

**FREDERICK CREWS**

**SKEPTICAL  
ENGAGEMENTS**

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ENGAGEMENTS***

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**For Adolf Grünbaum**  
*in friendship and gratitude*

## Preface

At Steven Pinker's suggestion, *Skeptical Engagements* now joins the first round of books to be recalled from out-of-print limbo and granted digital revival as Cybereditions. I could not be more pleased. As someone who has found cause to repent of positions once taken, movements once endorsed, and books once published, I harbor no such regrets about *Skeptical Engagements*. It remains my favorite among all of my books—the one that best integrates my perennial concerns and comes nearest my ideal of independent thought in the service of rational and humane values.

Rereading the text twelve years after its publication, I find *Skeptical Engagements* to be dated only in the obvious sense that befalls every work of contemporary analysis and exhortation. Inevitably, changes have occurred since 1986 in global, national, and academic politics, in literary criticism, and in psychological theory and its applications. But none of those developments, either positive or negative, strikes me as warranting an altered posture on my own part.

Here I have in mind not just the worldwide collapse of Communism and the accelerating disillusionment with Freud and his therapeutic/scientific brainchild—occasions for good cheer, needless to say—but also the increasing detachment of academic speculators from the dissuasive influence of just such real-world events. With its emphasis on “theoreticism” and “Left Eclecticism” (the latter overlapping with the subsequently popularized notion of political correctness), *Skeptical Engagements* anticipated the etherealizing and hermeticizing of Marxist and psychoanalytic doctrine; the widespread replacement of evidential standards by the claims of “positionality,” or group identity; and the cancerous diffusion of irrationalist dogma, until physical science itself has by now been reduced, in the discourse of influential professors, to mere power games and narrative.

For me personally, *Skeptical Engagements* represents a bittersweet moment in a career that has been out of step with prevailing academic opinion for the past thirty years and more. As a *vox clamantis in deserto*, the book went largely unheard at first, and those who did take note of it

tended to misconstrue it as an expression of nostalgia for pre-sixties conservatism and for outmoded schools of psychology and literary study. Seven years later, I would become much better known for a single article about Freud that appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. Yet except for a few previously unavailable biographical details, my essay of 1993 disclosed nothing that hadn't been plainly stated—and overlooked or discounted—in *Skeptical Engagements*.

Indeed, it was inattention to that book that enabled Freudians to misportray me as an *ad hominem* critic who leaps fallaciously from Freud's ethical lapses to the illegitimacy of his supposed findings. As any interested reader can perceive, my actual, epistemologically based, reasons for disputing psychoanalysis were articulated in the 1986 book. They have now been spelled out even more fully in Part II of my recent anthology, *Unauthorized Freud: Doubtters Confront a Legend* (Viking, 1998).

As for the allegedly reactionary character of *Skeptical Engagements* as an ideological and methodological statement, that very charge typified the altered climate I was trying to describe. By the mid-eighties, many academic humanists had already contracted the bad habit of labeling "right wing" all dissent not only from the overt politicizing of academic life but also from poststructuralist theory, including its component of esoteric Lacanian Freudianism. In the increasingly conformist atmosphere that has ruled the universities from then until now, scorn is routinely heaped on the ordinary liberalism to which I have long subscribed. And anyone who explicitly upholds rationality within the framework of a discipline will now be suspected of following a sinister hidden agenda, akin to the very different "disciplinary" aims that Michel Foucault ascribed to the prisons and mental hospitals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Emboldened, however, by some welcome signs that the rickety poststructuralist funhouse may be ready to topple at last, I dare to hope that *Skeptical Engagements* will soon get a second and more sympathetic look. A time may be coming when the empirical ethos, no longer slandered as positivism or confounded with simplistic ideas about the mind, is once again given its due as the most important prerequisite to reliable knowledge, social justice, and a truly democratic university. My book lamented a dark hour in which constraints on interpretation were taken to be constraints on freedom. As the folly of that error becomes more generally apparent, I expect *Skeptical Engagements* to be remembered (however dimly and briefly) not as a backward-looking manifesto but as a restatement of the conditions under which genuine advances in any

area of investigation can be secured.

In his provocative recent work of intellectual synthesis, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), Edward O. Wilson, too, celebrates the empirical attitude, and he goes on to predict, with approval, the refocusing of social-scientific and humanistic fields on the physical and biological laws undergirding them. As one of the few distinguished commentators who welcomed my book with enthusiasm in 1986, Wilson bears my lasting gratitude. Newly resuscitated, however, *Skeptical Engagements* must respectfully dissent from Wilson's announced reductivism. My view was—and it remains unchanged today—that each healthy discipline can be trusted to feel out its own most fruitful problem level, weighing the appeal of “deep” explanation against the need to honor complexities that outsiders can scarcely perceive.

The root message of *Skeptical Engagements*, then, is modest and simple, though by no means easy to put into effect. Let the disciplines flourish, free not only from pseudoscience and from theoreticist posturing but also from colonization by bigger and more glamorous neighbors. Although all earnest inquirers have a common adversary, apriorism, we can best overcome it by unsparingly practicing the particular style of empirical give-and-take that has already proven its mettle within our field.

Frederick Crews  
Berkeley, California  
October 1998

## ***Acknowledgments***

*Skeptical Engagements* has been so long in the making that I cannot remember all the acts of kindness that smoothed my path. Two figures were so important, though, that they deserve special mention. One is Adolf Grünbaum, who rekindled my interest in psychoanalytic questions, criticized some of my draft essays with his famous persistence, and gave me a model of the thinker who always puts rational considerations first. And then there is Elizabeth Crews, to whom I owe everything. My working definition of good fortune is to discover that your best friend is also the keenest and most demanding editor you have ever known.

Many other people have given me varying doses of support and encouragement, helpful criticism, and constructive disagreement. Few if any would subscribe to every contention in this book, but all have kept me going. My thanks go especially to Paul Alpers, Wayne Booth, Helene Boyd, William Chace, Peter Collier, Morris Eagle, Edward Erwin, Jacob Fuchs, Gerald Graff, Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Gribben, Nathan Hale, Jr., E. D. Hirsch, Jr., J. Allan Hobson, Sidney Hook, Albert Hutter, Martin Jay, Phillip Johnson, Hugh Kenner, Steven Knapp, Larry Laudan, Robert Lescher, David Leverenz, John Limon, Elaine Maimon, Leo Marx, Susan Meigs, Gerald Mendelsohn, Leonard Michaels, John R. Miles, the late Ernest Nagel, Cornelia Nixon, Hershel Parker, Ellen and Robert Pinsky, Norman Rabkin, Ralph W. Rader, Adena Rosmarin, William McKinley Runyan, Mark Shechner, Robert Silvers, William P. Sisler, Henry Nash Smith, Murray Sperber, George Starr, Frank J. Sulloway, Eric Sundquist, Peter J. Swales, John L. Traugott, Ian Watt, and Alex Zwerdling.

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## ***Introduction***

This volume, my first collection of essays and occasional pieces since *Out of My System* (1975), represents approximately a decade's-worth of reflection about books and ideas that have stirred my interest. Some of the books just happened along, thanks to editors who wanted them reviewed; but when I became engaged with them, I nearly always found myself reverting to the themes of my self-initiated essays. Those themes are the specific failings of Freudian psychoanalysis; the nature, appeal, and consequences of closed, self-validating doctrines; the resultant indispensability of an empirical (evidence-oriented) point of view; and the dubious effects of literary-critical methods that spurn that point of view. The several themes really come down to just one: the fear of facing the world, including its works of literature, without an intellectual narcotic ready at hand.

My equipment for understanding the power of that fear was acquired the hard way, through trying to work myself free of a seductive dogma that had promised quick, deep knowledge. For a decade or so I was convinced that psychoanalysis, with its distrust of appearances and its stoic willingness to face the unspeakable, was a useful adjunct to my skeptical principles. Only in halting stages did I come to reverse that opinion and acknowledge that Freudianism is a faith like any other. But throughout the process I was publishing my ever-changing judgments of the Freudian tradition, and when I came to put my essays together in *Out of My System*, I used the sequence of chapters as a kind of fever chart. By the end of the book, as one reviewer tartly observed, the Freudian ground I could still stand on was no larger than a postage stamp.

This experience of conversion followed by self-deprogramming explains why psychoanalysis occupies a central place in *Skeptical Engagements*, a book which does not change its mind about anything. Freudianism has become for me the paradigmatic example of a doctrine that compels irrational loyalty. But of course it is not the most consequential of such modern systems; that honor belongs to Marxism, to which I turn my attention in Chapters Eight and Nine. Marxism and psychoanalysis, I gradually came to see, make the same type of combined moral and "scientific" appeal, and, thanks to the fact that neither movement was

founded on a truly empirical basis, their troubled intellectual histories are significantly alike. That is, in both cases the need for flight from potential disconfirmation has dictated a characteristically pseudoscientific conceptual elaboration, hairsplitting, and excommunicative bickering. And ironically, each doctrine has attracted recent academic admirers through the very fudging of its original claims.

Though *Skeptical Engagements* exhaustively sets forth the grounds for my defection from psychoanalysis, many readers—not all of them adamant Freudians—will be reluctant to take my statements at face value. *Their* skepticism will tell them to distrust someone who began by overrating a theory that everyone knows to contain its stronger and weaker points, and who then proceeded to heap abuse on that very theory in its entirety. Is this not a classic reaction formation, a product of what one of my Freudian detractors has called “the zeal of the convert of negation” (Thompson, 16)? As the Marxist psychoanalyst Joel Kovel put it in a recent public debate with me, Crews on Freud is probably just another case of “The God That Failed.”

Kovel’s analogy was striking, and it sent me back to *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (1950) to see how appropriate the parallel might be. I had read that book in the mid-fifties and been strongly impressed by it, but since the mid-sixties I had heard it mentioned only with sarcastic contempt. Rereading it in 1985, I found it more persuasive than ever—especially the contributions by Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, Ignazio Silone, and Stephen Spender. Not one of them had written in the overcompensating spirit implied by Kovel’s allusion; on the contrary, they recognized that they had been driven toward Communism by the collapse of pre-1914 values and the sorry state of capitalism, and they still seemed dazed by the Party’s inability to make room for the “undisciplined” contributions of eager intellectuals.

Yet those saddened writers also marveled at their own former readiness to swallow all fundamental doubts and go on believing, /xiii/ in Koestler’s words, that “the Party could only be changed from inside” (Koestler et al., 73). That sounded all too familiar to me; I had frequently been urged by uneasy Freudians to remember whose side I was on and not “go over to the positivists.” And having been subjected to a good deal of diagnostic condescension since my apostasy, which Freudians have treated more as a symptom than as an intellectual stand, I could appreciate why the contributors to *The God That Failed* were sure they understood more about the Communist mentality than any Kremlinologist ever would. Closed systems show their true face to those who

want out.

It was only after breaking with psychoanalysis that I grasped that the *ad hominem* approach to dissent, which I was suddenly encountering at every turn, is not really a behavioral lapse to which certain Freudian partisans happen to be susceptible. Rather, it is an imperative emanating from the heart of the psychoanalytic vision, just as Marxism divides humankind into those people illumined by proletarian consciousness and those entrapped in capitalist false consciousness, so Freudianism can acknowledge only deep knowers—roughly, the analyzed—and the repressed. Hence at the moment of falling away I ceased to exist as an eligible critic of Freudian shortcomings; my file was simply rerouted, as it were, to the “Repressed” bin.

I plead guilty, then, to exhibiting the God That Failed syndrome. Like Koestler and Silone, I can no longer regard my abandoned faith primarily as a cluster of propositions, some of which must of necessity be more sensible than the others. I see it rather as a movement that channels thought in ways that are meant to perpetuate, not a scientific truth or a revolutionary passion, but the movement itself, which has long since forgotten what it was originally supposed to be about. Nevertheless, not expecting others to take my word for this understanding of psychoanalysis, in Chapters One through Five I take pains to show why Freudian propositions, even the mildest-looking ones, have not been significantly corroborated.

Since students of literature will be reading this book, however, I know that I face another credibility problem. Some colleagues oppose my current position by holding up against me my own psychoanalytic study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Sins of the Fathers* (1966). Insofar as they find that book convincing, they fail to understand how I can now turn my back on it. The shortest answer is that I see no need to repudiate the whole book. Much of its emphasis—for example, on the egregiously moralistic tradition of Hawthorne criticism and on the manifest psychological tone of Hawthorne’s fiction—owes nothing uniquely to Freudian theory. And in pointing out that Hawthorne’s concern with furtive sexuality, incest, and moral masochism was akin to Freud’s, I was not applying psychoanalytic method but simply mentioning what any reader of both authors can still ascertain.

*The Sins of the Fathers* went astray, however, by gratuitously relegating much of that concern on Hawthorne’s part to his repressed unconscious and by wielding Freudian symbol interpretation with unwarranted confidence. I think I could recast the argument more modestly today, giving

more weight to Hawthorne's background, milieu, and audience and to his conscious irony; the psychological themes would still come out much the same. And by drawing on recent studies such as Gloria C. Erlich's *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction* (1984) and Philip Young's more speculative *Hawthorne's Secret* (1984), I could provide other possible reasons for Hawthorne's sexual preoccupation than the oedipal one I highlighted in 1966.

Still, there remains Hawthorne's impressive-looking "anticipation of Freud," which at least one recent critic (Adams) takes to be a sign that Freud's ideas must be right. But Hawthorne and Freud were both immersed in the psychological atmosphere of Romanticism; the fact that they shared a thematic emphasis proves only that a *Zeitgeist* can pass across continents and decades. In fact one of Freud's most beguiling stratagems was to point to the surprising and delightful corroboration of his "clinical findings" by great works of literature and philosophy that he had supposedly read only afterwards. As Henri Ellenberger (1970) and others have shown, the reason psychoanalysis appears to validate earlier authors is that it was partly derived from them. In any event, if we want to justify the application of Freudian ideas to literature, we have to show not that they were anticipated but that they are well-founded and free of fatal confusions.

Yet well-foundedness is itself a confusing concept for many humanists and even some social scientists. A minority of them hold that there is no such thing as an empirically warranted idea, and many others feel that Freud's contribution to our culture is just too precious and familiar, too entwined with our sense of the modern, to deserve being subjected to potentially humbling interrogation. Freud, they are sure, was "one of us," the kind of thinker who penetrates directly to intuitive truth and sees the nuances and tragic ironies that are lost on data mongers.

In one sense this is a fitting apprehension of Freud, who mimicked the diction and the deterministic lawgiving of natural science, as he conceived it, but slyly thumbed his nose at scientific prudence. His magnum opus, for example, was self-consciously anti-inductive in its affinities, embracing the wisdom of poets and the folklore of popular dream interpretation, invoking hellish powers in its famous epigraph, and even tauntingly calling to mind astrology (*Sterndeutung*) in its very title, *Die Traumdeutung* (Ellenberger, 452). That, we might say, was the "cocaine" side of an extraordinarily embattled and imperious mind, at once clouded and indomitable. It was not by adding to our scientific knowledge but rather by concocting an ingenious witches' brew of speculative neuro-

physiology, mythic conceptualizing about subterranean psychic agents, literary charm, debaters' tricks, mendacious therapeutic claims, and spicy and grotesque sexual tales that Freud eventually captured the fancy of a civilization—or rather, of those of its members who were trying to modernize their morals and see through all “sublimations,” including the resented achievements of mainstream science.

Even so, Freud never doubted one rule of cardinal importance: since psychoanalysis purports to offer laws of mental functioning, it must be judged by the same empirical criteria as any other would-be scientific theory. Freud did everything he could to postpone and befuddle such judgment, but he accepted its appropriateness in principle. This acquiescence was not what Jürgen Habermas (1971) has perversely called a “scientistic self-misunderstanding” on Freud's part, but rather a simple recognition that a science of mental causes and effects would have to be discarded if its claims never received corroboration.

The case against psychoanalysis made by *Skeptical Engagements*, then, is an unabashedly empirical one—no less so than that of my friend Adolf Grünbaum, to whom the book is gratefully dedicated. Readers familiar with Grünbaum's pathbreaking *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (1984), however, will note that I am trying to take a step beyond its argument. Grünbaum, looking at Freudian tenets one by one, emphasizes the absence *thus far* of cogent support for those ideas that have turned out—no thanks to their proponents—to be experimentally or epidemiologically testable. In theory, though by no means in actual expectation, Grünbaum contemplates the remote possibility that eventually some psychoanalytic concepts or hypotheses will be shown to have been “serendipitously” cogent—a prospect that certain Freudians (e.g., Edelson, Lieberman) have clung to like drowning men.

I think, with Frank Cioffi (1970, 1985), that it is less useful to imagine such a miraculous rescue than it is to emphasize how, in practice, any given Freudian inference could be just as plausibly replaced by another one. If this is so, then psychoanalysis is not appreciably different in epistemic rigor from the reading of tea leaves, and the eventual discovery of some corroborated Freudian assertions can no more alter a negative verdict on the method than would the fortune teller's lucky guess. I therefore focus on the ambiguous and opportunistic character of the whole Freudian system, in which any given proposition, however testable in theory, is preserved from risk by escape clauses, vague interpretations, or even outright contradictions. What chiefly matters is not that we count the hits and misses in that cluster-bomb assault on truth, but that we

show the illegitimacy of reasoning in the self-indulgent Freudian style.

It is this interest in willful, arbitrary assertion that links Parts I and II of *Skeptical Engagements*. Over the past fifteen years or so, my own field of literary study has been invaded by a strong and widening current of anti-empiricism. In the very period when I was being beset by factually based misgivings about psychoanalysis, many of my colleagues were deciding to cast their lot with impressive-sounding doctrines, structuralist and poststructuralist, that had arisen within Continental philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, politics, criticism, and psychoanalysis itself. Those doctrines tacitly or openly subordinated the pursuit of corroborated knowledge to the swift overthrow of bourgeois illusions, which they replaced with no less debatable but more sweeping and dogmatic assertions. Chapters Six through Nine characterize this theoretical explosion and explain why, in my opinion, we should be extremely wary of its claims.

To “do theory” these days, as that expression is understood by department chairs who hope to load their ranks with a full panoply of “theorists,” is not to maintain a thesis against likely objections, but rather to strike attitudes that will identify one as a loyal follower of some figure—a Roland Barthes, a Jacques Derrida, a Michel Foucault, a Jacques Lacan, a Fredric Jameson—who /xvii/ has himself made unexamined claims about the nature of capitalism or patriarchy or Western civilization or the collective unconscious or the undecidability of knowledge. Such gurus are treasured, I suspect, less for their specific creeds than for the invigorating Nietzschean scorn they direct at intellectual prudence. The rise of “theory” has resulted in an irrationalist climate in the strictest sense—that is, an atmosphere in which it is considered old-fashioned and gullible to think that differences of judgment can ever be arbitrated on commonly held grounds.

When this position of rational undecidability is stated in a comprehensible way, it possesses a semblance of plausibility. Indeterminists, as I call them, contend that the “evidence” that might favor one critical interpretation over another will always be itself an artifact of an interpretation. All literary argument, then—indeed, all argument whatsoever—is considered circular. By citing such apparent cognitive radicals as Thomas Kuhn (1970) and Paul Feyerabend (1970), the indeterminists even manage to suggest that science itself, our model of orderly progress, lurches from paradigm to paradigm spurred by extrinsic, prejudicial factors.

Extending the indeterminist argument to scientific discovery, however,

has been a self-damning as well as a typical arrogation. As I maintain in Chapter Nine, where Kuhn's actual "sociology of rationality" is defended against its misinterpreters, the undoubted achievements of twentieth-century science are sufficient testimony against the envious proposal that scientists possess no evidential basis for choosing between rival ideas. The truism that all facts are theory-laden is irrelevant; what counts is whether a given piece of evidence, when judged by an expert community possessing common values and rules, is sufficiently independent of the particular theories in conflict. Recognizing that fact, we could return to literary study and show that there, too, just as in science, appeals are often successfully made to evidential points—biographical, historical, bibliographical, linguistic—that stand outside the arena of competing interpretations. It is only by choosing the most ambiguous literary examples—a typical anti-empirical tactic—that indeterminists can purport to show the contrary.

Moreover, as E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1967, 1976) and others have explained, the vanguard position of cognitive nihilism can only be managed through a logical trick, one that Gerald Graff has named the "Poststructuralist Two-Step." In step one, the theorist asserts a total undecidability between propositions, and anyone who /xviii/ doubts his claim is accused of being stuck in the outmoded Cartesian dualism of subject and object, whereby the facts of the world are innocently thought to lie "out there." But since the theorist is himself a subject making a claim that he wants to be deemed objectively true, he must take a discreet hop toward the cognitive center. In step two, then, he implies that for himself alone the truth is accessible after all, thanks merely to his watchfulness against the biases he finds in others.

But the Poststructuralist Two-Step is not as novel as it looks. In one form or another, it characterizes the whole "School of Suspicion"—the line of radically anti-consensual philosophy that runs from Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida and Foucault. All of those thinkers described a general human state of epistemic occlusion—of inevitable subjection to the warping effects of class membership or species-wide cowardice or the repressed unconscious or the hermeneutic circle or the prisonhouse of language; yet each, in the act of making his claims, implied that a superior mind, his own, was unaffected by those forces. Marxism and Freudianism became the modern movements *par excellence* that induced fervid belief by holding out this double promise: enlightenment for you and me, darkness for the others.

My reply to the School of Suspicion is that its Romantic, individualis-

tic model of the search for knowledge has been erroneous from the start. The turn toward nihilism is unavoidable if we begin by picturing the single mind alone with the enigmatic universe on one side and a meager stock of metaphors on the other. My own starting point is an acknowledgment that we do, by now, know a great many things with enough assurance to profit from their consequences. We know them, not because the isolated mind is a reliable instrument or because some magus has bequeathed us his vision, but because our disciplinary communities have evolved ways of choosing shrewdly between an array of (mostly poor, often foolish) cognitive opportunities.

If I dwell on anti-empirical movements rather than on positive gains, it is because such movements can poison the cooperative atmosphere that makes knowledge a feasible project. Regrettably, my own field has led the way in lending them sanctuary and prestige. Squinting in the unaccustomed limelight of publicity, well-intentioned colleagues have not known whether to be ashamed or proud of the grandiose claims now made for literary interpretation as the queen of techniques for overturning common sense. And so, by and large, they have lamely tried to adapt themselves to “new insights” whose sources they do not examine. When I notice that some of those “insights” depend on long-discredited Freudian dogma, I feel obliged to warn against misapprehensions that are all too familiar to me.

“Crews, Stannard, and their sympathizers,” one recent commentator has remarked, “must have noticed on their way to bury psychoanalysis that traffic going the other way is nearly bumper to bumper” (Weiland, 709). If everyone agrees that traffic patterns should set our intellectual direction, the case is closed. But this book presupposes that things are not yet that far gone. I address my arguments to readers who still cherish common sense and who suspect that schemes of drastic liberation are not always what they claim to be. Would it not be truly liberating to rehabilitate the empirical spirit and demand that literary theorists, psychoanalysts, and others show us why we should be expected to believe them? If *Skeptical Engagements*, though only a collection of previous encounters, nevertheless has a practical end in view, it is to make that prospect more attractive.

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