

“serious plays” (11). Apparently, then, he accepts Stoppard’s description of *Artist* as simply a “tape gag” with “74 minutes of padding or brilliant improvisation.” I confess that I do not see *Artist* as a minor play. Nor do I accept the implication that minor plays can be dismissed as unrevealing. In any case, *Artist* does not easily cooperate in the moral design that Delaney sees in Stoppard’s so-called major work.

Of course, Delaney believes that I misread the play. I, for my part, assert that Delaney misreads my reading. I do not propose, for instance, that *Artist* “renders it impossible to distinguish art from craftsmanship or charlatanism.” Rather, I say that the play points up the *difficulty* of making such distinctions. *Impossible*, had I used that word, would indeed have implied the position that Delaney attributes to me: namely, “the academically fashionable view that there is no such thing as truth.” *Difficult*, by contrast, implies that truth exists, although it may elude us.

If I seem to be begging the question of truth as addressed in *Artist*, I do so because the question is begged in the play. Interestingly, Delaney himself concedes in his book that Stoppard is not everywhere decisive. Delaney observes, for example, that “the emphasis of [*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*] is neither to exonerate nor to convict the courtiers but to dramatise their bewilderment before forces which they do not understand” (30). Similarly, he maintains that *Jumpers* “leads us to a complex vision which precludes a simple yes or no answer to the question of whether Stoppard comes down on George’s side” (37). Nonetheless, Delaney finds an overarching moral vision in these early plays by Stoppard. I fear that I cannot assent to his discovery of certitude in plays fraught with doubt, although I would agree with him that what “*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* do not comprehend is not necessarily incomprehensible” (14).

As for Delaney’s contention that I suggest Stoppard to be “an apologist for modern art,” I do not think so. The passage from my essay reads as follows: “Is Stoppard, then, an apologist for modern art? For Duchamp? It would seem so—until we reflect on the antics of the artists by whom Duchamp is represented.” My point is that Stoppard simultaneously lauds and condemns modern art. Does the play, then, lack “coherent meaning,” as Delaney charges me with thinking? Surely not. Compelling disputation, even when it does not come to closure, is anything but incoherent. What Thomas Whitaker says of James Saunders’s *Next Time I’ll Sing to You*—that it “toss[es] us a question that has charged our intellectual climate and ask[s] us to play with it” (46)—can also be said of *Artist Descending a Staircase*.

That the play is not a lesson but a challenge does not rob it of coherence.

Of all Stoppard’s comments that Delaney cites, only one appears to me to illuminate the play. I refer to the distinction Stoppard makes between an anarchic mind and an anarchic spirit. The mind that shaped *Artist Descending a Staircase* is elegantly conservative in its aesthetic practice. But the spirit that the play embodies is anarchic, undermining the certitude of One (aesthetically traditional) Voice by introducing arguments on behalf of modern art. These arguments may, of course, be answerable. They are not, however, answered in the play. That is the genius of *Artist Descending a Staircase*; and no amount of special pleading, with or without reference to Stoppard’s personal pronouncements, will make it otherwise.

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The Material Effects of Criticism

To the Editor:

I did not initially respond to Richard Levin’s “The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide” (105 [1990]: 491–504), although I was angered by the article’s sneering tone and by its seemingly wanton misrepresentation of literary-critical history. In Levin’s confused account of his own discipline’s history, the concept of the author as a culturally produced function appears ridiculously late, as an invention of Foucault, when it has been with literary criticism from the discipline’s methodological inception in the work of the Russian formalists and Prague-school structuralists. Levin’s reply in the March Forum, however (106 [1991]: 315–16), asserting that the term *project* begs the question of agency and suggesting that those who criticize so-called “political pluralism and market economies” should go to Eastern Europe, continues along dangerously anti-intellectual (or at least profoundly unrigorous) and deliberately insulting lines and so compels my response.

The term *project* takes an explicit position on the subject of agency. The word deliberately foregrounds public (here, scholarly) writing’s function as a social act with concrete material consequences. I use it in my own work to acknowledge my responsibility for the observable fact that scholarly writing contributes to, endorses, or gives rise to various material outcomes. Dismissing the term as evading the issue of agency (an issue that it in fact specifically raises) does not, however, get around this condition of writing. Just because the

English gained an enormous advantage from *not* applying *project* to their dissemination of the English literary tradition throughout their colonies and to their simultaneous suppression of indigenous literatures and tongues surely does not mean that these actions had no material consequences. Critical essays inspiring, lauding, or rationalizing England's promotion of its literature as superior to that produced by the cultures it dominated or retroactively endorsing this promotion are, similarly, social projects in miniature with specific material effects.

All Levin's sneering and nastiness do nothing to rid scholarship of its documentable role in advancing certain values and points of view and discouraging others. The routine and inevitable scholarly promotion and demotion—or even mischaracterization and evasion of texts, models, and values that Levin and others want to make ineligible for disciplinary scrutiny—clearly have specific and ascertainable real-world effects. Levin's own work intersects in myriad ways with communities and bodies around the world, as does everyone's. His attempts to ridicule and (hence) efface these intersections suggest that Levin would prefer not to think about what his own project might be or about what effect it might have on the social realm it inhabits.

Finally, Levin's suggestion that Marxists or those with stances critical to one or another form of capitalism should go to Eastern Europe and defend totalitarianism turns on the nasty assumption (time-honored among red-baiters and especially promoted by the HUAC) that all who criticize capitalism or specific forms of capitalism are communists and that all communists are totalitarian. By implication the remark also suggests that Levin and all capitalist boosters are ultrademocratic. None of these assumptions are correct, and I challenge Levin to come up with a less simplistic and ill-conceived account of the theoretical debates within our discipline and to better inform himself concerning the wide variety of noncapitalist economies that have existed and that now exist in our world. I also invite him to say why, since he holds Marxists responsible for explaining away the misfortunes of the Soviet Union's one-time bloc, Marxists should not expect him to tour Panama, Grenada, Nicaragua, Chile, the Philippines, Guatemala, the Occupied Territories, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Kenya, India, the bombed-out ruins of Baghdad, and the ghettos of the United States and other industrialized capitalist countries and explain to the (nonelite) people he finds there that they simply don't know how very happy they really are *now*, under capitalism.

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Reply:

Margot FitzGerald is right and I was wrong about the origins of *The Death of the Author*, although I would still argue that the current popularity of this concept stems directly from the essays of Barthes and Foucault, as Peter Erickson states in the sentence I quote (491). Her criticism of my remarks on the term *project*, however, is based on a misunderstanding. I never say that the term itself evades the issue of agency; my objection, explained in my article (492) and in my Forum replies to James O'Rourke and Daniel Boyarin (106 [1991]: 133–34, 315–16), is to the way certain critics deploy this term to evade the issue of agency in literary texts. The term *project*, that is, does not have a project but is used by these critics for their project. Of course *people*, including critics, can have projects, but I want to know how a *text* “can acquire an ideological project without the help of any human agency” (reply to O'Rourke). Both O'Rourke and Boyarin fail to address this question, and so does FitzGerald.

Her principal target clearly is the suggestion in my reply to Boyarin that Marxist critics attempt an intervention in Eastern Europe, which is a response to his praise of the “candor” of these critics in proclaiming their political project, namely, the replacement of capitalism by socialism. It seems obvious that the greatest threat to this project today is the collapse of socialism in that part of the world and the movement there toward political pluralism and market economies—a movement that, if successful, will probably set back the socialist cause for a very long time—and I therefore suggest that the most effective way for these critics to further their project would be to try to arrest this movement instead of writing literary criticism. FitzGerald never confronts this argument head-on but makes several indirect and often cryptic attacks on it that I would like to consider.

1. She inserts “so-called” before “political pluralism and market economies.” It is a kind of potshot that allows her to cast doubt on the movement in Eastern Europe, and thus on my argument, without having to give us any reasons. She never does explain it.

2. She implies that these events in Eastern Europe are irrelevant to the Marxists' project because the countries involved were “totalitarian.” This is now a standard Marxist move designed to set up a game where any problem in any capitalist country can be blamed on capitalism (which is apparently the point of her long list at the end), while no problem in avowedly socialist countries can be blamed on socialism because what those countries have, despite their socialization of the land and the means of production and elimi-