

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

certainty and precision and thus wish to emulate it by creating formidably technical-sounding words of their own. While the biologist can say *homeostasis*, the literary theorist can dazzle with such absurdities as *phallogocentrism*. By penis envy, I do not mean only the coveting of thy neighbor's vocabulary—I also refer to an actual issue of gender. Many tend to think of literature, and of the sort of "intuitive" thinking involved in its study, as "feminine." Literature is simply not as "masculine" as, say, chemistry, and so the creation of a terminology akin to that of chemistry is a way to diminish the shame of effeminacy. For evidence, observe the hairier members of nearly every English faculty who feel that they, like Hemingway, must cultivate hyper-masculine dress and mannerisms. It's not so embarrassing to study poetry if you can bring in a twelve-point buck from time to time.

Another factor that may be involved is a quite human tendency to avoid confronting the reality that the world offers no proof of anything, certainly not of the inherent meaning of a text. While I realize that this is a key doctrine of those who follow Derrida, I should point out that these same people must construct an elaborate theory (using those meaningless *words*) to explain this troublesome fact of human existence. It is comforting to be told that texts *always* and *everywhere* behave in certain ways (subvert themselves, reveal a feminine subtext, etc.) because the assertion gives some small measure of certainty, even if, in some theories, that certainty is only the knowledge that there is *no* certainty (which is, of course, a contradiction but is no less appealing for that). Complex-sounding theories expressed in highly polished prose and published by the best university presses are very reassuring to many.

Last, the transformation of universities from teaching institutions to publishing houses might further the cause of theory. As we know, profs must write quite a lot to prevent their careers from deconstructing, and so endless specialization affords more opportunities to write and thus more opportunities for promotion. Continually dividing the field also allows the multitude of university presses to maintain grant funding that would be lost if they were to seem unproductive. So, writing books on feminist vegetarian critical theory (I did not make that up) is very much a matter of economics for both scholar and institution. Every new school of theory gives birth to literally thousands of articles and hundreds of books, bringing great prestige to individuals, departments, presses, and universities. There is a profit motive here.

These are only suggestions, of course, and I am aware that they will anger many. The point is that these possible explanations for the interest in theory are politi-

cal issues relating to the form of critical language (and even to the reasons for its very existence) that were ignored by the May issue. Because we are living, they say, in the "age of theory" and because one of the main points of most theory (and a good policy) is the examination of assumptions, then it is certainly important that we examine the reasons behind the modern concern with the meta-. Unfortunately, we seldom do, and those who question the new faith are accused of "resistance to theory."

JASON P. MITCHELL
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Reply:

I agree with what I take to be Mitchell's central point—namely, that the various essays in the special issue (with the possible exception of David Kaufmann's ["The Profession of Theory," 519–30]) do not seek to uncover whatever unconscious professional motives lurk behind the critical languages in use today. Although Nicholas Rand explores the nationalist impulse behind Heidegger's etymologizing ("The Political Truth of Heidegger's 'Logos': Hiding in Translation," 436–47) and Susan Winnett the sexism controlling the language of some narrative theorists ("Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure," 505–18), only Kaufmann, in discussing "that new career path which we call 'theory'" (520), suggests some connections between the professionalism practiced by literary scholars and the ideas they voice.

Yet whereas Kaufmann argues that contemporary theorists are continuing the Arnoldian moral tradition (525, 527), Mitchell finds only negative implications in their activities ("There is a profit motive here"). Rather than assign praise or blame, one might ask how it came about that, in anglophone countries at least, a show of professionalism among literary critics has periodically met condemnation—as it has not, for instance, in neighboring fields such as musicology and anthropology or in a culture in which academic literary critics are called *Literaturwissenschaftler*.

If one examines the history of literary study in Britain and America, one quickly finds sentiments similar to Mitchell's expressed ever since literature as an academic subject became institutionalized in universities a century or so ago. Note, for example, the following complaint, made about 1910 or 1911 by Walter Raleigh:

The habit of treating Criticism as a distinct branch of literature has made great inroads. We hear of the philosophy of Criticism, the history of Criticism. . . . There is