Holding up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading "Rosencrantz" "Beyond Absurdity"

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HOLDING UP THE MIRROR TO MIND'S NATURE:
READING ROSENCRANTZ 'BEYOND ABSURDITY'

In cataloging the decades of unease and instability inaugurated by the late-1950s English theatrical scene, C. W. E. Bigsby notes that such anxiety often found its expression in 'ontological and epistemological questions' posed by writers such as Tom Stoppard. Stoppard in particular had to negotiate a sense of dislocation in which 'the social order, character, language, are all shown in a state of disrepair'.1 What we witness, in Bigsby's estimation, is 'the role-playing of individuals cut adrift from the history they had assumed to be the origin of their private significance' (p. 394). The construction of plays would go on, but no longer propped up by the sturdy scaffolding provided by social, political, and artistic institutions and traditions. Whatever play the artist envisioned would be enacted amid 'the collapse of formal structures of meaning' (p. 403).

Following Bigsby, Stoppard critics generally assume that principles of the Absurd best describe how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead functions.2 Victor L. Cahn, however, shifts the locus of the play's absurdity. He argues that Stoppard goes from the nihilism of conventional absurdity, 'where men have no role to play and must fabricate reasons for their existence', to one in which 'they must play a role that is strictly defined but still hopelessly unfathomable'.3 Stoppard has filled the Beckettian void in part by placing his own Vladimir and Estragon in recognizable surroundings, the Renaissance context of Hamlet. As Katherine E. Kelly remarks, the audience of Rosencrantz experiences 'the intersecting of multiple texts and frames'.4 Shakespeare's play serves as a reference source by which Stoppard moves beyond the placelessness and the absurdity of Waiting for Godot.

Stoppard's use of Hamlet permits him to go beyond another 'dis-Unity' of Absurdist drama: plotlessness. Admitting his own 'enormous difficulties' in plot structuring, Stoppard concedes that the already written plot of Hamlet saved him from some difficulties in the writing of Rosencrantz.5 In a more important sense, Shakespeare's play provides Stoppard a larger 'plot' linking the dislocations of his own era with those occurring in the late sixteenth century. Shakespeare, like Stoppard, wrote at a time of paradigm shift, a time in which fundamental reconceptualizations of reality and people's place in it were occurring. Indeed, Shakespeare borrowed the names of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the frontispiece of Tycho Brahe's Epistolae, in which the names of his ancestors are chiselled on the stones of an archway featuring a picture of the astronomer.6 Brahe's

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3 Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1979), pp. 64–65. Cahn also claims that Rosencrantz represents 'a significant step in moving theater out of the abyss of absurdity' (p. 95).
last words, ‘That I might not be seen as having lived in vain’, reflect the agony and self-doubt of an astronomer who desperately tried to save the orderly and reassuring Ptolemaic paradigm from the challenges offered by the emerging Copernican paradigm.

Through this genealogical link, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern connect the self-doubt and anxiety found in Hamlet to the larger issues being worked out in Shakespeare’s era. Hamlet’s lament that the times are ‘out of joint’ links the literary text to contemporary cosmology. Paradigm shifts, involving both the nature of reality and the perceiving subject, generally hinge upon questions of ontology and epistemology. Freud himself paralleled his own recognition of the role of the subconscious with Copernicus’s discovery of heliocentrism.7 The setting of Elsinore, just across the sound from Hveen, Brahe’s laboratory, combined with the reference to the astronomer’s ancestors, orients the play to questions of paradigm shift. Hamlet complains that he is ‘too much i’ the sun’. His own efforts, to use Polonius’s words, ‘By indirections [to] find directions out’ suggest that the play’s modelling of introspection and consciousness represents an internalizing of the epicyclic and eccentric motions of Ptolemy’s wobbling paradigm. The Senecan, ‘loose’, or Baroque style spawned by Renaissance scepticism is an outgrowth of this cosmological decentring. Hamlet’s ‘distracted globe’ mirrors the ‘distractions’ caused by the perturbations of paradigms bedevilling both Brahe and Shakespeare.

The conjunction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard’s alignment of his play with Shakespeare’s causes concerns of the late Renaissance and the modern period to dovetail. Jean E. Howard has identified the Renaissance’s ‘recognition of the discontinuous nature of human identity’ and its ‘clash of paradigms’ as themes particularly relevant to twentieth-century concerns.8 She sees both periods as caught up in ‘the exhilaration and fearfulness of living inside a gap in history, when the paradigms that structured the past seem facile and new paradigms uncertain’ (p. 17). In his use of Hamlet, Stoppard contextualizes the Theatre of the Absurd, as defined by Beckett, Ionesco, and others, in the scepticism of Montaigne and the melancholy of Burton. Stoppard’s audience is encouraged to view modern challenges to political, cultural, scientific, and even textual authority in the light of the Renaissance’s own anxiety-ridden shift into new modes of conceptualization. Towards the end of Stoppard’s play, Rosencrantz’s sardonic comment on the oncoming sunset seems aimed equally at Copernican heliocentricity and Einsteinian relativity: ‘The sun’s going down. Or the earth’s coming up, as the fashionable theory has it’ (p. 125). Stoppard’s dovetailing of the Renaissance and modern traditions often means that Rosencrantz bears out the Player’s observation that ‘every exit’ is ‘an entrance somewhere else’ (p. 28).

The larger plot that unites these two plays is one which defines the uncertainties of a failing paradigm in dramatic terms as both authors’ plays reflect their respective periods of crisis and change. Not surprisingly, we find that Rosencrantz’s movement

7 Thomas S. Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). In regard to the cross-disciplinary effects posed by paradigm shifts, Kuhn writes: ‘In our own century, Einstein’s relativity theories and Freud’s psychoanalytic theories provide centres for controversies from which may emerge further radical reorientations of Western thought. Freud himself emphasized the parallel effects of Copernicus’ discovery that the earth was merely a planet and his own discovery that the unconscious controlled much of human behavior’ (p. 4).

Beyond absurdity is aided by Stoppard’s use of decidedly modern elements drawn from the scientific frame of reference that had been forming from the early 1930s and that was still being refined in the decade of *Rosencrantz*’s appearance. Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s anachronistic diction and equally anachronistic knowledge of modern scientific concepts speak to Stoppard’s own familiarity with such issues of quantum mechanics as relativity, spatio-temporal fields, complementarity, and the problematic relationship of the observer to observed reality. Kelly catalogues Stoppard’s ‘sustained interest in illustrating philosophical and mathematical principles in precise stage terms’, starting with Cantor’s proof and Zeno’s paradox in *Jumpers* and proceeding to his wide-ranging employment of ideas of particle physics in *Hapgood* (p. 75). In *Rosencrantz*, Stoppard’s reliance on the scientific framework (here, probability theory) places his two characters more in the realm of quantum mechanics than in the *mise-en-abîme* of Absurdism:

In Guildenstern’s talk, ‘probability’ is the technocratic jargon for post-Beckettian ‘reality,’ and as such identifies Stoppard’s Courtiers as members of contemporary culture for whom the ‘real’ can be defined only as the probable and for whom the probable has been mysteriously suspended. This layer of scientific metaphor distinguishes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from both their Shakespearean and their Beckettian models. (p. 75)

Kelly is most judicious in inviting us to look for ideas of modern culture and science as metaphorical underpinnings for *Rosencrantz*. Indeed, the altered perspectives Stoppard offers on *Hamlet* and the superimposing of his own play on Shakespeare’s have their own corollaries in cultural and scientific advances being made at this time. In the mid-1960s, about the time Stoppard was transforming *Rosencrantz* from a pastiche of *Hamlet* to a more complex placing of his own characters within the reconstructed dimensions of Shakespeare’s work, western culture was becoming more sophisticated in its understanding of how media could manipulate and reshape experience. Marshall McLuhan boldly announced a crisis in the old paradigm, whose linearity was no longer sufficient for expressing new, multimodal experiences of reality. He proclaimed that the new media would challenge the fixed linearity of the traditional text with their own dimensionalizations of experience. He eschewed ‘our deeply embedded habit of regarding all phenomena from a fixed point of view’, prophesying that the new media would create a ‘participation mystique’ in their audience. Stoppard’s reworking of *Hamlet* from Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s point of view and his involving of the audience in his play were contemporaneous

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9 The long view of Stoppard’s career as a dramatist can confirm and clarify his reliance on the scientific paradigm as a frame of reference. In particular, *Hapgood* (London: Faber, 1968) is a play that overtly expresses the structures that are more covertly at work in *Rosencrantz*. In perhaps the only cloak-and-dagger work whose plot and characterization are derived from quantum theory, Stoppard gives us a world suspended between lived reality and theory, a world in which bullets possess an indeterminate, dual nature:  

KERNER ‘You chaps? Oh, scientists. (Laughs) Paul, objective reality is for zoologists. ‘Ah, yes, definitely a giraffe.’ But a double agent is not like a giraffe. A double agent is more like a trick of the light. Look. Look at the edge of the shadow. It is straight like the edge of the wall that makes it. Your Isaac Newton saw this and he concluded that light was made of little particles. Other people said light is a wave but Isaac Newton said, no, if light was a wave the shadow would bend round the wall like water bends round a stone in the river.  

Now, we will do an experiment together.  

BLAIR *Now, Joseph?*  

KERNER Absolutely. In this experiment you have a machine gun which shoots particles . . . which we call . . . ?  

BLAIR (Tentatively) *Bullets?*  

with McLuhan’s announcement of this new era. Written within the spaces of Hamlet, reconstructing those spaces and creating patterns of interference with Shakespeare’s text, Rosencrantz manifested the culture’s movement away from the linear text to new, more complex modes of conceptualizing the text.

As though to underscore McLuhan’s prophecies, a startling technological breakthrough in the optical science of holography was heralded in the lead article of Scientific American in 1965.11 Holography, the three-dimensional imaging technique first theorized by Dennis Gabor some twenty years previously, was now a practical reality. Featured in the article were several impressive holograms that showed in very clear visual terms that a reconceptualization of space was at hand. A culture that a few years earlier might have seen Rosencrantz as mere plagiarism or at least an intrusion into the hallowed space of a classic was primed for a dramatic spectacle that would redefine space in ways entirely consonant with the principles of holography. Holography provided the ‘instrumentation’ necessary for defining an emerging paradigm (just as Brahe’s own precise instruments, in spite of his commitment to the old paradigm, were announcing a new configuration on the horizon).

If we examine the mid-1960s from the perspective of Thomas S. Kuhn’s theories about paradigm shift, we can begin to see Rosencrantz as one of several concurrent responses to a sense of crisis and change. As Kuhn indicates, ‘crisis often proliferates new discoveries’ and reformulations of accepted modes of perception.12 Upatniek and Leith’s announcement of holography demonstrated that technology was providing a means for representing the space–time continuum and for opening up the fixed-point perspective to multiple perspectives. In the same time-frame, Joseph Frank and Rudolph Arnheim were calling for new fashionings of space and time in the literary and visual arts. In The Widening Gyre, Frank described modern literature as evidencing a constant will to subvert the restraining linearity of the written medium and ‘to rival the spatial apprehension of the plastic arts in a moment of time’.13 Speaking of works of art generally, Arnheim observed that ‘any organized entity, in order to be grasped by the mind, must be translated into the synoptic

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condition of space'. Arnheim speculated that memory is not only involved in storing and preserving information in a time-sequential pattern but that it also must 'convert that sequence into simultaneity, time into space' (p. 2). Working separately from each other, theorists from several disciplines seemed engaged in what Kuhn labels the 'process of conceptual assimilation' (p. 56) that occurs in the pre-paradigmatic period before a shift. The fundamental, broad-based influence of a paradigm shift was exerting its influence.

Providing a very important piece of the paradigm puzzle in 1966, the neurophysiologist Karl Pribram, inspired by the Scientific American article, proposed a holographic model of the brain. He had been grappling with the problem of explaining how a memory could be distributed throughout the brain rather than existing as a localized trace (engram). Working separately from Pribram, the philosopher David Bohm came to similar conclusions about the nature not only of the mind but of the universe itself. With Pribram's model and Bohm's speculations, all the tumblers seemed to click into place for unlocking a new paradigm redefining both reality and the perceiving subject. 

Given Stoppard's knowledge of modern science, it is not surprising that he provided a literary focal point for this emerging paradigm. One finds expressions of his interest in the physics of light both early and late in his career. Kelly sees 'a nearly literal prefiguration of his own comic hybrid' (p. 12) of drama and science in his 1960 review of the film The Angry Silence. Here, Stoppard praises the film's blending of 'entertainment and education as completely as a row of chorus girls explaining Einstein's theory of light' (As a Shout'; quoted by Kelly, p. 12). This comic hybridization, very fully played out in Hapgood, is an integral part of Rosencrantz. Hapgood offers, of course, a far more overt formulation of Stoppard's interest in contemporary physics, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to separate the plot of this play from the theoretical formulations from which it is spun out. Yet, in retrospect, there are few, if any, explanatory analogies applied to Hapgood that cannot also be applied to Rosencrantz, whether it be a matter of the space–time continuum or the paradoxical dualisms of modern physics.

Stoppard's integral involvement in issues of modern physics is no late occurrence. In an early appraisal of Stoppard's career, the discerning critic Clive James claimed that 'the appropriate analogies to Stoppard's vision lie just as much in modern physics as in modern philosophy'.

The absurdities that other critics viewed as arising from Stoppard's works were seen by James as 'ambiguities' rooted in 'the plurality of contexts' that concerned Stoppard; moreover, James defined the ambiguities found in Stoppard's works as 'just places where contexts join' (p. 70). The ambiguities and plurality of contexts that Rosencrantz in particular negotiates are manifest signs of the play's pivotal position amid the shift of paradigms, as expressed in Einstein's reformulations of Newton. James relates Stoppard's works to Einstein's own efforts to 'rule out the possibility of a viewpoint at rest' (p. 71). The abandonment of the fixed perspective led to new concepts of space and time for Einstein; in a similar fashion, Stoppard offers what James calls 'the dramatic

16 'Count Zeno Splits the Infinite', Encounter, 45 (1975), 68–76 (p. 71).
equivalent of the space–time continuum’ (p. 72). Stoppard’s familiarity with modern physics and his commitment to contextualizing its principles and problems in his writing ensured that he would steer his course by the prevailing winds of the modern paradigm shift.

In this historical context, with its ‘pluralities of contexts’, Rosencrantz’s ambiguities and its seeming absurdity take on a new dimension entirely. Its superimposing of one play on another, making Hamlet so much a part of contemporary culture and science, has important consequences that go beyond even a reconceptualization of space. Stoppard defines the audience’s memory as the locale for his play, shifting the action of his play away from Beckett’s mise-en-abîme to the one stage where questions of ontology and epistemology can be properly addressed: the mind itself. As Gillan Farish notes, ‘the boundaries of the action on the stage blur into the action in the audience’s head’. In this blurring between audience and characters, Stoppard creates two characters who are counters for a specific subsystem of that audience’s mental processing. Hamlet, a play already heavily invested in the themes of introspection and paradigm shift, serves a renewed use as Stoppard explores the audience’s role in the complex staging of two plays occupying one space.

As an outgrowth of an evolving paradigm and already cast in the Renaissance mould, Rosencrantz is a decided step beyond absurdity. Stoppard’s play encompasses all the projects of the various theorists mentioned above. Indeed, Stoppard engages in dramatic terms a similar set of problems that defined for McLuhan and others the sense of crisis associated with the old paradigm, and he comes up with a similar set of responses. This engagement defines Rosencrantz, in Howard’s concept of the literary text, as ‘an agent in constructing a culture’s sense of reality’ (p. 25). Rosencrantz reflects the modern ‘plot’ of paradigm change. Like the modern physicist, Stoppard is forced to explore the relationship between reality and the perceiving subject by the very nature of the paradigm shift from which his text emerges. Although I do not wish to claim that Stoppard was consciously aware of the holographic model of consciousness that I shall apply to Rosencrantz, I have tried thus far to recreate a sense of the historical moment, the prevailing zeitgeist that both shaped his play and was in turn shaped by it. Whether the author participates consciously or is ‘a beneficiary of one’s own subconscious’ (‘Ambushes’, p. 6), the ontological and epistemological issues arising from paradigm shifts are invariably reflected in that author’s work. What is ‘in the air’ philosophically and scientifically speaking often impinges upon a literary production; otherwise, we would have to preclude applications not only of holography but also of existentialism to Stoppard’s works for, as Stoppard points out: ‘First I must say that I didn’t know what the word “existential” meant until it was applied to Rosencrantz’ (‘Ambushes’, p. 6).

Holography, particularly its use as a neurophysiological model, may be viewed as offering simply a model that can be profitably applied to Stoppard’s play. In light of the synchronicity of events that I have catalogued, however, I would suggest that an author steeped in the concerns of modern physics did not coincidentally write a text that so dramatically enacts the new paradigm’s shift away from a fixed viewpoint and its turning toward the perceiving subject as an integral determinant of what constitutes reality. Working on a set of problems similar to those addressed by

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theorists across several disciplines, Stoppard creates a play that bridges the gap in paradigms.

In considering Rosencrantz from the point of view of various models of consciousness, I wish to suggest that such models can be helpful in complementing, supplementing, or sometimes displacing traditional and absurdist readings of Stoppard’s play. The neurophysiologist John O’Keefe proposes a holographic model for the operations of consciousness that will advance Cahn’s argument. Through this model, absurdist themes of alienation, loss or disintegration of identity, and the breakdown of language will be related to disruptions or gaps in the mind’s processing centres and problems in relating an interior subjective state to representations of external reality.18 The model for consciousness proposed by Daniel C. Dennett in Consciousness Explained (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1991) will point out the limits to filling in the Beckettian void with the contents of consciousness, for consciousness itself entails some inevitable gaps and inconsistencies for which current models cannot account. Considered together, these two models of consciousness can define the ‘parallel processing’ often at work between the audience and these two characters, especially in terms of the deep structures such processing reflects.

O’Keefe and Dennett view consciousness as arising from an interaction among various neural subsystems. Rosencrantz bears out Dennett’s rejection of a central processing centre in the brain in favour of a multiple-drafts model in which ‘what we actually experience is a product of many processes of interpretation’ (p. 112) mediated by these subsystems. In its relationship to Hamlet, particularly as Shakespeare’s play is stored in the audience’s memory, Rosencrantz is itself a multiple draft as reality becomes a matter of the processing occurring between the audience and the play’s two main characters.

Often, this processing is not parallel, causing an absurd effect because the subsystems underlying consciousness are not talking to each other. O’Keefe’s view of consciousness can help us locate the source of disturbance here. Defining consciousness as both ‘the process of awareness and the contents of that awareness’ (p. 62), O’Keefe describes its properties as continuity, unity, and integrity. He claims consciousness consists of ‘a stable framework that acts as the setting for a

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18 John O’Keefe, ‘Is Consciousness the Gateway to the Hippocampal Cognitive Map? A Speculative Essay on the Neural Basis of Mind’, in Brain and Mind, ed. by David A. Oakley (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 59–98; see also Lynn Nadel and John O’Keefe, The Hippocampus as a Cognitive Map (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Because of the particular structure of the hippocampus and the modes of information it has to process, O’Keefe states that it may very well store information about an environment in much the same way as that found in optical holography. What the subcortical region supplies is a frequency modulated code that interacts in the hippocampus with incoming sensory information about an environment as supplied by the neocortex. O’Keefe identifies a feedback circuit between these two systems, noting that ‘the business of this circuit seems to be the construction and manipulation of information about the animal’s location in an environment’ (p. 80). O’Keefe sees the sinusoidal impulses arising from the subcortical region interacting with neocortical impulses in the hippocampus in the same fashion as reference waves and object waves interact in holography to record and later reconstruct an image of the object fully dimensionalized in space. He finds several parallels between the physiology of the hippocampus and the holographic information storage system. In both, information about an environment is stored throughout the medium; in both, information about the environment can be reconstructed from only a part of the medium; in both, too, several scenes can be stored independently and, subsequently, they can be reconstructed for comparison in terms of discerning through tell-tale fringe patternings ‘the amount and direction of displacement’ (p. 78). This storage capacity is paralleled in the hippocampus, wherein each neural place cell is capable of entering into the representation of a great many environments and there is no localization of any particular representation.
sequence of episodes that vary in duration, content and elaborateness’ (p. 63). The septohippocampus supplies an extant environmental map, a ‘setting’ representing the mind’s current model of an environment. For an audience of Rosencrantz, this ‘cognitive mapping system’ (p. 76) is its memory of Hamlet, a predetermined pattern of events it has already internalized (in the subcortical region). Each ‘moment’ of Hamlet is mapped in the audience’s memory.19 This map provides for the audience (though not always for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) the two properties of unity and continuity. Guildenstern realizes this larger, encompassing order early in the play:

ROS We could go.
GUIL Where?
ROS After him [Hamlet].
GUIL Why? They’ve got us placed now—if we start moving around, we’ll all be chasing each other all night. (p. 62)

As Guildenstern notes of the apparent freedom he and Rosencrantz have gained on the boat, even their ‘trancy’
is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there, but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England. (p. 101)

Acceding to the complexities of their inescapable situation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern increasingly acknowledge the fact they are ‘little men’ who ‘don’t know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels etcetera’ (p. 110).

The absurdity of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s position reflects how Stoppard has split the various subsystems comprising consciousness, vesting some functions in the audience and others in our two characters. O’Keefe defines the role of consciousness as one involving ‘the storage and retrieval of narratives — organizing material into the appropriate form’ (pp. 68–69). Largely cut off from the storage and retrieval functions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lack the stability of consciousness. This concerns an ‘ability to knit together a set of experiences in spite of intrusions or gaps, or to relate the current episode to a stored narrative’ (pp. 65–66). The two characters are particularly unable to achieve any sense of continuity from their experiences; their lives are episodic, for they never have full access to the stored narrative that would give their lives continuity.

19 What enables Stoppard to elicit the holographic potential of Hamlet is that play’s special status in the cultural and individual memory. Few other texts are so embedded in the cultural memory as to offer the spatializing possibilities of Hamlet. In this vein, Marie-Clair Pasquier claims Hamlet to be so properly a text among texts that it presently exists as a ‘public domain’, a highly prized and recognizable piece of cultural real estate (‘Shakespeare ou le lieu commun: a propos de Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead de Tom Stoppard’, Recherches Anglaises et Américaines, 5 (1972), 110–20 (p. 110)). Hamlet occupies such a privileged place in the cultural memory that Charles Marowitz treats the play as though it were a vase to be broken to supply bits for a collage wholly recognizable by anyone in the culture who has had only the benefit of seeing even the smallest fragment of the whole (The Marowitz Shakespeare, London: Boyars, 1978). Such an inclusion of the whole contained in every part that Marowitz assumes as a relationship of Hamlet to the cultural memory finds its fitting analogue in the hologram, which is capable of reconstructing a total image of the recorded event even if one employs the smallest fragment snipped from the film’s corner. Rosemary H. Jackson depicts the ‘hologram’s ability to modulate time (time in space) [. . .]. It is as if the hologram is a record of a space of time, or a time in space’ (‘Through the Looking Glass’, Brochure from the Museum of Holography (New York: n.p., 1978)).
The problem for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that of integrating two differing modes of temporal and spatial relationships. Because the two characters are bodies on a stage, moving moment to moment through time, their explorations on the stage align them with a neocortical modelling of reality. Here, 'the brain models the environment [in a way that] can be characterized as discrete, individuated and non-recurrent' (O'Keefe, p. 75). The body's movement through space and its interactions with objects provide the sensory input necessary for constructing representations of external reality and comparing those representations to the extant environmental map. As the point of interface, the hippocampus integrates the interference patterns occurring between the audience's extant environmental map of *Hamlet* (reference wave-front) and the sensory input coming in from *Rosencrantz* (object wave-front). What renders Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's experience absurd is the lack of parallel processing between the neocortical and other neural subsystems.

Martin Esslin's description of the human condition in an absurd world 'deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle'\(^{20}\) needs some recasting in light of this model of consciousness. *Rosencrantz* is set precisely at the point where these two modes of processing should interface. The 'absurdity' of Stoppard's play is not that it lacks such an integrating principle. That principle exists. The problem is that the split staging of *Rosencrantz* does not always allow the sensory information provided by the characters on the stage to be referenced against the audience's external map (or, in a complementary sense, that map is not always available to the characters as a reference to their movements, to their sense of place and identity). Although *Rosencrantz* owes much to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in terms of character and situation, Stoppard's play engages its characters in a much more integral relationship with their audience. The holographic model suggests that this audience constitutes a ground for the characters' being, projecting upon them the strictly defined roles drawn from *Hamlet*. The model makes these roles fathomable by defining them in terms of how consciousness functions.

The episodic plot of Stoppard's play represents not the disintegration of the typical absurdist work but the continual shifting of the foreground of consciousness between characters and audience. In its relationship to *Hamlet, Rosencrantz* verifies O'Keefe's observation that 'the foreground of consciousness is not reserved for one actor delivering an all-night monologue' (p. 67). O'Keefe views consciousness as variable, shifting between a background and a foreground, the background constituting what William James labelled the 'fringe' (p. 67). Sometimes the contents of the audience's awareness and sometimes the contents of the two characters', this shifting fringe defines the potential for integration or disconnection.

In terms of disconnection, the staging of Stoppard's play and Shakespeare's becomes truly split. For instance, in attempting to stop Hamlet in the act of dragging Polonius's dead body, the two friends reveal not only their inability to change the action of *Hamlet* but also the extent to which they function as superimpositions upon the action of the Shakespeare text:

You stand there! Don’t let him pass!

(He positions ROS with his back to one wing, facing HAMLET’s entrance.)

(GUIL positions himself next to ROS, a few feet away, so that they are covering one side of the stage, facing the opposite side, GUIL unfastens his belt. ROS does the same. They join the two belts, and hold them taut between them. ROS’s trousers slide slowly down.)

(HAMLET enters opposite, slowly dragging POLONIUS’s body. He enters upstage, makes a small arc and leaves by the same side, a few feet downstage.)

(ROS and GUIL, holding the belts taut, stare at him in some bewilderment.)

(HAMLET leaves, dragging the body. They relax the strain on the belts.)

That was close.

There’s a limit to what two people can do. (p. 89)

Of course, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not capable of altering Hamlet. Stoppard’s bit of vaudeville reminds us that only part of the stage space correlates to the extant environmental map being projected from the audience’s memory. Because the action on the stage only partly coincides with that of Shakespeare’s text, the audience’s reconstruction of the scene from Hamlet splits the stage into two channels of space. These correlate in holography to the image formed in front of the holographic plate (real image) and that formed behind the holographic plate (virtual image). Virtual images, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not fully dimensionalized entities here, for they are not referenced against Shakespeare’s original work (they do not try to stop Hamlet from dragging Polonius’s dead body in Shakespeare’s work).

As O’Keefe’s model would suggest, Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s sense of isolation and alienation is most profound when they are ‘one-dimensional’, cut off from the referencing function provided by the audience. Their situation is like that of laboratory animals whose networks of brain cells O’Keefe charts as they move around either a familiar or an unfamiliar environment. Indeed, the two are planted in the audience’s activated consciousness like markers or electrodes (neurotransmitters) whose function is to signal the neural activity taking place in that audience’s processing and correlating of the play to their own extant environmental map. The firing of the place cells represents a correlating of the incoming sensory information with a previously mapped environment (a process analogous to the interaction of reference and wavefronts in holography). O’Keefe argues that ‘some such comparative mechanism as this is at work in the increased firing of the misplace cells following a change in a familiar environment’ (p. 87) and the synchronous firing of place cells in a familiar environment. Instrumental, operating as receptor signals, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the critical elements of a play which operates like a searchlight in probing the audience’s mind, its role in staging the text. Stoppard is operating in this respect very much like the neurobiologist Wilder Penfield, who identified localized functions in the brain by the use of electrical stimulations. (Interestingly enough, Penfield’s probings often elicited specific memories from his patients as he activated electrically those networks of cells in which these memories were stored).21

Because ‘words, words, words’ are all these two characters have to go on, their efforts to find their place often employ a language mirroring the operations of these

neural mechanisms. The rhetorical surface features of the play such as stichomythia, paradox, and paronomasia fit comfortably both into the Theatre of the Absurd, where language itself occasionally breaks down (as in the final scene of The Bald Soprano), and into modern science, where paradoxes such as light’s dual nature as a particle and wave must be negotiated. The holographic model complements more traditional readings by relating this language of negation to the workings of cell groups in the neural network, as the two characters seek to find their place in this environment. Thus, in seeking to orient themselves in space, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern frequently engage in a dialectic of place and misplace:

ros  We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?
guil  No, no, no... Death is not. Death isn’t. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can’t not-be on a boat.
ros  I’ve frequently not been on boats.
guil  No, no, no...what you’ve been is not on boats. (p. 108)

To the explanatory force of analyses based on Renaissance rhetoric or the nature of language in Absurdism the holographic model adds a more fundamental analysis still, that of ‘neurosignification’. Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s language often functions according to the Boolean logic of excitatory and inhibitory impulses characterizing cortical cell functioning. This Boolean logic is described by Rose and Dobson as ‘a two-valued logic wherein everything is either true or false, on or off, present or absent, etc.’.22 Neurophysiologists employ this system to describe the grating mechanism in the hippocampus by which neural networks are activated, matching sensory information against the extant environmental map. The language of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reveals a rapid-fire interplay of excitatory and inhibitory signals:

ros  Hamlet is not himself, outside or in. We have to glean what afflicts him.
guil  He doesn’t give much away.
player  Who does, nowadays?
guil  He’s—melancholy.
player  Melancholy?
ros  Mad.
player  How is he mad?
ros  Ah. (to guil) How is he mad?
guil  More morose than mad perhaps.
player  Melancholy.
guil  Moody.
ros  He has moods.
player  Of moroseness?
guil  Madness. And yet.
ros  Quite.
guil  For instance.
ros  He talks to himself, which might be madness.
guil  If he didn’t talk sense, which he does.
ros  Which suggests the opposite.
player  Of what?
   (Small pause.)
guil  I think I have it. A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself.
ros  Or just as mad.

Or just as mad.
And he does both.
So there you are.
Stark raving sane. (pp. 67–68)

The oxymoron in the last line of this exchange is a recognizable device of Renaissance rhetoric popularized by Petrarch. The descent of a process of Socratic dialectic into irrational self-negation is in line with Absurdist drama as well. Supplementing these analyses, the holographic model reaches to the deeper level of conscious functioning. This language’s alternating between on and off, place and misplace, reflects Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s attempt to situate themselves vis-à-vis Hamlet (in particular the character and in general the play that constitutes their external environment). As David A. Oakley has demonstrated,23 such play serves a critical function in the brain’s neural modelling and confirmation of an external environment. Like the goal-less play of animals, Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s play follows an ‘imperative to collect information for inclusion into representations of interactive object relationships’ (p. 118). Their goal is to bring the internal and external into some form of equilibrium. This goal eludes them.

This goal of integration eludes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because Stoppard, in filling in the Beckettian void with consciousness, has to deal with many of the contradictions or ‘absurdities’ implicit in the modern understanding of just what consciousness is. References to the problematic nature of consciousness and perception occur throughout Rosencrantz. Early in the play, Guildenstern invites his friend to discourse upon the content (or qualia) of perceptions: ‘‘‘The colours red, blue and green are real. The colour yellow is a mystical experience shared by everybody’’ — demolish’ (p. 20). Although consensual reality underwrites our personal sense of an exterior, knowable world, Rosencrantz often questions our means of validating what is ‘out there’:

A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until—‘My God,’ says a second man, ‘I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn’. At which point, a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience. (p. 21)

A very useful companion text to Consciousness Explained, Stoppard’s play mirrors and enacts many of Dennett’s own explorations into the problems implicit in any investigation of consciousness. Dennett, for example, considers the classic problem of the Cartesian Theatre model of consciousness — ‘the ghost in the machine’. Who is inside processing perceptions? Who is doing the editing? Who is in control? Finding this classic model to break down in absurdity, Dennett proposes a multiple drafts model of consciousness wherein various subsystems interact in relating exterior qualia to the perceiver’s interior state. Rosencrantz confirms this multiple drafts model in the interplay between the audience and these two characters. The

'deformation' of Hamlet that Kelly speaks of stems from the redrafting of Shakespeare's play. The breaks in continuity from Hamlet's five acts to Rosencrantz's three acts denote different modes of attending to and 'parsing' Shakespeare's work. Ophelia's verbal description of Hamlet's love-struck state is transformed into stage directions in Rosencrantz, suggesting different modes of processing.

These deformations have their basis not in the Absurd but in the structures of consciousness itself. The aberrant, almost schizophrenic effects these deformations cause in the play can be related to recent research on schizophrenics and how they process 'internal' and 'external' reality. In 'Sight and Insight: “Visualization” in Auditory Hallucinations in Schizophrenics', John L. Waddington reviews the current research regarding the neurophysiological basis of 'voices' heard by schizophrenics. Such 'voices' occur when the auditory–articulatory image of speech produced as subvocal or 'inner' speech fails to be fed forward to those areas of the brain that mark this speech as self-generated and intrapersonal. A short-circuit between usually linked processing centres causes confusion and anxiety.

Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's slippage of identity, semantic confusion, and generally crossed connections reflect a similar breakdown of processing between the two characters and their audience. This audience itself is often forced to experience its memory of Hamlet in a distorted fashion; for example, the audience has to process Ophelia's verbal account of Hamlet's mad display as written input (stage directions). For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, scenes generated from the audience's memory of Hamlet proceed with an inner logic that is at once inexorable and mysterious. What is frightening about these scenes is their conflicting senses of strangeness and familiarity. The hallucinatory quality of these scenes derives from the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often outside the feedback loop that confirms the content of Hamlet as self-generated and intrapersonal for the audience. Hamlet's soliloquies, artificial 'subvocalizations' sanctioned by convention, allow the audience of Shakespeare's play to make sense of the multiple drafts of reality that bedevil his fellow characters. The audience can maintain their objectivity. Stoppard upstages Hamlet by extending the Prince's tortured subjectivity beyond the floodlights to include the audience and his two characters, processing (and misprocessing) the action on the stage. The multiple drafts and the deformations that result mirror the consciousness that generates them.

Such multiple drafts and deformations challenge traditional ideas concerning the unity, stability, and centredness of consciousness. Indeed, Rosencrantz anticipates the postmodern/deconstructive questioning and dismantling of the individual authorial self by offering multiple perspectives as well as multiple drafts of Shakespeare's classic drama of introspection. The loss or disintegration of identity Rosencrantz and Guildenstern often experience stems from a 'dissociation of sensibility' at a deep structure level. As O'Keefe notes, the contents of consciousness 'are referred to the external world (perceptions) or to an internal generator (emotions, images, thoughts)' (p. 67). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have more than the daunting task of making sense of 'Hamlet's transformation [...] | Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man | Resembles that it was' (pp. 35–36). They must also correlate their own inward state to an exterior reality posited in the audience. The intense

introspection evidenced by *Hamlet* translates very well into both O'Keefe's and Dennett's prescriptions for agency and self-awareness. Dennett reminds us:

The need for self-knowledge extends beyond the problems of identifying the external signs of our own bodily movement. We need to know about our own internal states, tendencies, decisions, strengths, and weaknesses, and the basic method of obtaining this knowledge is essentially the same: Do something and 'look' to see what 'moves.' An advanced agent must build up practices for keeping track of both its bodily and 'mental' circumstances. (p. 428)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are constantly preoccupied with questions of perception and verification, looking down long corridors or engaging Hamlet in reality checks. Stoppard enlarges upon the theme of introspection in *Hamlet* by making the audience an integral part of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's quest for self-knowledge. Such a quest is not absurd; however, it must take into account that consciousness mediates the internal and external in a complex and interwoven fashion. For Dennett, notions of identity, introspection, and the processing of a world 'out there' increasingly contradict the experimental evidence concerning how the brain functions. Dennett, for example, questions the unity of consciousness, claiming it is apparent only:

To begin with, there is our personal, introspective appreciation of the 'unity of consciousness,' which impresses on us the distinction between 'in here' and 'out there.' The naïve boundary between 'me' and 'the outside world' is my skin (and the lenses of my eyes) but, as we learn more and more about the way events in our own bodies can be inaccessible 'to us,' the great outside encroaches. (p. 108)

Boundary problems are critical for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as witnessed by their own confusion of one with the other in the leg-pinching scene that begins Act III. Even in the relative security and containment of the boat, they recognize how distorted language becomes in their efforts to maintain a separation between what is internal and external:

**GUIL** (pause) No, somebody might come in.

**ROS** In where?

**GUIL** Out here.

**ROS** In out here?

**GUIL** On deck. (p. 100)

The 'absurdity' that arises from the play reflects this interaction between the internal and external. In its internal manifestations, this 'absurdity' is a reflection of the two central characters' lack of connection with the audience and the ensuing fragmentation of identity that occurs. In its external manifestations, such as the coin-throwing scene at the beginning of the play, the 'absurdity' is a manifestation of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's entrapment in a memory plot that the audience projects. What appears to be a play that has extension in time is merely a subset of a larger, pre-determined set of events (*Hamlet*). The audience of *Rosencrantz* is privy to a second order of time in which all moments coexist. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are themselves perceptually limited to a realm of time in which 'the coming "into" existence of a physical event is constituted by the "entry" of some of its "effects" into the "now" of the conceptualizing awareness'.

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audience’s awareness, some of these events cause a disturbing familiarity for these two courtiers.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two characters ‘for whom the probable has been mysteriously suspended’ (Kelly, p. 75). In the coin-tossing scene, the toss has turned up heads ninety times in a row, and Guildenstern tries to explain this oddity in probability law by hypothesizing that ‘time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times’ (p. 16). Though he dismisses this hypothesis as being ‘on the whole, doubtful’, Guildenstern suspects that he and his friend are not marking time in the usual sense:

gul Yes, one must think of the future.
ros It’s the normal thing.
gul To have one. One is, after all, having it all the time . . . now . . . and now . . . and now . . . (pp. 69–70)

Dennett’s view of brains as ‘anticipation machines’ (p. 177) whose fundamental purpose is ‘to produce future’ seems contradicted by Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s sense of their own fixed temporal existence. The external ‘absurdity’ of the coin-tossing suggests that there is nothing left for them to anticipate (a fact that intrudes more and more upon them). Stoppard gives an Einsteinian twist to Aristotle’s concepts of the probable and improbable as applied to a play’s presentation of plot. Here, dramatic theory has not been dissolved in the Absurd; instead, dramatic theory has been absorbed into quantum theory as Stoppard’s theatre-in-the-round enacts the space–time continuum. The ‘rub’ for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that they have entered Hamlet’s feared ‘undiscover’d country, from whose bourn | No traveller returns’ (III. 1. 78–79). Caught and seemingly arrested in a ‘sleep of death’, they are doomed to an eternal recurrence within their strictly bounded confines. The broad outline of their future is already contained in the audience’s memory of their fate. That audience both constrains them and defines them. Because they operate as fragmented agents of that audience’s consciousness, their paralysis of will mirrors Hamlet’s own. Probability, like spontaneity, does not operate in limbo.

What has to be constantly kept in mind is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Perhaps this is what John F. Catherwood intends when he invokes the names of our two hapless heroes in a recent article. Catherwood discusses those ‘borderline cases’ that ‘force us to question the definition of death being used’.26 He employs Stoppard’s characters as case studies: ‘Rosencrantz, without access to an intensive care unit (ICU), is dying when his heart stops. [...] Guildenstern, within an ICU, has a similar cardiac arrest’ (p. 37). By comparing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to patients in the death process who occupy a liminal position between life and death, Catherwood suggests that their future is also ‘rounded with a sleep’. To the extent that they operate in isolation from the audience, they have only partial and limited functioning. To the extent that their lives are ‘end-stopped’, their destiny predetermined within the narrow bounds of fixed terms, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lead an existence that is not absurd but one whose decisions have been largely taken out of their own hands.

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a degree of self-determination or free will to wander in those areas of the play that do not interfere with *Hamlet*, they can operate only as fragmented agents. Without the referencing of others to guide them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are merely ‘flat’ or one-dimensional characters when left to their own devices:

**ROS** We’re his *friends*.

**GUIL** How do you know?

**ROS** From our young days brought up with him.

**GUIL** You’ve only got their word for it.

**ROS** But that’s what we depend on. (p. 110)

Balanced between two texts, on their own, the two friends experience memory loss even to the extent of amnesia and aphasic impairment:

**GUIL** Has it ever happened to you that all of a sudden and for no reason at all you haven’t the faintest idea how to spell the word—‘wife’—or ‘house’—because when you write it down you just can’t remember ever having seen those letters in that order before . . . ?

**ROS** I remember—

**GUIL** Yes?

**ROS** I remember when there were no questions.

**GUIL** There were always questions. To exchange one set for another is no great matter.

**ROS** Answers, yes. There were answers to everything.

**GUIL** You’ve forgotten.

**ROS** (flaring) I haven’t forgotten—how I used to remember my own name—and yours, oh yes! There were answers everywhere you looked. There was no question about it—people knew who I was and if they didn’t they asked me and I told them. (p. 38)

Easily ascribed to the absurd condition, Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s loss of memory actually reflects a breakdown of communication between the various subsystems comprising consciousness. In *Memory and the Brain* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1984), Magda B. Arnold describes the patient who has undergone a bilateral hippocampal ablation, noting that this patient ‘does not even know how to go about remembering’ (p. 311). Claiming that the hippocampus is the site where the intention to remember is formed, Arnold believes that such a patient ‘can activate neither imagination nor memory circuits and simply reports that he does not remember’. This condition continually plagues Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have ‘only got their [others’] word’ for the fact that they grew up as Hamlet’s friends. Cut off from the audience, the two friends sometimes find themselves lapping into a ‘one-dimensional’, aphasic mode of being, eerily cast adrift in space, time, and memory:

**GUIL** . . . Home . . . What’s the first thing you remember?

**ROS** Ah, let’s see . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

**GUIL** No — the first thing you remember.

**ROS** (Pause) No, it’s no good, it’s gone. It was a long time ago.

**GUIL** (patient but edged) You don’t get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you’ve forgotten?

**ROS** Oh I see. (Pause) I’ve forgotten the question. (p. 16)

Their amnesia and aphasia are functions of their being ‘out of phase’. Left to their own devices, one-dimensional, they are in these scenes outside the play of difference between Stoppard’s play and the referencing features of *Hamlet*. They are their most Beckettian and absurd here, for they are not objectified or dimensionalized by that audience’s consciousness. In fact, as Rosencrantz’s ‘box speech’ reveals (pp. 70–71),
their greatest fear lies in being locked up in the mental equivalent of a sensory deprivation tank, enclosed in their own subjectivity for eternity. Like the actors, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have ‘pledged’ their ‘identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone would be watching’ (p. 64). Without an audience to objectify them, they are (in the Player’s analogy) like ‘bodies [. . .] emptied of meaning’ (p. 64). Their own existence is so predicated upon this interpenetration of consciousness between themselves and an audience that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like the players, seem to need an audience ‘or else they might forget everything they know’ (p. 22).

The two characters’ inability to act defines the hopelessness of the absurd condition in terms of the mismatches and lack of integration between two subsystems of consciousness that determine agency and action. O’Keefe’s description of consciousness as ‘the arena within which reasons and impulses struggle for control of behaviour’ (p. 70) is particularly relevant here. The improbability of the coins landing on heads ninety-three consecutive times places both the audience and the characters in conflict over who controls the events unfolding in the play: those supplying sensory information or those projecting the completed mapping of the play’s action. O’Keefe views consciousness as a continually shifting interplay:

Control of an action sequence passes to consciousness when either the outcome of a movement deviates from the expected result or the sensory information controlling the action falls below a certain level of predictability. [. . .] The general rule then seems to be that consciousness is required in those situations where reliable predictions cannot be made on the basis of the immediately preceding information and where other factors such as agency need to be taken into account. (p. 70)

The loss of identity and alienation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience stop short of the irreducibility of the absurd. Their condition marks the absence of what O’Keefe identifies as the final addition to any mapping system: a means for correlating internal autonomic states to representations of the self and that self’s internal processes. O’Keefe links consciousness to ‘the activation of a subsystem or the control of information transfer from one subsystem to another’ (p. 60). Citing Rosenthal, Dennett labels consciousness ‘the straightforward property of having a higher-order accompanying thought that is about the state in question’ (p. 309). For O’Keefe, such an ‘association of internal stimuli with states of fear, happiness, etc. is a learned one which is derived from the attribution of these states to others’ (p. 93). Objectified only in our experiences of others, such experiences as fear, hunger, and other bodily states are thus learned experiences. As O’Keefe notes, we can experience such states ‘but cannot remember the bodily state — only the fact of having been in that state at a particular time and place’ (p. 93). Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s own correlation of internal bodily states to representations of the self seems particularly tenuous, disconnected, and wispy:

**gul** What’s the last thing you remember?  
**ros** I don’t wish to be reminded of it.  
**gul** We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered. (pp. 61–62)

The parallel processing that occurs in the ‘overwritten’, coinciding sections of the two plays at least establishes a sense of place and identity for these two characters. A shift from Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s perspective occurs and the content of
Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is in the foreground for the moment. Often, its onset is signalled in the play's notes by a call for lighting changes and a reference to the tossed coin: 'He tosses the coin to *guil* who catches it. Simultaneously — a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior, but nothing violent' (p. 3). At this point, Ophelia runs in, and the contents of the two texts occur simultaneously in one place. Every coin, of course, has two sides. What the coin and the lighting changes reflect is the 'firing' of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's experience in synchrony with the audience's sense of place, its mapping of *Hamlet*.

These scenes of parallel processing startle and upset Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Consciousness is caught. Indeed, such scenes involve a global effect in linking the various subsystems in a highly complex way. Dennett links consciousness to just such a state of activation:

Couldn't consciousness be a matter not of arrival at a point but rather a matter of representation exceeding some threshold of activation over the whole cortex or large parts thereof? On this model, an element of content becomes conscious at some time \( t \), not by entering some functionally defined and anatomically located system, but by changing state right where it is: by acquiring some property or by having the intensity of its properties boosted above some threshold. (p. 166)

Dennett's model can help to correlate the stage space of *Rosencrantz* with the neural subsystems of consciousness. My own sense of projecting my memory of *Hamlet* onto the stage is strongest in these scenes, for they do indeed have the effect of 'boosting' their contents to a higher threshold.

In line with the holographic model of the play's action, Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's situation is less absurd when there is more integration of these subsystems. *Rosencrantz* achieves this integration with its staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, another play-within-a-play. *The Murder of Gonzago* serves a double function in Stoppard's own superimposing of one play on another, both in terms of 'catching' the conscience of the King and in terms of setting forth the conditions for Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's own self-awareness. Consciousness of their own situation is finally 'caught'. At least for the moment, they can grasp at the possibility of introspection, of understanding self-referentially their own place in the confusing environment of Shakespeare's play. Until this scene, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lacked what O'Keefe labels a 'proprietary sense' attaching to the contents of their consciousness, a necessary requirement for 'the association [of our perceptions] to a particular body' (p. 66). O'Keefe's 'sense of 'me-ness'' which tingles most or all of the contents of consciousness’ (pp. 65-66) is evoked momentarily as the two confront their 'bodies'. Thus, towards the end of the mime, there is a moment of self-recognition for the two friends:

*(The whole mime has been fluid and continuous but now *ros* moves forward and brings it to a pause. What brings *ros* forward is the fact that under their cloaks the two *spies* are wearing coats identical to those worn by *ros* and *guil*. *ros* approaches *his* *spy* doubtfully. He does not quite understand why the coats are familiar. *ros* stands close, touches the coat, thoughtfully...)

*ros* Well, if it isn't—! No, wait a minute, don't tell me—it's a long time since—where was it? (p. 82)

A few pages later, amid the anguished cries of Claudius for 'Lights, lights, lights!' the stage empties, 'save for two cloaked figures sprawled on the ground in the approximate positions last held by the dead *spies*’ (p. 85). The representational figures of the two spies have become objectified in the figures of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
themselves. Object and referent come into alignment; so, too, do the various subsystems comprising consciousness. This painful and fleeting moment of self-recognition completes the circuit of self-awareness for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for it introduces notions of the self into the mapping system. Until this point, the two characters hypothesized about the motives and intentions of other people as agents; now, they are supplied the internal self-reference necessary, in O’Keefe’s words, ‘to incorporate hypotheses about the internal processes of the representation of the self. The organism which represents itself as an object can also entertain hypotheses about the causes of its own behavior’ (p. 93). The confusing firing of misplace cells indicating their lack of synchrony with their external environment is quieted at this point; absurdity is breached.

Unfortunately, their moment of insight passes, and they drift once more, incapable of self-recognition. Even Hamlet has the moral satisfaction of spitting out into the audience (with unflattering results: ‘A split second later he claps his hand to his eye and wipes himself’ (p. 116)). The inability of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to come to grips with their own roles in the play dooms them to an eternal round of repetition, of forgetfulness and vague recall. As the two are left to their own devices toward the end of the play, their dissociative fragmentation becomes disturbingly more apparent:

**GUIL** *(leaping up)* What a shambles! We’re just not getting anywhere.

**ROS** *(mournfully)* Not even England. I don’t believe in it anyway.

**GUIL** What?

**ROS** Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?

**GUIL** I mean I don’t believe it! *(Calmer.)* I have no image. I try to picture us arriving, a little harbour perhaps. . . . roads . . . inhabitants to point the way . . . horses on the road . . . riding for a day or fortnight and then a palace and the English king . . . That would be the logical kind of thing . . . . But my mind remains a blank. No. We’re slipping off the map. *(pp. 107–08)*

Towards the play’s end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are indeed slipping off the map, for they are functioning less and less as objectifications of the audience’s consciousness. The clipped and telegraphic style that Guildenstern employs in describing his sense of ‘blankness’ suggests just how much the two characters are patternings of that audience’s consciousness as it references them against its extant environmental map. A similar patterning is observable in their memory of first being summoned forth, the messenger forming, like their own self-consciousness, into a slowly dawning background, summoning them into a mental field which will objectify them in the larger consciousness of the audience:

**GUIL** *(tensed up by this rambling)* Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

**ROS** *(promptly)* I woke up, I suppose. *(Triggered.)* Oh—I’ve got it now—that man, a foreigner, he woke us up—

**GUIL** A messenger. *(He relaxes, sits.)*

**ROS** That’s it—pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters—shouts—What’s all the row about?! Clear off!—But then he called our names. You remember that—this man woke us up. *(p. 19)*

As the play draws to a close, the two friends and co-conspirators are not so much nearing England as they are nearing the end of *Hamlet’s* periodic motion as it is stored in the audience’s memory (the neocortical mode of processing the environment in a way that is ‘discrete, individuated and non-recurrent’ (O’Keefe, p. 75) cedes to the brainstem’s mode of processing changes in the cyclic fashion of
circadian rhythms). Their life-support system, the audience, is being gradually withdrawn from them as they approach their deaths, the end term of their existence. They find it increasingly difficult to distinguish themselves from the larger motions that are carrying the play to its inevitable conclusion. ‘Give us this day our daily round’, quips the laconic Guildenstern (p. 93). Their concern with seasonal variation and spectral leaves is a poetic construct of their own situation as they, too, reflect on themselves and through themselves, filtering the light:

**ROS** We’ll be cold. The summer won’t last.

**GUIL** It’s autumnal.

**ROS** (examining the ground) No leaves.

**GUIL** Autumnal—nothing to do with leaves. It is to do with a certain brownness at the edges of the day . . . Brown is creeping up on us, take my word for it . . . Russets and tangerine shades of old gold flushing the very outside edge of the senses . . . deep shining ochres, burnt umber and parchments of baked earth—reflecting on itself and through itself, filtering the light. At such times, perhaps, coincidentally, the leaves might fall, somewhere, by repute. Yesterday was blue, like smoke. (pp. 93–94)

If there is any consolation to be gained from Stoppard’s play of difference, it is that the spectators have momentarily retrieved Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the Beckettian void. The audience has provided a ground of being for these two characters. As Cahn remarks of the traditional observer: ‘This observer has been God, and when knowledge of his presence falters, as in the condition of absurdity, then life loses its stability’ (p. 53). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ‘comparatively fortunate’ in that they do not have ‘to sift the whole of human nomenclature’ for their identity ‘like two blind men looting a bazaar for their own portraits’ (p. 39). The roles that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play are not unfathomable; the holographic model explains even their states of confusion as a lack of integration with that audience. As the Player observes, moreover, there is a saving grace to be had from such dramatic spectacles: ‘Occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality’ (p. 83). This thin beam of light objectifies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their self-awareness caught and shaped in patterns of interference arising from Stoppard’s theatre of consciousness. The audience’s own subjectivity and involvement become integral parts of both action and character.

The holographic model works well with traditional readings of the play, revealing a neurological basis for its rhetorical effects and relating themes of introspection and acting to the operations of consciousness. The model also advances the project of reading *Rosencrantz* beyond absurdity by showing how Stoppard has shifted many of the scenes and actions characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd to the Theatre of Consciousness. In holding up the mirror to mind’s nature, Stoppard arrives not at the irreducible and meaningless but at the very frontier of consciousness itself.

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