

# Exploration of Identity in Stoppard's plays: Examples of its Continuity and its Heterogeneity

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

**Exploration of identity in Stoppard's plays: examples of its continuity and its  
heterogeneity**

(Smjer: Engleska književnost i literatura)

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## 1. Introduction

The defining characteristic of any absurdist play is in the name of the genre. Yet, the question raised is in relation to what it is irrational. According to Martin Esslin “in these plays, some of which are labelled ‘anti-plays,’ neither the time nor the place of the action are ever clearly stated.” (3) Furthermore, he states how “The characters hardly have any individuality and often even lack a name; moreover, halfway through the action they tend to change their nature completely.” (3) Yet, one would be hard pressed to find a living person with a clear homogenous identity, who in relaying his story keeps the continuity of time or action intact. While these issues are farcically emphasized in an absurdist play, they mimic the contradictions of the postmodern world. “In short,” Currie explains the narrative world today, “poststructuralists moved away from the treatment of narratives (and the language system in general) as buildings, as solid objects in the world, towards the view that narratives were narratological inventions construable in an almost infinite number of ways.” (3)

The goal of this paper is to show how an identity of a subject is created by narration, and since narration is infinitely malleable, to argue that the incongruities an absurdist play creates are an exceptional model of the postmodern condition. Not only because are their stories inconsistent and their characters intermeshed, but also because they recontextualize famous literature and well-known people. It all brought to question the identity of the very plays. Therefore, I will show how the heterogeneous structures of the plays, together with the plays’ recontextualized identities mimic the process of identification of a postmodern subject.

## 2. Narrative Identity

Postmodernists have made large advancements in the theory of identity. By taking apart and criticizing the autonomy of grand narratives, they have also brought into question the unity of an individual identity. Lacey elaborates how:

The narrative view assumes that there exists an intrinsic connection between our lives, our personal identities, and the stories we tell about ourselves. In the process of narrating, arbitrary and unconnected experiences and events are transformed into a cohesive configuration, with a plot and characters and an ideological setting that enables us to experience meaning. (Lacey, 128)

She claims that the inclination to engage in storytelling is a fundamental feature of human life. (128) It is always difficult to discern what is intrinsic to human life and what is given. For a long time, it was thought that our identity comes from within, from a certain innate sense of individual manner and values. However, one cannot ignore the fact that we make sense of the world through storytelling. When we describe ourselves, we do it through the process of narrating and choose unconnected experiences which we believe make “us”. Furthermore, those stories do not only describe our selves but also, according to Lacey, “We make our life choices and our actions intelligible both to ourselves and to others by telling stories.” (128) So, they represent our past and govern our future choices, which leads to the modern claim is that identity is not self-imposed. As Culler writes: “The dominant modern tradition in the study of literature has treated the individuality of the individual as something given.” (108) If we now accept that it is given, then identity must follow the rules of that which gives it content. Therefore, he concludes, “the subject is ‘decentred’ in the sense that it is not a source or centre to which one refers to explain events. It is something formed by these forces.” (Culler, 109) The identity of those forces changes depending on the point of view of a theorist or more accurately, depending on the narrative which they subscribe to. In that sense, Culler writes how:

Marxist theory sees the subject as determined by class position: it either profits from others' labour or labours for others' profit. Feminist theory stresses the impact of socially constructed gender roles on making the subject what he or she is. Queer theory has argued that the heterosexual subject is constructed through the repression of the possibility of homosexuality. (Culler, 109)

In his examples we can see the effect of smaller narratives on identity. If there was still just one "correct" or "true" idea of the subject, then the subject could not be decentralized. Or, on the other hand, if it were decentralized, then the subject would lose all sense of agency.

However, Lucey reminds us that the choice of narrative with which one explains the world does not depend just on the individual actor. She writes how, "All these stories can differ depending on who is listening, on the context of telling, on our socio-cultural position or the life phase that we are in. Identity-constituting stories are thus dynamic and constantly in flux." (128) This is where the idea of narrative identity makes a complex turn because it defines identity as something inherently contradictory. If that is the case, then it would mean that one subject can hold multiple identities which certainly makes finding out who you are a futile endeavour. At one moment a subject can be something entirely other than the next, when some other narrative forces are applied to it. Luckily, in order to accept such a fleeting notion of identity, theory had first accepted the same form. Writing about the postmodernist party, Christopher Butler describes it as "certain of its uncertainty." (2) Postmodernist analysis is according to him "an attack on authority and reliability – in philosophy, narrative, and the relationship of the arts to truth." (110) It is an attack on the Latin expression of history as a life teacher, as the authority figure which guides the present into the future. It questions the possibility of predicting events on the evidence of the past. Butler calls it the "postmodern condition" and refers Frederik Jameson pointing out a "defining sense of the postmodern as the 'disappearance of a sense of history' in the culture, a pervasive depthlessness, a 'perpetual present' in which the memory of tradition is gone." (110) He continues describing "a general loss of confidence within the Western democratic culture."

(110) However, the idea of a “perpetual present” is not an entirely new one, and it does not necessarily disregard the past. In writing about the autobiographies and its writers as the historians of the self, Linda Anderson claims how one of Freud’s major insights was the “notion that the present can retroactively alter the past.” (61) It is not that the past does not exist, but she claims:

Rather the past can only be known belatedly, restructuring in the present what had previously been thought of as past. The past, then, lying dormant or latent within the subject, seems to come from outside their lived experience as a momentous and violent shock, causing them retrospectively to recast their sense of themselves and the life they have led. History is never definitive or finally known, therefore, but is capable of constant alteration as more is remembered or released into consciousness, causing the subject to think both the past and the present differently. Freud’s thinking on the relation between narrative and the subject has important consequences for the understanding of autobiography and how we remember our lives. (Anderson, 61-62)

This idea of reconstruction is what helped the theory of identity escape the uncompromising attack of deconstruction, which is according to Butler, “to deny that final or true definitions are possible because even the most plausible candidates will always invite a further defining move, or ‘play’, with language.” (17) Unable to disprove the argument, the theory of identity had to abandon the idea of a unified subject and try to put identity into a constant motion or accept the defeat. Identity then, became something constantly reconstructed in the convenient perpetual present. Therefore, theory came up with a concept of identification, a tricky one claims Stuart Hall, but still “...preferable to, 'identity' itself.” (2)

### **3. Identitification**

The concept of identification has some advantages over identity, especially in the modern theory. As Hall comments, “the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed - always 'in process'.” (2) Freud’s belief that we remember our lives

through reconstructing the past in the present, the discursive approach expands to make the point that we live our lives through constant construction and reconstruction. That way, as Hall himself claims, identity is never determined, and so once “secured, it does not obliterate difference.” (3) An important notion because by adopting contradictions within the same self, it accepts the decentralization of the subject without completely removing its agency. Hall continues to elaborate on the effect of the past in this process of reconstruction:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (Hall, 4)

Identity is, as he claims, “grounded in fantasy, in projection and idealization.” (3) Not only because the past is a “fantasy” reconstructed in the present, but because the same can be applied to the concept of future. The past and the future projections and fantasies are merged into one perpetual present functioning as “the meeting point,” as Hall claims: “between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'.” (5-6) Therefore, according to him, identities can be understood as places (subject positions) constructed by discursive practices to which the temporary element attaches itself to. (6) It is a fantastical meeting place operated, as Butler claims, through exclusion. According to him, what is constructed is always a marginalized subject, “apparently outside the field of the symbolic (...) which then returns to trouble and unsettle the foreclosures which we prematurely call ‘identities.’” (Hall, 15) It is a strange act, producing identities. They are never fully formed, since they are always being attacked and unsettled by the excluded. Like leaking water balloons, as soon as you fill it up, it starts to leak out. A smaller group realizes



it is being marginalized by the principal one, then tries to define its new identity through its difference from the main identity. However, that newly formed unity is also a fictive one, as Souter argues “‘produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought’.” (Hall, 16) Still, the idea that identities are imaginary does not mean that they are without meaning or influence, argues Hall. We have to reimagine them from as Hall puts it “so-called return to roots,” to a “coming-to-terms-with our ‘routes’.” (4) He elaborates how those ‘routes’ arise from storytelling:

They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field. (Hall, 4)

Finally, we can distance ourselves from Aristotle’s idea of literature as imitation. If identities are also constructed in fantasy, we can turn to literature in order to examine their nature more thoroughly. It helps that, as Culler writes, “literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions.” (110)

#### **4. Finding Identity in the Absurd**

Culler argues how “literary works offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed.” (110) He then gives examples of three different ways of defining narrative in literature: by birth, by change in fortune, and “based on personal qualities that are revealed during the tribulations of a life.” (110) But whatever the case, Culler writes how identities of characters in literature emerge as “the result of actions, of struggles with the world,” even though that same identity is then “posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions.” (111) The same way identities of characters are formed outside of literature, through struggle and exclusion. This is why, Culler can argue that literature plays an important role in

constructing the identity of the readers. He elaborates how it gives them vicarious experiences “enabling them to know how it feels to be in particular situations and thus to acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways. Literary works encourage identification with characters by showing things from their point of view.” (112) But this showing is not imitating real life, so one can learn and identify ourselves through the imitation. Currie would argue that the point of view of characters in literature is exactly as that of a real person. The uncontrollable desire to reconstruct and narrate events, he claims, takes over from the experience of them. “It suggests a kind of reverse mimesis, where people's lives imitate stories rather than the other way around.” (98)

Then again, if one read *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco, they would soon come to wonder what the point of view even is of any of its characters. Two of them meet for the first time and then find out they are married in the same scene. Barring illnesses, no amount of the fantastical influence on the construction of a subject's identity can create such a contradiction. It is impossible that anyone's life can imitate such a story. Still, it does not mean that such literature impedes our identification with its character. There is a purpose to such writing, Butler claims.

They [critics] argued that the work of postmodernists was deliberately less unified, less obviously ‘masterful’, more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together, and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it. (Butler, 5)

Such narratives push the processes of identification to the extreme in order to lay them bare. Because, even though, as mentioned, no fantastical influence can create such contradictions outside literature without illness, it is precisely through illness that Currie describes the state of postmodern culture. He uses Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of “cultural schizophrenia” to link the deconstructed narrative time to the contradictory logic of culture. (Currie, 96)

Currie writes of about the fragmented narratives within an increasingly globalised world. Globalisation entails standardization in order to make it possible, yet at the same time, in Lyotard work, Currie sees it as creating differences. “The proliferation of difference and the standardisation of the world seem to go hand in hand, and the politics of the dichotomy produce confused laughter. The American bumper sticker 'think global, act local' speaks as clearly to the transnational executive as it does to its implied environmentalist reader.” (Currie, 112) The world is a compressed place full of contradictions and that schizophrenia goes against the nature of a subject. Since, as he writes: “to be normal, as opposed to schizophrenic, it is necessary to have a linear concept of time, (...) because the narrative of personal identity and the experience of selfhood are at stake.” (103) Therefore, no matter the extent to which the characters in anti-plays are brought to their extremes, a normal person could never identify with them. So, they must either be exemplary of the schizophrenic world we live in or for some other reason, they resist interpretation. Maybe those characters are there to question identity by denying identification. Currie believes something similar. He claims that this kind of a cultural schizophrenia has conquered narrative identity. “Far from being the death of narrative identity or the death of totality,” he continues, unable to resist from linking ‘identity’ with ‘totality,’ “it is the playing out of savage narratives on the global stage, where fragments have acquired a new awareness, a new self-consciousness of their role in an increasingly visible totality.” (113) But if the unity of a subject is imaginary, then we should refer from understanding identity through any kind of linear or fragmented totality. Identity is, as Culler posits, a failure. “We do not become who we are supposed to be” (114) But also, we do not become anything. As Hall mentioned, rather than being, the subject is always in the process of becoming. It is urged to discard the idea of certainty and in a way, plunge into probabilities. As Bauman shows, without knowing the rules, the subject has to play the game: “In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep

changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short - so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones.” (Bauman, 24)

## 5. Identities of Stoppard’s Plays

Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* both embody these postmodern contradictions. His characters and his plays are rooted in some historical context to such an extent that their identities become a sort of a pastiche. So much so that even before we read the play, we know a lot about their worlds, characters, and their destinies. Not only that, but Stoppard spoils both plays in the title. In case the reader was not completely sure, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die, and Stoppard will make terrible travesties when representing the great men of history. Incidentally, while the plays create an illusion of unpredictability, the titles create an image of completeness. However, once the plays end, we come to the realisation that the titles were redundant. As Graham Allen points out, “The text’s plurality is neither wholly an ‘inside’ nor an ‘outside’, since the text itself is not a unified, isolated object upon which an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ can be fixed. This point needs stressing, because without it, Barthes’s statements about the text can at times seem contradictory.” (36) It was never about the end, nor the origin of the plays, but about the process. By extreme intertextualization, Stoppard is challenging us not to forget their roots, for we require the context, and he intentionally plays with our knowledge of it, but to restrain ourselves from constantly returning to their roots, so that we can accept their ‘routes’ within his plays.

Some critics were unable to do that, and so attacked Stoppard for the lack of originality and furthermore the disrespect done to the great works of art and people he recontextualises. Kenneth Tynan complains in the *New Yorker* how Stoppard has “failed to

do his homework” because the fictional Joyce does not accurately reflect the ‘real’ one. (*New Yorker*, 1997) He elaborates, “The implication of all this—that Joyce was an apolitical dweller in an ivory tower—is, unfortunately, untrue. He was a professed socialist.”

According to him, “‘Travesties,’ [is] a literary circus of a play in which historical figures jumped through hoops at the flick of Stoppard’s whim.” It is a little strange reading that from Tynan after he claimed that “despite its multiple sources, *Rosencrantz* is a genuine original, one of a kind,” while other critics like Robert Brustein were calling it a “theatrical parasite”. (Fleming, 49) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is evidently a play within a play. It is defined by intertextuality. It echoes not only Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but also many other authors such as Pirandello, Becket and Pinter. Furthermore, the play also contains references to itself, as Keyssar-Franke points out, “The initial scene is a self-conscious game. (...) When Guildenstern says in his first line that "There is an art to the building up of suspense," and after, Rosencrantz suggests that it is “Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?' each is clearly talking about the play and thus forcing us to look at the play as a play.” (*Ros and Guil*, 89) A bit later in the play, when it expects the question of the play's originality to arise in a spectator, it answers with Guil turning on Ros, yelling: “Why don't you say something original! No wonder the whole thing is so stagnant! You don't take me up on anything – you just repeat it in a different order.” To which Ros replies that he cannot think of anything original. (*Ros and Guil*, 76) This interaction points out not only towards the much-discussed problem of identity of plays, but also of individuals. The question is then, regarding *Travesties*, did the circus work in one play and not the other? In what way are Ros and Guil genuine original characters, but not Joyce?

On the other hand, Tynan’s stance on intertextuality could have changed because of some other faults of the play. As he further criticised *Travesties* for the lack of “the magic ingredient of pressure toward desperation,” which *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

have in the form of their inevitable demise. However, he mistakes his ingredients. The pressure toward desperation in the play does not come from their unavoidable deaths, but as Tim Brassell notices, from the inability of understanding the world they are in: “while retaining the broad context given by Shakespeare, Stoppard develops his 'borrowed' characters into his own creations speculating philosophically upon the 'reality' of a dramatic situation - the plot of Hamlet - which they cannot understand.” (37) Furthermore, Bryden describes the main characters as “frightened strangers in a world somebody else seems to have made.” (Brassell, 39) Even, Stoppard himself claims how during the first drafts of the play, it was bad, but he “had got interested in the characters as existential immortals.” (Brassell, 35) This is the ingredient and the same one can be found, to perhaps a lesser extent in *Travesties*. They are plays about characters being put in an unfamiliar world, even though, we as readers know that it is their world and if they cannot see through its mysteries, then we have no chance. However, as already mentioned, the reader must limit himself from reaching too deep into the source of the plays and their characters. One must know it to understand the context, but not hang on to it too tightly. Instead, we must come to terms with their ‘routes,’ as the characters themselves are unable to. Stoppard accentuates that inability through distorting their memories. In the first play, as Bennett says, “it is perhaps their absence of memory which is most disabling,” (Brassell, 47) while in the other it is the old age of the narrator and his ideas of self-grandeur which warp the play. The interesting thing is that both of those ailments are not absent from the ‘real’ life identities of people. We also forget (usually not to the point of Ros and Guil), we misremember and misrepresent like Carr and most assuredly many people cannot “begin to relate themselves to their world without a firmer grasp of their identities than they appear to possess,” as Bennet describes Ros and Guil. (Brassell, 47) This occurs because the identities we have are multiple, contradictory, and most importantly, they are given. And finally, Tynan might disagree, but for many people

today, such lack of knowledge about the world and oneself is enough to create the magic ingredient of pressure toward desperation.

## 6. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

### 6.1. Origin of the Play

First things first, what needs to be addressed is the intertextuality of the play. The play is clearly full of intertext. What is more, it relies on the reader to be aware of this fact. As Keyssar-Franke writes: “Tom Stoppard is himself not only aware of a play as being a set of strategies, but is overtly concerned that the audience have this awareness.” (86) Consequently, the script is then as she claims: “blatantly derivative, not only in its reliance for frame on Hamlet, but in its collage of themes and theatrical devices so clearly drawn from an assortment of major modern playwrights.” (85) And many critics try to guess its influences. Keyssar-Franke names “Pirandello, Brecht and many others,” (85) Kinereth Meyer mentions Beckett and Hemingway, (105) while Arnold Hinchliffe add Pirandello to the list in his dismissal of Stoppard as “a parasite feeding off Shakespeare, Pirandello and Beckett.” (Brassell, 61) However, Julia Kristeva herself defined intertextuality as “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” (Martin, 148) She added how “The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.” (Martin, 148) Therefore, not only is every text an “absorption and transformation of another,” but as we have seen, identity is also structured around recontextualizations. This is something Stoppard is keenly aware of, declaring that “it would be very difficult to write a play which was totally unlike Beckett, Pirandello and Kafka.” (Brassell, 61) Incited by the intertextual collage of every text, this uncertainty, continues Martin by invoking Graham Allen, undercut authorial intention and allowed Roland Barthes to proclaim the liberation of the reader ‘from the traditional power and authority of the figure of the ‘author,’ who was now ‘dead’.” (Martin, 148) In a way

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is an attempt at the liberation of the characters from the authority of the original author. As the title suggests, it ends unsuccessfully, however it perhaps does manage to liberate them in the eyes of the audience. As Brassell writes:

Where Shakespeare implicitly defends Hamlet's action in substituting the letters, Stoppard calls attention to the possibility of seeing it, certainly from at least two points of view (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's), as unnecessarily vicious. The sympathies of a *Hamlet* audience lie firmly with the prince and for them his survival from the potential peril of the ship is dearly imperative; Stoppard's concern, however, is to redress this balance of sympathies in favour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. (Brassell, 39)

Stoppard is almost forcefully trying to liberate the audience from the authority of the author, not only of Shakespeare's, but also of his own. Or should the argument be stretched a little further, by making the main characters so obviously contradictory, yet aware of the never-ending uncertainties which give them meaning, Stoppard could be seen as trying to liberate the audience from the authority of that which gives them identity. So that they realise that through the process of identification they can recontextualise and change their own stories, just how their sympathies toward Ros and Guil were.

The point of deciphering the origin of the play, then, eludes me. Especially since, Brassell himself ends his chapter on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* claiming to have finally come up with the "real" genesis. "That Eliot's poem, and especially the lines quoted above, rather than the writings of Pirandello, Kafka, Saunders, Beckett or even perhaps Hamlet itself, provides the real genesis of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*." (67) One cannot help questioning whether the purpose of his argument is that Eliot's poem is the starting point of Stoppard's play or that it is more influential than other influences. While it is important to be aware of its collage of influences, Brassell falls into the trap of searching for its roots. Instead of clutching on to the intention of finding the "true" genesis of the play, it would be more interesting to view the play as a process of identification. Furthermore, that



process runs through, from the main characters all the way to the play itself. As Stoppard himself suggested in an interview:

One of the reasons that the play turned out to work so well, I think, is that the predicament of the characters coincides with the predicament of the playwright. In other words I have these two guys in there and there's no plot until somebody comes in three pages later and they have to fill three pages and I have to fill three pages, and there's nothing. So they end up playing word games, spinning coins, speculating on eternals as well as the immediate situation, getting nowhere, and one finds that there becomes a sort of empathy, a circular one, between an audience watching somebody killing time watching somebody killing time, surrounded by somebody killing time. (Brassell, 62)

## 6.2. The Identity

Having lost their memories and being destined for execution, Ros and Guil are “perpetual present” personified. They have no past and no future. Therefore, all they can hold on to is to their identities. So, it is no coincidence that the two elements of Hall’s theory on identity as a “point of suture” come to life in Ros and Guil. On the one hand, according to Hall, the subject is the body which serves “to function as the signifier of the condensation of subjectivities in the individual.” (9) It is the way in which an individual brings together and connects all the discourses into one body. Therefore, if the meaning of order, according to Guil, is that “each move is dictated by the previous one,” (*Ros and Guil*, 51) then a subject is created by the different order in which the discourses appear. On the other hand, the subject consists of those discourses which construct an identity. As Hall argues “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference,” which entails that “it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not,” that the identity can be constructed. (4-5) If our identity is constructed in reference to the Other, to the discourses of Others, then we cannot say something original and Guil is certainly aware of it when exclaiming: “Words, words. They're all we have to go on.” (*Ros and Guil*, 32) Because language and those words are something one learns. They are not original, new or ours. All we can do is “repeat it in a

different order.” (95) Therefore, the processes which rearrange the order of discourses in an individual, are those which produce subjectivities. The fact that they are miserably aware of the processes of identification, and they still continue asking the wrong questions of who they are and where they come from, emphasizes the futility of their search for answers.

### 6.3. The World

Making the characters as exaggerated examples of the existential dread of identification was not enough for Stoppard. They had to suffer more, by amplifying the randomness of the natural world and the discourses which affect a subject. As if the world itself is as uncertain and as uncontrollable as an identity. The play mimics Luce's process of narrating our selves which consists of multiple seemingly arbitrary and unconnected events transformed into a cohesive configuration. The first of these events is when we meet Ros and Guil tossing coins. The coins apparently cannot land on tails, which would move, as Guil says, a weaker man to re-examine his faith in the law of probability. (*Ros and Guil*, 2) And were Tim Brassell there, he would have been that “weaker man,” claiming they exist in a world in which the normal rules of probability and expectation are simply not operating. (40) Such a conclusion does not escape Guil, who is a logical man and in the face of the unknown, looks for comfort in science. (*Ros and Guil*, 7) However, he comes to an antithetical conclusion: “If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub- or supernatural forces the probability is that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the first part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability will operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces.” (*Ros and Guil*, 7)

Guil's deduction may seem incongruous with science to any who have never read Derrida. But even further Lyotard notices how scientists when they are interviewed after a discovery, “They recount an epic of knowledge that is in fact wholly unepic. They play by the

rules of the narrative game.” (27-28) And the nature of the narrative game is a heterogeneous one, the rules change, which is exemplified in this contradictory world which Ros and Guil find themselves in. By reconstructing the plot of *Hamlet* into a world of randomness, Stoppard makes evident the possibility of the opposite happening; of reconstructing the world into plots. The plural is important, since one of Ros and Guil’s failures lies in them trying to make sense of the plot as a single storyline, which the play is constantly denying them. Tim Brassel describes their predicament as inhabiting “a world full of questions which, for them, have no answers.” (40) What he does not mention is that the same predicament applies to every subject in the real world. This clearly absurd play echoes Lyotard’s simplified definition of “*postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives,” (Hall, 13) thereby showing that the absurd is perhaps the correct choice when illustrating the complexities of the postmodern world.

#### **6.4. Between the Roles**

Considering the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, it is strange to later recall Bauman’s words that “in play, there is neither inevitability nor accident (there is no accident in a world that knows no necessity or determination).” (31) Because for Ros and Guil, everything seems accidental. However, while we can compare the two worlds (one of the play and the other “real” one), we must resist from thinking they correspond to each other. As Bauman elaborates:

In play, the world itself is a player, and luck and misfortune are but the moves of the world-as-player. In the confrontation between the player and the world there are neither laws nor lawlessness, neither order nor chaos. There are just the moves - more or less clever, shrewd or tricky, insightful or misguided. The point is to guess the moves of the adversary and anticipate them, prevent or pre-empt - to stay 'one ahead'. (Bauman, 31)

Anytime Ros and Guil come into contact with other actors from the play *Hamlet*, this is exactly how they play their roles. Moreover, they even play out their meeting with Hamlet

before it happens, trying to stay one step ahead of him. They are constantly trying to be the players, to play the game, but they are never sure which game exactly they are playing. So, their attempts inevitably end unsuccessfully. After their absurd role play, Stoppard does not even show the scene with Hamlet, still, Ros and Guil seemingly come out of the Shakespeare's conversation with Hamlet irritated at how badly they have played the game. Obviously, because they are not playing the same game or the same roles that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were playing in *Hamlet*, further emphasizing how they are not the same characters. What's worse, Stoppard intentionally blurs that line. The conversation does not happen to the full extent in his play, yet Ros and Guil still refer to it, as if it had just occurred. Ros complains to Guil how Hamlet made them look ridiculous, additionally referring to the question-and-answer game they had just played with one another, he irritably exclaims: "Twenty-seven - three, and you think he might have had the edge?! He murdered us." (*Ros and Guil*, 48) This is why they can never accept the Player's advice to relax and respond. "That's what people do," He claims, "You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn." (*Ros and Guil*, 58) Yet Ros and Guil have to question it, because they cannot understand why they could not have played the game better. They cannot accept neither of the plays completely. Not only that, but Ros goes so far as to even mock Hamlet's words: "Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all." (48)

Furthermore, in the short scenes when Stoppard does show an interaction between them and the characters of *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil are constantly miscalled. When they meet with Gertrude and Cladius, Cladius first welcomes Ros while raising a hand at Guil and then Guil while raising a hand at Ros. (26) But the characters of *Hamlet* cannot be in the wrong, so Ros and Guil try belatedly and hurriedly to bow when they are expected to do so. Furthermore, when Gertrude and Cladius start speaking in the style of Shakespeare, Ros and

Guil imitate. They, as Keyssar-Franke notices “go through the motions of waiting to play their parts in Hamlet.” (87) They are trying to respond and act accordingly, as the Player urges them. However, they obviously do not belong there. They are anchored in the wrong play. So when they realise how they are great friends with Hamlet, the realisation does not come from their experience, but from having heard it said by the queen. (*Ros and Guil*, 27) Hence, they act on the assumption that it is true. However, when they are alone, there is no Other for them to imitate, so they become lost and begin to question everything. Because, in the end, Ros and Guil are not people. They do not and cannot represent the every man, since they are bound by being characters in a different play, *Hamlet*. Thus, as we are forced to “look at the play as a play” (Keyssar-Franke 89), so are we, also, forced to see Ros and Guil as actors. They act on assumptions, and when they are alone they are lost because they lose, as the Player declares, the single assumption which makes actors' "existence viable – that somebody is watching. [...] Don't you see?! We're actors – we're the opposite of people!" (*Ros and Guil*, 55) He continues explaining the difference, that people do things secretly, secure in the knowledge of their privacy. (55) The point of the difference between actors, the Others, and people, the subjects, is not that the things an individual does privately is not influenced by the discourse of Others, but that identities are, as I have mentioned, constructed through difference (Hall, 4) and individuals have different secrets, which are kept as such because they are thought to be dismissed by Others. It reveals that the order in which the discourses construct identity, creates a different subject. And, at first, it may seem as though the Player is not putting Ros and Guil in the same box as himself. However, when he says that he saw them do it, Ros acts surprised. "You never! It's a lie! (He catches himself with a giggle in a vacuum and sits down again.)" (*Ros and Guil*, 55) He giggles because he does not actually remember such a moment. He cannot remember anything outside of the play, because he is an actor, a character. It is even more obvious when, in the beginning of the

play, the Player recognizes them "as fellow artists" (13) "What the players seem to have grasped," Brassel points out, "is a truth which eludes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the very end: that the 'on-stage' encounters hold the key to their existence." (41)

### 6.5. The Question Game

Zygmunt Bauman divides time in the "world-as-play" into a succession of games, where "each game is made of conventions of its own (...) self-enclosed and self-contained. Each demands that disbelief be suspended." (31) In that sense, Stoppard's play is not only a play within a play, but it also becomes a sort of a meta-play where Ros and Guil's scenes are literally shown as "a succession of games." Important thing to note is that Bauman continues claiming how "those who refuse to obey the conventions do not rebel against the game; they only opt out and cease to be players. But the 'game goes on'..." (31) Ros and Guil never opt out. That is why they are players in the end. The issue they face is a wholly postmodern one. "In the life-game of the postmodern consumers," Bauman writes, "the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short..." (21) He further explains what he means by that:

To keep the game short means to beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be 'fixed' one way or the other. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one's life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. (...) In short, to cut the present off at both ends, to sever the present from history, to abolish time in any other form but a flat collection or an arbitrary sequence of present moments; a *continuous present*. (Bauman, 24)

I have already mentioned how Ros and Guil represent this "continuous present." They should be the perfect players of both the game of the play and the game of life. Yet they constantly fail, because, while their presents are cut off at both ends (having no past and being destined for execution) they cannot free themselves from consistency and certainly not from "loyalty to anything and anybody." As Guil himself declares: "Consistency is all I ask!" Their failure

to play the games comes from their inability to accept Gilroy's the "changing same." (Hall, 4) Ros and Guil keep trying to return to their roots, to find out their identity, instead of creating it. And Stoppard undeniably puts that issue in our face during their question game.

The game begins with Guil noticing the conundrum they are in: "No. (At footlights.) What a fine persecution - to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened... (Pause.) We've had no practice." (*Ros and Guil*, 33) So, Ros offers a pragmatical solution and starts the game of questions in order to practice. Since, as Guil himself notices, pragmatism is all he has to offer. (*Ros and Guil*, 50) However, Ros not realizing that the game has started yet, Guil quickly takes the lead. Then, when he finally begins playing the game, Guil slowly stops playing the game and starts to question the point of it all, crying out: "What in God's name is going on?" (*Ros and Guil*, 34) They are cursed not to be able to play the game together. When one is playing, the other, pragmatic one, does not understand the game is on, and when the other starts to play, the first, dogmatic one, starts to question the point of it all. The play then, blurs the line not only between the two plays, but also between the two main characters. The play constantly points out that they are as if one character with multiple contradicting identities. Even their names get mixed up on a regular basis. They seem to be representative of Bauman's "schizophrenia in each postmodern personality." (32) As opposed to the Player's advice not to question everything, Stoppard is showing us that neither dogmatism, nor pragmatism can save them. While Guil is trying to understand the game without playing it, Ros is playing it without understanding. Not questioning everything is not enough. Furthermore, in the rare moments, Guil plays the game, Ros necessarily does not. They are always disconnected, from the plays, the game, the roles, or themselves. Stoppard, finally lays them bare with the end of their question game:

ROS (voice in the wilderness): ... What's the game?

GUIL: What are the rules?

(Enter HAMLET behind, crossing the stage, reading a book - as he is about to disappear GUIL notice him.)

GUIL (sharply): Rosencrantz!

ROS (jumps): What?

(HAMLET goes. Triumph dawns on them, they smile.) (*Ros and Guil, 36*)

The game abruptly ends by Hamlet entering the stage and galvanizing them into action. Shakespeare's play anchors them even when Hamlet does not notice them. Yet their trivial reaction fashions a sense of triumph. They are scared of failing their roles in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, but while doing so, they are failing their roles as characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. They fail to represent characters or people, since they cannot exist without the play of *Hamlet*. Then, the question of their identity falls on the reader, as of course it fell on Guil when he viciously seized Ros yelling: "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" (35)

They do make some progress in figuring things out. As Keyssar-Franke writes how during the course of the play they discover that "they are not free, that they cannot escape their roles, and that they therefore cannot escape death." (87) They are ultimately characters, but the play is about them accepting such a fate, but also of them trying to resist it. So, they play question games which lead "nowhere tangible or sufficient," (94) but only throws Guil further into despair. Guil wants to know the answer to who they are, he wants only consistency, while Ros does not care who he is, but all he asks for is consistency. (*Ros and Guil, 30*) It can be anything, he does not have a choice in it, because he is interpellated and intertextualized. He is stuck between two plays. Guil, on the other hand, wants to change it, wants to find out who he is, and cannot accept his role until the end, after he attempts to kill the Player. As Keyssar-Franke points out, his "final attempt to act out of character, and thus take on another character whose end would perhaps be different, necessarily fails." (96) For



they are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are characters who are "marked for death." (*Ros and Guil*, 71) In Keyssar-Franke's words: "Within a life, within a play, there is space for play, but the end is set before we begin." (96) Therefore, it does not matter who they are because it is already decided. "It is written" (*Ros and Guil*, 72)

The play raises many questions but gives little answers. It is up to us to play the game of life. "We are presented with alternatives." We can choose whether to question or to respond, but, ultimately, we do not have a choice. (*Ros and Guil*, 30) And for all the discourses and practices which construct our identity, and for all the assumptions we make about what is true or not, we can be certain that before everything that we learned, we knew one thing. We had an "intuition of mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words, out we come, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge that for all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction." (63) That is the only thing we can count on and do not have to question. That "the only beginning is birth and the only end is death." (31) Therefore, we should either accept our roles as people, or not. "To be, or not to be." (Shakespeare, 63) That is the only question.

## **7. *Travesties***

### **7.1. Origin of the Play**

This chapter must begin the same as the last one. Since *Travesties* recontextualises actual historical people, important ones (depending on the narrative) for that matter, the pushback against Stoppard was even harsher. Even though "Stoppard has never hidden his sources, in fact, takes pride in listing his reading, and the origin of his ideas," Ira B. Nadel writes how "much remains out of sync in the play that still nags audiences alternately increasing their pleasure and calling into question the play's success." (481) She continues her essay answering the question "does historical accuracy matter?" (482) Of course,

regarding literature and writing. Stoppard, she claims, “would be the first to say ‘no.’ What matters is the imaginative encounter, the possibility that these figures might have met and what they could have said.” (482) However, she posits that discrepancies do matter. Moreover, we know that Stoppard relies on the audience knowing at least some, if not most of the historical context the plays recontextualise.

As if writing a play with a group of people who actually lived in Zurich at some point during the First World War, but not at the same time, was not enough, Stoppard meshed it all together with Wilde’s play *The importance of being Earnest*. For some, this is where they drew the line. Robinson feels like it was a bit too much and “that neither literary and historical parody nor Stoppard’s own the humour are worked together to produce a statement which can stand on its own.” (41)

## 7.2. The Identities

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were insecure and always questioning everything, searching for someone with authority, characters in *Travesties* are the authorities. They are no ordinary people. Well, there is one who might be considered ordinary, but Stoppard made him the main character and our narrator, thereby giving him all the authority. So, they argue with one another trying to prove whose overarching grand narrative (not even a small one) is the correct one. Most importantly they quarrel about the purpose of art. Robinson posits that Stoppard is “really trying to come to terms with a personal problem: the play asks whether an artist has to justify himself in political terms at all.” (41-42) These bickering authority figures are, as Brassell concisely describes them:

Lenin, on the verge of revolutionary success in Russia; James Joyce, engaged in creating the revolutionary prose edifice of *Ulysses*; and the artist Tristan Tzara, who, with his fellow Dadaists, revolted against practically all established notions of art and culture. (...) In general Stoppard does not treat them

historically and their individual lives and achievements serve chiefly as the pretext for a playfully disrespectful comedy which, as its title suggests, makes 'travesties' of the characters which it presents. (Brassell, 136-7)

These travesties of the characters are made possible by our narrator. The play is told by an old Carr remembering his past. His role is, as Brassell points out “that of the pseudo-biographer and Stoppard employs a series of devices to warn us of the unreliability of his hazy recollections.” (137) Stoppard is a bit devious here. He gives Carr the one thing missing from Ros and Guil, the one thing which would clear up all the confusion and make sense of the world. Yet in *Travesties*, memory is shown to be the source of the confusion.

### 7.3. Memory and Ivory

The play is, as Carr himself describes it, a set of “recollections of a Consular Official in Whitest Switzerland.” (Stoppard, 21) Switzerland’s identity, even outside of the context of the war, is a multifaceted one. It is a meeting place of many cultures, where French, German and Italian language are represented. Fernández G.G. and Girod describe how Swiss federalism “accommodates diversity and autonomy as the mechanism that accounts for the political and social equilibrium between the shared-rule at federal level and the self-rule at the cantonal level.” (147) Even its constitution, they claim, is written in adherence to the formula of “diversity in unit”. (148) Then, adding to that unit the complexities of war and even further, of the play, it becomes “the theatrical centre of Europe” (*Travesties*, 47) and “a magnet for refugees, exiles, spies, anarchists, artists and radicals of all kinds.” (60) Furthermore, Carr describes how “in Zurich in Spring in wartime a gentleman is hard put to find a vacant seat for the spurious spies peeping at police spies spying on spies eyeing counterspies.” (26)

All these intrigues and complexities are further exaggerated by the hazy memory of the narrator. “Stoppard,” Robinson writes, “indicates his character's floundering and self-

contradictory memory by presenting different versions of the same scene,” and in doing so he “brings out the theme of uncertainty and confusion and it does so in a farcical manner.” (42-43) Furthermore, Carr himself claims he is retelling the story of Joyce as he knew him (20), Lenin as he knew him (21) and of Tzara who he almost mistakes for other Dadaists like Hugo Ball, (23) showing that perhaps Tzara himself is not important, as much as the position he represents. As Robinson notices, “Stoppard uses these giants to discuss ideas; he pits philosophies of life against each other and analyses moral positions.” (41) However, important for this paper is not how Stoppard uses them to discuss ideas, but how he uses Carr’s memory to intermesh their identities and create confusion out of certainties. Moreover, Carr is aware of his bad memory, saying how the only saving grace for his “senile reminiscence” are “constant digressions.” (*Travesties*, 20) Ironically, to save the story of excessive confusion, Carr disrupts it with constant digressions. Furthermore, in the instances where Cecily corrects his narrations it shows the heterogeneity of a person’s memory, because how can someone else tell you what you remember? This awareness grounds them and in a way, it humanizes them, which provides the audience ample connection to see through all the confusion and perhaps understand that there is no reliability, even outside of the play.

#### **7.4. Who is Who?**

For Stoppard, it is important for the audience to know, at least some of those certainties, because it is not that easy to generate confusion where there is no expectation. So much so that he has written in the introduction to the play explaining “that the figure of Henry Carr is likewise taken from history.” (*Travesties*, 11) The importance of differences was also realised by Ira B. Nadel, who first wanted to expose *Travesties* for its “historical incongruities within the play and argue that Tom Stoppard's redaction of lives and events was demanded by the conditions of dramatic performance.” (481) Such an explanation would

mean that those inconsistencies were not intentional, but a by-product of writing such a play with the intention of analysing their philosophies of life. However, as Nadel later writes, the differences create the play. “Discrepancies, however, do matter, and one of the most important is the exchange of identities between the key figures, one character absorbing the habits and attitude of the other. This osmosis gives Dadaesque qualities to Joyce, Joycean qualities to the Dadaists, and Stoppardian qualities to Lenin.” (482) If we accept those incongruities, it becomes a play about identity. Where not only does the reader question who is who, but the plausibility of this autobiographical narration. It would be easy to simply discredit the narrator as old and senile, but it would be just as discrediting the intentionality of Stoppard’s historical inconsistencies. For all identities are created through storytelling and all biographies are fabrications. One cannot write a biography without inevitably generating travesties. It is an indivisible part of the genre, as Linda Anderson explains on the example of Augustine’s *Confessions*: “The *Confessions* discredit the past and re-form it in terms of a meaning which transcends history, and therefore help to establish a critical narrative of autobiography as a genre which is also ‘beyond’ history. (...) What we see is the unified subject of modern liberal ideology successfully allegorizing their own history.” (19-20) There exists no way in which he could have written those historical characters within the play and not commit travesties. Consequently, once again we return to the key feature of identification, and the requisite of a narrated subject existing in a moving timeline; recontextualization. Moreover, Nadel adds how Stoppard, unlike Wilde, offers no escape from the uncertainty. Identity can never be reassembled back into its state before recontextualisation, neither in his play, nor in life, since identity is always a failure. “Identities and meanings in the play are unstable, echoing Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but at the end of that play, identity is comically reclaimed and reassembled. In *Travesties*, this never quite happens.

Confronted with his library card issued in the name of Jack, Tzara admits to Carr that ‘my name is Tristan in the Meierei Bar and Jack in the library’. (Travesties 27)” (Nadel, 482)

### 7.5. Lenin

When discussing factual liberties Stoppard took when writing the play, it is interesting to take a look at the character of Lenin. In his acknowledgments, Stoppard claims that “nearly everything spoken by Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya herein comes from his *Collected Writings* and from her *Memories of Lenin*.” (14) By choosing to represent Lenin through his own words, Stoppard almost anticipates the critique of wrongfully representing such “great men.” That is, if we can regard his *Collected Writings* or Nadezhda’s *Memories*, as factual, and not a fabrication. Stoppard, in his exaggerations, makes the reader question more than just his play. Still, in consequence of such treatment, Brassell claims that “Lenin is not only not incorporated into the Wilde pastiche, he is scarcely travestied at all. There is barely a joke directed at him in the whole play...” (158) However, as Brassell later writes, Stoppard uses the serious representation of Lenin, to condemn him the most. “Stoppard’s approach is to use Lenin’s own recorded statements whenever possible so that he may stand condemned, literally, by his own words.” (159) Therefore, what Stoppard does is he recontextualises Lenin, not by fabrication, but by placing him in a different context. He tries to show the audience how time and context is enough to change an identity, without necessarily changing it so to speak, from within. That is why old Carr interrupts his narration and comments upon the unfolding story: “And, don’t forget, *he wasn’t Lenin then!* I mean, *who was he?*, as it were.” (73)

Finally, through Carr, Stoppard himself tells us not to take notice even when he does take liberties regarding Lenin and his appearance: “As I shook the hand of this dynamic, gnomonic and yet not, I think, anaemic stranger, who with his fine head of blond hair falling

over his forehead had the clean-shaven look of a Scandinavian seafaring – hello, hello, got the wrong chap, has he? – take no notice, all come out in the wash, that’s the art of it.” (21) “All come out the wash,” not only in art and literature, but in narration. Of course, there are certainties in identity, however, since identities are something given, all it takes is a little “wash,” a little change of context and perspective to reorganize the story.

## **8. Conclusion**

In these two plays, Stoppard shows his knowledge and understanding of the processes of identification. By intentionally blurring the lines between his characters and by muddying the origin of his plays with multitude of sources, he creates a thorough example of the postmodern identity. Moreover, by exaggerating the differences and immersing the plays and their characters in a cloud confusion, he creates an illusion of accidentality which has no place in a play; of uncertainty where there is none. In doing so, he manages to show the audience a clearer picture of the impossibility of continuity and uniformity in any identity, because if a coherent play seems to have no, it begs the question how life can have it. The reason he is successful in his task is the fact that his characters are not ignorant to such difficulties. Ros and Guil understand the impossibility of certainty and consistency, while Carr is aware of his senile reminiscence. Furthermore, Cecily’s corrections to his story create an image of shared memory. Incredibly, Stoppard seemingly manages to recreate the process of identification. He recontextualises historical facts and writings into a different context, creating heterogeneity where there appeared not to be any. Additionally, by revealing the ultimate events of the plays with the titles, Stoppard hints to the unimportance of the fact that the plays form a complete text. All this allows the reader to focus not on the ending, or on the roots, but on the process of identification of the characters. They role play and tell stories in a constantly changing world. Then, if Culler claims that “The structure of literary works is such

that it is easier to take them as telling us about ‘the human condition’ in general than to specify what narrower categories they describe or illuminate,” (36) then structures of these absurd plays is such that it exemplifies the postmodern condition.



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## 10. Abstract

The paper examines the nature of narrative identity in Tom Stoppard's plays *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Travesties*. It analyses the multiple sources of their worlds through the postmodern theory of narration and claims that there is no text without recontextualization. It claims that Stoppard, by exaggerating its heterogenous origin of his plays, shows how trying to deduce the origin of any play will always result in failure. Further, by focusing on some key examples, it explains how Stoppard uses the structure of an anti-play to create confusion in continuity and contradictions in his characters. Furthermore, he distorts or eliminates memory, while at the same time predetermining their end, in order to guide the audience to focus on the present. Thereby imitating the concept of the perpetual present and the process of identification, which claims that identities are always in construction and never complete. Therefore, not only are the identities of Stoppard's plays a failure, but also of his characters. His characters cease to be definite and almost become empty subjects. They are never constant and always ready to be influenced by other narratives. In making them so, he allows them to be exemplary of the postmodern idea that identities are given. Finally, by exaggerating differences he shows the heterogeneity and the contradictory nature of the real "unexaggerated" world. The paper claims that the absurdist play is a great model to realise the inability to predict the rules of a postmodern life. Since, they are constantly changing. In Stoppard's plays, it is visible how the nature of identity is the same as the nature of a text. Since identities are always constructed through narration. Therefore, the paper claims that identities, just like texts, are necessary recontextualizations of multiple sources always depended upon the given context. Their constitution, their continuity, even their origins are always determined by the narration and the point of view of the narrator. Therefore, constantly appearing in the form of a recontextualization, never as a unique and unified text.

Key words: Tom Stoppard, identity, identification, continuity, heterogeneity, postmodern, narration