

connection with an increase in defence spending, who the country had to be prepared to defend itself against. He did not name another African country; he simply said 'America'. This was probably not reported in US daily newspapers. Of course, history often proceeds by reaction and America may undergo an unforeseen sea change yet. Nothing is inevitable. Perhaps it will sign up to the Kyoto Protocols, start honouring the Geneva Convention, give up trying to rig other countries' elections and change their regimes coercively, stop funding its own favoured terrorists and dictators, and do at least some of these things free from heavy overtones of self-servingness. Perhaps it will consider the possibility of 'becoming a "normal" country' (Talbot, p. 78). Perhaps.

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RECOVERING DEMOCRACY

Equals. By Adam Phillips. London: Faber & Faber, 2002; 246pp. £12.99 hb.

As I journeyed to Tilos the world was nearly 12 months into the 'war on terror'. I was taking Phillips to the Dodecanese as the prospect of poolside pulp seemed more than usually wearying in temperatures of around 35° and, like my insouciant indolence, he invariably delights. Meanwhile, George Dubya and Saddam's frenetic sabres rattled the afternoon air as I detoured to drop an old telecaster in Tooting. Round about the time Bush Senior was leaving the Kurds and the Shias to Hussein's macabre devices the fender had fallen silent as I'd quit studio and stage to become a shrink. Then as now, everyone who felt right seemed dead set on choosing my friends and enemies for me

and, as can so often be the case in a dictatorships and democracies, there would be no vote, merely decisions and announcements in the name of our national interests. As usual, this would beg questions about who 'we' are, something that seems vexed in a global village where increasingly we're them and they're us. After all, if the bad guy is always the other guy, doesn't the same guy keep getting burned? So often it's what we have in common that seems hardest to bear.

As I drank tea with my guitar's recipients, we mused that from certain perspectives the groups controlling the arsenals had so much in common they made curious adversaries. Each forced their way to power, had global networks, an empire-building zeal, and a theistic or secular religion deployed in conjunction with a litany of grievances to justify genocide, both now and then. Bush had even slipped into Ben Hur's skimpy ol' toga to declare, 'you are either with us or against us', a psychological position that one can't help but observe also underpins that of suicide bombers. However, Rome wasn't making an ironic declaration of civil war and Senator Ronald McDonald wouldn't be opening his wrists before Congress reflected on the wages of cultural imperialism; and certainly not before Baghdad was flame grilled.

I have dwelt on Bush's split injunction as it can be so sharply contrasted with one Phillips has chosen before and repeats in *Equals* – John Dewey's statement that: 'The value of ideals lies in the experiences to which they lead' – presumably because it continues to be worth thinking about. Indeed, perhaps as a result of their quantity in this work, it has become more than usually obvious that you can read Phillips as intriguingly by what he chooses of others' words as what he makes of his own. The forms he borrows and through which his

preoccupations declare themselves make perfect sense of the old aphorism about genius stealing. But beyond any of this there is what he hints at, the sense that even when his cards are on the table he's never quite shown his hand. To begin at the end, as it were, there is something simultaneously agonistic, draining and life affirming about what Phillips appears to be saying of himself and others and the bare attention our being demands if we are to live well. Reading his final essay, 'Strindberg', I was put in mind of Wilde's old adage, 'The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography' (Wilde, 1974, 5). Typically of Wilde, this registers as both a seductive invitation and a stern warning. Nonetheless, I was left wondering who else Phillips might be talking about when he said of Steinberg that:

. . . what is most powerful is that [he] doesn't know what to make of himself . . . he is exemplary because we can learn nothing from his story . . . there must be a sense [he] seems to be saying, in which it is morally better to take responsibility for your actions; but the fact that you can never know either the source of the full consequences of what you do makes the demand for responsibility already punitive. (pp. 243–5)

In the light of psychoanalysis, this might be something like Phillips' version of the human condition, glorious when you have the energy, exhilarating when it can be pleasingly re-described but rather sad when, like Wilde, you somehow run out of steam.

This is undoubtedly his most timely and political book to date. It considers amongst other things the impact of our ideals when we apply them to the ideas we cherish; like those of our freedom, our madness, our inhibition and our needs. *Equals* is written, as has become usual, with all the deft brilliance that marks Phillips as amongst our greatest living essayists even though its last

third is made up of reviews first published elsewhere, thus coming as no surprise. What does surprise, as he starkly addresses our collective life, is the unprecedented passion and *gravitas* accompanying his familiar intelligence. Phillips seems to have changed gear, such that when he writes – for example in 'Against Inhibition', 'To have the courage of one's preferences is to have the courage of one's feelings. Every wish is an experiment in consequences' (p. 65) – it is as if he is more pronouncing sentences than merely writing them. As though he was somehow haunted by the questions he began to pose at the end of *Houdini's Box*, questions about desire, escape and the consequences of their inter-relationship. There he wrote: 'Any culture that takes wanting as seriously as ours – that offers so few alternative satisfactions – must be talking itself into something and out of something else. It must obscure what it might be escaping from by dazzling people with what they might escape to' (Phillips, 2001, 142–3).

But if, like Strindberg, we are both sirens and sailors in the voyages we make and describe, we are not necessarily adrift. Phillips suggests, before he suggests anything else, that the best thing we can do is care for one another but that in order to do so we need to prioritize listening. After the secular 'fall' of psychoanalysis we can neither claim purity in our ideals nor can we know clearly what might be good for one another but we can try to be nice, kind and attentive. (If this sounds trite, try imagining Bush and Bin Laden applying these aspirations to their discourse for the challenge to gain its proper proportion.) So, in his opening essay, 'Superiorities', Phillips points out that for useful analytic and democratic processes to take place we have to have a capacity to listen, a capacity to stand one another. When we do, what we hear is conflict but this is integral to what

we are. For Phillips the enemies of democracy thus become violence, certain kinds of authority and idealization. The former two suppress the fertile disagreements that allow us to make our minds up and then, if we wish, change them; to keep on choosing. While the latter causes us to talk of our ideals as if they are our achievement rather than our goals – put otherwise, to stop thinking. In fact there is something truly hopeless about idealization. Which is perhaps why ‘the free world’, global capitalism, fundamentalism and terrorism are all so utterly antithetical to this version of democracy, not least because they all can’t stand the voices of ordinary individuals and treat us as if we are expendable. And further, that their consequences are one form of homogeny or another.

So when, in a highly compassionate later essay ‘Around and About Madness’, Phillips begins by noticing madness ‘. . . is when you can’t find people who can stand you’ (p. 77), from there making important points about the isolation, disempowerment and sheer suffering this entails. It is a relief that he concludes that the idea of madness, like that of mockery, is a way of pointing to ‘our infinite anxieties about exchange with other people’ (p. 88). If our anxiety about and our need for exchange is what we have in common, Phillips seems to be saying that we may as well seek ways of living nicely together, of making differences promising and of making agonism out of antagonism. To do this we really need to listen carefully. And although, especially collectively, we seem to find it hard to recover from knowing that the first thing we ever did was need: thinking about just what *it* is and what

our ‘needs’ will lead us seems particularly pressing. And it is to this that Phillips turns his attention in ‘On what we need’, which, for me, is his outstanding essay. Somehow, in paying effusive homage to the work of Emmanuel Ghent and his thoughts on needing, Phillips has made a talisman out of his own wonder, something so intriguing it resists precis. Indeed it is ironic, given what he says of him elsewhere, that one of my more persistent associations to this essay was Wilde’s idea: ‘A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it’ (Wilde, 1982, 434). Phillips invites us to keep going, to keep finding out what our needs might be, particularly when we don’t know our way. We have to figure things out through and for ourselves because there is nothing essential to find. He implies that psychoanalysis is one useful medium for this experiment, provided that it is not overdetermined. However, in the simple, attentive and accepting ways Phillips embraces complexity he increasingly sounds enamoured by Buddhist understandings of desire and its delusions. Of a piece with this is his political implication that the work and development of the individual is at once that of the whole. *Equals* deserves and rewards attention: and I, for one, give thanks for his vivacity.

Phillips A. *Houdini’s Box*. London: Faber & Faber, 2001.

Wilde O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Wilde O. *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

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