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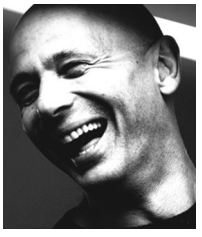
BOOK REVIEWS



Edited by Manu Bazzano

Against obedience

Unforbidden pleasures, by Adam Phillips, London, Hamish & Hamilton, 2015, 208 pp., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-241-14579-1

Reviewed by Michael Kalisch

A month or so ago, I went to hear Adam Phillips speak about his new book in conversation with Chris Oakley, of the Site for Contemporary Psychoanalysis, and Oakley kept referring to *Unforbidden Pleasures* rather teasingly as Phillips' 'manifesto'. Teasingly because, as an essayist, Phillips' work has always dealt with varieties of ambiguity, pluralism and speculation that have little to do with the kinds of definitive statements of belief and position – of commitments – one associates with manifestos. But Oakley is right: this book is a kind of manifesto against manifestos; a book about the dangers of, and the losses entailed in, thinking and acting definitively.

'There may always be things we care about more than the things we care about most' (p. 1), Phillips writes, suggesting that the values and beliefs by which we live are 'by definition restrictive' (p. 2), a process of selection in which a repertoire of possibilities is passed over in favour of a fixed position. And the first thing Phillips makes us aware of in this book is that we are often all too willing to make the necessary sacrifices involved in this programme of self-restriction: 'We want to narrow our minds […] because we want to set limits to our wanting' (p. 9).

These limits are partly self-constructed – as Phillips suggests in a discussion of the super-ego – and they will be made in tandem with the mother, to whose needs the infant will have to adjust his own wanting, as Phillips explains in his discussion of Winnicott (p. 51). They will also be culturally mediated. Morality, of course, has traditionally played this role, legitimating some pleasures (beliefs, values and so on) while forbidding others. And within this structure it has been the forbidden, Phillips suggests, that has been valorized and glamorized, to the detriment of more ordinary pleasures. What emerges is not simply a case of 'we want what we can't have', but that the forbidden becomes a kind of fantasy of what our life could have been: 'to forbid', Phillips writes, 'is to arrange a haunting' (p. 2). In this way, the forbidden can resemble the myth of potential at the heart of the idea of 'the unlived life', and can have a similarly detrimental effect. As Phillips writes in his earlier book, *Missing out*, 'what was not possible all too easily becomes the story of our lives' (Phillips, 2012, p. 2).

He looks instead to the alternative arrangements of desire and pleasure that might be possible beyond the structures of morality. He starts with the aestheticism of Wilde, for whom our obedience to morality amounts to an 'oversimplification of ourselves in the service of self-protection' (p. 36), and for whom colour-sense was more important than a sense of right and wrong. Phillips positions Wilde as one among a number of writers interested in 'what pleasures, if any, can sustain us' (p. 162) in a secular age, and in reframing notions of the forbidden, of the good and the bad, in a post-religious language. Darwin and, of course, Freud are also part of this turn-of-the-century conversation. And psychoanalysis emerges in Phillips' account as a space in which our obedience can be called into question, and in which the concept of the forbidden can be something to think with, rather than something that stops us thinking. Morality and obedience, Phillips suggests, function as prophecies or promises of the future: if you love and obey God, you will be saved. But in psychoanalysis – at least, in Phillips' version of it – nothing of the sort is guaranteed.

Reference

Phillips, A. (2012). *Missing out: In praise of the unlived life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Michael Kalisch

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Grace and danger

The selected poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini, edited and translated by Stephen Sartarelli, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 512 pp., £17.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0226325446

Reviewed by Subhaga Gaetano Failla
Translated from the Italian by Manu Bazzano

An initial unsettling scene in the 2007 film *One Hundred Nails* by the great Italian director Ermanno Olmi shows in dim light hundreds of books and manuscripts fastened with large nails to the floor of an old library – suggesting that books are fossils of the spoken word. This also evokes, perhaps, Plato's originary diffidence towards writing itself: precious, risky, even treacherous. The well-known Italian pun *tradurre*/*tradire* (translate/betray) refers precisely to the pitfalls inherent in translation.

I felt a similar sense of uneasiness at first when I came across this translation of Pasolini's poems. This was quickly dispelled by a feeling of freedom: these verses are transported away from the cage of Italian Catholic moralism that pollutes the art of a great author. I salute the publication of this book as a significant event, a bold attempt to evoke in a new language the moods and ambiences that have been absent for some