

On Wanting to Change

Adam Phillips. 2021. London: Penguin.

On Getting Better

Adam Phillips. 2021. London: Penguin.

I read these two books quickly. I was excited for various reasons, including some as simple as their colourful covers, and how they felt, literally, accessible. Adam Phillips was an author I did not know, more of which later, and I had not read much therapy-related content for a while. I felt the excitement and a keenness, yet when it came to writing this review, it was difficult. Difficult, difficult, lemon difficult. Not hard conceptually, not challenging in terms of knowing where I would end up in terms of a recommendation, simply difficult to sit down and do the writing.

Format-wise, they are simple, little books. *On Wanting to Change* has a preface, a post-realisation of COVID Coda and four chapters in between entitled ‘Conversion hysteria’; ‘Surprise changes’; ‘Converting politics’; and ‘Believe it or not’. *On Getting Better* has a similar preface but no Coda, and chapters on ‘Cure’; ‘Unsatisfying pleasures’; ‘Truth’; ‘On not having experiences’; and ‘Loose change’. Phillips uses religious examples and language throughout, something I struggled with as the Bible is not a favourite of mine, however it is a useful point of reference for conversion and change.

It was clear from the author blurb that Phillips is a big name. I felt flooded with shame, not for the first time, that I did not know him. What kind of therapist does not know him when he is the general editor of Freud? Then I took a step back. I read broadly, I read quite a lot, including a reasonable share of work-related books, and made a decent fist at reading many of the suggested readings during my training at an existential/integrative institute. The literature around psychotherapy is huge and my time to read is limited by such things as sleep, work, childcare and fun. Philips speaks to me about this very issue in the final pages of *On Wanting to Change* in his Coda written, unlike the rest of the book, in a world plagued by COVID.

It may be that when catastrophic change is inflicted upon us, with all the suffering that entails, we may become more able and willing to consider and discuss what kind of change we would like, the kind of change that we realise we need in order to get the lives we want. But to do that we must resist the temptation to get back to normal, now that we can see more clearly what normality has involved us in. And indeed, who decides what we take normal to be (*OWTC*: 140-141).

Phillips cites Socrates around the idea of wanting to be a converter or be converted when he writes “everyone is in pursuit of the good, but no one can agree about what the good is” (*OWTC*: 113), something highlighted in the clash between health considerations and restrictions on the one hand

and personal freedom on the other. I find myself torn between doing what I think an arbiter would say is right, something that was forced upon us for the 'greater good' during the pandemic and is still in the fabric of dialogue around us, judging whether each of us are back to normal, rather than being interested in what an individual's normal now is.

Phillips challenges what he pitches as the traditional aim of psychoanalysis, as in presenting it as a cure that will allow clients to lead a good life, when he writes

...are analysts doing anything more than adding to the culture's image-repertoire of the good life? ...There may, of course, be nothing wrong with doing this; but psychoanalysis could also be a way of wondering whether there might be anything else one could do; other than, as it were, stocking the supermarket shelves with new products, new ideals for ourselves.

(OGB: 15)

Of course, the idea of a cure and leading a prescribed good life is to imply that one knows beforehand the best route and the ideal outcome; this runs counter to what I am trying to be with my clients. I feel myself wanting to fight with the language and expound on differences between analysis and therapy, but part of my interest in this work is that much of the public do not know, and in my experience do not care, about all the differences, they just want help. So if Phillips is indeed representative of a new wave of analysts, then that is a good thing as it more closely aligned with what I understand therapy to be.

Do I think these books represent a good investment for the average (whatever that is) reader of this Journal? I am struck that I do not feel confident offering a definitive opinion. How many other readers of this journal also subscribe to *The Blizzard* or have a sizeable collection of books about running? Given the lack of interest in sport that I have encountered in my conversations with peers and educators, I am aware I am somewhat different. Yet I am also the one writing this review, so I am going to plump for a yes, for a multitude of reasons.

Firstly, I would suggest that despite my lack of knowledge of Phillips, I was moved to find out more about him post-reading. He is more central to any discourse around psychotherapy than any existential author, and that does carry some weight. In the clients who are drawn to my practice, there is not necessarily a chiming with existentialism, and they exist in the world where Phillips is a presence.

Secondly, the books are a good read. Tough perhaps, but also engaging to the extent that I found them relaxing while away with two-year-old twins. I consider them a package but think they could be read independently

without losing too much. I would go as far as to say that Phillips, or his publisher, should have waited and weaved them together into a single volume. But perhaps I am guilty of wanting him to be better, to have more when I should just do as he suggests and be satisfied with the progress until now and move from this point.

Ben Scanlan

Opera on the Couch: Music, emotional life and unconscious aspects of mind

Steven H. Goldberg & Lee Rather (eds). 2022. London: Routledge.

For several years the San Francisco Centre for Psychoanalysis and the San Francisco Opera have held post-performance psychoanalytically oriented talks which form the basis of this collection of essays. There are fourteen chapters, each about a different opera and by a different author, twelve of whom are American and two from the UK. The authors are mostly psychoanalysts. Several of them also hold music qualifications, and lecture and write about aspects of music and psychoanalysis. One contributor is a music professor at the Juilliard School.

Goldberg identifies some different approaches to putting opera on the couch, exemplified in the four chapters reviewed here. One is to view the opera as an expression of the composer's inner-life, where traces of unconscious wishes, conflicts and traumas may be identified. Another is to regard characters as if they were real people, leading to questions about why they behave as they do. Or they can be viewed as a myth that represents universal unconscious themes. These are often intertwined in the individual chapters reflecting the diverse backgrounds, different styles of doing therapy and interests of the contributors.

Madame Butterfly is a story of wilful refusal to face reality, complicated by cultural and language misunderstandings. It premiered in 1904 and was Puccini's own favourite among his operas. Goldberg labels his chapter 'Sliding walls and glimpses of the Other' where traditional Japanese sliding walls on stage are interpreted as internal defensive barriers and psychic blindness. Japan's borders were forcibly opened by the West in 1853 and the opera opens with Pinkerton, a handsome young naval officer confident in himself and his culture, arriving in Nagasaki. He rents a house with a beautiful fifteen-year-old Geisha, Cio Cio San, known as Butterfly. They have a marriage which he considers is for convenience while planning to eventually marry a suitable American woman. Butterfly, however, believes this is love and marriage for life. She converts to his religion and her family disown her. This sets the scene for tragedy. The American consul Sharpless raises questions about how differently they may view this marriage