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BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

'Unforbidden Pleasures,' by Adam Phillips

By MARK O'CONNELL MAY 20, 2016

UNFORBIDDEN PLEASURES
By Adam Phillips
198 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.

Although being probably the most widely read of living psychoanalysts, the prolific British essayist Adam Phillips has always been a somewhat equivocal advocate for his profession. In the title essay of his 2000 collection "Promises, Promises," he made the following casually heretical statement: "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 — whether it is something I can't help but be interested in."

This attitude seems central to Phillips's enduring appeal among those of us who are merely interested in, as opposed to initiated into, psychoanalysis: He writes playfully and suggestively on a topic that tends to get written about in the most unliterary of languages. This attractive quality in his work — its inviting (and mildly paradoxical) combination of the provocative and the ambivalent — is evident from the very beginning of his new collection, "Unforbidden Pleasures," in which he reframes this allegiance to the interesting over the true as a Wildean preference for aesthetics over morals:

"If, instead of the words 'good' or 'right' (or 'sacred') we use the words 'beautiful' or 'pleasurable' or 'enlivening,' . . . how would our lives be different?"

This question is exemplary of Phillips's approach, not least because it is never answered — or, rather, is answered via a succession of increasingly open-ended questions. The structure of his discussions (you'd never go so far as to call them arguments) is often bewilderingly rhizomatic; every question branches out into a series of further questions, each of which terminates in its own divergence of inquiries. That opening essay, for instance, ends on the following airy interrogations: "What are we being when we are being obedient? And what are we doing to ourselves?" Rather than an opening of the floor to the reader, this can seem like an abrupt, if elegant, dereliction of authorial duty.

"Unforbidden Pleasures" is a collection of essays loosely linked by a diaphanous thread of a theme: the idea that forbidden pleasures — taboos and prohibitions and shameful desires — tend to obscure the meaningfulness to our lives of unforbidden ones. (Like most of Phillips's books, though, it's only nominally about what it initially claims to be about. As with psychoanalysis itself, what seems central is often revealed as peripheral, and vice versa. "The content," as he put it in his book "Monogamy," "is often a smoke screen.")

This insistence on open-endedness — his interest, that is, in being interesting over being right — is in some respects his most appealing characteristic. The book's closing piece, for instance, is an engagement with philosophical pessimism's central claim that it would have been better not to have been born. Phillips doesn't come down firmly on either side — though you do get the impression that he's basically O.K. with having been born — but rather takes the pessimists to task for being insufficiently ambivalent. People with such convictions, he points out, "cannot, by definition, believe in multiple perspectives, alternative views, or competing aspects. An essentialist is someone who has limited his options by always knowing where he is starting

from."

Just as it is his preference to read psychoanalysis as poetry, Phillips wants us to read ourselves as endlessly open to interpretation, as meaning no one thing in particular. Knowing where you are starting from — as a person, as an essayist — is, in other words, a sure way of getting nowhere, or nowhere interesting. And so to the extent that he takes a firm position on anything, he takes a firm position against the taking of firm positions.

This collection's central essay, "Against Self-Criticism," is a sort of character study of that great taker of firm positions — and forbidder of pleasures — the Freudian superego. Here, in what I think is the book's most inspired passage, Phillips asks us to imagine our own superego as an actual person: "Were we to meet this figure socially, as it were, this accusatory character, this internal critic, we would think there was something wrong with him. He would just be boring and cruel. We might think that something terrible had happened to him. That he was living in the aftermath, in the fallout of some catastrophe. And we would be right."

We'd back away from this tedious weirdo, that is, for the same reasons Phillips backs away, in his writing, from any kind of essentialism. He is an advocate of what he calls overinterpretation: "To believe one interpretation," he insists, "is to radically misunderstand the object one is interpreting, and indeed interpretation itself."

But for all that this is inseparable from the most appealing elements of his writing — its openness, its resolute refusal of resolution — it is also a diagnosis of a condition that seems increasingly to afflict it: his apparent lack of interest in pursuing his ideas further than the point of suggestion. It's as though (to use one of Phillips's own favored hedging phrases) he feels that to do more with a question than merely raising it would be to foreclose the possibility of other, equally interesting, questions.

"Analysts," as he points out, "are not supposed to encourage their patients to talk about anything specifically." But the open questions that are so instrumental in the psychoanalytic encounter can seem like blunt and ineffective tools in the hands of the writer. What you find yourself wanting, as a reader, is not what you might need as a patient. What you find yourself wanting is, of all things, the pleasure of conviction.

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