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# Book Review

## Tony Coates

Adam Phillips. (1995). *Terrors and experts*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber. ISBN 0-571-17584-8. Pb

At a time when psychoanalysis and 'analysis' in general is attracting increasing attention within the association, I was intrigued and stimulated by this slim book by British child psychoanalyst Adam Phillips.

The book is about the search for expert knowledge, and the impossibility of the analyst as expert. For Phillips, a psychoanalyst is anyone who uses what were originally Freud's concepts of transference, the unconscious, and dream work, in paid conversations with people about how they want to live, and here he raises issues that are both challenging and engaging for our profession. I found his comments succinct and pertinent.

Phillips begins with a stimulating introduction in which he looks at how human terror drives us into the arms of the 'experts'. Here, in the psychoanalytic interview, the repressed unconscious is the uninvited guest. ["The unconscious", he states, "does not have a professional life, except that is, in psychoanalysis." (p. 24)]. The analyst is the expert on how and why people turn themselves into strangers, and also the expert from whom the patient learns 'inner hospitality'. He continues with a chapter on authorities, in which he discusses the nature of the relationship between Ferenczi and Freud. I found this a little off the point, without the sharpness of the other chapters, and it does not follow the thrust of the rest of the book, but then the past is our analytic obsession.

The rest of the book is filled with intriguing material. The chapter on symptoms begins: "People come to psychoanalysis—or choose someone to have a conversation with—when they find they can no longer keep a secret" (p 33). He continues with a delightful vignette about Tom, aged seven, who has eczema, and he explores what the eczema means, suggesting that one of the aims of analysis is to increase the repertoire of possibilities for exchange. In other words to enable the patient to forget himself, to freely associate. The aim of analysis, he suggests, is not to cure people of their conflicts but to find ways of living them more keenly. The risk of psychoanalytic theories, of psychoanalytic expertise, he says, is that it won't even meet the patient half way.

Phillips outlines how psychoanalysis can show us that fear, far from exclusively being a reflex, a natural reaction, is also constructed through the way we protect ourselves from it. "Fear is a state of mind in which the object of knowledge is the future, but is of course a knowledge that can only be derived from the past" (p 53). The meaning analysts give to dreams is a particular example of this, a meaning that is created in the psychoanalytic context. It is easy, he says, for therapists embroiled in our trainings or larger professional worlds to forget or disregard context. A Freudian slip made in a group of analysts has quite a different significance from a slip made when ordering something on the phone. He reminds us that when patients accept the use of dreams in therapy they have accepted the context in which the dreams are interpreted as well. He questions expert authority on dreams. The dream, he says, can make a mockery of its interpreters.

Whilst he pays tribute to postmodern deconstruction by analysing psychoanalysis itself he remains true to its basic tenets and at the same time re-establishes its territory.

Adam Phillips is both a critic and proponent of his craft, which he likens more to poetry than science. He sees its use as a particular way of interpreting human experience, and implies that psychoanalysis has no more expertise in the field of interpreting human experience than any other model. Yet it does have a viewpoint, one, he says, that the patient accepts in the course of being a patient.

The psychoanalyst and her so called patient share a project. The psychoanalyst must ask herself not, Am I being a good analyst (am I wild enough, am I orthodox enough, have I said the right thing)? But, what kind of person do I want to be? There are plenty of people who will answer the first question for her. Faced with the second question, there may be terrors, but there are no experts (p xvii).

I found this book to contain an incisive and revealing account of psychoanalysis in the 1990s, largely free from the reified theoretical abstractions which to my mind have cluttered and obscured the field over the past few decades. However, like so many psychoanalytic commentators, he illustrates his points with Freud's all too familiar case histories and peer relationships. Yet another account of Little Hans I could do without. Surely his own work, I thought, would be authority enough. Nonetheless Adam Phillips comes across as a highly original and articulate thinker. The material is dense, stimulating and demands to be further discussed.