

purposes, no legitimate objection can be raised. But what does this imply about the humanities' claim to be taken seriously as disciplines of knowledge? Marshall seems to concede what our harshest critics have alleged: the humanities are a sandbox in which we affect to reach real-world discoveries through maneuvers that, because of empirically compelling objections, are disallowed in their original domain.

Like other postmodern theorists, Marshall applies her relativism only to "truths" that she deems ideologically disagreeable. As for Freudian and Lacanian tenets, her trust in them is absolute. Thus Marshall confidently reiterates Lacan's assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language (1212); she reports that "the ego is shadowed by the residue of forces, desires, experiences that exceed symbolic structuration" (1211); and she chides historicists for ignoring Lacan's contribution in giving us "a methodology for understanding the individual in the context of social codes and structures" (1208). In short, Freud's and Lacan's purported laws of mentation are treated as both scientifically validated and immune from scientific review. The incoherence of this position would be startling if it weren't so commonplace in recent academic theory.

Among many deplorable consequences of such fashionable irrationalism, let me single out one that is notably on display in Marshall's article. Where evidential grounds remain unacknowledged, partisans are inclined to equate their beliefs with sanity and to "medicalize" opposing arguments instead of substantively addressing them. It was Freud, in his struggle with heretics against his movement, who perfected this form of calumny long before it was adopted by official Soviet psychiatry. If Stekel, Adler, Rank, Jung, Ferenczi, and others began showing unorthodox tendencies, it could only be because they had lost contact with reality. Marshall employs the same low tactic, forestalling a serious appraisal of rival views by invidious diagnosis-at-a-distance of the unconscious defense mechanism that must have generated them.

The historicists whom Marshall judges insufficiently deferential to Freud and Lacan are charged with having tried to "repress crucial issues of historiography"—by which Marshall means both "the Marxian and the Freudian concepts of repression: . . . the symptomatic language of individual historicists indicates an unconscious prohibition of certain

ideas" (1208). In illustration of this pathetic trait, Marshall cites Stephen Greenblatt's "ambivalent relation to psychoanalytic theory" and Lee Patterson's "confession of an earlier failure to 'control my own use of psychoanalytic terminology'" (1215n2). Here Freud's precedent is followed to the letter; those who have contracted misgivings about psychoanalysis are thereby identified as "cases" explainable in psychoanalytic terms.

Other critics besides me have protested the foolishness of advancing theories without holding them accountable to evidence, and still others have noted a recent decline in collegial civility. Is it just a coincidence that those two phenomena have developed side by side? Every intellectual discipline, even one that must make considerable allowance for subjectivity and indeterminacy, needs to posit some neutral ground on which disputes can be settled in principle if not always in practice. But some of our most emulated theorists are no longer willing to tolerate such appeals; nor do they tolerate schools of practice other than their own. The result is total war, not of all against all but of faction against faction, with one faction—the most militantly psychoanalytic one—going so far as to pronounce its adversaries mentally disturbed. Readers who prefer a less ad hominem style of debate should look to the root cause of trouble: a sustained assault, now some thirty years into its campaign, on the very notion of supporting and disconfirming facts.

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#### TO THE EDITOR:

I would like to ask Cynthia Marshall a few questions about her statement, in "Psychoanalyzing the Prepsychoanalytic Subject," that the criticism of psychoanalytic theory published by Stephen Greenblatt and Lee Patterson and apparently other new historicists "indicates an unconscious prohibition of certain ideas" (1208).

How did she gain access to Greenblatt's and Patterson's unconscious?

Is she claiming that her statement about them is really true? I wondered about this because later in the same essay she praises Lacan for "radically disabl[ing] Enlightenment notions of an available truth

of the subject” (1213), which would seem to indicate that the truth about these two subjects is not available.

Is there any conceivable criticism of psychoanalytic theory that cannot be explained, and thus explained away, in this same manner by blaming it on the unconscious motives of the criticizer?

Does she herself have an unconscious motive for invoking the critics’ unconscious motives? I am sure that she must have worried about this, since she says later in the essay that “psychoanalysis urges a habit of self-scrutiny that is advantageous in negotiating the difficulty (or impossibility) of critical objectivity” (1213), which also bears directly on my second question.

Finally, do I have an unconscious motive for raising these questions? If I do, I would not be aware of it, of course, and so I must depend on her to enlighten me.

*Richard Levin*

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### *Reply:*

According to Frederick Crews, literary scholars should use methods and terminology that have been scientifically validated. He favors empirical analysis in order to reach what he considers accurate conclusions about literature. Crews’s argument against psychoanalytic theory is familiar from his many published works on the subject, and since debate on the matter is rather well worn I will refrain from rehearsing it. I will simply point out that my essay observes common ground and cross-fertilization between historicism and psychoanalytic theory in the work of some recent scholars, instead of claiming the total dominance of the latter approach as Crews suggests.

The second half of Crews’s letter, in which he writes of “calumny,” concerns me more, because here the larger issues seem particularly timely. He uses the term to describe my observation that “the symptomatic language of individual historicists indicates an unconscious prohibition of certain ideas.”

For Crews, this amounts to calling these authors “mentally disturbed.” Richard Levin’s inquisitorial letter makes a similar point. But to suggest that texts contain traces of attitudes and ideas beyond the deliberate intentions of their authors is an altogether different matter from calling anyone mentally disturbed. The irreducible texture of language—its complex forms, the links between texts, the structures of figuration, image, and allusion—overwhelms the strict control of individual speakers or writers. Unlike scientific instruments, which we trust to function objectively and reliably, language both does our bidding and escapes our grasp. As I suggest in my essay, Lacan’s work has been important for students of literature because of the attention it directs to the surfaces and structures of language. If the study of literature is imperiled, as Crews fears, it is not because botched tools have limited our ability “to reach real-world discoveries” but because we sometimes stray from the responsibility of listening to what Roland Barthes called “the rustle of language.” Accordingly, when literature departments defer to colleagues in the sciences or social sciences for methodology and even for purpose, we lose what makes our discipline valuable. This is not to say that rationality has fallen by the wayside or to discount the genuine advances of historical research in literary study or to deny the excitement of an expanding canon.

Psychoanalytic criticism is not to everyone’s taste, yet its current manifestations contribute to the burgeoning interest in questions of aesthetics and literary form, as we collectively consolidate the gains of historicism with the insights of postmodern theory. In my view, the state of literary and language study is nothing so dire as Crews describes. Readers will note the irony of his bemoaning a loss of “collegial civility” while accusing a disputant of tactics used by “official Soviet psychiatry” and characterizing a debate about theories of literary interpretation as “total war.”

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