

The Beast In The Nursery
Adam Phillips

165pp. \$21.00
Pantheon Books, New York

Gerald J. Gargiulo

Words picture the world for us, words remember the world for us, and words expand our vision at the same time that they, of necessity, confine it. Adam Phillips uses words lyrically, evocatively and persuasively, but his vision, in this work, is confusing. The first section of this short text gives a lively re-wording of Freud's theories of childhood sexuality/sensuality, presented as the definitive bedrock for understanding us humans. Arguing that childhood curiosity and interest in the world, particularly the world of our bodies, is a re-findable experience via psychoanalysis, Phillips summons Blake, Keats, Henry James, among others, to poetically evoke the goal and need for curiosity in our lives. Yet the reader is never sure whether Freudian psychoanalysis is being praised or condemned, whether it has given birth to an invigorating understanding of human appetites via an appreciation of our primal sexuality or whether it is a dogmatic exercises awaiting Phillips' own reading, in order to have any contemporary cogency.

When Phillips writes of *the various hobbyhorses of contemporary psychoanalysis- myths of development, the perverse romance of "emotional nurture," the fetishization of language, the obsession with "relationship"-all of them in their different ways drift toward a disavowal of the sensuous pleasures of childhood* (p.132) he evidences a stridency at odds with his avowed therapeutic stance of "hinting".

Our expectations of what the world holds for us are highly dependent on our words. Contrast Phillip's title *The **Beast** In The Nursery* with Winnicott's image of the child, which he evokes by quoting the poet Tagore: *On the seashores of*

endless worlds children play. Winnicott interprets the dialogue of sea and shore in terms of sexual intercourse but the notion of play, as we know today, acknowledges a third area. An area not of neutralized energies but of creativity, like the shoreline itself, ever changing but not reducible to either self or other. All this is commonplace; it is puzzling that Phillips seems intent on pretending that he gives it no credence. While he is quite capable of giving a persuasive account of childhood rage and conflict, he seems intent, in his encounter with Freud's thoughts, to eclipse many of the more nuanced readings which psychoanalysis is capable of since Freud first penned his reflections. For example, Winnicott's transitional space/ phenomena is not an example, as I read him, of the classical understanding of sublimation, as Phillips maintains, (p.24), but simply a different metaphor; new wine, good or not, cannot be mixed with the old. Further, to be able to use childhood experiences as a bridge to adult experiences does not have to be read as a loss; with a different lens it can also be seen as a gain. Different lenses, different perspectives – isn't that what makes the history of a science, or a movement, interesting? Phillips is clearly aware that curiosity is nourished by various and changing perspectives, but he does not show that awareness.

Having stated the need for curiosity and interest in the world if we are to be fully alive, Phillips then goes on to present his thoughts on "hinting." His presentation is sensitive; a priori interpretations are not useful to human beings. Sometimes it is in the fall of a word, or a gesture, that change comes to be. In this context Phillips notes that *to say that one thing stands for another is more akin to an order than a suggestion or a hint*. (p.103). He likewise shows his reading of Wittgenstein when he writes that *The unconscious resides in its description. No interpretation, no unconscious*. (p.105) But having stated the obvious, nicely worded but obvious nevertheless, the reader is left perplexed. Most contemporary psychoanalysts have long abandoned the phantasy that they are, by force of their position, the bearers of truth.

Having established the obvious, Phillips goes on to show how others have missed the point. Note, for example the following, *Winnicott, one could say, by*

way of dramatizing an old contrast, is all hinting; he is almost phobic about telling anyone what to do, and no less coercive, of course, as a consequence. (108)

Sounds good but what has Phillips said that Wittgenstein has not said before, i.e., language is coercive, it forms our vision and our thoughts! Does he mean something more? When he states that *Forgetting, ... that pleasure always begins and ends with the body and its inevitable, enlivening, enduring conflicts (p140)* Phillips is not only begging the question, perhaps a necessary by-product of collapsing a live metaphor into a dead one, but in fact being coerced into a particular world view while extolling the opposite.

Phillips seems aware of the works of Francois Roustang, although he fails to mention him, when he writes that *...the paradox of all the deterministic theories is that they can only be discovered through the determinism they describe: God reveals God to us...our desire produces psychoanalytic theory. They are closed systems- self-fulfilling prophecies- because they can both explain and include everything that might falsify them. (p.147)* In Roustang's *Psychoanalysis Never Lets Go* and *Dire Mastery* such themes are developed masterfully; in Phillips' hands such mastery is absent.

I wish Phillips would focus his fine writing talents on case histories, he might then not only convey what he does in sessions, but also find it less necessary to imply how so many others are doing psychotherapy wrong.