

tities rather than divinities and represent a sense of undifferentiated participation in the life of the universe.

What Harrison describes is a spectrum ranging from an intense emotional, communal form to one that is intellectualized and individualized. At one extreme is the pure group, the “vague excited dance” in the “realm of motor discharge”; at the other extreme is the Greek statue, “remote almost to the point of chill abstraction” (202). The dithyramb is the site of transition, the place where the leader figure begins to emerge, although this first appearance does not yet establish a leader-centered form. The daimon merely prefigures the movement away from collective emotion toward abstraction and generalization, a movement that continues to lead away from communal consciousness as the leader becomes personified and individualized (or “de-daimonized” and heroized).

When Hoff turns her attention to *Between the Acts*, I think her interpretation again relies too much on one isolated detail. Can we really derive a hierarchical relation from the fact that one cow begins the primeval lament? It is difficult to see this cow as speaking for the other cows or directing their expression; if my yawning stimulates you to yawn, I doubt if I’ve established my superior position. But more important, the episode clearly resolves in a moment of collective action: the cows, the audience, suddenly, spontaneously, simultaneously, all lower their heads. Such repetitions and parallels form the predominant rhythmic scheme of *Between the Acts*. They suggest a continuity, a collectivity, running underneath the conscious distinctions of ordinary life and convey that immediate sense of participating in a larger unity which Harrison hoped might be recovered.

I have little space to comment on Hoff’s other points. I quite like the suggestion that Albert supplies the bawdiness of the Greek chorus. Certainly he does so in the larger choric voice of the audience; my comment applied simply to the chorus that La Trobe uses in the pageant. The mirrors of Apuleius may or may not be a relevant connection; if they are, it is important to note how Woolf refashions the image by erasing the processional aspect—her views on processions having been beautifully articulated through the photographs in *Three Guineas*. Two other points I consider Hoff’s misunderstandings of my discussion. I cite Freud as an authority not on Greek drama but on communal psychology—the subject that Harrison confesses in the preface to *Themis* is her real focus. And I have clearly separated Roman comedy from Old Comedy, my point being that Woolf moves away from the narrative strategies of Roman comedy to something closer to Harrison’s communal form.

Since Hoff raises the question of my approach, I would say that, as someone who has written on the importance of a dialogic community, I try to be guided by two principles: to sound the note of critical exchange rather than the note of critical attack and to advance a strong interpretation without setting it up as the definitive final word on the subject. As for preconceptions, my position is that they are unavoidable (see my note 10), although I would argue that I have been as much shaped by reading Woolf as my reading of Woolf has been shaped by me. Woolf’s lifelong protests against all forms of domination have long attracted me, as have both her respect for individual difference and her belief in a deeper collective existence uniting humanity and nature. If I happen to think that recovering a sense of identity with nature is crucial for ecological survival and that learning to work with cultural and racial difference is crucial to political survival (the urgency and difficulty of the latter has been amply demonstrated in Canada since the publication of my article), it means that my study of literature gains in significance for me by relating to these other concerns. It is important that, as scholars, we continue to sift, weigh, and evaluate our evidence, but if our work isn’t in some sense “currently attractive,” then the current of life might well leave us behind.

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Tom Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase*

To the Editor:

A few words about Elissa S. Guralnick’s outstanding piece on Tom Stoppard’s radio play (“*Artist Descending a Staircase: Stoppard Captures the Radio Station—and Duchamp*,” 105 [1990]: 286–300). Her reading illuminates a number of half-hidden rooms and closets in Stoppard’s text, which is surely, as she says, one of his best. Besides, Guralnick is also to be congratulated for turning high critical attention to the radio play as a form—as is *PMLA* for implicitly agreeing with her on the importance of the form.

To be sure, my own reading of *Artist Descending a Staircase* does not coincide with hers at the center. I am far from sure that mine is the right one; but it is perhaps worth advancing as a possible alternative. My reading depends on the way in which I “receive” the character of Sophie. I refer specifically to Guralnick’s view of her (294). For one thing, when Guralnick

scrutinizes names (doing an astonishing job on the three men), she seems to forget that Sophie means “wisdom.” (The notion of sophistry is excluded by the girl’s moving sincerity and depth of character.) Hence to me Sophie’s blindness suggests the contrary of what it does to Guralnick: I think of inner wisdom, like that of Teiresias and others. Furthermore, it seems to me that it is she, not Martello, who speaks the “unimpeachable” words in the central debate of the play. And finally, while it is true that “the only two characters who die in the play are those who turn aside from innovation” (294), it is also true that they are the two real human beings; only they are capable of loving. However, of the two, Donner remains a Duchamp clown in his art, and that is perhaps why Stoppard makes him die so ridiculously. Whereas the heroine, Sophie, dies the noble death of despair—despair over the lovelessness in Beauchamp the man and Beauchamp the artist. In short, I read the play as a half-funny, half-sad attack on avant-gardism by a conservative who accredits himself by showing that he is no fusty traditionalist but is as peppy an experimenter as they come. It may be, finally, that Sophie, whose last name is Farthingale, is a little bit more conservative than her creator; but he seems nevertheless to choose her over the Duchamps.

Why not ask Stoppard himself?

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Reply:

Mandel’s interpretation of *Artist* is very appealing in its kindness to Sophie, who is surely the most lovable character in the play. Because Sophie wins our sympathies, we want her to prevail. And so I think she does, insofar as *Artist* comments on the need for love in human relationships. (Hence the propriety of Stoppard’s naming her for wisdom.) But in her opinions on art, Sophie still seems to me suspect, for the reasons set out in my essay. Even so, I agree with Mandel that Stoppard is artistically conservative, for all that he loves to experiment. So it is that *Artist* is traditional in form. And to the extent that the form of the play is a part of Stoppard’s argument (how could it not be?), Stoppard may be said to side with Sophie (i.e., traditionalism), not with Donner and company (i.e., avant-gardism). In the light of Mandel’s interpretation, *Artist* appears more than ever to function like an optical illusion, gaily oscillating between mutually exclusive meanings right before our eyes.

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The Politics of Critical Language

To the Editor:

The May issue, dedicated to “the politics of critical language” (105 [1990]: 398–530), proved quite informative, particularly for those of us who profess no expertise in the myriad theories lurking out there in The Big City. However, some possible explanations for the current preoccupation with literary theory, while perhaps mentioned in passing, were not actually discussed. Maybe they should be.

One likely reason for all the “pretentious gibberish” to which Victor Brombert alludes (in the 1989 MLA presidential address, 105 [1990]: 395) is an unspoken (and probably unconscious) desire to *remystify* the text. Anyone who has spent hours slogging through a few turgid paragraphs of contemporary criticism only to discover that the ideas expressed therein are not terribly original or even very interesting might justifiably wonder if he or she has been victimized by the author’s passion for obscurity. For all the talk of demystification, of empowering the reader, most modern criticism serves to support the common impression that literature is the business of those who have nothing better to do than debate unceasingly the latest angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin controversy to emerge from France. The fashion for Eurojive came at about the time that members of the working class (such as myself) were first admitted to the academy in significant numbers, and a connection is certainly possible. To one who well remembers the musty grade school library, many modern theorists are reminiscent of the inevitable school librarian who believed in a divine mission to prevent the unworthy savages from soiling the books—and in the process ensured that they did not *read* them either.

A variation of penis envy might also come into play (or should I say *jeu*?). For several centuries now, Western society has accorded science a high position while viewing literary scholars, artists, and so on as superfluous; after all, we scholars cannot claim to have produced even one vaccine or to have sent anyone to the moon. It is revealing that when the government makes its ritual gestures of concern regarding the state of public education, the quality of *math and science* instruction is actually at issue. No one really fears that Japanese or West German schoolchildren write better explanations.

So, given the common perception that science is an exalted pursuit and literature a pastime, the touchy-feely end of the curriculum in a society that cares little for the abstract, it is not unlikely that some literary scholars envy the scientists their wonderful jargon and its