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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet Edward II

A study in intertextuality

It is a common fashion in literary criticism, or 'Lit Crit,' to treat reality, human behaviour, communication, and everything else as though they were 'texts to be read.' This paper proposes to go the other way: it interprets literature (or, more precisely, one literary text, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) as a part of reality in which several other layers of the *real* combine, such as linguistics, science, or other literary texts, most notably *Hamlet*. While *Edward II* is not generally considered a direct source for Stoppard's play, this paper shows how, in the wider perspective of 'interreality,' Marlowe's tragedy might interact with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. At the same time it is proved that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, contrary to the critical conception of many, is not a *parasitic* work 'feeding off' Elizabethan playwrights, but a play that enters a *symbiotic* relationship with its *host* (as defined by Hillis Miller).

Pretext

It is an interesting new trend in literary criticism to begin research papers with "Pretexts" instead of "Introductions." This is probably not just a case of shifting terminology; a *pretext* reflects a different attitude to the topic addressed than an *introduction*. Though both are textual passages that establish what the whole paper is going to be about (and in this respect an introduction is just as well a 'pre-text'), a pretext does so in a less direct way and with less commitment to the issue. Instead of defining the case, as an *introduction* should do (similarly to a Baroque French overture), it serves as a Romantic opera overture that enumerates the themes to be touched upon. My paper is not so much *about* either Stop-

pard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or Marlowe's *Edward II* as about the relationship between them and hence can be considered a study in intertextuality, evidently starting with a "Pretext." At the same time this "Pretext," true to the term's semantic nature, makes no attempt at structurally introducing the main argument; the latter unfolds merely *on this pretext*. The double meaning of such critical terms as "pretext" will play a crucial role in the discussion of the intertextuality of Marlowe's and Stoppard's pieces.

What this intertextuality consists in, however, is a question that needs some definition. Mark Turner, in the "Pretext" to his *Reading Minds* sums up the present state of literary criticism in the following mildly provocative and ironic way:

The world of contemporary literary criticism . . . has no equal as an uncanny marvel of self-sustaining institutional and human ingenuity. It is to the humanities what the self-sustaining fission reaction in a critical mass of mutually exciting unstable heavy molecules is to the natural sciences. It generates ever more subtle and masterful readings of ever more texts for an ever more specialized group of readers. Fuel is found not only in writing . . . but also in nontextual representations, mute artifacts, and ultimately human behavior itself, treated as if they were texts to be read. Finally criticism has become its own fuel, susceptible of a higher-order critical analysis that is not merely self-sustaining but, beyond fission, self-feeding, its output continuous with its input, a perpetual breeder reactor, unrestrained by laws of entropy. . . . It is like chess about chess. . . .¹

Apart from the fact that Turner's pointed remarks, for all his efforts to mock the present notion of academic and literary research, actually reaffirm the system in which they are uttered, it must also be noted that he proposes a possible way out from this 'self-sustaining,' 'self-feeding' system.² As far as the general

1. Mark Turner, "Pretext," *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 3–24, p. 3.

2. The excusable logical pit into which Turner falls by claiming that contemporary literary criticism is "to the humanities what the self-sustaining fission reaction . . . is to the natural sciences" can be fit into a long tradition of scholarly essays (ab)using scientific imagery in the field of humanities, beginning perhaps with T. S. Eliot, who, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge [London: Longman, 1972] 71–77), uses a blatantly nonsensical chemical equation to make his point that the poet's achievement is like that of a catalyst in a reaction. Contemporary literary criticism simply cannot have exactly the same relation to the humanities as the fission reaction has to the natural sciences, since literary criticism is part of the humanities, while the given reaction is merely the object of scientific research. Such inconsistencies, however, should not be permit-

proposal goes, this would mean a reconciliation of linguistics and literature, which for a long time have formed two rather hostile parties in what Turner understands as ‘the study of English.’³ Nevertheless, there are others, who have conceived of the present *status quo* as something less negative and would even invest literary criticism with real literary value. Jonathan Culler, for instance, quoting a substantial passage from J. Hillis Miller, puts the emphasis on the contrast between the ‘canny’ and the ‘uncanny’ type of criticism. These are not merely opposites, he argues, for *uncanny* criticism is superior to *canny* (or clear) criticism. Though at first sight the uncanny (or suspicious) critic may seem to give up order in favour of chaos, their findings contribute to order on a higher level, adding more depth to our understanding not only of literature but also of ourselves and our environment.⁴ Thus this becomes a fascinating case where the same word (*uncanny*) is used in its pejorative meaning (bizarre, eerie, weird) by one critic (Turner) and as a positive adjective by another (Hillis Miller).

What I propose is to turn things upside down. If Turner claims “nontextual representations . . . artifacts . . . and . . . human behavior [are] treated as if they were texts to be read,” I shall try to interpret textual representations as well as all other fields of the literary and non-literary world as *realities*, which can possibly serve as a basis of reference in works of literature.⁵ My aim is to show how Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* feeds off this reality, which has a set of well-definable layers. This, on the other hand, means that it is more appropriate to talk about a kind of *interreality* than “intertextuality” here.⁶

ted here. “Consistency is all I ask,” Rosencrantz exclaims in Act I of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; if he cannot get it within the theatrical world of the play, let the play get it, at least, from the literary critics active in the ortho-, para-, or meta-theatrical world dubbed ‘reality.’

3. Cf. Turner, pp. 3–24.

4. J. Hillis Miller quoted in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 23.

5. This idea is actually suggested by Stoppard himself, who flirted with the question of who was the king of England when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern got there, an idea that is retained in Act III of the final version of the play, in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s confused discussion of whether England actually exists (Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* [London: Faber and Faber, 1967], pp. 89ff.; all parenthesised references are to this edition).

6. After a certain point, of course, the two things might collapse: once *everything* is treated as a text or a layer of reality, such a distinction no longer makes sense. To treat reality, or history, as a text(ure) – however much in a metaphorical sense – can be seen in the finishing,

The technique of intertextuality, as Turner asserts, has developed to such perfection that a critic with sufficient practice can choose two literary (or even non-literary) texts more or less at random and still unravel their (real or supposed) textual correspondences with ease. Not having the amount of reading experience necessary for doing so, I have chosen a tragedy that can at least be chronologically related to *Hamlet*, the obvious source for Stoppard's play: Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. Indeed, Marlowe's work was born in the same sizzling cultural environment as Shakespeare's masterpiece, described by Géza Kállay as "that unrepeatable, fortunate age when all layers of society were interested in the theatre."⁷ Moreover, one of the major elements in *Edward II*, that of parasitism, is something that can be redefined in connection with Stoppard's play as well. These links, as we shall see, are enough to establish a context for the comparison of *Edward II* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, while they also have important consequences with regard to literary criticism.

Host and parasite vs. host and symbiont

Though he specifies several possible sources for Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Hayman⁸ does not mention Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* as one of them. Picking the, according to him, two major influences, he concludes: "Clearly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been wooed out from the shadow of *Godot* by 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock.'"⁹ Brassell goes even further in stating that Eliot's poem as a source is far more important in

incomplete paragraph of Thornton Wilder's *The Eighth Day*: "History is *one* tapestry. No eye can venture to compass more than a hand's-breadth. . . . There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some are strengthened by seeing a pattern wherein the oppressed and exploited of the earth are gradually emerging from their bondage. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see. Some" (Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day* [Toronto: Popular Library, 1967], p. 381).

7. Géza Kállay, "Ha megful a fuldokló rend. . .': a rend fogalma Shakespeare drámáiban" [The concept of order in Shakespeare's plays], in *Nem puszta tett* (Budapest: Liget, 1999) 19–45, p. 28 (my translation).

8. Ronald Hayman, *Tom Stoppard*, Contemporary Playwrights Series (London: Heinemann, 1979).

9. Hayman, p. 33.

Stoppard's play than either *Hamlet* itself, or Beckett's influence.¹⁰ In order to show this, both sources quote an important passage from Eliot's poem:

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,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
Almost, at times, the Fool.¹¹

Just as Brassell's judgement may have been intended as over-provocative, I shall not claim that Marlowe's history was or even could have been an important direct influence on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Nevertheless, much of the 'original' imagery in Stoppard's work derives from Marlowe and the Elizabethan playwrights.

One reason why *Edward II* may be useful is the way in which it explains the Elizabethan concept of a *parasite*.¹² At the beginning of Act II Scene ii, waiting

10. Tim Brassell, *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 67.

11. Though many of these statements could be applied to Polonius more easily than to Stoppard's protagonists (e.g., he *does* start 'a scene or two,' as opposed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – cf. Act II Scene i, or Act III Scene iv), a relevant description of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is found in the words 'easy tool,' or 'glad to be of use.' This reinforces that they are *used* rather than parasites, who would use their *hosts* instead; this point will have some relevance when we compare the question of their parasitism with the parasites in *Edward II*.

12. The relevant definition for this type of *parasite* is the following: "2a. *Biol.* An animal or plant with [sic!] lives in or upon another organism (technically called its *host*) and draws its nutriment directly from it. Also extended to animals or plants that live as tenants of others, but not at their expense (strictly called *commensal* or *symbiotic*); also to those which depend on others in various ways of sustenance, as the cuckoo, the skua-gull, etc. . . .; and (inaccurately) to plants which grow upon others, deriving support but no nourishment from them (*epiphytes*), or which live on decaying organic matter (*saprophytes*). 2b. Applied, loosely or poetically, to a plant that creeps or climbs about another plant or a wall, trellis-work, etc., by which it is supported. 2c. *fig* A person whose part or action resembles that of an animal parasite" (*OED, The Oxford English Dictionary*, 20 vols., ed. J. A. Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edition [Oxford: Oxford University Press & Clarendon Press, 1989], Vol. XI, p. 207). Of all these definitions, (2c) applies to the case in *Edward II*; however, definition (2c) is related to

for the feast to celebrate the return of Gaveston to the court, King Edward inquires about the ‘devices,’ i.e. coats-of-arms prepared by Younger Mortimer and Lancaster. The latter brings in his shield depicting the fate of a fish that will be caught and killed, no matter whether in the sea or ‘taking the air.’ The design of Younger Mortimer is more to our point:

YOUNGER MORTIMER A lofty cedar tree, fair flourishing,
 On whose top branches kingly eagles perch,
 And by the bark a canker creeps me up,
 And gets unto the highest bough of all;
 The motto, *Æque tandem* [equally at length]. (II.ii.16–20)¹³

What this means is easy enough to decipher, but if any doubt should arise, that well-known parasite, the footnote comes to one’s rescue: “the parasite is as high as the tree itself.”¹⁴ The plain fact remains that Younger Mortimer is to Queen Isabella what Gaveston is to King Edward; a mere parasite, someone who is always out for some opportunity to climb higher and higher until he reaches that point from which there is no return, as described above, in the image of falling ‘headlong’ down. It is a question of luck which of them gets higher. As it turns out to be, Mortimer outlives Gaveston – but his fall is just as inevitable. As a point of comparison, it might be noted here that Richard III succeeds in climbing highest of all such parasites; no doubt, he is aided in this by his royal descent – his fall, however, is equally necessary, no matter how much ‘in style’ he takes it. And Shakespeare used the selfsame simile himself elsewhere: in Act I Sc ii of *The Tempest* Prospero tells Miranda the story of their banishment, he refers to his false brother as a parasite: he was “[t]he ivy which had hid my princely trunk.”

Should Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be considered parasites in this sense? This is a reasonable question, which has been used in attempts to prove their irrelevance in *Hamlet*; their relationship to the Danish court is certainly doubtful. Still, the answer is that they are probably not parasites in this sense. At least this is not the image we receive of them when addressed by the King (“being of

(2a). Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has often been called a ‘parasitic’ play in the same, rather disapproving sense; this term, however, is completely misleading, as I shall show with regard to both textual and metatextual considerations.

13. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (London: Penguin, 1969).

14. Marlowe, p. 465.

so young days brought up with him, / And sith so neighbour'd to his youth and haviour," II.ii.11–2),¹⁵ the Queen ("Good gentlemen, he hath much talk'd of you, / And sure I am, two men there is not living / To whom he more adheres," II.ii.19–21), and Hamlet himself ("My excellent good friends. . . . Good lads, how do you both?" II.ii.224–6). This sounds more like friendship, however dubious it is from the start. For the audience have already gathered that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are merely used by the King and Queen (a fact Hamlet soon discovers as well, after which they cannot carry on with their roles), not to mention the fact that there is at least one man (Horatio) to whom Hamlet 'adheres' more than to them. This is far too little for them to be considered parasites with Hamlet as their host, and even from the royal couple they do not seem to receive any reward, whether moral, or financial. And as Rosencrantz remarks (this time in Stoppard's text): "I think we can say he [Hamlet] made us look ridiculous. . . . He murdered us" (41). If conceived in the way Marlowe's interpretation of parasitism warrants, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be considered rather inefficient parasites, who have not even managed to climb as high as "the secret parts of Fortune" (II.ii.235), as Hamlet asserts.

* * *

If we want to have a fuller understanding of the origin of *parasitism*, however, we are faced with yet another available definition of *parasite*: "1a. One who eats at the table or at the expense of another; always with opprobrious application: 'One that frequents rich tables and earns his welcome by flattery' (J[ohnson]); one who obtains the hospitality, patronage, or favour of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery; a hanger-on from interested motives; a 'toady.'"¹⁶ The expression comes from Greek, the etymology of *parasite* being "*παράσιτος* lit. one who eats at the table of another, hence one who lives at an-

15. All references to *Hamlet* are to this edition: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Harold Jenkins (London & New York: Routledge, 1982).

16. *OED*, Vol. XI, p. 207. This is an interesting case of double metaphorisation: the term *parasite* first refers to people, is then transferred to animals and plants and eventually falls back upon human beings whose behaviour resembles that of 'animal parasites.' An even more exhaustive enumeration of the possible readings of the *parasite* can be found in J. Hillis Miller's "The critic as host," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London & New York: Longman, 1988) 278–85, which I shall shortly discuss in more detail in the context of alleged parasitism present in literary criticism. Hillis Miller specifies this sense of the *parasite* in the following way: "a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return" (Hillis Miller, p. 280).

other's expense and repays him with flattery, etc.; orig. an adj. = feeding beside; f. *παρά-* beside + *σιτος* food.”¹⁷ In its social context it is closely related to *symbiosis*,¹⁸ *commensalism* (“sharing one's table,” a Latin synonym for *symbiosis*)¹⁹ as well as *symposium*: “*σμπόσιον*, fr. *σμπότης* fellow-drinker (cf. *σμπίνειν* to drink together), f. *σύν-* SYM- + *πότης* drinker (cf. *πότιμος* drinkable, *ποτόν* drink).”²⁰ This is the point where the pejorative and ameliorative meanings of all these terms become irreversibly confused, for even Plato's transmission of the famous *Symposium* is presented as handed down to us by a most meritorious parasite, Aristodemus.²¹ Similarly, Gaveston, for all his negative traits, is still perhaps the most appealing of all characters in *Edward II*, which does not seem to contradict the fact that he is also the most obvious parasite.

Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern parasites in the same sense? Not on Hamlet, to be sure – from him they never receive more than suspicious looks, tricky questions, i.e. some less than rewarding exchanges. And though the royal couple could still be considered hosts for the two attendant lords, another stichomythia between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leaves little to hope for in this respect:

GUIL We have been briefed. Hamlet's transformation. . . .
 ROS We cheer him up – find out what's the matter –

17. *OED*, Vol. XI, p. 207.

18. “1. Living together, social life. 2a. *Biol.* Association of two different organisms (usually two plants, or an animal and a plant) which live attached to each other, or one as a tenant of the other, and contribute to each other's support. Also more widely, any intimate association of two or more different organisms, whether mutually beneficial or not. 2b. *transf* and *fig*” (*OED*, Vol. XVII, pp. 450–1). Note the inherently positive overtones of *symbiosis*, as opposed to the negative implications of the colloquial use of *parasitism*.

19. *OED*, Vol. III, p. 549.

20. *OED*, Vol. XVII, p. 464.

21. Actually, there is a whole chain of story-tellers before the narrative reaches its eventual reader: Plato tells us the story as recited by Apollodorus to a friend; Apollodorus, in turn, having heard it from Aristodemus himself, who was present at the feast as a parasite of Socrates, and, indirectly, of the ultimate *host*, Agathon. Two points in this argumentation pertain to Hillis Miller's discussion of the critic as host: (a) gift as a chain of things, semantically related to the French expression *cadeau*; and (b) the equivocal nature of the words “host” and “gift” in general (cf. Hillis Miller, p. 283, and pp. 281ff., respectively). If we add to all this the fact that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, the embryo of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was completed by Stoppard in the course of a *symposium* in (West) Berlin, where he spent several months on a scholarship from the Ford Foundation (cf. Brassell, p. 5), we might reasonably say that the context of terminology has more or less been circumscribed.

- GUIL Exactly, it's a matter of asking the right questions and giving away as little as we can. It's a game.
- ROS And then we can go?
- GUIL And receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance. [Cf. *Hamlet*, II.ii.25–6]
- ROS I like the sound of that. What do you think he means by remembrance?
- GUIL He doesn't forget his friends.
- ROS Would you care to estimate?
- GUIL Difficult to say, really – some kings tend to be amnesiac, others I suppose – the opposite, whatever that is...
- ROS Yes – but –
- GUIL Elephantine...?
- ROS Not how long – how much?
- GUIL *Retentive* – he is a very retentive king, a royal retainer...
- ROS What are you playing at?
- GUIL Words, words. They're all we have to go on. (30–1)

Thus we are forced to abandon the idea of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being parasites on Hamlet, or the royal family, either in the figurative, or in the physical meaning of the word. They have little hope for success. Thus, at least in Stoppard's interpretation, which, in this respect at least, seems to be reconcilable with Shakespeare's original, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot be seen as real parasites. At best, they are incompetent investigators, who lose their heads all too easily in any direct encounter with Hamlet or other members of the court (and then they lose them even more easily at the end of both plays in a physical sense). "Toadies," however, they cannot be called within a reasonable framework.²²

22. I have consciously avoided the assessment of the role of comic parasites. In fact, the 'parasite,' who exaggerates the boasts of his patron, or *host*, had been an almost indispensable character in comedies since Plautus, to whom many Renaissance playwrights were indebted for their use of comic elements. The investigation of this, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Similarly, the term 'parasitic comedy,' as applied to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (cf. Michael Scott, "Parasitic Comedy: Tom Stoppard," in *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist* [Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1989] 13–27), cannot be interpreted in this way, as there are no clear (i.e. 'full-time, professional') *parasites* appearing in Stoppard's play. Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a *par excellence* 'parasitic' comedy insofar as it is based on the theme of various characters trying to become the most obsequious parasites, establishes an intriguing connection between *parricide* and *parasite*, whose pronunciations are more or less identical. (The same parallel is touched on by the motto in Hillis Miller, p. 278.) Though the murdering of the father can have some relevance with regard to *Hamlet*, and the killing of the

We have just seen that apparently Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are no parasites living at the expense of Hamlet. Before we can put things in a wider critical context and prove that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is not a parasite feeding off *Hamlet*, however, it is important to make one last distinction and discuss whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are parasites in *Hamlet*.

This seemingly wild idea was reflected in a production of *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier, who simply eliminated the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.²³ There is a strange kind of tension between these characters and Voltemand and Cornelius, respectively. The latter, as ambassadors to Norway, must be kept, since they mean one of the few tangible links with the outside world and without them Fortinbras can hardly be brought on stage. Thus the paradoxical situation arises that Voltemand and Cornelius, who play a rather irrelevant role as regards the development of the plot, are more indispensable, as it were, than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who do not have a formal part in *Hamlet*, yet function as catalysts to help Hamlet expound philosophical notions which he cannot or simply does not touch on in his soliloquies. Thus the presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern provides Hamlet with the opportunity to feign madness, which Shakespeare does not make him do when soliloquising on various profound matters, the most famous one of which is cited by Stoppard in a parodistic way in a S.D. as “(HAMLET enters upstage, and pauses, weighing up the pros and cons of making his quietus)” (54).²⁴ Thus Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s audience as he delivers the stunning speech on his own situation and the nature of man:

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most

host is a frequent consequence of parasitism (as in *Edward II*), the comparison does not work in the case of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, for which reason I shall not discuss it in more detail here.

23. Though this is not mentioned as frequently as many other sources for Stoppard’s play, the removal of the ‘attendant lords’ from Olivier’s production may have triggered the coming into existence of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Indeed, in such a production of *Hamlet* they would be dead even before the beginning – or, rather, they would not even have been born.

24. The same scene is mocked in W. S. Gilbert’s burlesque *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: a Tragic Episode*, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep interrupting Hamlet’s soliloquy with their silly remarks. (Cf. quotations in Thomas R. Whitaker, *Tom Stoppard* [Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1983], pp. 48ff. and Brassell, pp. 36ff.)

excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

(II.ii.295–310)

Who could these words be addressed to, if not to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Certainly not to Polonius, since the sincerity of Hamlet's locution exceeds the mockery the 'old fool' constantly receives from him. A possible choice could be Horatio, but then Hamlet never talks prose to him (i.e., he never appears to be mad, or joking, when conversing with Horatio). Thus Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for all their alleged irrelevance to the unfolding of the tragedy, serve as the ideal witnesses to Hamlet's brief presentation of ontological theses about mankind. At the same time this means that the idea of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern serving as *audience* to Hamlet is, at least in an embryonic form, present in *Hamlet*, too. This role is reinforced again and again in Stoppard's play as well.

To make another, sombre but true remark: the pointless deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern add to the tragic element in both plays, though Stoppard's work emphasises the ironic side of this: "A slaughterhouse – eight corpses all told. It brings out the best in us," the Player explains (61). This is made even 'funnier' (as long, that is, as the audience do not realise that they are on the same side[*line*] as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) by the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not grasp the fact that they are included in the roll call until the very end of the play. In the first, Edinburgh version, the point was made even clearer (and for that reason rather disillusioning and weak) by the dialogue of the two ambassadors from England:

2ND AMB Tragic. . . (he looks in the direction of the departing corpses) . . .
 four – just like that.
 1ST AMB Six in all.
 2ND AMB Seven.
 1ST AMB No – six.

2ND AMB The King, the Queen, Hamlet, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius. Seven.

1ST AMB Ophelia. Eight.

2ND AMB King, Queen, Hamlet, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius, Ophelia. Eight.²⁵

Moreover, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two possible candidates to step into the empty role of the Fool – a character seldom missing from Elizabethan tragedies, *Hamlet* being one such – as they willingly let Hamlet ‘fool’ them. In this way, they synthesise the excessively tragic (through their unmotivated execution) and the utterly ridiculous (in their foolish incapability to spy Hamlet’s true condition and motives). It is therefore quite evident that their role, though obviously not a major one, adds to the rich texture of *Hamlet*, and one is justified in considering their relationship to the play symbiotic rather than parasitic.

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The final consideration of the alleged parasitism of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has important theoretical implications. It is not all too demanding a task to show that for all of its quotations from *Hamlet* (and a ‘host’ of other literary precursors) this play is not parasitical. Even critics like Scott, who refer to Stoppard’s work as a “parasitic comedy,” tend to admit that it is a “technically brilliant extravaganza in its own right, a play indebted to others but *existing in itself*.”²⁶ Such criticism disproves itself, for it is a contradiction in terms: a parasite can never be considered in its own right, existing in itself – it must always relate to some host.

The notion of the *host*, however, is very problematic in itself, as J. Hillis Miller proves, discussing the etymology of the word. His argument boils down to the conclusion that “the host is both eater and eaten” and as such “he also contains in himself the double antithetical relation of host and guest, guest in the bifold sense of friendly presence and alien invader.”²⁷ On the literary level, this is the position Gaveston finds himself in: he is a friendly presence to the king and an alien invader in the eyes of the members of the court. On the level of literary criticism, the statement implies that there is an irresolvable tension inherent in the notion of host and parasite. They call up each other; “‘Parasite’ . . .

25. See Brassell, p. 271.

26. Scott, p. 25 (my emphasis).

27. Hillis Miller, pp. 280–1.

calls up its apparent ‘opposite.’ It has no meaning without that counterpart.”²⁸ So, if criticism becomes “uncanny,” if literary criticism becomes “its own fuel,” it is not the fault of the critics – nor, indeed, a fault of anyone – but a consequence of the nature of language. For, if we say that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a parasite feeding off *Hamlet*, we might at once go on and claim that Shakespeare’s play is, in turn, a parasite feeding off an *Ur-Hamlet*, or Saxo’s *Amloði*, or Belleforest’s narrative based on Saxo’s account – that is, a chain, or *cadeau* of precursors. This question has been thoroughly investigated²⁹ and is doubtlessly an important aspect of *Hamlet* as we know it, but still nobody would dispute Shakespeare’s own authority and dramatic achievement today.

We have seen how *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* pays tribute to poems by T. S. Eliot. In exchange, Eliot’s essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent” lends itself quite readily as an apologetic text that can be applied to Stoppard’s play. Eliot claims we tend “to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else.”³⁰ To this cult of originality, Eliot would prefer the “historical sense,” which in his view is equally indispensable as a touch of originality in any type of creative work. He demands that one show perception “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”³¹ And Stoppard has an ear open to these claims – too much so, as some of his critics would claim.

Ultimately, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* can also be read in terms of a statement in Hillis Miller’s essay:

‘Para’ [as the prefix in ‘parasite’] is an ‘uncanny’ double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority A thing in ‘para’ is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other.³²

28. Hillis Miller, p. 279.

29. For a comprehensive overview of these efforts see Harold Jenkins, “Introduction,” in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Harold Jenkins (London & New York: Routledge) 1–159, pp. 82–112.

30. Eliot, p. 71.

31. Eliot, p. 72.

32. Hillis Miller, p. 280.

It is hard not to see the relationship between this passage, Gaveston's simultaneously being inside and outside the royal court, and the Player's remark in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: "We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out" (22). One must also consider whether it would not be more fruitful to use the figure of *symbiosis* for a relationship so advantageous for all parties: the 'communion' or 'symposium' of canny and uncanny critics at the table of the given poem or play.³³ Due to the language of any human discourse, levels of primary literature and literary criticism become profoundly intertwined at this point. For, as J. Hillis Miller asserts, "[l]anguage . . . thinks man and his world," and

[t]o speak of the 'deconstructive' reading of a poem as 'parasitical' on the 'obvious or univocal reading' is to enter, perhaps unwittingly, into the strange logic of the parasite, to make the univocal equivocal in spite of oneself, according to the law that language is not an instrument or tool in man's hands, a submissive means of thinking.³⁴

No matter what critics of 'uncanny' criticism say, this is something that is bound ever to compromise any attempt at an exclusive, univocal interpretation of any text, or event for that matter. "What are you playing at?" Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern in Stoppard's play. The critic *reading* has no other reply to this question than Guildenstern's: "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" (31). And not even our words are unproblematic. For "what thought is not figurative?"³⁵ This issue, the figurative nature of language, with special regard to the bodily turns of speech, will now lead us on to the evaluation of further points of connection between *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Edward II*, in a wider critical context.

A game of life – a play of death

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is full of references to the parts of the human body. This kind of word-play could well be described as a game of life, of

33. "Both readings, the 'univocal' one and the 'deconstructive' one, are fellow guests 'beside the grain,' host and guest, host and host, host and parasite, parasite and parasite. The relation is a triangle, not a polar opposition" (Hillis Miller, p. 282).

34. Hillis Miller, p. 282.

35. Hillis Miller, p. 282.

living organs or organisms. The play begins in the famous coin-tossing scene, with an unusually long series of 'heads' coming up.³⁶ The link between this and the fact that the two main characters are about to lose their heads is quite evident (whether they are hanged or beheaded at the end is rather unimportant in this respect). But the imagery used here is far from original, if 'original' should signify something that has not occurred before. In Marlowe's *Edward II*, where an unnaturally great percentage of heads fall (mainly off but sometimes also) on the stage, the metaphoric use of 'heads' becomes almost, at times, nauseating. It should be enough to quote two notable cases of this.

When Gaveston is summoned for the second time, King Edward defies the lords of his court with the following words: "The *headstrong* barons shall not limit me; / He that I list to favour shall be great" (II.ii.263–4, my emphasis). In what way the barons are headstrong and, more importantly, where this 'headstrongness' inevitably leads, is specified by Mortimer's assessment of his situation soon after Queen Isabella has commented on how their common tragedy has begun: "Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel / There is a point, to which when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down: that point I touched. . ." (V.vi.59–61). The fall – in a figurative meaning as well as in the very physical fall of heads – is necessary, then, and this is confirmed by the consistent use of 'head' as a metaphor and a compound. And *Edward II* may, in this respect, actually prove a rather arbitrary choice of source if one considers how many other Elizabethan tragedies played on the same reference to parts of the body. To take just another example: in *Titus Andronicus*, attributed now to George Peele, now to Shakespeare,³⁷ the lexeme 'hand' appears no less than 78 times. What strange

36. Stoppard retained this scene from the original script for the unsuccessful *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. "Stoppard's agent, Kenneth Ewing . . . had often wondered who was the King of England when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrived with Hamlet. If the choice had to be based on Shakespeare's other plays, it would be between King Lear and Cymbeline. What if the boat from Denmark docked at Dover while Lear was careering madly about the heath?" (Hayman, p. 32). What if not; what if we search the answer in Marlowe and suppose Edward II was reigning? (However much *historical* facts falsify this assumption, one must note that Marlowe's play itself also pays little attention to historical fact as put down in his major source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*; cf. J. B. Steane, "Additional Notes," in Marlowe, pp. 598–9.) Even if such *real* readings of texts may be deemed far-fetched, it is an interesting idea to make *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* meet *Edward II* on a textual level.

37. Not to mention some other contemporary playwrights, cf. John Dover Wilson, "Introduction: An Essay in Literary Detection," in William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, The New Shakespeare, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: CUP, 1948), pp. xix–xxxiv.

significance this fact bears to Lavinia's or Titus's mutilation, among other things, hardly needs explication. At the same time Guildenstern also refers to the tongue threatening the Player who has irritated him: "Now mind your tongue, or we'll have it out and throw the rest of you away, like a nightingale at a Roman feast" (45). What Stoppard does masterfully is to apply these metaphors to entirely new fields of human cognition. The metaphor of 'head' is, through the tossing of coins, applied to chance, betting, and on a higher, perhaps ethical level, it is connected to "faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability" (10).

The question arises how this scene can be acted out plausibly; in other words, who would believe that spun ninety-two consecutive times, coins would come down heads every time? Moreover, that this should happen each and every time the play is performed? This goes opposite to the normal view of how things work in the world and it is beyond doubt that no one in the audience would actually believe that the coins show heads each time they are tossed, no matter what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say. Although this is not altogether impossible, it is implausible. Though the Player believes "There's nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death" (56), there still may be this one thing that is more unconvincing than even *real* death on stage, for, as the Player explains, "Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in" (62). How could the audience believe, then, that coins have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times (or even more, if one takes into account the times Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play against the Player)?

The situation here is similar to a Concept-Art piece by the Dutch artist Johan van der Veen. One of his works bears the title "Two sets of thirty-six dice rolls" and is nothing more than two 6×6 matrices, the one showing the numbers between 1 and 6 in an apparently random distribution, and the other showing 36 occurrences of a throw of 6. The viewer willingly believes that the first series of throws reflects a real experiment, while they certainly doubt that the artist should have thrown a 6 thirty-six consecutive times. Nevertheless, the first set is not an atom more probable than the second. Similarly, who would believe that the set 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 is as likely to come up winning in the English lottery, as, say, 9, 25, 28, 37, 41, and 48 – or, indeed, any other combination picked at 'random'? And yet this is so.³⁸ Thus, the coin-tossing scene is at least doubtful, if

38. In this respect, probability has no 'memory' – but humans interpreting it do. This is what makes the difference. This is why a lottery player who always bets on the numbers drawn the previous week is looked upon as a harmless lunatic – and yet, his numbers have the same

not completely incredible and implausible; on the other hand, it masterfully signifies the ‘bracketing,’ or suspension of time (“There is an art to the building up of suspense,” as Guildenstern states at the very beginning [9]; could this be the suspension of time itself?) up to the point where Ophelia and Hamlet, i.e. two major characters in *Hamlet*, both in a distraught state, storm the stage, and thereby move the action.³⁹ This is also the time when a coin comes down tails for the very first time (cf. Hayman 38). At this very early stage it is thus established that whenever action takes place, it has to do with the appearance of central characters from *Hamlet*: Claudius, Ophelia, Hamlet, Gertrude, or Polonius. At other ‘times,’ the time of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is suspended in the sense that they (as well as the players) are simply incapable of acting on their own. But of all characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surely at the bottom of this scale of activity; the Player can at least claim: “I can come and go as I please” (48), which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot. They are the manifest *Dasein* – “Sie sind doch immer *da*,” one could say in a vulgar-Heideggerian sense.

But the tossing of coins has a scientific relevance as well. Not that this is not mentioned by Guildenstern (the more metaphysically-inclined of the two, perhaps a variant of Beckett’s Vladimir, while Rosencrantz is more of the Estragon-type empiricist) in his long speech on probability theory (13–14). But the game of tossing coins can itself be linked to a famous logical trap, the so-called St. Petersburg paradox, which, however, is no real paradox, “merely quite surprising – to some.”⁴⁰ Assume there are two players, *A* and *B*, tossing coins. If the coin comes down heads, *B* pays two pieces of silver to *A*. If it is tails, *A* throws again. If it is heads this time, *B* pays four pieces of silver. But if it is tails, *A* repeats the throw yet again. If he throws heads now, his reward is eight pieces of silver. And they carry on in this manner until *A* throws heads *for the first time*. *B* pays him 2^n pieces of silver, where n is the number of throws necessary for the *first* throw of heads. The question is, then: if *B* wants to pay *A* ‘beforehand,’ how many pieces of silver should he give him to make a reasonable balance? The answer is

chance to be drawn (again) as any other combination would. This memory is, incidentally, also the reason why Edward’s personality disintegrates after he has abdicated; remembering his previous state as king he has no chance to cope with the new situation any more. Whether this fact bears any significance to the loss of memory on the part of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an intriguing question that should be addressed elsewhere.

39. This is the moment where outside and stage *reality* clash for the first time.

40. Raymond Smullyan, *The Riddle of Scheherazade, and Other Amazing Puzzles, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 191.

that there is no limit, unless the number of total possible throws be restricted. For the probability of *A*'s throwing heads at the first attempt is $1/2$, at the second $1/4$, at the third $1/8$, and so on. If he throws heads at the first attempt, his average win is $2 \times 1/2$, i.e. one piece of silver; if he throws heads at the second attempt, his average win is $4 \times 1/4$, i.e. another piece of silver, and so forth, *ad infinitum*. (This is because there is no guarantee that he should not continue throwing tails for ever, in which case the game will never end.) If, however, the number of throws is limited, *B* should pay him as many pieces of silver beforehand as there are throws.⁴¹ Surprising as this reasoning may sound at first, it is nonetheless impeccable.⁴²

No wonder that the unexpectedly long series of heads confuses and threatens Guildenstern. As he remarks at the beginning of his philosophical speech, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear" (13). His reasoning suggests both he and Rosencrantz have somehow 'fallen out of time.' He claims:

We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it is all that time) I don't suppose either of us was more than a couple of gold pieces up or down. . . . The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon the law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his opponent by winning too often. This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. (14)

This 'harmony and confidence' is lost if the 'law of probability' is suspended together with time. Rosencrantz's reply to Guildenstern's reasoning is a total anticlimax: it concerns his experience of the growth of the beard as well as finger- and toenails. Rosencrantz's biology is contrasted with Guildenstern's philosophy of science.

Here 'hand' is, on the one hand, referred to in a strictly biological sense, but on the other hand, it is applied in a meta-linguistic way (an effect not foreign to Marlowe's or other Elizabethan playwrights' practices); most notably in the main protagonists' conversation about the growth of finger- and toenails, right after Guildenstern's lecture on the law of probability:

41. Smullyan, pp. 33 and 191.

42. This is why betting on the *infinite*, that is, God, is favourable in Blaise Pascal's system; a connection for which I am indebted to Géza Kállay.

ROS (*Cutting his fingernails*) Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard.

GUIL What?

ROS (*Loud*) Beard!

GUIL But you're not dead.

ROS (*Irritated*) I didn't say they *started* to grow after death! (*Pause, calmer.*) The fingernails also grow before birth, though *not* the beard.

GUIL *What?*

ROS (*Shouts*) Beard! What's the matter with you? (*Reflectively*) The toenails, on the other hand, never grow at all.

GUIL (*Bemused*) The toenails on the other hand never grow at all? (14–15)

Biology or, in a more general sense, natural science, is at the heart of these metaphors, and from the first moment it is patent that the way the parts of the human body are referred to is fairly different from the methods the Elizabethan precursors followed. Rosencrantz, of course, comes to a false conclusion as regards the growth of toenails; they grow as well, only at a speed far slower than that of the growth of fingernails. Why his 'empirical' result is false⁴³ is one of the key elements in the entire play: memory is deficient with both main characters. They have nothing to relate to, they have lost their bearings altogether. But the other way, that of thinking and deduction, is equally inapplicable for them, as another attempt shows; when Claudius commissions them to find out what plagues Hamlet, they role-play the conversation with the prince ("Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways," as Guildenstern asserts with a platitude [35]), only to realise that although they have all the necessary background information, they cannot decipher the strange behaviour on Hamlet's part:

ROS 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. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL I can't imagine! (38)

43. Unless, of course, one would take the literal meaning of the statement "The toenails on the other hand never grow at all," which is by definition true. This interpretation, however, can be neither the intention of Rosencrantz, nor the conclusion of the "bemused" Guildenstern and should therefore be dismissed.

This exchange follows closely upon another, rather different instance of ‘head’ used in a meta-linguistic way; after they take their leave from Claudius and Gertrude (or, rather, they are left to their own devices), they are dumbfounded as to the proper use of the idioms ‘to be home and safe,’ ‘out of one’s depth,’ ‘over one’s dead body,’ and ‘to be high and dry’:

ROS I want to go home.
 GUIL Don’t let them confuse you.
 ROS I’m out of my step here –
 GUIL We’ll soon be home and high – dry and home – I’ll –
 ROS It’s all over my *depth* –
 GUIL – I’ll hie you home and –
 ROS – out of my head –
 GUIL – dry you high and –
 ROS (*Cracking, high*) – over my step over my head body! – I tell you it’s
 all stopping to a death, it’s boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it’s all
 heading to a dead stop – (29)

Never a less overwhelming case of prose stichomythia! What is happening here is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have just found something to relate to, soon realise once again that they are ‘out of their depth’: the entry of Polonius, who claims to have discovered the reason of Hamlet’s ‘lunacy,’ makes their mission quite pointless: why should they find out about it again? Their renewed confusion leads to the obsessive repetition of fixed verbal expressions about drowning, death, heads, and the like. It may not be completely ‘out of joint’ to link this passage to the last lines of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

* * *

Just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have nothing to relate to, since they have lost their bearings altogether, Marlowe’s play also reveals a desperate search for identity on the part of the main characters. In both cases the problem arises from a lack of fixed points, though obviously for different reasons. In Stoppard, all memory, or point of reference is missing as to the self-definitions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; moreover, this is so from the very beginning. In Marlowe, however, Edward II is robbed of his identity as he is forced to abdicate and

sent to prison eventually to be murdered in the most heinous way (by means of a cruel use for a “table,” rather different from the jovial setting of any *symposium*), whereas Mortimer undergoes an opposite but equally destructive change: his rise is quicker than he could get used to his new position. For this reason, he cannot remain king, or regent, for long.

Seeing how troubled a situation he has come to, Mortimer makes efforts to establish himself as the ruler of the country. This surfaces most clearly in the scene when he decides that Kent be executed (beheaded, in style). To Kent’s question, “Art thou king? Must I die at thy command?” he answers: “At our command” (V.iv.102–3). The subtle play on the words “thy” and “our” reveals much about the struggle that takes place between the two noblemen. Kent, who is the brother of the dethroned king and thus more justified to be the infant king’s guardian than Mortimer, addresses the self-styled monarch in the informal, to which Mortimer’s answer comes in the royal plural. Here, indeed, time is out of joint, and as soon as Kent is taken away to be killed, Edward III understands that he (and even the monarchy itself) is in danger: “What safety may I look for at his hands, / If that my uncle shall be murder’s thus?” (V.iv.108–9).

At almost the same time, King Edward, or no longer king, not even ‘lord,’ as he exclaims to the Bishop of Winchester right after his abdication (V.i.113), is force-shaved and utterly humiliated near ‘Killingworth,’ a conscious (?) misspelling of Kenilworth, only to endure further humiliations and physical afflictions before he is killed by Lightborn. Even after being imprisoned he cannot come to terms with his loss of the throne – and the loss of his identity with that. In this, he is reinforced by Kent, who has also been repudiated by Younger Mortimer.

KENT Where is the court but here? Here is the king
 And I will visit him: why stay you [the guards] me?
 MATREVIS The court is where Lord Mortimer remains:
 Thither shall your honour go; and so, farewell. . . .
 KENT O, miserable is that common-weal,
 Where lords keep courts, and kings are lock’d in prison!
 (V.iii.59–64)

Shortly before he is murdered, Edward II asks “Where is my crown?” (V.v.92); the crown is the only way he could still redeem his existence. But he knows the answer, too: “Gone, gone! And do I remain alive?” (V.v.93) – thus he confirms his loss of identity and basically this is the point from which there is no return for him any more.

To be sure, Younger Mortimer and Queen Isabella are punished in a just manner, and their fall is introduced by the Queen's apparently calm statement: "Now, Mortimer, begins our tragedy" (V.vi.23). And so it happens, too, due to the initiative the young King Edward III takes and enforces with the help of *his* attendant lords (parasites).

In the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, though there may be loss of *life*, there is obviously no *loss* of identity, since they do not seem to have any particular identity at the beginning of the play either (in this, they clearly resemble Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon). Moreover, they cannot exclaim at any point that it would be the beginning of their 'tragedy,' since the audience knows from the very start of the play that they are (or will soon be) dead – if not because the viewers are familiar with *Hamlet* then because the title of the play itself suggests this.⁴⁴ Therefore, there is no real *peripeteia* to be sought in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; if the execution of Kent was such in *Edward II*, it would evidently be in vain to look for the like in Stoppard's work. In an even more abstract interpretation of the play, there is no death at all, inasmuch as there is no real time represented on stage. As Scott puts it: "such deaths are as phoney as the murder of The Player by Guildenstern. . . . The truth of death is beyond the dramatic classifications of tragedy or comedy."⁴⁵ This is an uncanny paradox in itself; the strange deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak for themselves – at the end of the play they simply 'disappear.'

* * *

One last thing that needs to be mentioned in connection with the 'play of death' is Stoppard's fascinating though not too 'original' use of the metatheatre.⁴⁶ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are involved in tossing coins, speaking nonsense ("a lot of academic twaddle," in the words of the presumably less than unbiased Charles Marowitz⁴⁷), and other kinds of pseudo-actions, in order to have at least the impression of being alive. This we could call the 'game of life.'

The 'play of death,' on the other hand, manifests itself in the theatre the players represent. As the Player explains:

44. Cf. Scott, p. 24.

45. Scott, pp. 24–5.

46. If theatre can be about theatre, why should chess not be about chess, or "Lit Crit" (Stoppard's own abbr. quoted in Brassell, p. 2) about "Lit Crit" (cf. Turner, p. 3)?

47. Cited in Hayman, p. 32.

I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and I can do you all three concurrent or consecutive, but I can't do you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory. . . (25)

But the Player's comment also serves as a self-definition on Stoppard's part. Just as (according to Beckett's strivings) the venomous 'critics' cannot say anything about *Waiting for Godot* that should not be expounded or mocked in the play itself as a meta-text, Stoppard leaves little space for commentators to find external wisdom regarding *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The most prominent example is given by the Player in the following words: "We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else" (22). This trite assertion in itself calls for an ironic interpretation of the Player's words. But the dark irony is not lost on Guildenstern, who shortly before his death eventually understands what the players are talking about. He replies in an Eliot-like manner:⁴⁸

No. . . no. . . not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over. . . Death is not anything. . . It's the absence of presence, nothing more. . . the endless time of never coming back. . . a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound. . . Our names shouted in a certain dawn. . . a message. . . a summons. . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it. (91–92)⁴⁹

For all the comic elements, the ending of the play is thus rather tragic. Death is no game, yet it is an integral part of the *play*, something that is quite impossible to avoid. As the Player explains: "In our experience, most things end in death" (90). So, in the midst of farce Stoppard's play still manages to re-

48. The reference, for instance, to the wind blowing through the gap caused by the 'absence of presence' is reminiscent of Eliot's "Gerontion" (cf. Zsuzsa Angela Láng, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness? The quest for spiritual integrity in 'Gerontion' and the *Book of Job*," *The AnaChronisT* [2000] 229–249, pp. 233ff.).

49. As soon as Guildenstern understands his fate, he disappears from the stage (we only know how he ends from *Hamlet* – or, alternatively, we can conjecture on the basis of the Players' performance); however, the understanding of his tragedy relates him to Edward II. Without a kind of anagnorisis it is pointless to talk about full tragedy. Thus, though there is no peripeteia in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, anagnorisis is a term that can be interpreted in this play as well.

tain a touch of that sublime pathos which characterises Eliot's Simeon, whose words are echoed in the first words Guildenstern utters on finding out about his fate.

Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision. ("A Song for Simeon")

Non-conclusion

This paper might not have provided an "ultimate vision" even as to the tragic elements in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, or all the parallels between Stoppard's play and Marlowe's *Edward II*, and their relevance for literary theory. Nevertheless, it may have thrown some light on how various (seemingly unrelated) literary and critical texts can be linked to one another as an attempt of intertextuality. It has also questioned whether such 'ultimate,' or 'univocal' readings are at all possible. However limited this perspective may seem, it can be used for further research, possible directions for which have been pointed out during the evaluation of certain theatrical and theoretical elements above. If history (and literature, too) may be conceived of as a tapestry, even though one does not see more of it than a "hand's-breadth,"⁵⁰ such analyses of one single thread may actually extend our understanding of the whole. Whether it be a tapestry, a literary text, an intertext, or history itself.

50. Wilder, p. 381.