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Deconstruction in the World's Playhouse

Laura Ellen McGrane

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Deconstruction in the World's Playhouse

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by
Laura Ellen McGrane
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Deconstruction in the World's Playhouse
by
Laura Ellen McGrane

Approved by:

Scott Richardson
Associate Professor of Classics

David Farnsworth
Assistant Professor of English

Chair, Department of English

Mark L. Krammer, O.S.B.
Director, Honors Program
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The contact and the habit... have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels.¹

Throughout the history of Western Civilization human beings have grappled with notions of supreme order, divinities, and societal absolutes, which seem to bring a sense of security and rationality to individual existence. When the city of Troy is razed to the ground, leaving the Trojan Women overwhelmed by mass death and destruction, Euripides' Hekabe succumbs to a dubious, seemingly habitual petition to the accepted divinities: "O ye gods! It's poor helpers indeed I am now invoking; but still it's the fashion to call upon the gods when trouble overtakes us. This is my swan-song..." (Euripides 185). From the 5th century B.C. through contemporary Western 20th-century experience, however, this continued need for absolute reason behind life's inexplicable complications has crashed head-on into humanity's other, equally strong drive—an intrinsic desire for sole possession of individuality and personal destiny.

The various literary movements of past centuries have alternately embraced these mutually exclusive desires, attempting to capture the spirit of each era's dominant concern. But in the atmosphere of post-war 20th century, the focus changes. Previous attempts to discern the rightness of
complete personal independence versus the security of ordered
a priori absolutes become increasingly absurd as the
destructive forces of World War I open humanity's eyes to the
ephemeral nature of accepted absolutes and eternal truths.
When the habits and customs people classify as absolutes are
ripped apart by such catastrophic disasters: when such
familiarities become detached from meaning and relations,
their contingency is felt. Sartre bases his existentialist
philosophy upon this phenomenon of dislocation, suggesting
that we must move away from belief in noumenal realities.
"from what Nietzsche called 'the illusion of worlds-behind-the-scene'" (Being And Nothingness xlvi). At the same time,
however, human beings are unable to function without some
sort of ordering force, be it society, self, divinity, or
science, to shape an otherwise chaotic world. In their
treatise on The Social Construction of Reality, Berger and
Luckmann assert that without patterns, the simplest, most
basic actions in life could not be effortlessly performed
(53). Hence, creating boundaries and ultimates is necessary
in order to shape a world within which one can function.
Sartre agrees that "it [universality] is perpetually being
made [by man] . . . whatever age he might have lived in"
(Existentialism 39). But when one loses sight of the
ephemeral and dependent nature of such human-created
structures, allowing simple boundaries the powerful role of
rule-maker and referee, freedom disintegrates.

Faced with the potentially paradoxical need to live
as free individuals within some sort of ordered world, many post-modern writers have turned to created fictional worlds to experiment with possible resolutions. Two contemporary British authors, playwright Tom Stoppard and novelist John Fowles, have employed the concept of theatre, both literally and metaphorically, to present their own hypotheses. Both Stoppard and Fowles use literature as artifact to enlighten the reader. Working within complex arenas of reality fused with fantasy, they peel the layers away one by one, revealing each of them for what they are—human constructs. Through self-conscious manipulation of words and characters, they discover the "truth": Freedom comes through knowledge—the knowledge that we exist as writers of, yet participants within, an oscillatory deconstructive process (the process of creating then dismantling realities). Conscious awareness of the process and the ability to play with this awareness offer the only means of escape from otherwise domineering and sculpting forces.

Fowles's novel, *The Magus*, and Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, both use the staged nature of theatre and role play, in two different genres, to place fictional characters on stages more easily identifiable as, but very similar to, the structures human beings create for themselves everyday. Because of this similarity, the play (theatre) is the ideal atmosphere for both fictional characters and the reader/audience to grasp the concept of reality as construct. Theatre reveals dialogues and language
as merely ordering forces, while scripts allow us to read the stage directions before seeing them acted out smoothly on stage, emphasizing how artificial and structured seemingly spontaneous actions can be.

The protagonist of *The Magus*, Nicholas Urfe, is a young Englishman who has spent the majority of his life perfecting—without realizing it—the skill of *acting* spontaneously independent of extrinsic forces. Only after an intense physical and psychological journey into a more overt theatrical existence does Nicholas come to terms with his former self-deception:

> [A]ll my life I had tried to turn life into fiction . . . always I had acted as if a third person was watching and listening and giving me marks for good or bad behaviour. . . . [B]ecause of it I had always been incapable of acting freely. (549)

Nicholas' awareness arises from the machinations of Conchis, an eccentric millionaire who weaves his way into Nicholas' life. Fowles steps back to allow the character of Conchis directorial duties and limitless artistic freedom in a frightening theatre of the real. Taking full advantage of Fowles's generosity, Conchis creates an exotic script, full of complex characters and props. And unknowingly, Nicholas steps from his "real-life" stageshow, performed for an imagined "third person" figure, into Conchis'—blind to the controlling, theatrical atmosphere of either one. Sucked
completely into this new performance before its scripted nature is revealed, Nicholas embarks on an unplanned journey toward awareness—awareness of the artificiality characteristic of both his previous life and any future form of "ultimate" structure which he may try to grasp.

Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern undergo a similar experience, transported back and forth between one stage-play and another—Shakespeare’s and Stoppard’s. Much like Nicholas, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unaware that they exist only as characters, with no potential for freedom. When Stoppard moves Shakespeare’s play into the context of his own, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mistake the change for freedom and abandonment; they are torn by the universal desire for the former and fear of the latter. Not surprisingly, they find no answers. The illusion of being separated and somehow freed from the original script is soon destroyed as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern submit to their need for direction, for limits:

G: We have, for the while, secured or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

R: Within limits, of course.

G: Certainly within limits. (Stoppard 116)
There are always boundaries set by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s desperate need to have somebody calling the shots, giving their life meaning, lest it all be in vain. This desire continues to haunt them—unfulfilled—until death.

What both British authors offer, however, reaches far beyond the circumstances of individual characters’ and stories’ outcomes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may fade into nothingness, Nicholas may remain frozen in time, but it is what Nicholas has learned along the way, and what the reader/audience is exposed to through Fowles’s and Stoppard’s playful discourse and artistry within novel and play, which offer the unique alternative—the answer lies in the non-existence of a “right” answer. Both works strongly emphasize this philosophy. Rather than struggling between ordered divinity and chaotically unbounded individuality, Stoppard and Fowles instead continually create and have fun with the “absolutes” necessary for everyday existence. In doing so, they live with a permanent awareness that such constructed absolutes are simply that: constructs.

**Facing the Factitious**

Both writers face a difficult obstacle as they attempt to set forth the exciting possibilities of such enlightened “deconstruction.” Before the characters and audience can comprehend such an alternative, they must first come to the self-realization that they are indeed entangled
within two strong, polar desires—the need for both the freedom of independence (though an independence still defined by self-created constructs) and the security of omniscient and directive absolutes. Humanity often tries to hold onto the positive aspects of both longings, repressing one, while consciously adhering to the other. Living in such a self-deceptive mental paradigm, however, leads to widespread paralysis and impuissance.

This state of self-deluded impotence is very evident in Fowles's Nicholas, who tries to set himself up as an individual and existentialist, completely free from extrinsic ties and influences, needing only "a new land, a new race, a new language . . . a new mystery" (Magus 21). Unwilling or unable to admit that his need for newness is not a spontaneous and individual act, but rather one that is escapist—blaming the world around him for the failures within himself—Nicholas remains unaware of his deeply buried desire for the absolute order of an idyllic, "new" existence.

The inauthenticity and inevitable impossibility of Nicholas' supposed freedom from absolutes and constraints soon begin to reveal themselves, though, and Nicholas senses that he can no longer function in the role of pseudo-self-controlling independent. When Nicholas trades the ennui and constraints attributed to London and its inhabitants for the wilderness and unrestrained pre-humanized Phraxos, he cannot cope:

The whole island seemed to feel this exile from
contemporary reality. . . . Yet in the end this
unflawed natural world became intimidating. I
seemed to have no place in it. I could not use it
and I was not made for it. (58)

After failing to order the beauty through poetry, and failing
to escape its unbearable freedom through suicide, Nicholas
turns to Conchis, who can fulfill the desire Nicholas himself
is still unwilling to embrace consciously—the desire for
direction, for a lead role, and for an ideally sculpted
reality.

Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience a
sense of dislocation similar to Nicholas' island experience.
But in Stoppard's scenario, the disorientation lies in a
logically defined reality gone awry rather than in a Phraxiso-
like reality of pre-civilization. The play opens with
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flipping coins. Every coin
falls heads, completely defying all comforting laws of
probability which normally contain the chaos of an unbounded
universe. Unable to explain such a phenomenon, Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern turn for direction and identity to a world
constructed by Shakespeare, within the tragic story of
*Hamlet*:

G: Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come
down heads ninety-two consecutive times. . . .

R: But then he [a messenger from *Hamlet*] called
our names. You remember that--this man woke us
up.

G: Yes. . . .

R: That's why we're here. Travelling.

G: Yes. . . .

R: We have not been . . . picked out . . . simply to be abandoned . . . set loose to find our own way. . . . We are entitled to some direction. . . . I would have thought. (18-20)

Reassured by such hopes in new-found "order," all three characters stand ready to jump into a different, yet still staged, existence, vaguely sensing the inconsistencies inherent in their present conceptions of reality.

For Conchis, Nicholas' immersion into his staged fiction is the first step toward ripping away old skins in preparation—not for an eventual total lack of structure; not for a new-found certitude in life's absolutes; but, rather, for the difficult, but freeing, knowledge of the third, self-creative alternative. The plan is to create a multi-layered "godgame," forcing Nicholas to differentiate between the reality of his pre-Conchis life and the complexity of a seemingly staged, yet frighteningly "realistic," Conchisian existence. Initially this is not difficult, since Conchis' scenes are set in different time periods, with historical and ghost-like characters. But as each of these experiences is peeled back, recognized as script and role play—one more masque of reality—the characters and situations begin to resemble evermore closely the face that Nicholas has
classified as the "actual" reality. Such parallels between
different levels are very important in establishing the
relation that suggests they are all constructs. When one
recognizes her own absolute in someone else's fiction, she
begins to question her own reality in these same terms (Waugh
34). In his Other Inquisitions, Borges emphasizes that these
similarities must, furthermore, be both subtle and seemingly
spontaneous. The fiction must be capable of

an infinite and plastic ambiguity . . . [and] it
is a mirror that reflects the reader's
[or Nicholas'] own traits. . . . And it must be
ambiguous in an evanescent and modest way, almost
in spite of the author [or Conchis]. . . . (87)

As the parallels are mirrored in the "godgame," all of
Nicholas' absolutes--his control over sexual relationships,
his ability to separate "real" life from Conchis' play-world,
his adherence to reason--gradually become fiction. What
initially affects Nicholas intellectually begins to seep past
all limits of abstract storytelling into both physical and
emotional realms, shaping his life far beyond the boundaries
of propriety and explainability: "I was . . . very
frightened; but my fear came from a knowledge that anything
might happen. That there were no limits in this masque, no
normal social laws or conventions (204).

Yet as the lines between reality and fiction blur
indistinguishably, Nicholas adamantly sticks to his trust in
reality. As long as he plays his part right, he assumes that the face of "reality" will bare itself, rewarding him for his perseverance. Even after Conchis pulls all of the actors and players out. Nicholas still believes. "All this leading me on. shutting me out. leading me on . . . it was not over yet. I began to be sure that I had only to wait . . . ." (471). Only when Conchis pulls away the final masque, unveiling nothing but empty space, revealing no absolute truths, no ultimate rewards, just cruel betrayal and painful "disintoxication," does Nicholas finally realize that the fiction and reality are one and the same. What Conchis and Fowles have done. Bradbury asserts, is to confront and connect "the world of rationalism and the world of illusion, feeding the former into the latter and then withdrawing it in its incompleteness" (37). Nicholas must stop deceiving himself now. The idyllic reality of his "real" world is no more complete, no less self-created, than Conchis' godgame. In realizing that absolute "reality," some destined ideal, is an illusion, Nicholas can finally start acting (not in a theatrical sense) rather than reacting, creating instead of imitating the roles of a non-existent script, of "shoulds" based on imagined absolutes.

As a final "explanation"--the word is used loosely since Conchis' philosophy is one of ambiguity, not answer--Conchis leaves behind the lesson of the godgame in a hand-written fairytale, "The Prince and the Magician." When Nicholas reads the tale, the parallels become clear. Conchis
is the Magician: Nicholas is the Prince. The time has come for Nicholas, like the Prince, to become his own Magus, his own magician:

"Father, is it true that you are not a real king, but only a magician?" . . .
"Yes, my son, I am only a magician." . . .
"I must know the real truth, the truth beyond magic."
"There is no truth beyond magic. . . . You see, my son." said the king, "you too now begin to be a magician." (562)

With his parting gesture, Conchis has given Nicholas a new beginning. The concept of continuously creating one's own order can be enacted by a Nicholas who is now able to appreciate his need for boundaries while problematizing the existence of these limits as everlasting essentia. In this paradigm, Nicholas becomes completely responsible for his own choices and actions toward others, and at the same time he is released from the constraints of societal and self-expectation. He has the magic—the choice to create and destroy his own temporal absolutes, or perhaps to live by those extrinsically created, but only so long as he continues to recognize both their ephemerality and constructed nature.

Nicholas, then, immersed as he is in the extremities of Conchis' labyrinth of play-acting and staged realities, eventually stumbles through, back to a non-Conchis-directed
level of reality. Here he lives beyond the godgame with a clearer sense of his relation to the world—as creator rather than clay. The reader and Nicholas are left unsure of the long-term effects of this knowledge, but the mystery is another aspect of the deconstructive process. As Conchis warns, "If you disclose the solution to the mystery you are simply depriving the other seekers [readers, perhaps] . . . of an important source of energy." (240).

*The Play Toys and the Players*

While answers are both unnecessary for, even detrimental to, the discovery process, the opposite—complete lack of hope for potential enlightenment—is just as fatal. Such an absence of hope paints the clear line of distinction between Nicholas’ and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fates. Stoppard’s characters are irrecoverably abandoned in darkness, forever lost in their initial stage of frustrated paralysis. Clearly, their dismal fate is a result of more than the whim of a sadistic Stoppard who revels in futility. It is, rather, their limited existence by definition, as characters within a play, which leads to their inevitable demise. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no alternatives.

Their situation is very different than Nicholas’ who is a character in a novel, a character who initially chooses to participate in Conchis’ “metatheatrical” production. Outside of Conchis’ theatre, Nicholas exists with some amount of free will. As Fowles explains in his later novel, *The
French Lieutenant's Woman,

a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator. . . . It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. . . . [H]e [Charles, a character similar to Nicholas] has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it. . . . (81-2)

Unlike the autonomous Nicholas, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are created solely for utilitarian purposes, for their useful participation as actors in theatrical productions—Shakespeare's and Stoppard's. They have no "ordinary life"; beyond the stage is oblivion. Because their genre does not offer them the same growth capabilities as Nicholas', Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation, in many ways, reflects Nicholas' mind-set before and during his "godgame" experience. Nicholas is enticed by the "game," by its enigma and excitement. He compares himself to "some hooked addict," "furious that Conchis could spirit his world away . . . like a callous drug-ward doctor" (246). His mental and emotional dependence is personified in the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who will always remain the pre-game Nicholas. They are not characters who display addiction as a temporary psychosis; rather, they are physically dependent upon directorial figures for their very existence. If their "drug-ward doctor" spirits their world away, they will cease to exist! Hence, any quest for
identity, for meaning, is futile. The two live obsessed by, but unable to act upon, the desire to find a viable relation between freedom's individuality and security's absolutes. Individuality brings non-existence: absolute order brings meaningless, insignificant parts. Barred from the creator's freedom by definition, they are Stoppard's play-toys, hence they cannot play.

Much of Stoppard's power lies in his ability to imply alternatives through this absence of alternatives for his two protagonists. Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Stoppard addresses questions of personal freedom through them--two characters defined by freedom's absence. Ironic, and a profoundly effective means of exemplifying the problems and consequences of such entrapment. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed by their character descriptions, created to die in Hamlet, then recreated, to die and fade away once again in Stoppard's version. Hence, the two exemplify (for the audience who does perhaps have the choice) the ramifications of succumbing to an omnipotently ordered world view which will inevitably lead to chaos and death. Even though enlightenment is not meant for Stoppard's characters, then, the implications of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's experiences for human beings in general shed light upon possible alternatives for the audience.

Carballis notes that "Stoppard's play turns Shakespeare's inside out, so that . . . we see 'on stage the things that are supposed to happen off'" (33). This
resupination affects the audience's perception of the play. As spectators of an inverted stage show, they can no longer relax safely off-stage, enjoying a pleasantly framed reflection of life. They are, rather, led by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's schizophrenic bewilderment, a result of Stoppard's aforementioned integration of Shakespeare into his own script, to focus on the theatricality of the production. Such continued focus shatters the frames which usually distinguish between audience and production. Consequently, the spectators begin to see glimpses of themselves mirrored in the characters--much as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet themselves in the Player's mime:

*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. . . . He [Ros] does not quite understand why the coats are familiar. . . .*

R: I know you, don't I? I never forget a face--(he looks into the spy's face). . . . For a moment I thought--no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else. (82, emphases mine)

Notice the switching around of subject and object, reaffirming the blurring--will the "real" Rosencrantz please stand-up? Thus Stoppard's audience is no longer the "entertain me please" Elizabethan audience, but instead, one pulled into the same arena in which Nicholas finds himself in
the godgame--that of the meta-theatre--the object of which is "to allow the participants to see through their first roles.
. . . To see through the roles we give ourselves in ordinary life" (Magus 415).

Clued into the multi-leveled nature of this play within a play within a play production, the audience begins to participate--themselves another level of the stage show. The lack of distinguishable boundaries between what is on- and off-stage places the audience in an unsettling position. As the smoothed-out, flowing script of Shakespeare (the surface smoothness of a humanity ordered by a director/writer as good as Shakespeare) professes itself on one stage, back-stage, or perhaps on the real stage, the questioning, inconclusive futility of such an existence cries out. Echoing these questioning cries, the audience is left to figure out where and how they fit in.

Stoppard's third play within a play, on the level of the "Player" and tragedians, adds another level of complexity. These characters move on three stages, those of *The Murder of Gonzago* (Shakespeare's play within his play), *Hamlet*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Player and tragedians are aware of the game; they have accepted the questions and learned to create meanings in the face of uncertainty:

P: They [the tragedians] have to exploit whatever talent is given to them. . . . I extract significance from melodrama, a significance
which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light. . . . (83)

In their self-awareness, they try to do for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what The Magus's Conchis cryptically suggests for Nicholas, in the guise of a cure for a "schizophrenic" actress: "I wish to bring the poor child to a realization of her own true problem by forcing her to recognize the nature of the artificial situation we are creating together here" (287). The Player's lesson, hence, is that of "The Prince and the Magician" revisited, the need to play with one's own insignificance, the need to construct one's own truths:

P: For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust: truth is only that which is taken to be true. . . . There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured-- (67)

so long as the illusory magician believes in his own magic.

The Player understands the magic because he recognizes himself--and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern--as actors. He tries to reconcile Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their similar identities, addressing them as "fellow artists." but they are confused, unable to let go of a permanent "gentleman" status.

One may wonder why the Player and his tragedians are not limited by the theatrical genre as are Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern. It would seem that they too should be nothing more than manipulated play toys, yet there is clearly a difference. As his name suggests, the Player is a generic embodiment of play itself. He is a self-conscious actor who possesses a creative power and existence beyond his role in Stoppard’s script. Granted, he and the tragedians were not always so pliable. They once existed much as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do:

P: We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. . . . Even then, habit and a stubborn trust that our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush, forced our bodies to blunder on. . . . (64)

But they finally realize, much like Nicholas, that nobody is, or ever will be, watching. Once the Player and tragedians have accepted an empty theatre, a world without spectators, they can begin living the art of relaxing, responding, and accepting life as uncertainty. While such an identity, or lack thereof, is rough, it eventually saves the Player’s and tragedians’ lives. When Hamlet escapes, leaving Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the players alone on the boat, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern panic, and with good reason. They have been ejected from the story-line. Scriptless and stripped of their given identities, they fade away. The Player and tragedians, however, are sad but unconcerned. This sort of
thing happens all the time, the Player laments: "Once more, alone--on our own resources" (119). When one reality crumbles, they have the resources, the creative powers, to create or take on new roles as they come along.

What distinguishes the players of the world from the play toys, then, returns again to the ability to recognize identity and reality as construct, to "celebrate the momentary taming of the random while affirming that this game is only an exceptional moment in . . . the passage from order to disorder" (Thiher 176). And because the Player has the ability to move from one "exceptional moment" to another, the entropic process poses no threat to him. The audience, too, need not be overly uncomfortable as they become entangled in the theatrical production. Because they possess what Rosenorantz and Guildenstern so pathetically lack, self-awareness, they can, if they so choose, play. Like the Player, they can continuously create their own roles, backdrops, and scenarios.

The Bridge of Language

So far in our discussion, the player mentality has been identified only with Fowles' and Stoppard's characters--Conchis, a converted Nicholas, the Player and tragedians--but we need not limit ourselves to the realm within Fowles's fiction and Stoppard's play. The authors themselves, in regards to the self-conscious discourse employed to communicate their stories, fit the necessary qualifications.
We have examined the story-line of the two fictions--Nicholas's slow and painful self-discovery, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's failure and imminent negation--as the three struggle toward recognition of reality as a continual "deconstructive" process. At this juncture, it will be advantageous to examine more closely this same idea as it overflows from the characters' experiences to its depiction through and effect upon the structured mediums of *The Magus* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In more definitively interconnecting the "deconstructive" process between stories, their formal modes of discourse, and the implied reader/audience's experiences, previous parallels amongst their respective situations solidify into more easily understood ties, moving the de-creative alternative into an arena relevant beyond the pages of the works themselves.

The applicability to everyday life of Nicholas' and the Player's experiences is doubly impressed upon the reader/audience when Stoppard and Fowles weave the same "deconstructive" ideas into the formal delivery of their story-lines. In other words, they spotlight the vehicle of expression most treasured by the reader/audience--language--in order to bridge the gap. The components of the bridge are words. Written and spoken. They are the building blocks for creating magic within novels: they are the novelists' and playwrights' playtime: and they are one of the most widespread, implicitly accepted and unchallenged illusions of order in the history of Western Civilization. Stoppard and
Fowles, playing upon the illusive absoluteness of words, begin to expose language as Wittgenstein's linguistic constructs, obeying arbitrary rules, [which] come through overlapping consistencies and mutually supportive definitions to constitute what we take to be reality at any given moment in history. (Thiher, 161)

The two authors endeavor to dispel these façades of "reality" in two ways: First, they place the English language of varying historical periods side by side, thereby emphasizing its fluid character and dependence upon history and society for existence. At the same time, they also make it clear that the characters are, in turn, shaped by the mode of English they are speaking. Since the words themselves are created by Fowles and Stoppard, however, the creative responsibility returns to the author, and by analogy, to the reader/audience.

Fowles aligns language and history in Conchis' script through the character of Julie, cast in Conchis' godgame as Nicholas’ multi-century dream woman. Her first appearance in the masque is in the role of Lily, a Victorian gentile lady. She acts, dresses, and speaks with perfect 19th-century intonations. But Nicholas, a strong believer in the fixed temporality of reality, cannot buy into the masquerade. He schemes to force her out of character and finally succeeds when his physical threats force a slip from Victorian to
modern-day English: "She said, 'You're killing my back. There's a stone or something.' Victory was confirmed; I [Nicholas] noted those two verbal contractions" (213, emphases mine). Later, when Nicholas finds the script, he finds along with it books from the 19th-century, written to teach proper conversational skills—hence highlighting the nature of language as human construct. Language, then, can exist as a creative device only because it is ultimately created and shaped by people. It is used by Lily/Julie and Conchis to create realities; it is the creator of the different Lily/Julie personas; but the language structure itself is created arbitrarily by human beings (e.g., the 19th-century writers) throughout different periods of history.

When Nicholas initially posits Julie's language slip as evidence of her modernity, however, none of the constructed nature of language is clear to him. The godgame is just beginning; Nicholas is still bound by notions of one absolute "reality." Lily's metamorphosis into the Julie persona is therefore, for a deluded Nicholas, the unveiling of the "true" human being behind the games. Basking in self-satisfied egoism, he condescends for a while: "You're wonderful [Julie]... Only, you know, it's one's sense of reality. It's like gravity. One can resist it only so long" (214). Later, when Conchis (and Fowles) allude to this incident—through the 19th-century conversational texts left for Nicholas to find—it is not coincidence that, along with
them. Nicholas discovers "The Prince and the Magician," his own magician identity. Both novelist and director are making very pointed connections.

The simultaneity of the two findings obviously rubs salt into the rawness of Nicholas' new-found self-awareness, ridiculing the cockiness of his former "sense of reality." Even more importantly, the proximity of the language texts with the "Magician's" lesson strongly alludes to Conchis' (the Magician's) use of language manipulation to create not only Lily, but all the characters of the godgame. These implied acknowledgments of language as a creative and ultimately human-created device are not only Conchis' proddings for a reluctant Nicholas, but also Fowles' final nails in the "bridge." The readers, like Nicholas, are unable to grasp the significance of the Lily/Julie language confrontation until they have, over a 350-page time lapse, completed the godgame. As the readers watch Conchis and his cast in action—their manipulation of "linguistic constructs," their continual de-creation of "what we take to be reality at any given moment"—the illusions of the reality/fiction boundaries are shattered, preparing the readers for the second, more overt unveiling of language and making them ready to share in Nicholas' moment of awareness. This connection between the readers' own language and that of Fowles and his characters may transform the readers' detached awareness of Nicholas' condition into an acute consciousness of their own deluded submission to some non-existent
absoluteness within a human-dependent language. Such consciousness of one’s own misguided acquiescence to language, initially exposed through Fowles’s contraposition of 19th- and 20th-century English, begins to unveil the possibilities of the “deconstructive” alternative for the world of lived experience beyond the pages of *The Magus*.

Stoppard brings his implied audience to a similar point of awakening, brilliantly employing the same technique by integrating Shakespearean poetry into his own bantering script. First he offers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, drifting between two plays differentiated only by varied English dialects. On Shakespeare’s stage, they speak grandiloquently. Guildenstern can offer his services with self-confident Shakespearean lyricism; the next moment, however, outside of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the same Guildenstern is reduced to nonsensical babble, lost in the abstractions of language. But neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern is conscious of any variance in their lines, or of the very lineness of their speech! They always stand on the verge of realization, then back away. When Guildenstern, for example, briefly experiences a sensation of linguistic arbitrariness, Rosencrantz quickly leads him back to the dead-end security of absolutes:

G: 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 . . .?

R: I remember--

G: Yes?

R: I remember when there were no questions.  (38)

They simply cannot acknowledge even the most blatantly obvious language manipulation (as they cannot recognize the role play) when it involves themselves.

This is not the case, however, when they witness the same phenomenon in the Player and tragedians. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can see in them everything they remain unaware of in themselves and their own experiences. After a particularly moving emotional outpouring by the Player (strangely resembling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's futile tirades), Guildenstern rips away the emotional surface, revealing manipulated structures of speech and drama:

_Silence._  Then GUIL claps solo with slow measured irony.

G: Brilliantly re-created. . . . Rather strong on metaphor, mind you. No criticism--only a matter of taste. And so here you are--with a vengeance. That's a figure of speech . . . isn't it? (64)

The audience recognizes the absurdity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's short-sightedness--just in time to make the subtle but undeniable connection: The audience is to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
are to the Player and tragedians—recognizing the empty
meaninglessness of the others’ worlds, aware of the others’
constructed nature, all the while relieved that their own
“real” world is absolute and sane. Only the Player and
tragedians—and Stoppard—see all the levels at once.

But if the analogy itself is not enough to open the
audience’s eyes, the direct relevance of the analogy to human
experience—the bridge of language—may provide the necessary
catalyst. The connection between language as construct and
society as construct, between recognizing the construction
and playing with it, hits home in a typical Stoppardian word
game:

R: What are you playing at?
G: Word, words. They’re all we have to go on....

What in God’s name is going on?
R: Foul! No rhetoric. Two—one.... Is there a
choice?
G: Is there a God?
R: Foul! No non sequiturs, three—two. One game
all. (43)

While Stoppard seems to be revealing his and Shakespeare’s
lines as products of the static disciplines—rhetoric,
philosophy, logic, and theology—he is actually reversing the
causality relationship. The disciplines are merely products
of arbitrary labels and language combinations—in a game of
words. What Fowles does with language as absolute creator of
character—twisting it around to unveil people as creators of language—Stoppard does with these “disciplines.” People tend to look to them for definitions of ultimate truth and purpose, for forces to order human existence. Even Heidegger, who in his earlier philosophies on Dasein (humanity’s Being) problematizes the Western philosophical tradition of defining this “Being” in terms of metaphysical connections, hence attempting to describe human experience without reference to any metaphysical presence, and who identifies language as a naming process, still succumbs to the temptation to allow language some element of transcendence. In this case, language exists contemporaneous with the existence of something transcendent:

Since language really became actual as conversation, the gods have acquired names and a world has appeared. But . . . the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not merely a consequence of the actualisation of language, they are contemporaneous with it. . . . [T]he gods bring our existence to language.

(Heidegger, Existence 279-80)

For Heidegger, human beings exist as conversation. They do have the power to create, to name things, even the gods. But paradoxically, people cannot exist as conversation unless they are somehow connected, a priori, with language. Hence the gods (some transcendent force) become concurrently
responsible for connecting humanity with language.

Heidegger’s ultimate tie to transcendence, then, reflects his own inability to take the “deconstructive” prospect to its hazardous conclusion—a journey that his contemporary, Johan Huizinga, chooses to take. Language is the human being’s shaping instrument; we are its “maker”:

Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life, man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature. (Huizinga 4)

All of the abstract expressions are, as with Stoppard’s word games, nothing more than a play upon words. Such awareness destroys absolutes but at the same time allows for the construction of new and different worlds.

When the audience begins to recognize the element of word-play within Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, they are brought face to face with “real life,” recognizing their own absolute in someone else’s fiction. Language is just one of the many “constructed” tools of construct that human beings try to hide from; yet, by bringing this one element specifically to the audience’s and readers’ attention, Stoppard and Fowles open the way for further connections and a realization that the “deconstructive” alternative is more than just a fairytale.
The Dangers of Discovery

Recognizing one's absolutes as constructs does not come without risk. People have continually shunned the accountability which accompanies accepting one's role as creator (as Hekabe does in her supplication to the gods). Enlightened self-consciousness does bring responsibility—a responsibility bent toward challenging, hence threatening, even the most basic structures of existence. And in offering reader, audience, and character such an alternative, Fowles and Stoppard make their own artistry vulnerable. Examining the ramifications of discovery for the genres of play and novel in these two specific works may then offer an idea of the dangers inherent in exposure and critical examination of the human-made structures supporting illusive absolutes.

Were Fowles to uphold the vision of the Victorian novelist, one which "allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending. . . . [T]he writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight—but in fact fixes the fight . . . ." (Fowles, French 317). The Magus, as it now exists, would be an impossibility. For as long as the novel remains "a mantle against dispersion and confusion, against the great insecurity and sum of unknowns that life has become" (Llosa 1024), it remains an unexamined structure, a haven hidden away from the temporality of the construct's existence. Fowles, however, chooses not to fix the fight. An aura of enigma hovers over the novel—its ambiguities of plot and ending—hence challenging its value within the
guidelines of the genre of novel. If reality has been unveiled as construct, the literature reflecting that "reality" must also be unmasked, hence Nicholas' discoveries within the novel become grounds for trying The Magus.

When Nicholas is first expelled from the godgame with no all-encompassing explanations, he seems to understand the lesson of "The Prince and the Magician," yet is still not quite willing to relinquish his desire for a "real" answer. He must find facts, the actors' "real" identities, the "hows" and "whys" of the whole episode. But eventually he realizes, in light of the godgame's experiences, the absurdity of such a search:

By searching so fanatically I was making a detective story out of the summer's events, and to view life as a detective story, as something that could be deduced, hunted, and arrested, was no more realistic (let alone poetic) than to view the detective story as the most important literary genre. . . . (563)

It is not that Nicholas must settle for a cryptically opaque ending to the godgame. Rather, as we have seen, the whole godgame leads to the realization that joy and freedom lie within such ambiguity. And Fowles' novel, without a clear-cut meaning or ending, allows for this same shift to the freedom of questions in readers' expectations. His is no more a detective story than Conchis' godgame. Yet in
challenging the principles of the traditional novel without concretizing The Magus within the realm of detective or any other definitive genre. Fowles places his own literature in an uneasy position, even more so by explicitly aligning Nicholas' acceptance of self-structured reality with Nicholas' consecutive dismantling of fictional truth and order.

During one of his first meetings with Conchis, Nicholas asserts his belief in the absolutes and answers contained within words: "'We were taught to assume that if words can't explain, nothing else is likely to'" (109). To an extent, Conchis plays along. In an earlier meeting, he seems to have said the same thing, that "'[w]ords are for truth. For facts. Not fiction'" (99). But when Conchis suggests that words are for "truth," he is affirming something very different from what Nicholas is. Conchis does not equate such "truth" with absolutes, but rather with that which stands in opposition to "fiction." As we have already seen, however, this line of distinction does not exist. Hence, Conchis has started the unveiling process by labeling the very dichotomy--fiction/reality--that he plans to destroy as the godgame unfolds. It is Nicholas who (in one of his frequent displays of "brilliant" discovery) points this out to us, and to Conchis--"'I'm not quite sure what the difference is between what you're doing here and the thing you hate so much--fiction'" (236). Good call, Nicholas. The Magus' identity crisis, then, lies in its denouncement of
fiction as an ordered reflection of reality—for the divisive mirror has been removed and the illusion of either side (fiction or reality) as ordered and ultimate has been shattered.

Stripped of its usual functions, the novel is put on trial. Conchis declares that it is "dead," the "worst form of connection" (114). And as Nicholas is drawn deeper into Conchis' fiction, he experiences words as restraint rather than clarity: "I was having feelings that no language... can describe. ... I knew words were like chains. They held me back... [T]he act of description taints the description" (244). But Fowles is not setting-up his fiction for self-destruction. Quite the contrary, his discursive self-consciousness, intertwined so closely with the protagonist's own self-searching, allows Fowles to re-create, on his own terms, a newly empowered fiction. For now that the fiction of the absolute has been put to rest, the fiction of the "deconstructive" alternative can rise. Perhaps, as Conchis suggests, fiction in itself is not so bad. Simply that in print, in books it remains mere principle (236). Conchis overcomes fiction's inapplicability to life by creating his theatre of the real. And Fowles, by resurrecting his fiction in a world where fiction and reality blend, has turned principle into effective vitality. He can leave his characters frozen in time at the end, hence emphasizing the non-conclusiveness of everyday existence. In this paradigm, the implied reader is left to create her own
ending, hence employing a new awareness of fiction’s creative process which can then carry over to her own perception of the world (Waugh 34).

While Fowles promotes a fiction that comes alive beyond the “print” on the page, theatricality like Conchis’ does not in itself transcend the risks of self-examination. Granted, since the genre of theatre has had a much longer, hence more varied history than the novel, Stoppard does not have to defend his modern mode of dialogue in the same way Fowles does. In other words, he does not have to defend his absurd discourse or his twisted Shakespearean ending against a definitive norm like the traditional Shakespearean theatre. The consequences of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s predicament, the correlation between life and random word play, do, however, threaten to undermine the communicative value of theatre. One begins to question the worth of an artistic genre with characters and a stage show that offer little more than personified arbitrary word play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may present a glimpse of the consequences of the “non-deconstructive” existence; yet, in order to accomplish this, they can exist only as “play toys.” Such definitive limitedness may render them ineffective.

Because of their roles, or because they are their roles, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “have no identity outside the script, and do not ultimately have identity within the script” (Waugh 120). Theirs is a theatre of limits:
G: We can move of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along inexorably as the wind and current. . . . (122)

Had Stoppard not chosen to focus on the underlying structures of the theatre, sticking instead strictly to the Shakespearean main stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be less pathetic, or at least, less willing to share their despondency with the audience. The audience, in turn, would still be participating as spectators; and the mirror, reflecting "real" life on stage, would still be in place. All of this is wiped away, however, by the Stoppardian off-stage. Perhaps there is nothing to gain from a stage show without the mirror, protagonists with no identity. But Stoppard is challenging the audience to move past the realm of mirror to that of intimate interaction. Just as Fowles buries the old to create the new, so too does Stoppard bury Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their identities and existence (symbolic perhaps of Shakespearean lyricism and order), to emphasize the power of the new non-form—the self-created, ever-changing, slightly bumbling Player and troupe.

Assuming that the provision of this new alternative is part of Stoppard's game plan, his blatant exposure of theatre's underlying structures becomes not only advantageous but necessary. Theatre intensifies its strength by expanding its communication lines to include character identity (or lack thereof), discursive technique, and theatrical structure.
itself. Both Fowles and Stoppard have, therefore, turned discovery's danger to its triumph. In a commentary on Borges, who also employs self-conscious artistry, John Barth pinpoints the source of such success:

His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts a dead end and employs it against itself . . . it turns the artist's mode or form into a metaphor for his concerns-- (32)

a metaphor for the "deconstructive" alternative. Hence, while the risk of embracing creativity in its fullness means facing identity crises, even destruction, doing so will inevitably build the foundation for a freer, more dynamic and imaginative artistry.

*(Dis)(En)Closure*

One cannot become attached to this foundation, however, nor to any specific artistic edifice which may spring from its supports. Nicholas is left with eternal enigma and "fragments of freedom" in his willingness to embrace the ever-changing, pulsating vitality of an unboxable existence; the Player is spared the life of a "play toy," yet his existence hinges upon role changes, upon the repetitive ephemerality of the "act" of dying. Even the artistry of Fowles and Stoppard must continually face the "dangers of discovery." The mystery, the uncertainty, the temporariness of the "deconstructive" existence cannot be forgotten.
Understandably, temporary amnesia is often inevitable, even necessary, to carry out everyday activities. But if such forgetfulness remains unchecked, it is lethal. Playtime ends: everybody loses.

The magician and de-creator is the individual who can stand strong and deal with life’s obscurities, not as Sartre’s “anguish,” but rather as unsolved delights, unanswered quandaries to be enjoyed. The game can have no end:

Inasmuch as infinite players avoid any outcome whatsoever, keeping the future open, making all scripts useless, we shall refer to infinite play as dramatic. Dramatically, one chooses... (Carse 20)

One chooses to accept the fiction characteristic of any “reality” behind the “godgame,” behind our everyday existence. If we can begin to identify ultimate with end, absolute with atrophy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate may become a rare tragedy replaced by beautiful and imaginative fictions--fictions to become, to re-become, to...

During a recent conversation with John Fowles, a student excitedly explained that she was writing a thesis, incorporating one of his novels, along with the work of a contemporary British writer, into a brilliant philosophical and literary treatise. Fowles only smiled, expressing his
sympathy for the students and professors of the world who spend months, years, often lifetimes trying to excavate nuggets of insight and meaning from beneath literature's surface. "I simply write," he said. End of topic: the discussion moved on to more interesting subjects. The lesson, however, was not swept aside. The infinite game, according to Huizinga, is a priori to culture, but in its concrete forms (forms of novel, theatre, beliefs, theses) it itself becomes a social construct (4). Consequently, any combining of literature, philosophy, and language in an attempt to contain the bombarding inquiries of the mind exemplifies the human being's need to structure chaos creatively. The structure, like all concrete forms of play, must, however, disclose itself as structured, lest enclosure's detriments take hold. The "deconstructive" alternative, then, can never be carved in stone, can never be offered as Stoppard's and Fowles's final meaning. It, along with the pages of this essay, remains forever subject to itself—to the exhilarating hazards of oscillatory "deconstruction."
Notes


2 The "deconstructive" process refers to the mid-20th-century's "Metafictional" branch of literary and theoretical study which focuses upon an experimental form of literature that employs infinite alternation between the construction and shattering of illusion and reality. Patricia Waugh's Metafiction (1984) offers a comprehensive study of the topic.

3 In his Fabulation and Metafiction (1979), Robert Scholes discusses the author's struggle to bridge the language/reality gap in reference to Borges' Labyrinths (1964).


