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## In Tribute to John Forrester (1949–2015)

*In this issue we remember John Forrester. An active, inspiring presence in the world of psychoanalysis across geographic and disciplinary boundaries, he opened new paths in psychoanalytic theory, the philosophy of psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytic history. He did so in the first place as a historian of science and culture, in works such as Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions, and, with Lisa Appignanesi, in Freud's Women: Family, Patients, Followers. He did so also as the innovative, tireless editor of Psychoanalysis and History, as a colleague and mentor, and as a teacher. American Imago was privileged to have John serve on its editorial advisory board for more than a decade, and we are honored to publish here the tributes to him that Maud Ellmann, Sherry Turkle, and Daniel Pick presented at the service dedicated to him at King's College, Cambridge, in May of this year. —The Editor*

### Maud Ellmann

I first met John Forrester way back in the 1970s, when he was a Junior Research Fellow at King's, and renowned for his prodigious knowledge of Freud. I was an undergraduate in English at the time, and I was taking a Tripos paper that is still quaintly known as "the English Moralists," which covers such honorary Englishmen as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. My supervisor for this paper was Colin McCabe, fresh from Paris and bursting with exciting new ideas, which were regarded with intense suspicion in stick-in-the-mud Cambridge. Anyway it was Colin's brainwave, for which I am eternally grateful, that I should get in touch with John Forrester to benefit from his expertise in psychoanalysis. So I did, and we spent an unforgettable hour talking about Freud and Lacan.

As a teacher John conveyed a great sense of authority, but not by flaunting his learning or brilliance; he held those

in reserve. Like a good analyst, John was a disconcertingly attentive listener, who seemed to find everything I said much more intriguing than it really was (and no doubt much more symptomatic than I realized). Needless to say, he was extremely helpful; the first of his many books on Freud had just come out, and he was now embarking on his long critical engagement with Lacan. But what I remember most about our hour together was John's curiosity—about Freud, about me, about our mutual friends. John was a wonderful gossip, and he also understood the key role of gossip in creating and sustaining institutions, including psychoanalysis itself.

In fact there is not that much difference between psychoanalysis and gossip; what we say when we are "lying on the couch"—John's pun—is much the same as what we whisper to our friends about third parties. As John puts it, gossip and psychoanalysis "are both conversations taking place in the *absence of the real*" and specifically in the absence of the parties being talked about. "When we gossip," the poet Auden says, "we do for nothing in the street or the parlor what we should have to pay two guineas an hour for doing in the consulting room." And Auden goes on to insist: "all art is based on gossip, that is to say, on observing and telling." The same goes for psychoanalysis.

Well, it is the fate of psychoanalysis, like gossip, to be vilified; both are constantly accused of exaggeration and embroidery, but also of reducing everything to sex. As John shows in my favorite of his many books, *Dispatches from the Freud Wars*, psychoanalysis has always been disreputable, not just because it deflates the much-vaunted human spirit but because it flouts the protocols of positivism. Like gossip, psychoanalysis remains an unofficial form of knowledge, even though it apes official forms by producing the whole panoply of rituals and institutions associated with professional legitimacy.

It was because of John's interest in disreputable knowledge that Peter de Bolla invited him to join the discussion-group he launched many years ago in King's with Simon Goldhill, Jonathan Burt, and myself, which was called Unofficial Knowledge. Paradoxically this group achieved a certain measure of legitimacy here in King's, where we were actually funded to fly

to California and share our somewhat half-baked thoughts with the Rhetoric Department at Berkeley— thank you, King's! This trip provided the occasion for many unofficial pleasures, the most memorable of which was a tour of the wine country of the Napa Valley, where we ate and drank like the gods of the warm south. What I learned in California was that John was an unapologetic sensualist whose enthusiasm for good food and good wine knew no bounds. What is more, these pleasures were always heightened by his love of jokes and laughter; as all his friends can confirm, his giggle was irresistibly infectious.

To share one final anecdote: in 2001 John had major heart surgery, from which he rallied splendidly and went back to all his old pleasures, I am glad to say. I remember a health-conscious American visitor to Cambridge was shocked by John's relish for jam doughnuts after a heart attack. So in honor of John's unreformed appetite, my husband John Wilkinson and I now refer to his favorite pastry as a Forrester. Move over jam doughnuts! Move over beignets! Long live the Forrester!

### Sherry Turkle

I was not one of John's close friends, but he showed a quality in the friendship we did have that I found extraordinary. He was able to get personally close very quickly because in the conversations of friendship he used his rigor of thought, a tenacity about puzzle solving, and combined this with a gentle tact. He was interested in the human heart, yours, but he never seemed intrusive, no matter how personal the conversation, because he was treating you so respectfully.

And thus it was that during only the second time I had dinner with John and Lisa in London, the subject turned to a difficult moment in my own analysis.

At the age of thirty, I had discovered my biological father. I had not seen him since I was twelve, in court, when he had agreed to leave my life. He was willing, as was my mother's wish, to be done with me. But of course, I was not done with him. So after my mother's death, I hired detectives. I searched him down. I got to visit him and through this was able to learn what

had made my mother wish us apart: my father had delusions. Among these: he believed he had disproved Einstein. He had written a book about it. And had privately published it before such things were easy and fashionable. And when I found him and he found out that I was an MIT professor he was determined that every member of the MIT physics faculty—and other well known MIT luminaries—get a copy of his Einstein book, which he now had re-dedicated to me.

These men had mocked him when over the years he had written them and tried to point out Einstein's flaws. Now they would pay attention. So he printed out seventy copies and wrote a defiant cover letter for each.

But I was a vulnerable junior faculty coming up for tenure. Particularly vulnerable because I studied the MIT science and technology culture as an anthropologist and the MIT science and technology culture was not sure it liked that. My Dean told me that I should really try to get my father not to send those books.

But how to do this? *Threaten? Cajole? Take the books away?* How to stop my father became a Rorschach test for one's own personality. My personality was paralyzed.

I talked about my dilemma in analysis. And when I did, my analyst stepped out of analyst mode and gave me advice: my father had not sought me out. He had been content to be out of my life. I had found him, activated him, pursued him. If I dropped out, she said, he would be deactivated. I did what she said. I did nothing. And she was right: the seventy copies of the Einstein disproof that my father had printed went nowhere.

When I told John and Lisa this story, John began to consider the limits of analysis—when analysts choose to stop an analysis and when they feel they can bring moments such as that one into the structure of a treatment. We began to talk about why my analyst felt she had to bracket my analysis in that way. But how there might have been another way: how the discussion might have been made part of the analysis. We talked about what I felt about my father as I contemplated the pile of books, all those disproofs of Einstein. I was ashamed, angry, but was I also proud? It was after all, his first recognition of me. It was what he was capable of. And now I knew why

my mother had left him and I felt close to her. My father had given me a great gift.

That conversation with John was one of the best conversations of my life. And I have already said what there was about John that made it so special. John met my story with care, intellectual rigor, and depth. He met it with patience. He did not want to simplify. He knew that this conversation made my thinking about my analysis more difficult. This did not make John unhappy. He did not engage in therapeutic second-guessing or psychobabble. He was interested in psychoanalysis and its limits. He was interested in me. For me, he embodied the best of the psychoanalytic sensibility as it can work in friendship. A requirement to listen. To embrace complexity. To be fully present. To be kind because you are committed.

I am sorry I did not have more conversations. I envy so many of you in this auditorium who did.

### **Daniel Pick**

I was struck hearing other tributes paid to John today, that whilst each of us has our particular treasured stories and idiosyncratic anecdotes, all clearly knew, in a deeper sense, the same man. So much of what others have shared, I suspect, was highly recognizable to us all. This was surely at least in part because John seemed so at home in himself. Like Maud Ellmann, who spoke here earlier, I first met John at King's around 1981. My most recent memories are of John on the phone as he went into University College Hospital London for the last round of treatment, and of John, only a short time earlier, on great form at a conference at Birkbeck last summer, and the year before, in New York. He made light of his illness, revelling in being back in Manhattan. He was great fun to be with, in bars and restaurants, as well as at the Columbia conference on psychoanalysis which had brought us there, and at which he made, as ever, a number of memorable interventions.

My first meeting arose because I was an undergraduate and came to him for supervision on Freud, in preparation for a paper on the English Tripos that, as Maud has also noted,

is known as “the English Moralists.” Given its title it seemed surprising you could focus upon Freud (not to mention other well-known English moralists, from St Augustine to Nietzsche). In his brilliant forthcoming co-written book *Freud in Cambridge*, John has shown that, in fact, many twentieth-century English moralists were indeed Freudian, and nowhere more so than right here at Cambridge, in this university town.

I found John dauntingly erudite, but this was softened by his wry humour and friendly, laid back style. In my early student days I also remember attending but understanding very little at a rather august seminar he ran here on Lacan. But, whatever his high minded scholarly side, John also could regale you with stories, quite often with psychoanalytic gossip, although this was not used shrilly in attack. He had a large fund of such stories. His manner of thinking and writing about Freud and his followers managed to be cool and careful, a subtle and interesting explorer of truth claims, and games, the rich and checkered history of the Freudian movement, with all its foibles, sometimes madness, revolutionary ideas, clinical achievements, and, as he also charted, its chronic propensity to slide back into deadening institutionalisation. His book *Dispatches from the Freud Wars* has him as a kind of war correspondent, reporting from the front line. Psychoanalysis as we all know was a subject he clearly profoundly loved and cared about.

John said to me once that he regretted spending quite so much of his youth on the Frenchman he called, perhaps with a growing hint of irony, “le maître,” although his important first book on language and the origins of psychoanalysis would not have been possible without that deep immersion. And John of course made a major contribution in bringing Lacanian thought to English-speaking readers.

He clearly felt there was more to life than academia or psychoanalysis even if he was so steeped in both. I once asked John for a recommendation on where to stay in Paris during a research trip. He looked nostalgic, as he said “you must have a kitchen, no matter how small the garret, you must be able to cook...in Paris!”

One minute he would be talking of some abstruse point from Derrida, the next recounting how the intelligence services

in the Second World War dreamed up a scheme to build artificial icebergs in Canada for the Brits to land their planes. Here he was trumping a story of mine. He once sent me a message including an alternative, obscene version of the Colonel Bogey March, relevant in an abstruse way to my research. (He had a magpie like ability for collecting such things.)

One of the stories John's friend and colleague Tony Tanner enjoyed telling many years ago was of two eminent, long-in-the-tooth professors, Frank Kermode and John Wisdom, conferring after they had conducted John's doctoral viva. They were not preoccupied by how John had done (which was of course extremely well) but how they had coped. Wisdom to Kermode, a little anxiously: "How did we get on?" There may be an apocryphal element to this story, but it captured something of John's panache.

People have already said a great deal about John's curiosity, pugnacious wit, and infectious Sherlock-Holmes-style tenacity. I just want to add his versatility, and his delight in switching registers, according to the audience: as a mutual friend, Lyndsey Stonebridge, pointed out to me, John could be disconcertingly psychoanalytic when talking to historians, challengingly historicist in the company of clinicians. For all the abstract theoretical and philosophical side of him, he was also to prove the most meticulous and serious of *historians* of the psychoanalytic movement, revelling in archives. He seemed to have read everything, mined numerous collections, and could effortlessly tell you what was embargoed, and until when, at the Library of Congress (a question there of censorship by Freudian custodians, on which he could become quite enraged).

I also found John exceptionally generous in sharing that compendious knowledge—a tremendously facilitating "go-to" figure. He would furnish you with tales of Bloomsbury Freud, the wackier shores of Californian sexology, British ecology, shellshock clinics, luminaries of Parisian existentialism, the psychoanalytic vogue in Buenos Aires, and more, but always as part of a more complex *argument*.

He and his old friend Roy Porter had such different temperaments, but both found common inspiration, I think, in Foucault, exploring the history of systems of thought...about



the body and its ailments in the one case, the psyche and its troubles in the other. And John's brilliant stewardship of the journal *Psychoanalysis and History* reflected and further extended this capacity for fostering and connecting the work of others.

Let me mention finally how much I treasured John's correspondence. I am sure that I am not the only person here who has revisited, since his death, their interesting messages from "jpf11@cam.ac.uk." As I re-read these messages John's many voices—patient, facilitating, teasing, funny, challenging—came alive again, on any number of subjects. I noticed going back through all the correspondence his fear and concern that he would go too far with the robustness of his challenges. One of his emails expressed his relief that I had taken the challenge of his formidable forensic dissection of a draft text of mine in good heart. He hoped I would not be downcast. I noticed how sometimes he would sign off "very best" rather than just the more usual "best wishes," when especially affectionate, or perhaps after having delivered a particularly powerful critique (or pummeling). Looking back I found that his characteristic term of praise was "bravo," and I think he sometimes offered this too as a kindly meant balancing note. But because he was so serious about the critique, the encouragement and praise also really meant something to me.

In one of these messages I came across John's seemingly innocent but actually quite teasing inquiries about various oddities in a bit of work in progress I had sent him: "Is Götterdämmerung misspelt in the original?" was one such example. This was more tactful than directly tut-tutting at my carelessness or ignorance. Some of his briefest messages could also stop you in your tracks and make you think very hard. Take this succinct email response he sent to my inquiry about Jacques Lacan's apparent interest in the Nuremberg Trial: John writes, "Well, 'Kant avec Sade' came of it! You might say Lacan poses the Hitler question in terms of Kant combined with Sade: the genocidal heart of reason, the jouissance of erotic destructiveness. Best, John."

Like a master barrister in full flow, he could also rattle off precise information in emails or on the phone. I remember him telling me precisely what Freud's patients paid the professor

(guineas, dollars, or other denominations), and how he gave me the number of members of each psychoanalytic society around the world in 1924, in order to underline, in his email, the following counterintuitive point he wanted to make: "Note that the Indian Society is larger than the Budapest...!"

Sometimes his marginal comments on my work in progress had also seemed poignantly to reflect life and death preoccupations of his own during his years of illness, as well as his analytical cast of mind (analytical in the philosophical as well as the Freudian sense of that term). Thus I thought there was something striking about the vehemence of his rejoinder, when he took up a statement of mine about the father of a particular historical character. I had no doubt described too glibly the man in question as having died "*prematurely*" (my word) in 1899; John replies: "Not sure what it means to die prematurely! (When is one supposed to die?) I think you mean 'young'."

I am hoping that the seminars that have been held to discuss John's work, here and in Paris, this month will lead to publications about John's life's work, and that these will help illuminate for us the complexity and diversity of John's approaches to history, science, psychoanalysis, culture, and psychobiography. I mention the latter since it became, post-war, a somewhat notorious genre, and one about which John was on the one hand suspicious (the risk of "wild analysis"), and on the other, a brilliant exponent, as we can see in his and Laura Cameron's riveting reconstructive accounts of the psychic and social world of Arthur Tansley. (This is work that will form a key chapter of their forthcoming *Freud in Cambridge*.)

I felt greatly privileged to be asked by John to read *Freud in Cambridge* in manuscript last June and to be able to reciprocate in a small way for all the help I had received from him over the years. This book is quite simply a *tour de force* and will surely become a classic. It is the outcome, clearly, of a very creative collaboration with Laura. It is marvelous reading but also of course painful reading: we cannot but feel, in reading it, great sadness at the fact that John himself died too young. It brings home what we have lost and an awareness of the further important work he would have gone on to produce. Anyway suffice for me to say it is a brilliant achievement and captures

so much of what was extraordinary about John's writing and research. It weaves an astonishing historical tapestry. All of us here I am sure will read it not only for the knowledge and expertise it provides in spades, but also because it provides acute reminders of our friend, his dual locations (Cambridge and psychoanalysis), and something of his lively voice and ever curious mind. John always had I think a unique way of working and thinking, of asking telling questions, and providing the most unexpected answers.