, 10-31; *Rosencrantz* 55 – *Hamlet* III, i, 89-92; *Rosencrantz* 57-58 – *Hamlet* III, i, 144-148 and 161-168; *Rosencrantz* 63-64 – *Hamlet* IV, i, 32-39; *Rosencrantz* 66-67 – *Hamlet* IV, ii, 2 and 5-29; *Rosencrantz* 67-68 – *Hamlet* IV, iii, 11-15; *Rosencrantz* 69 – *Hamlet* IV, iv, 9-14 and 29-31; *Rosencrantz* 93 – *Hamlet* V, ii, 353-372. Shakespeare’s dialogue is intact. Sometimes, stage directions are interpolated. Only the last passage from *Hamlet* (*Hamlet* V, ii, 358-372) that occurs in Stoppard’s play, part of Horatio’s speech after Hamlet’s death, is changed: what occurs in *Hamlet* as verse, is produced in *Rosencrantz* as prose.

*Hamlet* that are changed<sup>114</sup> or additions to *Hamlet* involving Hamlet with no support in the text,<sup>115</sup> I will consider only the unchanged passages from the text of *Hamlet* to stress my point.

### 3.1. Shakespeare, Stoppard ... Pierre Menard: Creative Tautology<sup>116</sup>

ROSENCRANTZ: Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

HAMLET: Ay, sir, that soaks up the Kings countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end. He keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

ROSENCRANTZ: I understand you not, my lord.

HAMLET: I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.

(*Hamlet*, IV, ii, 13-21)

ROS: Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

HAMLET: Ay, sir, that soaks up the Kings countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end. He keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

ROS: I understand you not, my lord.

HAMLET: I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.

(*Rosencrantz* 67)

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz* provides a situation that can be described in terms of the "Menard's case". Petr Kot'áko defines this phenomenon as "a situation in which we have two instances of the same text before us, created in radically different circumstances and we ask whether they represent the same literary work."<sup>117</sup> No one would probably be surprised by the passages of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz* since the "intertextual" link between the texts is strongly established by the title of Stoppard's play. If asked about the nature of these instances of the text of *Hamlet*, the most common answer would probably be "(extensive) quotation." On the inter-textual level, this is true; however, considering the dramatic text and the names attached to the utterances one can raise a relevant question: when Hamlet retorts to Rosencrantz with

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<sup>114</sup> The appearance of Hamlet at Ophelia as described by her in *Hamlet* II, i, 77-84 and 87-100 is staged in *Rosencrantz* (*Rosencrantz* 26).

<sup>115</sup> Hamlet noisily clears his throat and spits overboard (into the audience) while wind blows his spit into his face (*Rosencrantz* 85). After all, the whole play is a sort of addition to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Cf. Genette 292.

<sup>116</sup> Originally, this chapter, in a (slightly) altered version, was submitted as an essay for the English Literature IV course under the title "Some Thoughts on the Appearances of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: Forging the Notion of the 'Menardian Text' as a Literary Concept" on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009.

<sup>117</sup> "[...] situace v níž máme před sebou dvě instance téhož textu, vzniklé za radikálně rozdílných okolností a ptáme se, zda představují totéž literární dílo." Petr Kot'átko, "Text, dílo, interpretace: k implikacím Menardova případu," *Text a dílo: případ Menard*, eds. Karel Cisař and Petr Kot'átko (Praha: Filosofía, 2004) 171. Author's translation. Cf. the following account of the implication given by Paisley Livingston: "The lesson generally—but not unanimously—drawn from the tale is that since tokens of a single text-type could be the constituents of two distinct works, literary works are not conceptually reducible to texts." Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) 112.

his witticism in *Rosencrantz*, is he quoting himself from *Hamlet*? That is, is it still a quotation if the instance of an enunciation is to present itself as the original of itself?

This paradox is not the only one that arises from the appearances of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped in a world they do not comprehend. Therein lies the absurdity of their situation: they are summoned to play a role, but they do not know what this role is. As Anthony Jenkins puts it, “the rule book here is *Hamlet*, and everyone knows the game except Ros and Guil.”<sup>118</sup> However, there is a paradox attached to this view. There is a marked difference in the way Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak in Stoppard’s and in Shakespeare’s text in *Rosencrantz*. Jenkins notes this paradox himself: “Oddly, the pair know how to play, responding to their parts in the Shakespearean dialogue, but they do not know *what* they are playing.”<sup>119</sup> How can they know how to play if they do not know the game and its rulebook? Can these paradoxes be solved? My aim here is to forge a literary concept that I christen “Menardian text”<sup>120</sup> and to show how this concept is useful in assessing the nature of the appearances of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz* and in assessing the relation between the two texts.

“Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” “Borges’s teasing little tale,”<sup>121</sup> as Tilghman calls it, has received wide publicity among philosophers of art. “It is remarkable,” Tomáš Hříbek notes, “that the evolution of the philosophical discussion about the notion of identity of the literary work during circa last three decades can, indeed, be viewed as a commentary to Borges’s argument.”<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, this is not supposed to be a philosophical essay dealing with the ontology of art. The various philosophers of art have treated Borges’s short story somewhat unfairly since they have used the premise of the tale to serve their thought experiments. While the narrator explicitly states that Menard’s “work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two,”<sup>123</sup> philosophers, for their purposes, have considered his work as if finished and have spoken about “Menard’s novel.” Also, they

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<sup>118</sup> Anthony Jenkins, *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 39.

<sup>119</sup> Jenkins 40.

<sup>120</sup> The proof that the idea of “adapting” the premise of Borges’s short story for literary theory/criticism was not born out of a nightmare like Borges’s tale, but that it is a legitimate task is the observation by B. R. Tilghman that “the point that Borges wants to make, however, by way of his joke is not essentially philosophical; it concerns, rather, the appreciation and criticism of literature.” B. R. Tilghman, “Danto and the Ontology of Literature,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Spring 1982: 296.

<sup>121</sup> Tilghman 293.

<sup>122</sup> “Je pozoruhodné, že vývoj filosofické diskuse o pojmu identity literárního díla během uplynulých zhruba tří dekád lze skutečně nahlížet jako komentář k Borgesově argumentu.” Tomáš Hříbek, “Případ Menard a identita literárního díla,” *Text a dílo: případ Menard*, eds. Karel Císař and Petr Kořátko (Praha: Filosofía, 2004) 140. Author’s translation.

<sup>123</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans. David A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964) 51.

usually neglect the importance of context that differentiates the two *Quixotes* in the story and muse on the possibility of identity of two texts ignoring their pragmatic relations.

While neglecting the subtleties of Borges's intricate story, such as the ideological stance of the narrator and the irony of the story, I will adhere strictly to the textual qualities of Menard's effort. Some preliminary comments are in place. Context plays an important role in my definition of the Menardian text; however, while the cultural difference can be a context that is significant, authorial intentions are not. The narrator of Borges's story says that Menard "did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. [...] His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes [...] to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard."<sup>124</sup> I do not claim that Stoppard wanted to reconstruct Shakespeare's *Hamlet* either by becoming Shakespeare, or "through the experience of Tom Stoppard." The functioning of the Menardian text in *Rosencrantz* is purely textual, its purpose is to produce "*Hamlet*, but with a difference."<sup>125</sup>

To be strict and lucid about what I mean by the term "Menardian text" here is a definition providing its signposts:

1. The Menardian text is a text whose source is identifiable as an instance of some other text than the one in which it is identified.
2. The text is identical, i.e. its notation is identical, with the one in the source; the identification proceeds from a string of graphemes/phonemes.<sup>126</sup>
3. As follows from the first point, the text is distinguished from its source by a different con-text, i.e. the context of another, encompassing text.<sup>127</sup>
4. Being an instance of a text in another text, it is, strictly speaking, a quotation; however, only on an (inter)textual level. In the fictional world constructed by the text it remains its "natural" part.
5. The framework provided to the instances of the Menardian text by its new context, both on the (inter)textual level and on the level of the fictional world of the respective text, gives rise to a new view on, or a new interpretation of, the Menardian text.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Borges 52.

<sup>125</sup> Kelly 77.

<sup>126</sup> The identity between texts is here that of Livingston's "locutionary text" which allows to consider differences, for example, in spelling and punctuation as instances of the same text. See Livingston 121-124.

<sup>127</sup> Due to practical reasons, this implies a fragmentary occurrence of the text – which is the case of Menard's *Don Quixote*. However, fragmentation is not a necessary condition.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Livingston's argument on the insufficiency of text identity to determine work identity:

(1) The text tokens, t1 and t2, generated by two writers are type-identical ('first Borgesian assumption').

(2) The two literary works, w1 and w2, which these writers produce in generating their respective tokens of this single text-type, have divergent artistic or aesthetic properties ('second Borgesian assumption').

The appearance of *Hamlet* is fragmentary, which is conditioned by the fact that it presents, more or less, only the instances of the text where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are present. These are made even more fragmentary, being represented only partially and appealing, thus, to the knowledge of Shakespeare as the top of the western literary canon. Moreover, the appearances of *Hamlet* are disrupted by an interpolation of stage directions that either serve to provide with extra context (gestures, movement etc.) or, mainly, for the comical effect of various characters confusing Rosencrantz with Guildenstern and *vice versa*. Nevertheless, as far as the speeches from *Hamlet* are concerned they remain intact.<sup>129</sup> It is interesting to note that in quoting the passage from *Hamlet* at the beginning of this essay, one cannot know whether I used the text of *Rosencrantz* at all. I might have simply copied the first quotation and just attach the name of Stoppard's play. As Danto notes, "nothing would be easier than to mistake a copy of Cervantes for a copy of Menard."<sup>130</sup>

As I noted before, the context is the decisive element that distinguishes the two instances of the same text as two different works.<sup>131</sup> As Borges's narrator observes, "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer."<sup>132</sup> While I do not want to imply any evaluative comparison of the two dramatic masterpieces in question, it is interesting to ponder a moment on the relation between the text and its con-text. Since I have set aside authorial intention, an essential part of Borges's short story, I have to dismiss the rejection of quotation as a device used in the construction of the text of *Rosencrantz*. Yet, the quotation does not seem to be a sufficient term for what one encounters in Stoppard's play. As Danto observes, "there is a difference to be marked between a copy and a quotation, in the respect that a copy, as suggested, merely replaces an original and inherits its structure and relationship to the world. [...] It is a general truth that

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(3) Two literary works with divergent artistic or aesthetic properties cannot be identical, so  $w1 \neq w2$  (from (1), (2), and an assumption about identity: if A is identical to B, A and B have the same (non-epistemic) properties).

(4)  $t1 \neq w1$  or  $t2 \neq w2$  (given (1) and the substitutivity of identity, if  $t1 = w1$  and  $t2 = w2$ , then  $w1 = w2$ , which is incompatible with (3)).

If this argument is sound, it establishes that textual identity is not sufficient to determine work identity in all cases.

Livingston 113. What determines the work identity in my definition is the con-text.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Kelly 72 and Cantor 88.

<sup>130</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981) 34.

<sup>131</sup> "[...] Menard's case thus points to content parameters of a work that are not *internal* in the sense that they would be fully determined by the text [...] We can insist that the literary function of individual elements of a work is determined by their place in the structure of a whole: but this whole cannot be defined by the limits of a text as the whole in which linguistic utterances acquire meaning cannot be defined by the limits of language." "[...] Menardův případ tedy poukazuje na obsahové parametry díla, které nejsou *interní* v tom smyslu, že by byly plně determinovány textem [...] Můžeme trvat na tom, že literární funkce jednotlivých prvků díla je určena jejich místem ve struktuře celku: ale tento celek nemůže být vymezen hranicemi textu, tak jako celek, v němž nabývají významu jazykové promluvy, nemůže být vymezen hranicemi jazyka." Kořátko 179. Author's translation.

<sup>132</sup> Borges 55.

quotations do not really possess the properties possessed by what is quoted: they *show* something that has those properties but do not have themselves.”<sup>133</sup> It is essential for the functioning of *Rosencrantz* that the instances of *Hamlet* have the properties that *Hamlet* possesses. Therefore, to paraphrase Borges’s narrator, Stoppard has created, only fragmentary, “the *Hamlet* itself.” How is this achieved?

The fourth point of my definition implies that the world of *Rosencrantz* is somehow, partly the fictional world of *Hamlet*. The word “intertextual” occurred above describing the relation between the two texts only in quotation marks, because the connection is better described as hypertextual. Gérard Genette calls *Rosencrantz* “a transfocalization of *Hamlet*” since “the *dramatis personae* of both plays are rigorously identical.”<sup>134</sup> Genette’s seminal work on narratology gives the definition of focalization as a “mode of regulating information, arising from the choice (or not) of a restrictive ‘point of view’.”<sup>135</sup> Even though Genette developed his term to avoid the visual connotations of “point of view,” the notion of the visual perspective is particularly useful for the consideration of *Rosencrantz*. One can paraphrase part of Guildenstern’s existential rumination on death to describe the appearances of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz*: “now you see it, now you don’t” (*Rosencrantz* 62). The verb “see” is particularly apt when thinking about Stoppard’s drama in terms of a theatrical performance. The important implication is that in *Rosencrantz* we are in *Hamlet*, but with a different distribution of *Hamlet*; obviously, the phrasing can be reversed to express the relationship from a different point of view.

Is, then, *Rosencrantz* “one of those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebière or Don Quixote on Wall Street [...] fit only—as he [Menard] would say—to produce the plebeian pleasure of anachronism or (what is worse) to enthrall us with the elementary idea that all epochs are the same or are different”?<sup>136</sup> Is it true, as Graver asserts, that Stoppard’s play “turns the most famous English tragedy inside out”?<sup>137</sup> The answer is simply “no.” The effect of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz* on *Hamlet*, or rather on our understanding of *Hamlet*, its interpretation, is essentially Menardian. As František Vrhel

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<sup>133</sup> Danto 36-37.

<sup>134</sup> Genette 292.

<sup>135</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) 185-186. An extended definition of Genette’s focalization can be found in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*: “Focalization denotes the perspectival restriction and orientation of narrative information relative to somebody’s (usually, a character’s) perception, imagination, knowledge, or point of view. Hence, focalization theory covers the various means of regulating, selecting, and channelling narrative information, particularly of seeing events from somebody’s point of view, no matter how subjective or fallible this point of view might turn out to be.” Manfred Jahn, “Focalization,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>136</sup> Borges 51-52.

<sup>137</sup> Graver 93.

observes, “Menard’s originality does not consist in the creation of a new text, but in ‘a suggestion’ that an old text can convey new meanings.”<sup>138</sup> Stoppard’s text is a play: he plays with his play, with Shakespeare’s play, with his audience, with the literary canon, with literary conventions and his play is the “hermeneutical play of *Pierre Menard*, the author of blessed tautology transformed into a creative act.”<sup>139</sup>

Speaking about the text itself, there is actually nothing inherently contradicting or overturning Shakespeare’s tragedy. The accuracy with which Stoppard’s drama follows Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is striking in view of what effect it has produced according to the Graver’s quote. This includes not only the Menardian *Hamlet*, but also the identity of the two main protagonists. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the same *dramatis personae* in *Hamlet* and in its “modern rewriting.” They are modelled on Vladimir and Estragon from *Waiting for Godot*, but they fulfil their roles in *Hamlet*. The modelling of their personality is a feature that would not be expected from the text of *Hamlet*, but does not, in any way, contradict its text.<sup>140</sup> What one arrives at is the fact that *Rosencrantz* does not reveal anything disturbing about *Hamlet* in itself, but by itself: it is not a revelation, only a tool for a revelation. What is disturbing is that what “turns *Hamlet* inside out” has been all the time there and to realize it one had to wait for Stoppard to write his play.

In *Rosencrantz* transfocalization (a different point of view) combines with the Menardian text (a new view) to produce a specific world where the two protagonists “are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces after all” (*Rosencrantz* 14). That the concept of hypertextuality and that of the Menardian text are both useful and apt in describing Stoppard’s play is not so surprising since Genette confesses his “debt” to the Borges’s short story as a source of his *Palimpsests*.<sup>141</sup> Obviously, then, the name of his extensive study derives from Menard’s observation on his own work that “it is permissible to see in this ‘final’ *Quixote* a kind of palimpsest.”<sup>142</sup> Genette comments on Menard’s *tour de force* that “in writing a rigorously literal *Don Quixote* from his own inspiration, Menard allegorizes the act of reading considered as, or disguised into, an act of writing.”<sup>143</sup> And what else is *Rosencrantz* than one such reading of *Hamlet*, a reading giving prominence to the two ambassadors of seeming

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<sup>138</sup> “[...] Menardova originalita netkví ve vytváření nového textu, nýbrž v ‘sugesci’, že starý text může sdělovat nové významy [...]” František Vrhel, “Borgesův Pierre Menard: kontexty a interpretace,” *Text a dílo: případ Menard*, eds. Karel Císař and Petr Kořátko (Praha: Filosofia, 2004) 33. Author’s translation.

<sup>139</sup> “[...] hermeneutická hra Pierra Menarda, autora posvěcené tautologie, proměněné v tvůrčí akt.” Vrhel 38. Author’s translation.

<sup>140</sup> See the following section.

<sup>141</sup> Genette admits that his study “is nothing other than the faithful transcription of a no less faithful nightmare, stemming from a hasty and, I fear, sketchy reading, in the dubious light of a few pages by Borges, of I know not what Dictionary of Works from All Times and All Countries.” Genette 394.

<sup>142</sup> Borges 54.

<sup>143</sup> Genette 252.

insignificance, “Ros” and “Guil,” in which, “when, at the play’s conclusion, we hear the announcement of their deaths, we hear it as we have never heard it before.”<sup>144</sup>

### **3.2. Cloning *Hamlet* after *Godot*: The Tragedy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “the indifferent children of earth”<sup>145</sup>**

*Hamlet* is a very significant presence in *Rosencrantz*. I will now move from the textual level to the level of the world created by the text. As the text of *Rosencrantz* is, to an extent, the text of *Hamlet*, its world is to an extent that of Hamlet, that is, of Shakespeare’s Renaissance world. The textual intrusion of *Hamlet* is complemented by similarity of several essential aspects of the world of Hamlet that are shared by the world of *Rosencrantz*. I have argued, despite the critical speech about the “topsy-turvydom”<sup>146</sup> of Stoppard’s play in relation to Shakespeare’s tragedy, an essentially replicating technique of Shakespeare’s text. It is my purpose now to show the similarities in the conditions of Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After all, Esslin himself recognized Shakespeare as an important forefather of the Theatre of the Absurd.<sup>147</sup>

*Hamlet* is a Renaissance play. Not only by the fact of being written in the Renaissance, but by portraying a Renaissance world. In his monograph on *Hamlet*, Paul Cantor says that “[t]he universality of the play is ultimately grounded in the fullness of its portrayal of its own age. *Hamlet* transcends its historical moment, not by ignoring it or leaving it behind, but by so completely capturing its essence that it becomes a prime source for later ages to understand the Renaissance.”<sup>148</sup> What Cantor has in mind is the portrayal of tensions “which reached their peak during the Renaissance.”<sup>149</sup> I will come to that later; now I want to point out some other Renaissance features of the play and the similarity to *Rosencrantz*.

*Hamlet*’s universe is the Renaissance, or Elizabethan, universe that “was still solidly theocentric.”<sup>150</sup> In his study on the Renaissance conception of world order, Tillyard points out to the problem of evidence of this order in drama: “[...] the conception of order is so taken for granted, so much part of the collective mind of the people, that it is hardly mentioned except in explicitly didactic passages.”<sup>151</sup> Indeed, references in *Hamlet* are scarce. One of them is the reference to Fortune, for example, in the comic dialogue between Hamlet and Rosencrantz

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<sup>144</sup> Kelly 81.

<sup>145</sup> *Hamlet* II, ii, 223.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. he previously quoted pronouncement by Graver as well as the quotes arguing for the essential absurdity of the play.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Esslin 322.

<sup>148</sup> Cantor 19.

<sup>149</sup> Cantor 59.

<sup>150</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Penguin, 1972) 12.

<sup>151</sup> Tillyard 17.

and Guildenstern (*Hamlet* II, ii, 223-232) where Hamlet calls Fortune “a strumpet” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 232). Fortune was the arbitrary agent of disorder, in the Renaissance world, but “ultimately fortune herself is, like nature, the tool of God and the educator of man.”<sup>152</sup> Fortune in her operations is the same principle as chance in *Rosencrantz* expressed in the description of the boat: though randomness is allowed, it is, ultimately, only a restricted system contained within a larger one. It is the orderly disorder dictated by the “Supreme Being”: the God in *Hamlet*; *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz*.

After all, *Rosencrantz* and Guildenstern are explicitly designated as “[t]wo Elizabethans” (*Rosencrantz* 9) as the first thing in the text. The specifically Elizabethan feature of the world is in both plays, in explicit terms, created by the reference to the period topic of the children players. In *Hamlet*, there is a lengthy dialogue concerning the topic preceding the entrance of the players (*Hamlet* II, ii, 322-352). In *Rosencrantz* the Player gives the reason for his asking so much for the performance offered to *Rosencrantz* and Guildenstern: “A nest of children carries the custom of the town. Juvenile companies, they are the fashion” (*Rosencrantz* 19). This is probably the most explicit signpost of the world of *Hamlet*. In one of the passages from *Hamlet* shared by both plays, Guildenstern invokes the heavens as a power with a determining influence: “Heavens make our presence and our practices/Pleasant and helpful to him” (*Rosencrantz* 28/*Hamlet* II, ii, 39). The world of *Hamlet* imposes the order of the Elizabethan world where “the stars dictated the general mutability of sublunary things.”<sup>153</sup>

*Rosencrantz* is presented as a Renaissance world in other, comic, ways as well. Just before his disappearance, or death, *Rosencrantz* gives a major clue to the position of *Rosencrantz* into Renaissance: “The sun’s going down. Or the earth’s coming up, as the fashionable theory has it” (*Rosencrantz* 92). Moreover, there are specific echoes of *Hamlet* that place the play into its world. Guildenstern’s remark that “the very *air* stinks” (*Rosencrantz* 24) is a voicing of the implication of Marcellus’s exclamation “[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark” (*Hamlet* I, iv, 90). The beginning of Act III of *Rosencrantz* grotesquely echoes the first scene of *Hamlet* stating its metaphysical undertones in a dismayed way:

*Opens in pitch darkness.*  
*Soft sea sounds.*  
*After several seconds of nothing, a voice from the dark ...*  
GUIL: Are you there?  
ROS: Where?

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<sup>152</sup> Tillyard 63. Tillyard observes that Elizabethans “were obsessed by the fear of chaos” (Tillyard 23); hence such names as “strumpet” for Fortune.

<sup>153</sup> Tillyard 60-61.

GUIL: (*Bitterly*) A flying start ...  
 (Pause.)  
 ROS: Is that you?  
 GUIL: Yes.  
 ROS: How do you know?  
 GUIL: (*Explosion*) Oh-for-God's-sake!  
 (*Rosencrantz 71*)

This exchange is dictated, again, by the immediate poetics of the text since one of the major questions challenged by the play is “role-playing versus identity.”<sup>154</sup> Nonetheless, the same question is important to *Hamlet* as well: at the beginning of the play he denies his acting ability – “I know not ‘seems’” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 76) – and then acts his madness. The scene from *Rosencrantz* points to the vital difference in the sameness of the two plays. In *Rosencrantz* almost everything that appears in *Hamlet* is downgraded from its dignified status. This is the result of the union of tragedy and comedy in tragicomedy.<sup>155</sup> Karl Guthke says that “one of the most dominant and most successful products of this union may be called metaphysical farce; its protagonists, it might be argued, are neither heroes nor non-heroes but anti-heroes.”<sup>156</sup> The loss of the tragic pathos is due to the fact that comedy “has usurped [...] the universal, ultimately metaphysical and religious themes of tragedy and turned them to its own advantage: more often than not, it is in comedy, rather than tragedy, that questions are being asked about some ‘ultimate’ meaning of human existence.”<sup>157</sup> In *Rosencrantz*, these questions are presented, appropriately, in a game of questions:

GUIL: What in God's name is going on?  
 [...]  
 GUIL: What does it all add up to?  
 [...]  
 ROS: Is there a choice?  
 GUIL: Is there a God?  
 [...]  
 GUIL: (*Seizing him violently*) WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?  
 (*Rosencrantz 32-33*)

The similarity between the initial scenes of the two plays has been pointed out already in the previous chapter. In his reading of *Hamlet*, G. Wilson Knight identifies the main theme of the play as death: “From the first scene to the last the shadow of death broods over this play. [...] Death is truly the theme of this play, for Hamlet's disease is mental and spiritual death.”<sup>158</sup> Jenkins comments on *Rosencrantz* that “the play contains at its centre an affecting

<sup>154</sup> Fleming 53.

<sup>155</sup> Curiously, Polonius's account of the players' repertoire, quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter, lacks the one combination of two of the primary genres in the repertoire that describes *Rosencrantz* best: tragicomedy. Cf. *Hamlet* II, ii, 387-390.

<sup>156</sup> Guthke 119.

<sup>157</sup> Guthke 120.

<sup>158</sup> G. Wilson Knight, “The Embassy of Death: An Essay on *Hamlet*,” *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 31.

exploration of what death means”<sup>159</sup>: it shares its theme with *Hamlet*. As Fleming observes about *Rosencrantz*, “the specter of death looms over the play.”<sup>160</sup> Though it is not literally a spectre as in *Hamlet* where death is embodied by the Ghost; in *Rosencrantz* it is the title which introduces the outcome of the play at the beginning nearing its fulfilment steadily. By the intertextual reference, it is also *Hamlet* and Hamlet that loom over the play as a deadly presence. Consistent with the downgrading effect of the metaphysical farce, death enters, in the text itself, as a “curious scientific phenomenon” (*Rosencrantz* 14) that Rosencrantz counterpoints to Guildenstern’s syllogistic reasoning and his metaphysical meditation in the shape of “the fact that fingernails grow after death, as does the beard” (*Rosencrantz* 14).

The Ghost represents various things. One of them is paradox and this is a major quality shared by *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz*: both plays are about entrapment of their protagonists by external circumstances in connection with their inner selves. In a convincing argument, Paul Cantor claims that *Hamlet*’s inaction and his dubious “heroism” are caused by two interconnected conditions: an impossible demand made by the Ghost and “the Renaissance ideal of totality [which] pushed human nature to its limits and thereby uncovered the great theme of tragedy: the ultimate incompatibility of different human desires and aspirations.”<sup>161</sup> Commenting on the Ghost’s challenge to revenge him ending with the warning “But howsoever thou pursuest this act,/Taint not thy mind” (*Hamlet* I, v, 84-85), Cantor observes that “from the very beginning, the ghost places the prince in a double bind, a situation in which, no matter what he does, he will be forced to violate some legitimate principle.”<sup>162</sup>

There is impossibility also in the predicament of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When they are summoned they are told that it is an “official business and no questions asked” (*Rosencrantz* 15). They are told nothing; they have no a priori knowledge of their business, and are ordered to ask nothing which is the only means they can get to know anything. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are thus deprived of activity from the very beginning, even before the beginning, since the only time they are active is when they play questions. The demand deprives them of their vital activity, as shows their following exchange echoing the beginning of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy:

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<sup>159</sup> Jenkins 49.

<sup>160</sup> Fleming 64.

<sup>161</sup> Cantor 14.

<sup>162</sup> Cantor 23. The impossibility of the demand might be seen from another point of view. Knight, in his essay, approaches the problem as a problem of Hamlet’s psyche at odds with activity: “Hamlet, when we first meet him, has lost all sense of life’s significance. To a man bereft of the sense of purpose there is no possibility of creative action, it has no meaning. No act but suicide is rational. Yet to Hamlet comes the command of a great act—revenge: therein lies the unique quality of the play—a sick soul is commanded to heal, to cleanse, to create harmony.” Knight 20-21.

ROS: [...] Where's it going to end?  
GUIL: That's the question.  
ROS: It's *all* questions.  
(*Rosencrantz* 33)

There is another sense of impossibility in their task. The two protagonists are summoned by the King to find out “[t]he very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 49) when Hamlet is not actually mad which the King knows as he himself says: “what he spake, though it lacked form a little,/Was not like madness” (*Hamlet* III, i, 162-163). The rehearsal to question Hamlet is successful: “To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped on to his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice.” (*Rosencrantz* 38) Yet, they are both baffled: after his summary Rosencrantz asks “[n]ow why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?” and Guildenstern answers “I can’t imagine! (*Pause.*) But all that is well known, common property. Yet he sent for us. And we did come” (*Rosencrantz* 38). As Egri puts it “[w]ho is the joke on? Ros and Guil, who invent verbal games with loosely observed, self-defeating rules, endeavouring to learn what they know? The King, who, unaware of what everybody is aware of, gives Ros and Guil instructions to clarify what is clear? Hamlet, who is observed in the hope that he would give away what is generally known?”<sup>163</sup>

To explain another problem in the Ghost’s demand, I have to explain, to some extent, Cantor’s argument. Cantor says that Renaissance “was characterised by an uneasy and unstable alliance of classical and Christian elements.”<sup>164</sup> The clash of these two worlds was visible also in the problem of heroism: “[...] the tendency of Christianity is to redefine heroism so that suffering misery becomes a higher or deeper form of heroism than inflicting misery [...] the pride and power of the classical hero is regarded as the height of sin in Christian terms.”<sup>165</sup> The central dilemma is embodied by the Ghost who is “at one and the same time a pagan and a Christian figure, and as such points to the heart of Hamlet’s tragic dilemma as a modern Christian charged with the ancient pagan task of revenge.”<sup>166</sup> The play is about death which for a modern Christian means also the salvation of the soul: “The fact that an eternity is at stake in his deeds gives him good reason to pause and consider their consequences. [...] The most striking fact about the afterlife for Hamlet is that he cannot know with certainty what it will be like.”<sup>167</sup> Hamlet’s open-mindedness “to all the competing

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<sup>163</sup> Egri 41.

<sup>164</sup> Cantor 2.

<sup>165</sup> Cantor 5.

<sup>166</sup> Cantor 30.

<sup>167</sup> Cantor 39.

models of heroism available in the Renaissance”<sup>168</sup> seems to be “his tragic trait, which is also his greatness [and] is fatal to him.”<sup>169</sup>

Hamlet’s problem is, like that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, epistemological uncertainty which leads him to the same fluctuation between two principles as Guildenstern: “rather than pursuing one heroic model to an extreme, he moves back and forth between a number of competing heroic models, subjecting them all in the process to a critique.”<sup>170</sup> Though the subject of Guildenstern’s questioning is the ontology of the world and not a heroic model, both has the same implications in their respective situations: they condition the protagonists’ action. In *Rosencrantz*, speech supplants action because one might discover that every action is predetermined, that there is no free choice; because, due to the roles prescribed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the text of *Hamlet*, there is almost nothing to do; and, because words are all there is.

Hamlet sets himself in opposition to classical heroism when he speaks about Claudius: “My father’s brother, but no more like my father/Than I to Hercules” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 152-153). Therefore, “[t]he savagery of classical heroism must be transformed into something more civilised [...] As his talk of hypocrisy suggests, the inhibition of his ability to act opens up the gap between words and deeds.”<sup>171</sup> Indeed, Hamlet fails to follow his own advice to the players to “[s]uit the action to the word” (*Hamlet* III, ii, 16). It is no coincidence that this observation echoes the situation of language in the Theatre of the Absurd.<sup>172</sup> In his essay analyzing the “dramaturgy of delay,” Robert Hapgood points out to the similarity between “a basic rhythm of arrested action”<sup>173</sup> of the play and the Theatre of the Absurd. Hapgood traces this element in various manifestations in the play and connects it with the excess of speaking instead of acting. In his words, “[i]n the same sense that *Hamlet* – for all that happens in it – is about not acting, *Hamlet* – for all its more than 3700 lines – is also about not talking.”<sup>174</sup>

On another level, Hamlet’s talking is an effort to understand himself. In the Renaissance cosmos, one of the differences between man and angels, in the chain of being, is

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<sup>168</sup> Cantor 11.

<sup>169</sup> A. C. Bradley, “The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy,” *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 15.

<sup>170</sup> Cantor 51.

<sup>171</sup> Cantor 37.

<sup>172</sup> Echoing Esslin’s observation that Shakespeare is a forefather of the Theatre of the Absurd, Cantor observes the following on *Hamlet*’s transitional status: “it seems to be uniquely situated at the intersection of ancient and modern literature. On the one hand, Hamlet strikes us as the most modern of Shakespeare’s heroes, caught up in a kind of questioning and doubt that seems all-too-familiar to us in the twentieth century. [...] Thus *Hamlet* has a peculiarly rich texture: it has passages that sound as though they could have come from an Elizabethan translation of the *Iliad*, but at other times the dialogue seems to anticipate a work like *Waiting for Godot*.” Cantor ix.

<sup>173</sup> Hapgood 134.

<sup>174</sup> Hapgood 139.

that “[t]he angels understand intuitively, man by the painful use of the discursive reason.”<sup>175</sup> Hamlet’s soliloquies are attempts to recognize where he stands: what is he going to do in the present state of affairs? As Bakhtin has observed “[a] dialogic relationship to one’s own self defines the genre of the soliloquy. It is a discussion with oneself.”<sup>176</sup> Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz repeatedly whether Hamlet is talking “to himself” (*Rosencrantz* 68). In other words, Hamlet “asks question before he shoots.” Words supplant action because Hamlet is meditative and contemplates the consequences of his acts: acts are here supplanted by speech acts.<sup>177</sup> However, the Player’s words to Guildenstern suit Hamlet maybe even more: “You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn” (*Rosencrantz* 48). The doubt and self-questioning of Hamlet approach absurdity.

The dramaturgy of delay has three stages: firstly, “the intense declaration of purpose”; secondly, “the arrestment of action”; thirdly, “the final, sudden, almost inadvertent success that seems to come of itself.”<sup>178</sup> After comparing tellingly this structure of action with the scene of raising Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*, Hapgood concludes that “‘Waiting on Hamlet’ is clearly an important part of the effect of Shakespeare’s play.”<sup>179</sup> What is an important implication of the dramaturgy of delay and connects Shakespeare’s play with Stoppard’s is the fact that “[a]bove all, the dramaturgy of delay contributes to our sense of a world in which direct action and speech are extremely difficult, almost impossible.”<sup>180</sup> When Rosencrantz asks “[s]houldn’t we be doing something – constructive?,” Guildenstern answers “[w]hy? They’ve got us placed now – if we start moving around, we’ll all be chasing each other all night” (*Rosencrantz* 31).

What is already present in *Hamlet* comes to the fore in *Rosencrantz*: that is the basic sameness of the two plays. Challenging the formula promoted by critics in the first chapter, the formula I promote, if it is desirable to explain the text’s poetics in terms of “pseudo-mathematics” at all, is

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<sup>175</sup> Tillyard 79. As Tillyard says, the mind in Renaissance has been seen as consisting of two parts, understanding and will. He observes that “[i]t may not be an accident that of the heroes in Shakespeare’s four tragic masterpieces two, Othello and Lear, are defective in understanding and two, Hamlet and Macbeth, in will.” Tillyard 79.

<sup>176</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 120.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. the following account of the beginning of *Hamlet* in terms of speech acts given by Ohmann: “By contrast, tragedies are often more varied in illocutionary acts, as if to establish at the start a fuller range of human emotion and action. *Hamlet* begins with a question, a refusal, two commands, a kind of loyalty oath (‘long live the king’), a question, a statement, a compliment, a statement, an order, thanks, and a complaint – all this, of course, between two guardsmen.” Richard Ohmann, “Speech, Action, and Style,” *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) 253.

<sup>178</sup> Hapgood 144-145.

<sup>179</sup> Hapgood 145.

<sup>180</sup> Hapgood 143.

where *Hamlet* is exponentiated, in other words, amplified, to a power of *Waiting for Godot* stressing the similarity between *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz*. That is to say, the features latently present in *Hamlet* are amplified by the use of various elements from *Waiting for Godot*. This is the basic structure of the drama upon which is imposed the poetic principle of the “two sides of the same coin” so that the text provides its relativistic probe resulting, among other things, in an “exercise in dramatic deconstruction.”<sup>181</sup>

### **3.3. Subversion Subverted: From Hypertext to Metatext and Back to Hypotext**

Though the two plays are very similar, the point of view is that of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, as far as *Hamlet* is concerned. However, Stoppard’s play does not present an “offstage of *Hamlet*.”<sup>182</sup> As a case in point we can take the instance when *Rosencrantz* shouts “Lord Hamlet!” and *Hamlet* indeed comes (*Rosencrantz* 66). This is a proof that the intention of the two protagonists is not consistently opposed by the text of *Hamlet* to show their insignificance, but that the text is followed along its lines regardless of any point to be made. The following scene is the second scene of Act IV in *Hamlet*. In spite of the Menardian nature of the scene, as shown above, there is a difference in stage directions, and, therefore, in action. In the text of *Hamlet* it is *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* who come, enter the stage; *Hamlet* is already on it. When *Hamlet*, after seeing *Fortinbras*’s forces, goes to say his soliloquy, the stage direction says “HAMLET turns to face upstage” (*Rosencrantz* 69). The supposition that he actually faces “audience” and *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* are in the background is wrong: all of them are facing audience.

The point of the play is to show the plurality of perspectives: each play, *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz*, has its own audience. Together with the presentation of the two protagonists facing similar situation as *Hamlet* himself, this is a more powerful critique than such where Stoppard would have produced entirely different circumstances or kept the point of view of *Hamlet*. However, by partly preserving the sameness, Stoppard’s play does not “produce the plebeian pleasure of anachronism” neither it tries “to enthrall us with the elementary idea”<sup>183</sup> that we are all *Hamlets*. The point of the play is to stress the insignificance of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* as characters in *Hamlet*. The criticism on Stoppard’s drama swarms with idioms capturing the insignificant role of the two protagonists: they are, for example, “two

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<sup>181</sup> Egri 41.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Kelly 77.

<sup>183</sup> Borges 51-52.

coin-tossing attendants,”<sup>184</sup> “the lackeys of world history,”<sup>185</sup> or “the celebrated nonentities.”<sup>186</sup> In this play, “point of view is everything.”<sup>187</sup>

As Cantor observes, [p]erspectivism has proved to be the key to twentieth-century reworkings of *Hamlet*.<sup>188</sup> *Hamlet* becomes the subject of criticism as *the* text established by the workings of the canon at the very top of western literary art: “Having emerged as a cultural icon, the play has become subject to the iconoclastic tendencies of modernism.”<sup>189</sup> Therein lies, according to me, the absurdity of the play that is not dependent on the text and predetermines the perception of the play as absurd(ist). The absurdity is induced by the incongruence of the premise lying behind the genesis of the text: to “retell” the story of Hamlet, one of the most famous of western literary heroes from the point of view of two minor characters “[s]o expendable as to have been omitted from some productions of the play, so colourless as to have become theatrical bywords for anonymity.”<sup>190</sup> In Guildenstern’s words, the knowledge of the premise of the play is “like being ambushed by a grotesque” (*Rosencrantz* 29).

*Rosencrantz* attacks the mythic position of Hamlet. As Knight puts it, Hamlet “is a superman among men.”<sup>191</sup> The view of Hamlet, which the play tries to present, is, in Knight’s words, “the figure of Hamlet pale with the consciousness of death. He is the ambassador of death walking amid life.”<sup>192</sup> Knight’s essay sounds the chord of *Rosencrantz*, of a rewriting of *Hamlet*. Majority of the essay is, perhaps even more applicable to *Rosencrantz* than to *Hamlet*. This is because the essay is written “from the point of view” of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of all the other characters of *Hamlet* apart from its protagonist.<sup>193</sup> Like Terence Hawke’s essay “*Telmah*” and like Stoppard’s drama, it is a reading that goes against “the orthodox Hamlet-centered interpretation of the play.”<sup>194</sup> Knight warns that “[t]he popularity of the play is not innocent of misunderstanding”<sup>195</sup> which is the unanimously accepted point of view of Hamlet.

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<sup>184</sup> Jenkins ix.

<sup>185</sup> Guthke 123.

<sup>186</sup> Graver 93.

<sup>187</sup> Jenkins 45.

<sup>188</sup> Cantor 87.

<sup>189</sup> Cantor 85.

<sup>190</sup> Jenkins 41-42.

<sup>191</sup> Knight 42.

<sup>192</sup> Knight 35.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Knight 43-44.

<sup>194</sup> Terence Hawkes, “*Telmah*,” *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 2005) 317.

<sup>195</sup> Knight 32.

Knight calls the entrance of the Ghost a “sepulchral cataclysm.”<sup>196</sup> The Ghost brings with himself the knowledge of death. Hamlet’s burden is one of knowing, in Knight’s words, of remembrance.<sup>197</sup> Though the Ghost withholds a tale that “Would harrow up thy soul” (*Hamlet* I, v, 16), he tells Hamlet one of “Murder most foul, as in the best it is,/But this most foul, strange and unnatural” (*Hamlet* I, v, 27-28) and does to Hamlet almost the same. At one point in her narrative of her encounter with Hamlet, Ophelia describes Hamlet looking “As if he had been loosed out of hell/To speak of horrors” (*Hamlet* II, i, 83-84). This is a description fitting perfectly the Ghost of Hamlet’s father: like Ghost, like Hamlet. However, as Knight points out, Hamlet is already exhibiting signs of his “peculiar disease”<sup>198</sup> when the Ghost appears: “To Hamlet the light has been extinguished from the things of earth. He has lost all sense of purpose.”<sup>199</sup> When Marcellus and Horatio warn Hamlet not to follow the Ghost, he answers “Why, what should be the fear?/I do not set my life at a pin’s fee” (*Hamlet* I, iv, 64).

As A. C. Bradley has put it in his classical account of Shakespearean tragedy, the supernatural “gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence.”<sup>200</sup> That Hamlet is preoccupied with death can be easily seen in his first soliloquy starting “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 129-130). If the criticism of Hamlet by *Rosencrantz* is to be functional at all, one thing has to be said: nowhere in the play is Hamlet mad. He knows it, though he announces proudly at the beginning “I know not ‘seems’” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 76); the audience knows it; the characters around him observe it, though they cannot be certain<sup>201</sup>; and as Bradley says, “[i]f Lear were really mad when he divided his kingdom, if Hamlet were

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<sup>196</sup> Knight 45.

<sup>197</sup> Cf. Knight 47. Note that the burden of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is one of unknowing: again, there is a difference in sameness between the two plays. Curiously, had their conditions in this particularity been reversed, their lives would have been better – their stories would have turned into comedies; in the case of Hamlet ending in the marriage with Ophelia. Knight observes that “[h]ad Hamlet forgotten both the Ghost’s commands, it would have been well, since Claudius is a good king, and the Ghost but a minor spirit.” Knight 48. Knight also adds that “had he remembered both it would have been still better—Hamlet would probably have felt his fetters drop from his soul, he would have stepped free, then—but not till then—have been a better king than Claudius, and, finally, the unrestful spirit would know peace.” Knight 48. However, as it has been observed, the second hypothetical outcome would destroy an essential part of *Hamlet* since “Hamlet acquires depth as a character precisely because he cannot play the straightforward classical role of the aggressive hero.” Cantor 37.

<sup>198</sup> Knight 23.

<sup>199</sup> Knight 18.

<sup>200</sup> Bradley 9.

<sup>201</sup> Polonius remarks, in his aside, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 202-203). Guildenstern calls Hamlet’s disposition “a crafty madness” (*Hamlet* III, i, 8). After hearing Hamlet’s discourse with Ophelia, Claudius remarks that “what he spake, though it lacked form a little,/Was not like madness” (*Hamlet* III, i, 162-163).

really mad at any time in the story, they would cease to be tragic characters.”<sup>202</sup> Hamlet is “bitterly cynical.”<sup>203</sup>

In his essay, Knight says that “[w]e [humanity] have done ill to sentimentalize his [Hamlet’s] personality [...] we have been unable to sympathize with the demon of cynicism, and its logical result of callous cruelty.”<sup>204</sup> Knight’s essay might be seen as radical,<sup>205</sup> but he is right: Hamlet is cruel no matter that he is right.<sup>206</sup> Stoppard’s play shows Hamlet somewhat in this murderous view. The Player voices the doubt about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*: “Traitors hoist by their own petard? – or victims of the gods? – we shall never know” (*Rosencrantz* 61). Fleming states that “[p]assivity and fate are the downfall of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.”<sup>207</sup> We have seen that in *Rosencrantz* as in *Hamlet* there is fate “which seems to determine, far more than they [the characters], their native dispositions and their circumstances, and through these, their action; which is so vast and complex that they can scarcely at all understand it or control its workings.”<sup>208</sup> The passivity is the frustration of action due to their epistemological uncertainty and their awe before the superimposed world of *Hamlet*: as Guildenstern says “we are little men, we don’t know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera – it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings” (*Rosencrantz* 81).

I have already remarked on the suspension of Hamlet’s action; nevertheless, there is a change in the last act of the play. Cantor notes that “[t]he new Hamlet of Act V is a fatalist, convinced that nothing he can do will alter the outcome of events if God wills otherwise.”<sup>209</sup> Hamlet reveals his fatalistic attitude when he reports to Horatio the opening of letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting,  
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay  
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly –  
And praised be rashness for it. Let us know  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,

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<sup>202</sup> Bradley 8. Cf. Knight 22. Knight observes that the only time when Hamlet only nears madness is with Ophelia: “[...] absolute loss of control is apparent only in his dealings with Ophelia.” Knight 23.

<sup>203</sup> Knight 23.

<sup>204</sup> Knight 29.

<sup>205</sup> However, similar account can be found in Hawkes and Jan Kott says that “Hamlet feigns madness, he puts on, in cold blood, a mask of madness in order to perform a coup d’état.” Jan Kott, “Hamlet of the Mid-Century,” *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966) 62.

<sup>206</sup> It has to be noted that though Knight paints Hamlet only in shades of black in his essay, he admits that Hamlet is justified in his actions: “There is no question but that Hamlet is right. The King’s smiles hide murder, his mother’s love for her new consort is unfaithfulness to Hamlet’s father, Ophelia has deserted Hamlet at the hour of his need. Hamlet’s philosophy may be inevitable, blameless, and irrefutable. But it is the negation of life. It is death.” Knight 37.

<sup>207</sup> Fleming 59.

<sup>208</sup> Bradley 22.

<sup>209</sup> Cantor 54.

When our deep plots do pall. And that should teach us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will –  
(*Hamlet* V, ii, 4-11)

When Hamlet later reports that he had his father's signet to duplicate the Danish royal seal he exclaims that "even in that was heaven ordinaunt" (*Hamlet* V, ii, 48). It was not only Hamlet, but rather Providence that dispatched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death, which suggests that the two were rather "victims of the gods" (*Rosencrantz* 61). Hamlet speaks also of rashness. In her essay, Diana Devlin observes that "after his departure to England Hamlet is never alone again, and therefore speaks no further soliloquies. The fighting inside his head has been replaced with real fighting."<sup>210</sup> Cantor comments that "Hamlet's diminished sense of ethical responsibility is a dangerous tendency."<sup>211</sup> Cantor recognizes the cold-bloodedness of Hamlet's act: "His fatalistic feelings about his struggle with Claudius are after all what allowed him to send the relatively innocent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their 'sudden death,/Not shriving time allow'd', and claim a clear conscience about the deed."<sup>212</sup> Hamlet himself acknowledges the unethicalness of his act:

[...] in the dark  
Groped I to find out them, had my desire,  
Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew  
To mine own room again, making so bold,  
My fears forgetting manners, to unseal  
Their grand commission [...]  
(*Hamlet* V, ii, 13-18).

As Devlin rightly comments, Hamlet's "explanation reveals a necessary and expedient ruthlessness and places him for the first time on equal footing with Claudius."<sup>213</sup> Though Hamlet employs the methods of Claudius and his employees previously and, thus, already stoops to their level: in Polonius's words, "Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth,/And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,/With windlasses and with assays of bias,/By indirections find directions out" (*Hamlet* II, i, 63-66). Nevertheless, when he voices the tragic condition of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, after commenting on his actions, Hamlet sets himself at the same level as Claudius: "'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes/Between the pass and fell incensèd points/Of mighty opposites" (*Hamlet* V, ii, 60-62). Hamlet denotes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern specifically as "baser nature," that is, "little men" in Guildenstern's words; this, again, suggest rather their innocence, their point of view.

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<sup>210</sup> Diana Devlin, "Has Hamlet Changed at All, after His Return from England?," *Hamlet (Longman Critical Essays)*, eds. Linda Cookson and Brian Loughrey (London: Longman, 1992) 105.

<sup>211</sup> Cantor 54.

<sup>212</sup> Cantor 54.

<sup>213</sup> Devlin 106.

Yet for all the “subversive” reading of *Hamlet* against Hamlet,<sup>214</sup> there is another turn. The similarity of the two plays contributes to a reversion in the subversion. Kott observes that characters in *Hamlet* “are actors in a drama they do not always wholly understand, in which they have become involved”<sup>215</sup> and recognizes that “*Hamlet* is a drama of imposed situations, and here lies the key to modern interpretations of the play.”<sup>216</sup> Kott has in mind interpretation in the sense of a particular performance interpreting the text of *Hamlet*; however, this is also the condition of the two eponymous protagonists of Stoppard’s drama. Kott puts it wittily when he says that “*Hamlet* is like a sponge [...] it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.”<sup>217</sup> The revolt against the inhuman and the superhuman Hamlet<sup>218</sup> and his mythical position in our culture is contained already in the text itself.

Knight observes the subversion in the “two different modes of poetic vision and technique: one for Hamlet, one for the other persons. They are placed together, and our sympathies are divided.”<sup>219</sup> This is similar to what Terence Hawkes observes in his essay as the “recursive mode” of the play and calls it “*Telmah: Hamlet backwards*.”<sup>220</sup> Hawkes sees the main source of this recursiveness in the avuncular role of Claudius and the failure of the dumb show preceding the Murder of Gonzago to elicit his reaction to the replay of his crime.<sup>221</sup> The recursiveness thus lies in Claudius’s perspective. In the same sense is *Rosencrantz*, the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “a manifestation of *Telmah* [...] the disruption of the normally smooth and, in terms of individual ‘personality’ (Hamlet’s or Shakespeare’s), explainable surface of a text that our society has appropriated as a manifestation of great (and thus reassuring) art.”<sup>222</sup>

However, as Hawkes explains, *Telmah* is “a sense of an everpresent potential challenge and contradiction *within* and *implied by* the text that we name *Hamlet*. In this sense, *Telmah* coexists with, is coterminous with *Hamlet*, in a way that must strike us, finally, as

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<sup>214</sup> This is manifest as well in Guildenstern’s summary of Hamlet’s symptoms in which the Prince looks like a petty ridiculous lunatic, though the description ultimately points to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s incomprehension:

GUIL: It really boils down to symptoms. Pregnant replies, mystic allusions, mistaken identities, arguing his father is his mother, that sort of thing; intimations of suicide, forgoing of exercise, loss of mirth, hints of claustrophobia not to say delusions of imprisonment; invocations of camels, chameleons, capons, whales, weasels, hawks, handsaws – riddles, quibbles and evasions; amnesia, paranoia, myopia; day-dreaming, hallucinations; stabbing his elders, abusing his parents, insulting his lover, and appearing hatless in public – knock-kneed, droop-stockinged and sighing like a love-sick schoolboy, which at his age is coming on a bit strong.  
(*Rosencrantz* 85-86)

<sup>215</sup> Kott 64.

<sup>216</sup> Kott 67.

<sup>217</sup> Kott 64.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Knight 41-42.

<sup>219</sup> Knight 47.

<sup>220</sup> Hawkes 312.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. Hawkes 317. See the next chapter.

<sup>222</sup> Hawkes 327.

impossible.”<sup>223</sup> This confirms my view that *Rosencrantz* turns Hamlet “inside out” by revealing something that is already present there. Paradoxically, in the spirit of *Telmah*, the “sameness” of *Hamlet* and its criticism, achieved by replication on the textual level as well as on the level of the worlds created by the texts, is both the best means to subvert the “scripture” of *Hamlet* and the way which leads back to Shakespeare’s drama. Thus, the relation of *Rosencrantz* to *Hamlet* leads via circle from hypertext to metatext and reverts back to its hypotext. The criticism of *Hamlet* is also the acknowledgement of its position, since in *Hamlet*, “there is everything you want.”<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Hawkes 328.

<sup>224</sup> Kott 59.

[...] play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.<sup>225</sup>

Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious.<sup>226</sup>

## 4. The Play With(in) the Play

Stoppard’s drama is born out of the spirit of the play in the broadest sense of the word which has been explored by Johan Huizinga in his classical study *Homo Ludens*. I do not wish to draw similarities between theatrical play and play as the abstract concept since I would end up repeating Huizinga; nevertheless, it has to be said that *Rosencrantz* is essentially ludic: the characters as well as the author are members of the species *homo ludens*, the species of culture. Stoppard’s play is ludic also in a more restricted sense. Towards the end of his study, Genette remarks that “the pleasure of the hypertext is also a *game*. [...] One could even go so far as to say that every form of hypertextuality entails some kind of game, inherent in the very practice of reusing existing structures.”<sup>227</sup> Play is even a major theme of *Rosencrantz*, so much that the play is largely metafictional; considering the specifics of the genre, it is meta-dramatic, or meta-theatrical.

### 4.1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Search of an Exit

Keyssar-Franke says that “[f]rom the title of the play and its obvious relationship to *Hamlet*, through the emphasis on the Player and the number of speeches about theatre, Stoppard stresses that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a probing of the nature of the meaning and experience of theatre, past and present.”<sup>228</sup> It might be expected, from the title of Stoppard’s drama and the famous inscription on the wall of the Globe Theatre *totus mundus facit histrionem*, that the hypotext for Stoppard’s drama, in its play dimension, is *Hamlet*, or, at least, Shakespeare’s theatricality since Jacques voices the idiom explicitly in *As You Like It*:

All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages

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<sup>225</sup> Huizinga 1.

<sup>226</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Partial Magic in the *Quixote*,” *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans. David A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964) 187.

<sup>227</sup> Genette 399.

<sup>228</sup> Keyssar-Franke 86.

(*As You Like It* II, vii, 140-144)<sup>229</sup>

Huizinga observes that in Shakespeare's time "[i]t was the fashion to liken the world to a stage on which every man plays his part"; however, "[o]n closer examination this fashionable comparison of life to a stage proves to be little more than an echo of the Neoplatonism that was then in vogue, with a markedly moralistic accent. It was a variation on the ancient theme of the vanity of all things."<sup>230</sup> Eric Bentley provides the following commentary on Jacques's monologue:

Shakespeare didn't mean it. Pirandello did. For Shakespeare, or maybe just for his Jacques who says the line, the notion is merely illustrative. At best a comparison: life reminds one of drama in one or two vivid ways. No problem is seen therein. In Pirandello, it is all problem, even agony—that one cannot escape from play-acting. If there is any truth in that, then theatre embodies the profoundest pain and conflict – a whole destiny.<sup>231</sup>

Stoppard's play is more radical in its meta-theatricality than Shakespeare's and its hypotext besides Beckett's first play and *Hamlet* is Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.<sup>232</sup> The difference between Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays is both in quantity and quality of the meta-dramatic aspect. In *Rosencrantz*, fiction, the illusion of theatre, is a theme from the very beginning: the initial tossing of the coin is a spectacle, or spectre, of fiction which asserts that "the play is a conscious creation, an illusion (or at least a separate reality), and a play."<sup>233</sup> The drama contains several self-reflexive elements that create the *mise en abyme* effect: the initial scene; the story about a man seeing a unicorn (*Rosencrantz* 16-17); the story about "a Chinaman of the Tang Dynasty – and, by which definition, a philosopher" who dreamt of being a butterfly (*Rosencrantz* 44); the boat of Act III is a metaphor of stage on which players are "contained" with their movement prescribed by the text of the play (*Rosencrantz* 73)<sup>234</sup>; and the play within the play. The players are the embodiment of theatre, "their incessant slapstick and mock histrionics infuse the stage with playfulness. In fact, in all their onstage moments they call attention to and celebrate the

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<sup>229</sup> Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>230</sup> Huizinga 5.

<sup>231</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Pirandello Commentaries* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1986) xii.

<sup>232</sup> Katherine Kelly is doubtful about the connection between Stoppard and Pirandello: "If he is specifically indebted to Pirandello, which I doubt, Stoppard's debt lies less in his use of actors as characters than in his broad exploration of the mutually penetrating realms of art and life." Kelly 77. Helene Keyssar-Franke observes the connection to Pirandello yet claims that "Stoppard's purpose is very different from that of Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or for that matter, from Shakespeare's in *Hamlet*." Keyssar-Franke 92.

<sup>233</sup> Keyssar-Franke 89.

<sup>234</sup> Guildenstern expresses his theatrical fate when he remarks "I think I'll spend most of my life on boats" (*Rosencrantz* 73).

practice of dramatic play itself.”<sup>235</sup> The dialogues are permeated with allusions to the ontological status of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters in a play:

ROS: (*Looks out over the audience*) Rings a bell.  
GUIL: They’re waiting to see what we’re going to do.  
(*Rosencrantz* 63)

All this suggests, as Jenkins puts it, that “[i]n Stoppard’s theatre, the stage is, first and foremost, a stage, just as the radio is a box of sounds.”<sup>236</sup> This is the Pirandellian theatre where “the boards of the theatre represent—the boards of the theatre. That is to say, they do not represent, they are. They are appearances which are the reality: the quintessential Pirandellian principle.”<sup>237</sup> This is not so in Shakespeare’s drama. From the beginning, Hamlet is preoccupied with the problem of appearance versus essence. When he says “I know not ‘seems’ [...] I have that within which passeth show” (*Hamlet* I, ii, 76 and 85), “[t]he figure of Hamlet introduces itself with an ontological claim to an essence independent of both role models and behavioural models.”<sup>238</sup> Cantor observes that “[i]n the end, rather than reminding us that the reality of the action on stage is mere acting, the presence of the players in *Hamlet* suggests how much of what passes for action in the real world is in fact a form of acting.”<sup>239</sup> This holds true also for the two meta-theatrical micro-structures.

The story of Pyrrhus reflects, to an extent, the action of *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s arrested revenge is like Pyrrhus’s sword which “seemed i’ the air to stick” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 465) and Hamlet, like Pyrrhus himself, “like a neutral to his will and matter/Did nothing” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 467-468). The lines are an echo of Hamlet’s reproach to himself for his inability to act.<sup>240</sup> At the end of the drama, Hamlet, like Pyrrhus, is “horridly tricked/With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 443-444) having killed Polonius, Laertes, Claudius,

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<sup>235</sup> Robert Egan, “A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,” *Theatre Journal* March 1979: 62. Egan also observes the parallelism of the players to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “Shabby and unheroic, traveling in a random direction toward an unknown goal, the Tragedians play out the roles predetermined for them by the gory melodramas of their repertoire. We immediately sense a metaphor here for the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, soon to enact the parts dictated to them by Shakespeare’s script.” Egan 61.

<sup>236</sup> Jenkins ix.

<sup>237</sup> Bentley 76.

<sup>238</sup> Greiner, Bernhard, “The Birth of the Subject out of the Spirit of the Play within the Play: The *Hamlet* Paradigm,” *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, eds. Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 4.

<sup>239</sup> Cantor 64.

<sup>240</sup> Hamlet’s words come after his welcome to the players as a part of his second soliloquy:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,  
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,  
A scullion!  
(*Hamlet* II, ii, 565-573)

having contributed directly to the deaths of Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and having witnessed the death of Gertrude drinking the poison intended for him. The play within the play, the Murder of Gonzago, is connected more directly to the encompassing play. Though the play within the play “calls for the breakdown of the spectator’s suspension of disbelief and draws his attention to the purpose of this mise-en-abîme structure,”<sup>241</sup> the Murder of Gonzago foregrounds other aspects.

Within its external frame, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the play within the play serves mainly as a proof of Claudius’s guilt, as an assurance that the Ghost spoke the truth. This is dubious. In his essay, Terence Hawkes evokes an essay written by Walter Greg in which he points to the discrepancy between the story of the murder of King Hamlet as told by the Ghost and the failure of the dumb show as the staging of the murder to elicit a proper reaction on Claudius’s part. As Hawkes comments, “[t]he ‘orthodox view’ of the play, which requires an objective truthbearing Ghost, with Claudius properly indicted by its testimony as the dastardly poisoning villain of the story, ignores or tries to think ‘around’ the dumb-show.”<sup>242</sup> Hawkes continues to observe the disruptive effect of this fact: “For Greg, the ‘extraordinary nature’ of the dumb-show needs to be grasped. If we do so, we can see how genuinely upsetting Claudius’s negative response to it is. Its effect is to ‘promote’ Claudius.”<sup>243</sup> Claudius is then “a *victim* of the Ghost’s malicious reportage as much as a villain in terms of the way the play is usually seen” and “genuinely, as the play terms him, no simple mustache-twirling criminal, but Hamlet’s ‘mighty opposite’; an impressive figure of potentially tragic stature.”<sup>244</sup> In *Hamlet*, there is a discrepancy between the structure of the play and the reading solidified in our culture similar to the problem of the structure of *Oedipus Rex* and the reading of its story as a manifestation of the “Oedipus complex.”<sup>245</sup>

Claudius’s reaction is not his caught conscience, as Hamlet would have it,<sup>246</sup> but fear. Claudius reacts after the actual part of the play where Lucianus kills Gonzago by pouring poison into his ear, but reacts immediately when Hamlet comments on the development of the play: “He poisons him i’ the garden for’s estate. His name’s Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of

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<sup>241</sup> Yifen Beus, “Self-Reflexivity in the Play within the Play and its Cross-Genre Manifestation,” *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, eds. Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 17.

<sup>242</sup> Hawkes 317.

<sup>243</sup> Hawkes 317.

<sup>244</sup> Hawkes 317.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. Jonathan Culler, “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative,” *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 188-208.

<sup>246</sup> At the end of Act II, Hamlet announces that “The play’s the thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 591-592).

Gonzago's wife" (*Hamlet* III, ii, 250-253). If Claudius did not react to the opening dumb show, it means that he is not, as Hamlet puts it, "the galled jade" (*Hamlet* III, ii, 232-233). His non-reaction to this point suggests that Claudius is in the dark, that is, he is not affected by the play since he did not kill King Hamlet this way. He watches the play as a show to enjoy, but gradually, given the context of his life and the content of the show, he perceives affinities with the situation around him. The possible meaning of the play suddenly occurs to him when Hamlet pronounces the above quoted speech. Given Hamlet's strange conduct that seems to be madness, Claudius fears that what is shown and what Hamlet says reveals his intentions: Claudius fears that Hamlet wants to kill him<sup>247</sup> and, possibly, in his "madness" to get the love of his mother.<sup>248</sup> Claudius's conscience is stricken by the performance as well, but not necessarily because he recognizes that Hamlet knows: the analogy to his past crime is impossible for him to miss.

In his essay, Bernhard Greiner argues that the play within the play is a manifestation of "the interior, which can only be achieved by exteriorization of the interior, in other words, by playing (by acting in masks, in the world of show)."<sup>249</sup> In his reading, Hamlet stages the play within the play to achieve "the evocation, if not the creation, of a subject that possesses an essence beyond the performances on display."<sup>250</sup> Hamlet himself has seen the effects that performance can have on the subject: "The actor's self-deluding performance has, however, produced a result in Hamlet; reflection on himself, and renewed resolve, stemming from his comparison of the actors' text and performance with his own situation."<sup>251</sup> This way, "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (*Hamlet* II, ii 591-592) whether Claudius killed King Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear or not. This reading also appeases the paradox of Hamlet exclaiming that he knows not "seems" and then performs madness for the court.

However, it is clear that in *Hamlet*, there is a distinction between the self and role-playing. *Rosencrantz* shares rather "Pirandello's view of life: we men can only play roles, we cannot just be."<sup>252</sup> This is the view shared also by *Waiting for Godot*: it is full of plays performed to pass the time, identity exchanges occur and there are meta-theatrical comments. The stage is thematized explicitly as a stage when Vladimir suddenly runs from the stage

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<sup>247</sup> Such appearance of Hamlet's intentions is only confirmed when he answers to Guildenstern that his cure for the king who is distressed "would perhaps plunge him into far more choler" (*Hamlet* III, ii, 292).

<sup>248</sup> That is, he does not like the second marriage of his mother (as the Mousetrap suggests) and wants her undivided attention, her undivided love. Maybe, since he lost already one of his parents.

<sup>249</sup> Greiner 4.

<sup>250</sup> Greiner 9.

<sup>251</sup> Greiner 9.

<sup>252</sup> Bentley 41.

while Estragon shouts a direction after him: “End of the corridor, on the left” (*Waiting for Godot* 35). Then, he explains to Pozzo that Vladimir needed to go to the toilet. However, Beckett’s play does not reach the ostentation of the meta-theatrical dimension of either Pirandello’s play or *Rosencrantz*. The philosophical premise of *Waiting for Godot*, Bishop Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*<sup>253</sup> is transposed in *Rosencrantz* to the level of theatrical performance. The Player says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reproaching them for leaving the performance he staged for them, “[y]ou don’t understand the humiliation of it – to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable – that somebody is *watching*” (*Rosencrantz* 46).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard’s tragicomedy are the same dramatis personae as in Shakespeare’s tragedy. It has been observed, in the second chapter, that their personalities are patterned according to Vladimir and Estragon. Nonetheless, this is nothing to contradict the text of *Hamlet*. Firstly, the identification of the two characters is minimal in *Hamlet*; secondly, the identity is ascribed by Claudius who describes them as “being of so young days brought up with him,/And sith so neighboured to his youth and havior” (*Hamlet* II, ii, 11-12). This imposition of identity, a role, is thematized in *Rosencrantz* and connects with the notion that words are all the two protagonists have to go on, even concerning their role. This is manifest, for example, when they repeat their task given by Gertrude and Claudius:

ROS: I can’t remember ... What have we got to go on?  
 GUIL: We have been briefed. Hamlet’s transformation. What do you recollect?  
 ROS: Well, he’s changed, hasn’t he? The exterior and inward man fails to resemble –  
 GUIL: Draw him onto pleasures – glean what afflicts him.  
 ROS: Something more than his father’s death –  
 GUIL: He’s always talking about us – there aren’t two people living whom he dotes on more than us.  
 ROS: We cheer him up – find out what’s the matter.  
 (*Rosencrantz* 30-31)

This sequence repeats their briefing in *Hamlet* (*Hamlet* II, ii). This exemplifies the sense that “[they’ve] been caught up [...] Till events have played themselves out. There’s logic at work – it’s all done for you, don’t worry” (*Rosencrantz* 30). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed by fate which is art, which is the text of *Hamlet*. As the Player explains “[t]here’s a design at work in all art – surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion” (*Rosencrantz* 58). The aesthetic conclusion is that practically no one is standing on their feet (*Rosencrantz* 58), the logical conclusion is “the point where everyone who is marked for death dies” (*Rosencrantz* 58) and

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<sup>253</sup> Graver 51.

the moral conclusion is the following lesson: “The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means” (*Rosencrantz* 59). *Hamlet* is the fate and is condemning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. As the Player says, “[i]t is *written* [...] there is no *choice* involved” (*Rosencrantz* 59). Thematising the textual existence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard comes closest to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: “Our reality doesn’t change: it can’t change! It can’t be other than what it is because it is already fixed for ever. It’s terrible.”<sup>254</sup>

#### 4.2. The Play within the Play within the Play ...

The two protagonists do not know what is going on around them because they “cannot recognize that they are nothing more nor less than characters created and controlled by Shakespeare to act out specific roles in *Hamlet*.”<sup>255</sup> In terms of the playful spirit of the play, one might as well talk about trickstership. In his essay, Daniel Jernigan observes that *Rosencrantz* is a “text that suggest[s] the hand of some intervening trickster at work.”<sup>256</sup> Indeed, Guthke defines metaphysical farce as “as a tragedy for man and a comedy and amusing entertainment for the gods who bring about this human tragedy”<sup>257</sup>; there is “a celestial practical joker”<sup>258</sup> presiding over the world. As it has been observed the scripture is *Hamlet* and the “celestial practical joker” is thus *Hamlet* and its author, William Shakespeare, or Stoppard as the author of *Rosencrantz*. It is also Hamlet who switches the letter condemning him to death with the letter condemning to death his two friends.

I have shown the important presence of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz* in the previous chapter: *Hamlet* is a text within a text. Since both these texts are plays it follows that it is a play within the play. And it is literally so. Though it is only a logical extension of the obvious presence of *Hamlet* in Stoppard’s drama, it is not so readily perceived.<sup>259</sup> Nevertheless, the view that majority of Stoppard’s play is actually a play within the play helps to elucidate various problematic aspects of the work’s structure. The play within the play starts when Rosencrantz reveals that the hundredth toss of the coin “was tails” (*Rosencrantz* 26). After ninety-nine heads something has changed. The outcome of the final toss serves as a portal to the play within the play: the stage is mysteriously transmogrified into a setting of *Hamlet*. As Yifen Beus observes, the device of the play within the play

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<sup>254</sup> Pirandello 971.

<sup>255</sup> Keyssar-Franke 96.

<sup>256</sup> Jernigan 162.

<sup>257</sup> Guthke 121.

<sup>258</sup> Guthke 120.

<sup>259</sup> None of the secondary sources concerned with Stoppard’s drama used in this thesis observes this fact.

literally breaks the conventions that are contained within a drama and clears the space for itself to exist separately and yet, at the same time, as part of the main play. The physical stage is thus no longer an obstacle in terms of scene and location change or even identity disguise for characters; such changes could easily be performed and staged in the context of a play within a play that justifies any manipulation or inconsistency in technicality or illusion.<sup>260</sup>

The play within the play also concurs with the shift in setting from “*a place without any visible character*” (*Rosencrantz* 9) to Elsinore to the ship to England: the shift from no-place to specific sites of *Hamlet* suggests the transfer from the vagueness of reality to the tangibility of fiction which is determined.<sup>261</sup> Huizinga observes that play “creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme.”<sup>262</sup> This general observation echoes aptly the specific situation of *Hamlet* within *Rosencrantz* exerting determining influence where everything is predetermined. As the performance counterpart of the text of drama, the play within the play, as the Menardian text of *Hamlet* within *Rosencrantz*, helps to explain the paradox of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s ignorance of *Hamlet* and their ability to react in accordance with its text.

As Beus points out, “the framing of the inner play exposes the existence of the author from within and, in so doing, gestures towards the actual author (of the outer play) at work.”<sup>263</sup> The actual author is Stoppard, and partially also Shakespeare as the author of *Hamlet*. The “author from within” is the Player. Before the tails outcome is revealed and *Hamlet* begins, the Player prepares to stage a play for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When he indicates the exits for his players, he indicates the actual exits which are used later for the characters from *Hamlet* (*Rosencrantz* 25). The Player offers a performance for a coin that “has music in it” (*Rosencrantz* 18). This is the coin which comes out as tails and the coin tossed at the beginning of the play: all create art, both materially as the coin to buy and “make a jingle” (*Rosencrantz* 18) and metaphorically as the poetic principle ruling Stoppard’s drama.

Since his entrance on the stage, the Player is a strangely knowing character – he alludes to the loss of memory the two protagonists suffered a little while ago: “[...] by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew. That’s a thought, isn’t it? (*He laughs generously.*)” (*Rosencrantz* 17). Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he is aware that “times being what they are” they are “indifferent” and “wicked” (*Rosencrantz* 19).

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<sup>260</sup> Beus 18.

<sup>261</sup> Manfred Draudt observes a shift on a different level, corresponding to mine: “When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter the troupe of players for the first time, they insist on the distinct division into actors and spectators [...] and they are convinced of their own superiority over the low ‘rabble’. [...] Having given up their former pretentiousness, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have become more and more insecure, while the disreputable players have successfully established their superiority [...]” Draudt 349-350.

<sup>262</sup> Huizinga 10.

<sup>263</sup> Beus 19.

Commenting on the dumb show of the players which is the Murder of Gonzago turned *Hamlet*, Fleming notes that “[t]he use of identical cloaks seems more logical than the use of the Spies’ coin-tossing because the coin-tossing suggests that the Player knows the text of *Rosguil* as well as that of *Hamlet*.”<sup>264</sup> However, this view is tempting, especially as the Player, this “Stopspear,” is the only one who is aware of the poetic principle at the heart of the play and uses it in the same metaphorical way: “For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins” (*Rosencrantz* 18).

Undoubtedly, the Player betrays a “godlike omniscience”<sup>265</sup>: he has to know *Hamlet* since he stages it for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There are many pieces of evidence. The Player is distinguished by his ominously prophetic words. For example, when he and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern escape the pirates, the Player comments that “[p]irates could happen to anyone. Just deliver the letter. They’ll send ambassadors from England to explain ...” (*Rosencrantz* 88). The aposiopesis can be filled in very easily by the title of the play – they will explain that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. When the players stage the Murder of Gonzago it ends in *Hamlet* with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dead. Also, their exhibition of various deaths ends as the final scene of *Hamlet* (*Rosencrantz* 91).<sup>266</sup> When the Player recounts the repertoire of his tragedians, he gives actually incidents of *Hamlet*, echoing the summary of *Hamlet* given at its end by Horatio<sup>267</sup>:

PLAYER: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, dénouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion ... clowns, if you like, murderers – we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers – set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins – flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms.  
(*Rosencrantz* 18)

The last words obviously suggest the staging of *Hamlet* for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on terms of their death. Immediately after, the Player adds that “[i]t costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that’s your taste and

<sup>264</sup> Fleming 267-268.

<sup>265</sup> Fleming 60. In this acknowledgement of the knowingness of the Player, Fleming seems to contradict himself.

<sup>266</sup> After the lights go on again after their performances, the first time, their performance is reflected in the action of *Rosencrantz*, the second time, in the action of *Hamlet*. This is another instance where fiction and “reality” are interwoven.

<sup>267</sup> Horatio gives the following summary of the events that have passed:

So shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,  
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads.  
(*Hamlet* V, ii, 366-371)

times being what they are” (*Rosencrantz* 18). It costs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a head; this is the “realism” on “special terms.” This leads to another problem solved by the play within the play: how is it that the two protagonists die if this is only a play? This is due to the fact that “[s]tructurally, the play within the play also takes on the (con)fusion of various levels of reality, blending the theatrical reality as well as illusion while maintaining a reflexive posture through this very design.”<sup>268</sup> As Huizinga observes, “[t]he play-mood is labile in its very nature. At any moment ‘ordinary life’ may reassert its rights either by an impact from without, which interrupts the game, or by an offence against the rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment.”<sup>269</sup>

Guildenstern’s remark to the Player, that he is “operating on two levels” (*Rosencrantz* 48), suits this “quintessential chameleon of identity”<sup>270</sup> perfectly. His double operation is as a human and as an actor, a character, though he maintains that actors are “the opposite of people” (*Rosencrantz* 46).<sup>271</sup> The dialogue of the Player and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern following the remark about “two levels” shows the Player, actor by profession, advising them how to behave in the play *Hamlet* suggesting that he is the one staging it. The two protagonists operate on two levels as well; they are both characters (actors) and people.<sup>272</sup> The important point is that these two levels function at the same time: they are like the Chinaman dreaming about being a butterfly “in his two-fold security” (*Rosencrantz* 44). The only difference is that the Player is conscious of this fact<sup>273</sup> while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not:

GUIL: Well ... aren’t you going to change into your costume?  
 PLAYER: I never change out of it, sir.  
 GUIL: Always in character.  
 PLAYER: That’s it.  
 GUIL: Aren’t you going to – come *on*?  
 PLAYER: I *am on*.

<sup>268</sup> Beus 17.

<sup>269</sup> Huizinga 21.

<sup>270</sup> Fleming 58.

<sup>271</sup> This remark fits the meta-theatrical dimension of the play. Yet, it can be another transposition from *Hamlet*. When in *Hamlet* II, ii Hamlet disclaims his interest in man, Rosencrantz informs him that he probably will not welcome the players that are arrived to Elsinore. However, Hamlet welcomes them warmly. This may be because for him “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and of the time his form and pressure” (*Hamlet* III, ii, 19-22).

<sup>272</sup> Fleming observes the following on the various levels of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are simultaneously Shakespeare’s characters (they speak Elizabethan verse and participate in *Hamlet*), Stoppard’s characters (who use contemporary English as they spectate, comment on, and ruminate about the implications of the events transpiring around them), and have a metatheatrical existence (they espouse lines that indicate their awareness of the live audience), they are, I assume, fundamentally seen as characters whose experiences have some relevancy to those of the viewers.” Fleming 53-54. However, his observation can be reduced to two levels in the art/reality dichotomy: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters (Shakespeare’s, Stoppard’s and meta-theatrical) and people (relevant to the viewers).

<sup>273</sup> Cf. Draudt 351.

GUIL: But if you *are* on, you can't *come* on. *Can* you?

PLAYER: I start on.

(*Rosencrantz* 24-25)

As Egan puts it, “[m]ore than a profession, then, the acting of the Tragedians is in effect a way of living.”<sup>274</sup> So it is also for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.<sup>275</sup> This can be seen in the fact that they are most successful in their doings when they consciously play. For example, when they role play in their make-believe practice of Hamlet’s questioning, they accomplish successfully to “pluck out the heart of [Hamlet’s] mystery” (*Hamlet* III, ii, 348-349) despite some problems in the procedure: “To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped on to his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice” (*Rosencrantz* 38).

It is similar with Guildenstern’s killing of the Player: though it comes to nought, at least he acts. The Player acts as well and most successfully. In the discussion on acting death, the Player supports his argument by Coleridge’s notion of the “willing suspension of disbelief” (*Rosencrantz* 62), the quintessential fictional contract between audience and the work of art. The Player relates how he had a possibility to hang an actor during a performance and concludes that “the whole thing was a *disaster*” (*Rosencrantz* 62). When Guildenstern “*pushes the blade in up to the hilt*” (*Rosencrantz* 90), he is convinced that he has killed the Player. But the dagger was a prop and the death was a performance. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern got “caught up in the action” (*Rosencrantz* 18), for them, “[s]imulation is the only thing not simulated. Pretense is the ultimate reality.”<sup>276</sup>

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s recognition of the staged death being the “real” death is the recognition of their real existence being a staged existence. This is the *mise en abyme* effect of the play within the play and the foregrounding of the fictional aspect of the dual identity of the characters in drama. Keyssar-Franke observes that “if *Hamlet* is to continue ineluctably, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will have to allow their roles to conclude their lives or their lives to conclude their roles.”<sup>277</sup> As we have seen, *Hamlet* is the determining influence here and so “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead” (*Hamlet* V, ii, 357). Since they operate on several levels, “[a]s characters they cannot escape the playwright’s plot; as

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<sup>274</sup> Egan 62.

<sup>275</sup> Egan observes that the tragedians who “play out the roles predetermined for them by the gory melodramas of their repertoire” are “a metaphor here for the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, soon to enact the parts dictated to them by Shakespeare’s script.” Egan 61.

<sup>276</sup> Bentley 41.

<sup>277</sup> Keyssar-Franke 94.

actors they cannot remain on stage and escape their roles; as men they cannot stay in this world and escape death.”<sup>278</sup>

Guildenstern’s view on death is consistent throughout the text: “It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all – now you see him, now you don’t that’s the only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back” (*Rosencrantz* 62). His perspective is of the bereaved and in his situation this means, ultimately, of the audience: for him as for them, death is “an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death” (*Rosencrantz* 62).<sup>279</sup> Though the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is consistent with this notion, “[t]heir manner of dying can be read as final, if minor, vindication of their resistance to traditional playing.”<sup>280</sup> Guildenstern’s “[n]ow you see me, now you –” (*Rosencrantz* 92) is a conjurer’s trick whose refusal of “mimesis in a sudden and final gesture of defiance”<sup>281</sup> becomes even more theatrical because more artificial.<sup>282</sup>

Just before Guildenstern stages his own death, he announces that “[they]’ll know better next time” (*Rosencrantz* 92). This is not a display of the cyclical existence, the life of infinite regress of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. As it has been observed “in contrast to Beckett’s play, the universe in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves discloses a manifest sense of order, plan, and predictability.”<sup>283</sup> Guildenstern’s remark is another thematization of theatre which, once again, reminds that Stoppard’s drama is rather meta-drama. As a criticism of drama, a fiction, Stoppard employs the play within the play as a proper fictional means to show that “it is Shakespeare himself who sends his characters to their deaths each time his play is performed for a new audience.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Keyssar-Franke 96.

<sup>279</sup> Cf. Jenkins 43.

<sup>280</sup> Kelly 81.

<sup>281</sup> Kelly 81.

<sup>282</sup> As Fleming observes, “[w]hereas they begin the play outside of *Hamlet*, and thus might be seen as representative of humanity, they, and the play, end completely in Shakespeare’s world, and thus represent characters not people.” Fleming 65.

<sup>283</sup> Egan 59.

<sup>284</sup> Jernigan 167.

The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.<sup>285</sup>

Life goes on [...] Just like in Shakespeare: bring on Fortinbras and cart off the corpses.<sup>286</sup>

## 5. Instead of a Conclusion: Confusion

The atmosphere of Stoppard's *tour de force* is one of confusion from the beginning to end. Guildenstern is confused about the outcome of the coin tossing and, thus, about the ruling principle of the world, Rosencrantz is confused about Guildenstern's role-playing practice of questioning Hamlet, everyone is confused about which one of the pair is Rosencrantz and which one is Guildenstern, and they are in turn confused about everyone else. Determinism is confused with absurdity, fate is confused with chance, reality is confused with fiction, and art with life. All this is because of the coin, because of all the duality and duplicity of and in the play. When it is announced at the end that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet, all are dead, the reader or the audience are confused about what they have read and seen.

“Clearly, Stoppard is transgressing well-defined literary boundaries, and doing so in such a way that his own characters suffer the consequences of his manipulations.”<sup>287</sup> Stoppard's drama, a hypertext, is situated at the fringes of texts. He thematizes the textual relationships of *Rosencrantz's* hypotexts. By doing so, the confusion of his protagonists is brought about by the (con)fusion of texts: “That duplicity of the object, in the sphere of textual relations, can be represented by the old analogy of the *palimpsest*: on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through.”<sup>288</sup> Stoppard's hyper-, inter- and metatext is a palimpsest, a composite, a collage of literary classics. To re-write something means not only to write, but also to erase: it is both creative and destructive act. Selection does not involve only what is present, but also what is absent: the creation of Stoppard's text results into literature under erasure

The poetics of the text is confusing. The tossed coin is relativist and destabilizes matters: as there are several texts, there are several points of view. The “Menardian text” of *Hamlet* leads to the confusion of Shakespeare with Stoppard as the achievement of one becomes indistinguishable from the achievement of the other. The (con)fusion of texts leads to the confusion of reality and fiction or rather of various levels of reality: life is only a play (*Hamlet*) and play is only life. The confusion is manifested in the play within the play which is not only an appropriate means of this confusing text to reflect and in the process criticise

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<sup>285</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Russell Jackson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) 83.

<sup>286</sup> B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (New York: New Directions 1985) 179.

<sup>287</sup> Jernigan 166.

<sup>288</sup> Genette 398.

literary texts, but also “a particularly apt device for the expression of the playful self-referentiality of the post-modern condition.”<sup>289</sup> Fiction is reflected by fictional means creating the *mise en abyme* effect of two opposing mirrors. Drama, literature and fiction are, like play, a “temporary abolition of the ordinary world”<sup>290</sup> during which one can “happen to get caught up in the action” (*Rosencrantz* 18) and become easily confused.

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<sup>289</sup> Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner, “The Play within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives,” *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, eds. Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) xiii.

<sup>290</sup> Huizinga 12.

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## 7. Résumé

Hra *Rosencrantz a Guildenstern jsou mrtvi* Toma Stopparda je svou podstatou hypertextuální: využívá různých textů a jejich poetických technik k dosažení svébytného efektu. Jakožto „přepis“ Shakespearovy tragédie *Hamlet*, vrhá na ni nové světlo s použitím technik hry *Čekání na Godota* Samuela Becketta a *Šest postav hledá autora* Luigi Pirandella. Dominantním prvkem Stoppardova dramatu je pak metaforické využití principu dvou stran jedné mince, který, jednak ukazuje stejnost v odlišnosti a odlišnost ve stejnosti, a jednak zdůrazňuje základní okolnost moderního života, kterou je relativismus: co je pro jednoho panna, je pro druhého orel. Tento metaforický obraz tak diktuje několik dichotomií zásadních pro dílo: realita – fikce, umění – život, bytí – hraní, divák – herec, tragédie – komedie atd.

Ustanovení světa hry jako absurdního v počáteční scéně házení mincí je pouze zdánlivé. Naopak, tato úvodní hra ve hře jasně poukazuje na linearitu a determinismus vládnoucí světu Stoppardova dramatu. Rozhodujícím „činitelem“ je zde text *Hamleta*, který diktuje nevyhnutelný konec Rosencrantze a Guildensterna. Zatímco *Čekání na Godota* reprezentuje absenci a nekonečný koloběh života jako absurdní čekání na čekání jehož ukončení závisí na arbitrární náhodě, ukazuje svět Stoppardovy hry nevyhnutelnost osudu Rosencrantze a Guildensterna jako postav, které nemohou uniknout předepsané roli a jako lidí, kteří nevyhnutelně spějí ke konci představení, tj. smrti. Jejich „život“ je vyplněn podobnými hrami jakými tráví čas Vladimír a Estragon. Osobnost představitelů Stoppardova dramatu je modelovaná podle protagonistů Beckettových: to je hlavní příbuznost těchto dvou her.

Guildensternova přemýšlivost a otevřenost myslí, ne nepodobná Hamletově, která se nejjasněji projevuje v jeho schopnosti zvažovat fenomény z různých úhlů pohledu, umožňuje pocítit tragičnost osudu obou anti-hrdinů. Tato přednost je také částečně zdrojem pádu obou postav: neschopnost rozeznat „scénář“ jejich života předepsaný *Hamletem* a epistemologická nejistota vedou přes nerozhodnost v jednání k nevyhnutelné pasivitě, která v důsledku odsuzuje k záhubě. Ačkoliv je „kosmologie“ obou her zásadně odlišná – absence vs. prezence, cykličnost vs. linearita, arbitrárnost vs. determinismus –, obě dosahují vyjádření stejné metafyzické úzkosti protagonistů: v případě Beckettovy hry jde o úzkost, která má opodstatnění v ontologickém založení světa; v případě Stoppardovy hry je absurdnost života problémem čistě epistemologickým.

Rozhodující přítomnost *Hamleta* v Stoppardově dramatu je doslovná a přesahuje podstatu citace. Z povahy dramatického textu a začlenění textu *Hamleta* do textu *Rosencrantz*

a *Guildenstern jsou mrtvi* nemůže jít o citaci, protože tato představa vede k paradoxu, kdy Hamlet cituje sám sebe. *Hamlet* je ve Stoppardově dramatu tím, co nazývám „Menardovský text“, tj. text, který není „originální“ částí (kon)textu, který ho obklopuje, ale je do tohoto (kon)textu začleněn jako jeho přirozená součást. Tento pojem vysvětluje i další paradox hry, a to situaci ve které Rosencrantz a Guildenstern, ač neznají text *Hamleta*, jsou schopni jednat podle jeho „scénáře“. Stejnost *Hamleta* v Stoppardově hře a Shakespearova *Hamleta* podtrhává podobnosti těchto her. Protagonisté obou jsou postavy, které se ocitají v situaci, z níž nevidí východiska, a která je souhrou jejich charakterů s okolními událostmi do jisté míry paradoxní. Shakespeare jakožto jeden z důležitých předchůdců absurdního dramatu v sobě latentně obsahuje témata, která v Stoppardově dramatu vystupují do popředí a to i s použitím prvků Beckettova *Čekání na Godota*.

Replikace podmínek v Stoppardově hře je doprovázena změnou úhlu pohledu: příběh *Hamleta* je viděn očima Rosencrantze a Guildensterna. Tato změna je doprovázena žánrovým posunem od tragédie k tragikomedii a zachovává „bezvýznamnost“ protagonistů. Jiný úhel pohledu a jiný náhled na *Hamleta* zapříčiněný Menardovským textem vede ke kritice, v níž se Hamlet jeví jakožto element sváru, který má za vinu smrt několika nevinných lidí. Avšak tento metatextový charakter Stoppardovy hry je již obsažen v *Hamletovi* samotném. *Hamletova* bohatá textura latentně obsahuje protichůdná čtení, a tak se Stoppardova kritika mění v uznání statutu Shakespearovy tragédie v kánonu západní literatury.

Premisa geneze textu, tj. „přepsání“ příběhu jednoho z nejznámějších hrdinů západní literatury z pohledu dvou „bezvýznamných“ vedlejších postav, je, kromě hlavní příčiny vnímání hry jako absurdní, ze své podstaty hravá. Hra je jedním z hlavních témat Stoppardovy hry a svým metafikčním, či metadivadelním rozměrem a tematizací fikčního charakteru Rosencrantze a Guildensterna jako postav Shakespearovy hry navazuje na divadelnost Pirandellovy hry *Šest postav hledá autora*. Jedním z hlavních projevů metafikčního rozměru Stoppardova dramatu je začlenění textu *Hamleta* jako hry ve hře. Jejím inscenátorem je Herec, který je po celou dobu zvláště vědoucí postavou. Technika hry ve hře vede ke smíšení reality a fikce jakožto sebe-reflexivní prostředek a vysvětluje anti-mimetický charakter některých prvků Stoppardova dramatu. Je také náležitou součástí hry, která reflektuje literární texty, tj. fikci vědomě fikčními prostředky.