

Forum

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Virginia Woolf and Psychoanalytic Criticism

To the Editor:

In “Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Critical Approaches to Virginia Woolf’s Life and Work” (103 [1988]: 10–23) Thomas C. Caramagno suggests, but does not provide, a welcome antidote to the dehydration of authors by clinically uninformed (if not naive) psychoanalytic critics. One could not agree more with his implicit charge that literature is yoked to the brand of theory that is at stake for the critic. Such a charge might be made against other theoretical architectonics as well, not just analysis. For analysis, however, Caramagno finds an indisputable (monolithic?) objective “test” of validity: biological psychiatry. While one can sympathize with his questions about analytic criticism, two objections must be made to this sort of appeal, one formal and the other methodological.

Methodologically, it is impossible not to be reductive when trading within the discourse of biological reductionism. The objection is simply this: Caramagno gives no evidence for the clinical picture that he alleges. Quoting any particular biobehaviorist does not provide enough support. It is uncomfortably like a clerical appeal to ecclesiastical authority, not unlike the tactic of analytic critics who invoke the authority of Freud.

Indeed, the “authority” that ought to reside with the author and the text is displaced sideways onto psychobiology—a theory that is at least as much ideology as science.

Furthermore, the literature is made to serve biology, no matter how much one might try to recuperate it as “insight” into the experience of some allegedly objective illness. Likewise, analytic critics have too often made literature serve some allegedly objective neurosis. With an author like Woolf, it would seem that the difference, or disjunction, between biology and the body is much more to the point. Psychobiology does not represent a critical corrective, let alone an advance, because determinism by any other name insists in the discourse of psychobiology no less than in analysis.

Formally, there may be a more insidious risk. Psychiatry is cold comfort for anyone seeking to escape the deplorable reductionism of psychoanalytic criticism (itself a conflict, if not a contradiction, in terms). Where the analytic critic would “convict” Woolf of neurosis, the psychobiologist would not even read the literature. Lan-

guage has no role in current theories of biobehavioral psychiatry. Certainly there is “language behavior,” but in biological psychiatry language has no function akin to its capacity to respond to the multidimensional reality of the existence of any human subject and to convey that multidimensionality to another through reading.

In addition, it must be noted, there are many psychoanalysts, certainly clinically informed, who pursue a link between a theory of affects and a biological substrate in the neuronal structure of memory. They would speak openly today of a future where there will be a biological test of the analytic cure. Indeed, analysis is becoming more and more a form of biological intervention. This situation curiously reiterates the era of biological discourse out of which Freud himself emerged one hundred years ago (as in the “Project”). The idea that there is a “germ” responsible for the visible manifestation of disorder is certainly not new. It is just that very few, if any, actual germs have been found for the syndromes that Freud was the first to diagnose: hysteria, obsession, and the delirium of a Schreber. Certainly, psychobiology has yet to offer anything other than new “descriptions” of an as yet unnamed “germ.”

One would like to think that there might come a time when the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts would come to literary scholars to learn something of the context within which to assess the significance of their findings, rather than the other way around that Caramagno’s article evidences.

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To the Editor:

I should like to respond to several issues that Caramagno’s essay “Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Critical Approaches to Virginia Woolf’s Life and Work” raised about my book *Virginia Woolf and the “Lust of Creation”: A Psychoanalytic Exploration*.

1. Caramagno writes, “Psychoanalytic critics like Panken who desire to ‘demystify the aura surrounding Woolf’s emotional oscillations’ must learn to tolerate and