

What Used to Be Called Psychoanalysis

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Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature, by Adam Phillips, Basic Books.

ADAM PHILLIPS likes the sound of questions. Although he is an extravagantly accomplished aphorist, he is uncomfortable with the way aphorism courts silence. So whenever his sentences become seductively conclusive (“There’s no such thing as a free association”), we feel him torn between the satisfaction of having made the sentence and the desire to break the silence of satisfaction. The final essay in *Promises, Promises* ends with a question: “Why have an analysis when you can read?”

Promises, Promises is a collection of twenty-eight occasional pieces—essays and reviews on literature, psychoanalysis, and the language we use to describe these disciplines. Phillips may at times sound like a psychoanalyst or a literary critic, but he never sounds like a psychoanalytic literary critic: he is a great prose stylist who happens to be interested in psychoanalysis. “The individual is always mistaken,” said Emerson in a passage from “Experience” to which Phillips is devoted: “It turns out somewhat new and very unlike what he promised himself.” If the title of *Promises, Promises* hints that promises are made to be broken, it is because Phillips wants us to feel more promising than promised. This is how *Promises, Promises* itself feels, for its coherence is inseparable from Phillips’s need to pose the next question—to break the promise of his own argument. As a result, the texture of Phillips’s prose constitutes his argument, and to read him is to feel imbricated in that texture—seduced by the pleasure he takes in making sentences.

The question that concludes *Promises, Promises* is tonally complex. Ripped out of context, it might too easily sound rhetorical: an imperative posing as an interrogative. But Phillips is not merely asserting that whatever can be gotten from psychoanalysis can be gotten as

easily (or better) from books. He really means to leave the question unanswered, and by the time we've read the whole of *Promises, Promises* we feel sure that the answer to the book's final question ought to be another question: what do we want psychoanalysis to be when we wonder if it is another name for literature—or what we used to call literature?

By my loose count, Phillips uses the phrase “what used to be called literature” seven times in *Promises, Promises*. Sometimes he capitalizes the word *literature*, sometimes not. On one occasion he recognizes that many people in the world of professional literary criticism have been wondering about that use of the capital letter: “the whole question of what literature is now—of what that word itself might refer to and whether or not it should have a capital *L*—has become increasingly contentious.” Rather than lamenting the rise of this debate, Phillips wants to celebrate it—but only inasmuch as the debate has something to offer psychoanalysis. If he has one overarching complaint about the professional world of psychotherapy, it's that, unlike literary critics, analysts haven't asked hard enough questions about themselves: “The psychoanalytic literature is easier to define nowadays than ‘literary’ literature, though one hopes that this too is changing.” As a psychoanalyst, Phillips welcomes the scrutiny that professional literary critics have devoted to the notion of the “literary”; but at the same time, Phillips is a literary critic with a boldly Paterian sensibility: he is the kind of critic whose power rests on a stylishness that most professional literary critics don't often need to acknowledge. What is Phillips asking for when he asks that psychoanalysis become as contentious as literary criticism?

He is asking for two incompatible things. Phillips points out that psychoanalysis has always been divided between dreamers and pragmatists: the dreamers want to go on free-associating, experiencing the pleasure of the problem, and the pragmatists want to solve the problem. Neither of these enthusiasms can ever be silenced, Phillips insists, and he himself is simultaneously a dreamer and a pragmatist. Against the better judgment of the pragmatist, the dreamer occasionally leads us to believe that the final question in *Promises, Promises*

really is rhetorical—not a question at all, but an assertion of the uselessness of what used to be called psychoanalysis: “For me—for all sorts of reasons—there has always been only one category, *literature*, of which psychoanalysis became a part. I think of Freud as a late romantic writer, and I read psychoanalysis as poetry, so I don’t have to worry about whether it is true or even useful, but only whether it is haunting or moving or intriguing or amusing.”

As these sentences suggest, the dreamer in Phillips is a more provocative writer than the pragmatist. When the pragmatist catches up with the dreamer, Phillips must acknowledge that more people are harmed by “bad psychoanalysis” than by bad poetry: “Inspiring writers may persuade us to become writers ourselves, may indeed persuade us of the truth or the power of their vision, but they don’t offer us a job. Anyone who loves what was once called Literature can teach it, write it, and, of course, read it. But people who love psychoanalysis can teach it, write it, read it, *and* practice it.” No matter how intricately related, literature and psychoanalysis perform different social functions, and, if the dreamer in Phillips wants simply to go on reading books, the pragmatist reminds him that books do different things for us depending on what kinds of questions we ask about them.

Tellingly, for all of his dissatisfaction with the professional world of psychoanalysis, Phillips never uses the phrase “what used to be called psychoanalysis.” And for all of his desire that analysts interrogate the object of their profession as contentiously as literary critics, part of Phillips does lament the loss of “what used to be called literature.” When he asserts that psychoanalysis has only ever been a part of a larger category called literature, he is thinking of a notion of the literary that Walter Pater would have recognized. In fact, the words Phillips uses to describe Pater could as easily be used to characterize his own sensibility: “careerism and routine and transcendence were his targets”; “his style unashamedly competed for attention with what he was apparently writing about.” So however deeply Phillips may wish for psychoanalysis to become as contentious as literary criticism, his sense of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature

rests on a notion of the literary that has by and large been discarded by contentious literary critics.

I'm not complaining: if the war between the dreamer and the pragmatist must be won by somebody, I'd rather see the dreamer come out on top. What's more, the dreamer in Phillips knows what he's talking about. He rightly laments the fact that, beginning with Freud, psychoanalysts have glorified poets as purveyors of wisdom when in fact poets are more often skeptical of language's ability to embody insight. It's easy to find high-caliber support for this position ("I have no faith whatever in poetry," said Keats, "sometimes I wonder that people read so much of it"), but it's more difficult to do what Phillips does next. What distinguishes poetry as poetry if it is not our best vessel for wisdom?

Poetry—the form of writing that we can distinguish from prose so that we can call some prose poetic—is distinguished by its line endings. Poetry, T. S. Eliot said in a famous pronouncement, is a form of punctuation. Where ordinary prose ends according to the size of the page and the compositors' conventions, poetry adds a different kind of punctuation to the repertoire. What is added to the ordinary human poetry of language are formal constraints. Poets, unlike psychotherapists and their patients during sessions, write; and they impose line endings.

These sentences are seductive because of the way Phillips surprises us with the ordinary: of course poetry is set in lines. But to notice that few psychoanalysts are equipped to describe the implications of this fact is to be reminded that few literary critics are similarly equipped. Unlike most critics, poets think about line and punctuation obsessively. When the poet Frank Bidart writes (expressing incidentally an insight about insight with which Phillips would agree)—

insight like ashes: clung
to; useless; hated

—we feel palpably his effort to make the poem move in one way and not in another: the endlessly unpredictable interaction (tension, resis-

tance, confluence) of syntax and line constitutes our experience of the poem.

But if poets are not purveyors of insight but exquisite punctuators, what then can psychoanalysts learn from them?

Now it is, as Lacan has shown, an interesting literary analogy for the practice of the analyst to say that she punctuates the sessions—with verbal interventions, or their omission, and by the endings of the sessions. “The punctuation,” Lacan writes, “once inserted, fixes the meaning”; “changing the punctuation renews or upsets” the meanings that the patient asserts in his speech. The analyst’s repunctuating of the analysand’s speech “shows the subject that he is saying more than he thinks he is.” If, rather absurdly, one was to speak quantitatively, it is as though the point of the punctuation is to increase meaning, not to replace the patient’s intended meaning but to add to it. The aim is to upset old meanings with a view to creating new ones.

Analysts invoke poetry as a vessel for insight when, Phillips suggests, they feel most insecure about the kind of insight psychoanalysis is supposed to offer. To think of poets as punctuators (or, more substantively, as people who are extremely attentive to the precise ways in which sentences become meaningful for us) would give analysts one way to de-emphasize insight as the goal of psychoanalytic treatment. Insight, wisdom, self-knowledge, understanding—Phillips is not overly impressed by these words. When he says that the analyst’s job is to “repunctuate” the patient’s utterance in order to create new meanings, he is offering a synonym for his favorite word of all: *redescribe*. It is in this word that the dreamer meets the pragmatist, for not only the task of the analyst but the promise of a better life inheres in our ability to find new language for old problems—to rediscover the questions to which our lives have too readily become the answers.

The notion of our having an unconscious makes redescription—or what Freud called dream-work—possible: we are always more or other than ourselves. In dreams we are liberated to become the artists of our own lives, redescriving the raw materials of our experience. In our conscious lives, we are too easily persuaded to depend on what we

know rather than what remains to be discovered, and we turn to psychotherapy (or to art) not when we need wisdom but when we need to dismantle our wisdom. The philosopher E. M. Cioran once said that people become wise when they should have been depressed: wisdom prevents us from facing our need to create a new narrative about our lives. Redescription is, in contrast, a way of forgetting so that we might more fruitfully remember, a way of transforming the most finely formulated answers back into questions. If a person engaged in the work of redescription while asleep, says Phillips in *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites*, “we would call it a dream; if he does it while he is awake, it will be called a misunderstanding, a delusion, or an original contribution to the subject.”

That sentence was written by the dreamer in Phillips. At other times the pragmatist reminds us that what comes easily to us in dreams is often difficult to replicate in our conscious lives. D. W. Winnicott, about whom Phillips wrote his first book, had another word for the way in which our conscious psychic processes might feel like dream-work: object-use. While Freud stressed the ways in which the external world destroys our illusions, Winnicott maintained that we actively create the external world by willing its destruction: to “use” the world is to make something out of the bits and pieces that survive our aggression.

In *Terrors and Experts*, his least charming but most beautifully argued book, Phillips honors this aggression—the work that distinguishes a dream from an original contribution to the subject (however similar these acts of redescription might otherwise be). As a result, Phillips also recognizes how a distaste for the false seductions of wisdom can itself become too wise, too knowing. If psychoanalysts are the experts who dispel our terrors, they can too easily become terrorists: “When psychoanalysis makes too much sense, or makes sense of too much, it turns into exactly the symptom it is trying to cure: defensive knowingness.” It’s one thing to suggest that our lives would be better if they were more like dreams or poems; it’s another thing to teach someone how to dream.

Phillips has written seven books, all of them approaching the problem of redescription, each of them essential in its own way. Some

of the books, like *Terrors and Experts*, *The Beast in the Nursery*, and the recent *Darwin's Worms*, are conceived whole. Others, like *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* and *On Flirtation* (which contains his brilliant essay on "Freud and the Uses of Forgetting"), are more loose collections of essays. *Promises, Promises* is his longest, baggiest, but unexpectedly his most coherent collection of occasional pieces. As the title's nod to Emerson suggests, the book's coherence is inseparable from its extravagance—from the ways in which Phillips's signature promises are to be broken in unpredictable places.

So far, I've been quoting mostly from the two long essays that frame *Promises, Promises*: "Poetry and Psychoanalysis" and "Promises, Promises." Between these bookends, Phillips writes more specifically about various psychoanalysts (Winnicott, Laplanche, Klein, Lacan) and various writers (Pessoa, Pater, Crane, Housman); he writes more speculatively about a variety of issues he has encountered in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis: eating, narcissism, clutter, translation. These grander essays are always surprising, but the book's most startling assertions are often to be found in the less synoptic performances. Turning to a brief review of Elisabeth Roudinesco's biography of Lacan, for instance, it's easy to imagine that Phillips will not admire Lacan for the same reasons that psychoanalytic literary critics do. But the austerity with which he stakes his claim for Lacan's importance is nonetheless astonishing: Lacan's essays offer simply "the most inexhaustibly interesting and stylish psychoanalytic writings since Freud's." The "inexhaustibly interesting" seems like a throwaway, for Phillips's real case for Lacan stands on the potent example of his stylishness. "If there are to be usefully inspiring psychoanalysts in the future," Phillips continues, "they will have to stop trying to have new theories and aim instead just to write interesting sentences."

The pragmatist and the dreamer are fighting for control of this sentence, the latter of the two having introduced the word "just" in order to transform a serious claim into a more playful provocation. But Phillips is most serious when he is most playful, and he is gesturing towards two crucial aspects of his argument here, one concerning the limits of theory, the other concerning the redescriptive power of lan-

guage. What would happen, he asks in "Narcissism, For and Against," if instead of referring to "retreats" from psychic and emotional development, we called them "resorts" or "resources"? By asking this question, Phillips wants to de-pathologize John Steiner's notion of narcissism: a literal act of redescription (the substitution of the word "resort" for "retreat") is undertaken in order to facilitate psychic redescription, and Steiner's dead-end detour from emotional growth is transformed into the road to possibility. What is at stake here is not just inventive language, for the problem with a stable theoretical vocabulary is that the language itself becomes a kind of retreat, a movement towards premature closure. How can we be sure, Phillips asks apropos of Steiner, that we will always recognize legitimate emotional growth when we see it? Why can't the "point" about retreat be transformed into a "question" concerning the kind of life we want?

Phillips's prose is littered with strings of questions such as these. Whether writing as a psychoanalyst or a literary critic, his most potent strategy is to formulate the question to which a text or person appears to be the answer: the more conclusive the assertion, the more desperate the question that needs to be rediscovered. "Questions are, among other things, the grammatical form we give to our desire," says Phillips, and rather than standing firmly on the satisfaction of answers, he wants to live the open-ended narrative of desire.

But what is the wish for more questions a wish for? The danger in resting too comfortably on questions is to become too knowing about knowingness, to transform open-endedness into the ground on which we stand—as if to say that a longing for answers was merely for other people. "It may also be true, of course, that the aim of incessant questioning is to keep one outside: that idealizing the critical spirit keeps at bay the fears associated with being an insider." The conjunction of "may be true" with "of course" suggests that Phillips wants simultaneously to know and not to know—to doubt the power of incessant questioning and to go on questioning nonetheless.

Which is as it should be: the hard work of redescription depends on our sustaining both of these imperatives at once. What moves me most about Phillips's writing is not its ultimate coherence (which is for-

midable, not in spite but because of his anxieties about a stable theoretical vocabulary); rather, it is the lavish pleasure Phillips takes in setting out his most cherished ideas while simultaneously turning against them, breaking their promise, making them available for further use. His prose enacts the processes of redescription that he urges us to bring to bear upon experience. And because Phillips allows us to feel the satisfaction he takes in making sentences, he implies that the work of redescription may be itself our greatest pleasure—not merely the search for pleasure. Embodied in every sentence is the conviction that our most serious intellectual questions can be addressed through our deepest desires.

The “chief question” that we must ask an artist, said Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*, is this: “What is the peculiar sensation, what is the peculiar quality of pleasure, which his work has the property of exciting in us, and which we cannot get elsewhere?” Phillips (who unlike many readers refuses to underestimate Pater’s tough-mindedness) points out that this question could speak only to people “bold enough” to have “confidence in their possibilities for pleasure.” Phillips shares that boldness, and, like Pater, he is willing to risk seeming like a dreamer in order to ask the most disarming questions. Why go to Adam Phillips for analysis when you can read his books?

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