

Forum

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Psychoanalysis and Literary Criticism

TO THE EDITOR:

Cynthia Marshall's "Psychoanalyzing the Prepsychoanalytic Subject" (117 [2002]: 1207–16) acknowledges in passing that serious questions have been raised about the legitimacy of the Freudian system as a science. Indeed. Historians and philosophers have shown that Freud's "findings" were coerced, muddled, and unsupported except by his own self-flattering anecdotes; that psychoanalytic inquiry, with its question-begging concepts, its open-ended rules of interpretation, and its inadequate precautions against suggestion, is always fatally circular; and that the ever-widening squabble among competing psychoanalytic sects is an inevitable consequence of such disorder. Meanwhile, as Marshall and others could confirm by checking the course offerings of any well-regarded psychology department, psychoanalysis has been utterly cast aside as a research paradigm.

Because scientific considerations are worse than meaningless in her eyes, however, Marshall attaches no importance to this fiasco. She is an instrumentalist who expects a theory not to make a convincing fit with ascertainable realities but to produce effects—and one such effect is a decertification of science and "truth," along with such odious discursive formations as "the autonomous, heterosexual male subject" (1211). If she prefers Lacan's version of psychoanalysis to Freud's, it is not on any reasoned empirical basis but only because Lacan's hermeneutic more "radically disables Enlightenment notions of an available truth of the subject" (1213). We needn't worry, then, that an erroneous theory of motivation may lead to inaccurate conclusions about literature. The concept of error belongs to an epistemology that Marshall thinks we ought to have outgrown by now.

"Freud's assertions notwithstanding," Marshall declares, "in the academy psychoanalysis is now considered primarily humanistic" (1213). Many members of our profession reflexively agree: if we simply ignore the lawgiving intent of psychoanalytic propositions and adapt them to our interpretative

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