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Life under Scrutiny

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Book Reviews

“Life Under Scrutiny”

ON KISSING, TICKLING, AND BEING BORED: PSYCHOANALYTIC ESSAYS ON THE
UNEXAMINED LIFE

Adam Phillips

Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

1993, Hardcover, 138 pages, \$19.95

Andrés Martin, M.D.

Ignorance of myself is something I must work at;
it is something studied like a dead language.
(quoted from Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason)

At first glance a book with whole chapters dedicated to solitude, to “worrying and its discontents,” to obstacles, to boredom itself, would appear severely downbeat. Adam Phillips’ new book may indeed gravitate around a grim premise: one considering that “hell is not other people, but one’s need for other people,” that “the individual’s first and forever-recurring loss, in Freud’s view, is not of the object but of the fantasy of self-sufficiency, of being everything to oneself.” Initial fears prove misleading—not only because the book deals with kissing and tickling, as well as with being bored—but because it offers surprisingly fresh insights into two otherwise overcriticized, overpunished and overlooked topics in current psychiatry: the quotidian, and classic psychoanalytic theory.

Phillips has the uncanny ability to bring into light the virtuous side of otherwise sobering topics of everyday life. Worries, “imply a future, a way of looking forward at things . . . a conscious conviction that a future exists. . . . So worrying is an ironic form of hope.” Boredom is “integral to the process of taking one’s time.” Even the more generally dislikable obstacles are but “the way, rather than something in the way.” In the same three chapters Phillips not only explores the unexamined themes themselves—he reminds one of the many clues of oneself to be found therein. In worrying, for example, “we recognize ourselves. . . . Indeed one’s own personal history of worrying—the subjects chosen, their modification over time, the people involved, the

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relative pain and pleasure of the experience—all this would be a potentially lucid revelation of character.”

Only one chapter, the second, deals explicitly with pathology: “First Hates: Phobias in Theory.” But it is more than thematic choice that lends the book its focus on health and normalcy, rather than on disease and deprivation. It is freedom from the medicalized *curative ideal* that permits the author (succinctly) to explore the realms of the unexamined life, of the apparently obvious. Only when it is free of disease models can analysis be conceived of as a place where the patient goes “to reconstitute his solitude through the other, the solitude that only he can know,” wherein the aim is “for both participants to produce interesting redescrptions: redescrptions that the patient is free—can bear—to be interested in.” The book itself redescrbes psychoanalytic terminology and makes it interesting: analysis is summarized as “a story—and a way of telling stories—that makes some people feel better,” where one merely “exaggerates the patient’s muted voices.” Phillips’ experience in talking to children must certainly have contributed to his ability at redefining transference into simple, shooting-gallery terms—as dependent on “the possibility of psychic mobility: by sitting still the analyst becomes a moving target.”

There is no hidden sarcasm behind Phillips’ belief that “the aim of psychoanalysis is not to cure people but to show them that there is nothing wrong with them.” There is a very serious notion behind his proposal of “psychoanalysis as a curiosity profession instead of a helping profession.” Throughout the book he uses the terms (psychoanalytic) “profession” and “conversation” almost interchangeably: he is well aware it is for conversation that people seek “the curious solitude *à deux* called the analytic situation”—that conversation must go on when “the story they are telling themselves about their lives has stopped, or become too painful, or both.”

A scholar on the works of Klein and Winnicott, Phillips is not only part and parcel of the object-relations movement, he is historically attuned and responsive: “In its twilight, the British Empire produced a theory of good-enough mothering as the antithesis, the guilty critique, of what was always a bad-enough imperialism.” In a similar contrast, it is noteworthy that this book, and some of the most original material on solitude, has come from object-relations theorists. In his work on the schizoid personality, Harry Guntrip had made brilliant observations into the psychology of the withdrawn, solitary life (1). In his view, solitude and withdrawal were seen as defensive maneuvers away from a threatening world rich in dangers—as the essentially pathologic conditions of the schizoid or the depressive positions. Phillips, however, does not think of solitude—or of worries, obstacles or boredom—as deficiency states. Like his compatriot Anthony Storr (2), he sees solitude as a state of plenitude whereby one can not only “mother oneself, or rather, foster-mother oneself, with one’s mind,” but be in “a certain kind of primary relationship with (one)self.”

For solitude—the book’s *leitmotif*—to be a genuine state of fulfillment, of “replenishing privacy,” as Phillips sees it, one must take risks. It is through risk not only that one “relinquishes an environment of external objects and becomes the seed of (one)self,” but risk-taking is an integral part in the formation of the capacity for

solitude. The adolescent unconsciously jeopardizes his body in order to make it feel more real and "his capacity for a beneficent solitude will depend on his being able to entrust himself to his body as a sufficiently holding environment." The fulfilled artist, solitary supreme, needs to risk his infantile "capacity for ruthlessness" in establishing a means that can "survive the person's most passionate destructiveness"—his art turned into a sufficiently holding environment. Even for the reconstitutive solitude of therapy to be played out with the therapist, "the most familiar stranger," risk must necessarily ensue in the "most difficult task of fully allowing (one)self one's symptomatology."

Elegantly written and thought-provoking, Adam Phillips' new book reminds one that the unexamined life is not possible to live, let alone not worth living. More importantly, however, it leaves behind a reassuring lesson in humility: to completely know ourselves may be no desirable goal. To exercise the ongoing exploration of our lives, to resume our many suspended conversations, to be reminded of how ignorant we really are, to feel each day the awe at knowing ourselves afresh and anew—is to be truly, to be fully alive.

REFERENCES

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2. Storr A: *Solitude—A Return to the Self*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1988