

*O*N K I S S I N G  
T I C K L I N G  
— *and* —  
B E I N G B O R E D

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*Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*



A D A M P H I L L I P S

**T**ickle a child, and she peals with laughter. Go on too long, and her laughter is sure to turn to tears. Where is that ticklish line between pleasure and pain? Why do we risk its being crossed? Does psychoanalysis possess the language to talk about such an extraordinary ordinary thing? In a style that is writerly and audacious, Adam Phillips takes up this subject and others largely overlooked by psychoanalysis – kissing, worrying, risk, solitude, and composure. He writes about phobias as a kind of theory, a form of protection against curiosity; about analysis as a patient's way of reconstituting solitude; about "good-enough" mothering as the antithesis of "bad-enough" imperialism; about psychoanalysis as an attempt to cure idolatry through idolatry; and even about farting as it relates to worrying.

Psychoanalysis began as a virtuoso improvisation within the science of medicine, but virtuosity has given way to the dream of science that only the examined life is worth living. Phillips shows that the drive to omniscience has been unfortunate both for psychoanalysis and for life. *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* is a set of meditations on underinvestigated themes in psychoanalysis that shows how much one's psychic health depends on establishing a realm of life that successfully resists examination.

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On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored



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Psychoanalytic Essays on the  
Unexamined Life

ADAM PHILLIPS

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*For Hugh Haughton*

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## Preface

Because psychoanalysis is about the most ordinary things in the world it should not be difficult to be interested in. The essays in this book have been written in the belief that any psychoanalytic theory that is of interest only to members of the profession is unlikely to be worth reading. So I am grateful to have been able to publish most of them originally in journals—the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, *Raritan*, the *London Review of Books*—which have, as it were, a wider appeal. Each of these journals, in quite different ways, endorses J. L. Austin's remark that "it is not enough to show how clever we are by showing how obscure everything is." It was at the invitation of Michel Gribinski and J.-B. Pontalis, the editors of the *Nouvelle Revue*, that I first began writing the essays in this book. I have gained a great deal from their incitement, their translations, and their hospitality (and the fact that they are unbeglamored by obscurity). Similarly, in Richard Poirier and Suzanne Hyman at *Raritan* and Mary-Kay Wilmers at the *London Review of Books*, I have had the kind of congenial and attentive editors that have improved everything that I have submitted to them. Also, at Harvard University Press I am very grateful to Angela von der Lippe and Lindsay Waters for keeping faith with the project over several years, and to Ann Hawthorne for editing the manuscript with such a good ear.

Jacqueline Rose made enormous differences at the last moment; the book has been braced by her shrewd enthusiasm. In our clinical work with children and families at Charing Cross Hospital, my colleague Glenda Fredman has transformed the way I think about psychoanalysis; some of these essays derive from conversations we have had, and some of the best lines in

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P R E F A C E

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them may be hers. Sarah Spankie has entitled more than this particular book.

Throughout the text, I have observed the economical, but obviously unsatisfactory convention of using the masculine pronoun.



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The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know. The persons who compose our company converse, and come and go, and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it all, but an unlooked-for result. The individual is always mistaken. He designed many things, and drew in other persons as coadjutors, quarrelled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new and very unlike what he promised himself.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Experience*

Which is wrong? The weather or our calendars?

John Cage, *A Year from Monday*

When people think they've seen enough of something, but there's more, and no change of shot, then they react in a curiously livid way.

Wim Wenders, *Time Sequences, Continuity of Movement*

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# Introduction

Brichard was quite right when he said to me with his usual malice: "When you're in love with a woman, you must ask yourself: What do I want to do with her?"

Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard*

When Freud began to discover what we now think of as psychoanalysis, it was clear to him what it was to be used for. It was a new method, a potential form of cure, in the medical treatment of what were then called hysterical symptoms. And insofar as psychoanalysis was a medical treatment, the concept of cure seemed relatively unproblematic. "I have often in my own mind," Freud wrote,

compared cathartic psychotherapy with surgical intervention. I have described my treatments as psychotherapeutic operations; and I have brought out their analogy with the opening up of a cavity filled with pus, the scraping out of a carious region, etc. An analogy of this kind finds its justification not so much in the removal of what is pathological as in the establishment of conditions that are more likely to lead the course of the process in the direction of recovery.<sup>1</sup>

In this concluding section of *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud is interested in the consequences of his analogy. He is comparing talking to someone with a surgical operation, which now seems an unusual thing to do (for obvious reasons, surgeons don't tend to think of their work as a form of conversation). The operation, Freud suggests, is not the cure; it is only the prelude to the cure. By removing the pathological material the surgeon creates the conditions in which the cure can take

place. The cure can begin only after the treatment has ended. The psychotherapist simply clears the way to establish the conditions requisite for recovery. Obstacles are removed to facilitate a possible process. But to believe in such a process, and to know what a cure is—what recovery looks like—the doctor must already know what a life is supposed to look like. In any analogy—and Freud had to be preoccupied with analogies for psychoanalysis because it was so difficult to place—two sets of largely tacit assumptions seem to join forces.

All of Freud's by now well-known analogies for the skill of the psychoanalyst are in one sense immensely reassuring. They orientate the curious very quickly. The detective knows a clue when he sees one, and has a recondite ability to read it; the archaeologist can imagine a past that makes sense of the rubble; and the doctor, of course, recognizes the symptoms of a disease. In each of these professions the pragmatic aims of their respective practices are apparently clear. All of these professions can formulate their aims because they have them (or vice versa). The vocabularies that constitute their practices are their idea of what they are attempting to do. And because their tasks are definable—and teachable—they will know what it is to fail. In other words, canonical texts, persuasive practitioners, and training institutions conspire to create the necessary aura of plausibility. Even if there are mavericks like Sherlock Holmes, they can be mavericks only against a backdrop of orthodoxy.

Psychoanalysis, at its inception, had no texts, no institutions, and no rhetoric; all it had to see itself with were analogies with other forms of practice. The first practitioners of psychoanalysis were making it up as they went along, Freud being the prototype of the "wild analyst." Psychoanalysis, that is to say, was improvised; but improvised, despite the medical training of the early analysts, out of a peculiarly indefinable set of conventions. Freud had to improvise between the available analogies, and he took them, sometimes in spite of himself, from the sciences and the arts. Something new, after all, can be compared only with something from the past, something already

established. Even though Freud's analogies were compelling, sustaining at once the romance and the worthiness of psychoanalysis, he was unwilling to describe the ways in which psychoanalysis was *unlike* the professions he most admired; the ways in which psychoanalysis, for example—as I suggest at various points in these essays—turns the familiar concept of cure into the problem rather than the solution. It is indeed disappointing—as I show in “Playing Mothers”—that after Freud had invented a new kind of person called a psychoanalyst, some clinicians began to believe that a psychoanalyst should be, in some way, “like” a mother. Psychoanalysts have been tardy about this problem of unlikeness.

Psychoanalysis began, then, as a kind of virtuoso improvisation within the science of medicine; and free association—the heart of psychoanalytic treatment—is itself ritualized improvisation. But Freud was determined to keep psychoanalysis officially in the realm of scientific rigor, partly, I think, because improvisation is difficult to legitimate—and to sell—outside of a cult of genius. With the invention of psychoanalysis—or rather, with the discovery of what he called the unconscious—Freud glimpsed a daunting prospect: a profession of improvisers. And in the ethos of Freud and his followers, improvisation was closer to the inspiration of artists than to the discipline of scientists. Prospectively, and despite the range of his own cultural interests, Freud wanted to think of himself as a scientist. Retrospectively it seems rather as though it was very much the confluence of disparate traditions—and traditionally separated disciplines—that produced the new sentences that are called psychoanalytic theory. Curiosity, which Freud did so much to redescribe, is always opportunism.

One does not need to idealize either the indefinite or the improvised to think that the fact that psychoanalysis is difficult to place—unlike a lot of things to which it is similar—may be one of its distinctive virtues. Nor need it be cause for dismay—despite the splits and the synthesizing of theories (the having of “dialogues”) in contemporary psychoanalysis—that psychoanalysis can be a circus with many acts. There is no reason why

psychoanalysts should agree with one another—be either zealously partisan or gently pluralist—nor is there any reason to believe that if the perfect synthesis of competing theories is achieved it will speak inside the analyst like a god telling him what to do in the ordinary disarray of a psychoanalytic session. A repertoire might be more useful than a conviction; especially if one wants to keep in mind that there are many kinds of good life.

The psychoanalysis that interests me—and that is entertained in these essays—tries to do this. It is prodigal in its use of analogy and promiscuous in its references because the very process of comparing and contrasting, mixing and matching, offers the possibility of more enlivening and diverse redescriptions. One sense in which a life is always unexamined—or endlessly examinable—is that it can always be described in different ways, from different points of view. And psychoanalysis can be good at showing the ways in which certain points of view become invested with authority; but it is also too good at assuming an authoritative point of view for itself. By pooling the language of psychoanalysis rather than hoarding it—by circulating it in unusual places with other languages—psychoanalysis can be relieved of the knowingness that makes it look silly; the knowingness that comes from its “splendid isolation,” the fantasies of inner superiority in the profession. And it keeps alive the potentially glib irony that psychoanalysts are experts—if they are experts about anything—about the fact that there are no experts on life. Psychoanalysis is a story—and a way of telling stories—that makes some people feel better. But there are, and have been, many stories in the culture and in other cultures through which people examine, and do other things to, their lives. Psychoanalysis—as a form of conversation—is worth having only if it makes our lives more interesting, or funnier, or sadder, or more tormented, or whatever it is about ourselves that we value and want to promote; and especially if it helps us find new things about ourselves that we didn’t know we could value. New virtues are surprisingly rare.

As an evolving and relatively new story it is one of the distinctive virtues of psychoanalysis that it can give us new lines

on things that matter to us (like kissing, tickling, and being bored). But psychoanalysis itself has now become available as an analogy, and analogies, of course, work both ways. If psychoanalysis can make worrying more interesting, then worrying can make psychoanalysis more interesting. It is this kind of enthusiasm that psychoanalysis is particularly prone to—significantly so—and that Freud tried to use the idea of science to manage, to keep the traffic going one way. When he did so in, for example, “The Question of Weltanschauung” in *The New Introductory Lectures*, he became unusually strident in his dismissals of philosophy, art, and religion, producing caricatures of them in his promotion of science as the supreme method of human inquiry. Science, and psychoanalysis as a science, can be used to explain religion, but religion cannot—indeed must not—be used to explain science. Science, as I show in “Psychoanalysis and Idolatry,” becomes for Freud the method he believes to be most exempt from wishfulness, and therefore the most truthful (and despite the fact that the relationship to truth becomes a sadomasochistic one, truth being that which it is better for us to submit to). Having, through psychoanalysis, placed the wish at the center of mental life, the wish then becomes the saboteur, the contaminator, of truth.

By allying psychoanalysis so insistently with science—with a pursuit of truth irrespective of value—it was as though Freud could also exempt himself and his “new science” from the old question of what a good life is. But his fear of wishing and his disavowal of psychoanalysis as a form of ethical inquiry are, of course, connected; because another version of the question, What constitutes a good life? is the question, What kind of person does one want to be? Quite understandably this has been a question—and a connection—that Freud, and psychoanalysts after him, have been wary of. It is, after all, an extraordinary thing to take wishing seriously. If it were to be taken seriously in psychoanalytic trainings, for example, the question for the trainee at any given moment would not be, Am I doing this properly? but, Do I want to be the kind of person, say, who at this moment refuses to answer the patient’s question?

Insofar as psychoanalysis is essentialist—when, for example, psychoanalysts claim to believe in instincts, development, or innate preconceptions—it can only try to reconcile people to who they are by telling them what that is. In Freud’s work, as we know, there is an inspiring contradiction: on the one hand he describes what a life is, a developmental progress through the oral, anal, and phallic stages fueled by the “war” between two fundamental instincts, Eros and Thanatos; and on the other hand he describes an unconscious that is by definition the saboteur of intelligibility and normative life-stories. Indeed psychoanalysis, as described by Freud, might make us wonder why it is so difficult to imagine a life *without* normative life-stories. A good life, in this context, is either the successful negotiation of a more or less preset developmental project (in which the question, Set by whom? might seem irrelevant); or it can be something that we make up as we go along, according to our wishes, in endlessly proliferating and competing versions, the unconscious, as Richard Rorty has remarked, feeding us our best lines.<sup>2</sup> Psychoanalysis in this version cannot help people, because there is nothing wrong with anybody; it can only engage them in useful and interesting conversations. So one could then say that as a form of treatment psychoanalysis is a conversation that enables people to understand what stops them from having the kinds of conversation they want, and how they have come to believe that these particular conversations are worth wanting. Rather than: psychoanalysis is a conversation that helps people get back on track. Psychoanalysis, in other words, would be a curiosity profession instead of a helping profession. It is, of course, one of the tacit assumptions of psychoanalysis that there can be no good life, and no curiosity, without talking.

Psychoanalysis does not assume, in the same way, the value of writing (one couldn’t do analysis as a correspondence course, although some accounts of analysis sound remarkably like one). But the kind of distinction I have been making for the treatment of psychoanalysis also holds for the writing of psychoanalysis. One of the dramas that these essays try to sustain—and that is



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present in every clinical encounter—is the antagonism between the already narrated, examined life of developmental theory and the always potential life implied by the idea of the unconscious. The conflict between knowing what a life is and the sense that a life contains within it something that makes such knowing impossible is at the heart of Freud’s enterprise. So in one kind of psychoanalytic writing the theorist will be telling us by virtue of his knowledge of development or the contents of the internal world what a life should be like, however tentatively this may be put. And in another kind of psychoanalytic writing—which in its most extreme and sometimes inspired form pretends to ape the idea of the unconscious—there is a different kind of conscious wish at work: rather than informing the reader there is an attempt, to echo Emerson, to return the reader to his own thoughts whatever their majesty, to evoke by provocation. According to this way of doing it, thoroughness is not inciting. No amount of “evidence” or research will convince the unamused that a joke is funny. And by the same token ambiguity, inconsistency, or sentences that make you wonder whether the writer really knows what he is talking about, are considered to be no bad thing. I prefer—and write in these essays—this kind of psychoanalysis, but each is impossible without the other. Their complicity is traditionally underrated in psychoanalysis. One can put the whole notion of what it is to understand into question—as psychoanalysis does—without sneering at the wish for intelligibility, the wish to find stories for whatever is unbecoming.

The different kinds of psychoanalysis have different projects, different “dreams of Eden,” to use Auden’s phrase.<sup>3</sup> So we don’t have to worry, for example, about whether psychoanalysis is scientific or not; we simply have to ask what we want to do with it. People have traditionally come for psychoanalytic conversation because the story they are telling themselves about their lives has stopped, or become too painful, or both. The aim of the analysis is to restore the loose ends—and the looser beginnings—to the story. But if the story is fixed—if the patient ends up speaking psychoanalysis—we must assume that some-

thing has been lost in translation. Psychoanalysis is essentially a transitional language, one possible bridge to a more personal, less compliant idiom. It is useful only as a contribution to forms of local knowledge, as one among the many language games in a culture (and the local, of course, starts with the individual person and his always recondite sense of himself). In order to regain interest in the idea of the unconscious we have to lose interest in the idea of the superordinate point of view:

Who has once met  
irony will burst into laughter  
during the prophet's lecture.<sup>4</sup>

## On Tickling

The ear says more  
Than any tongue.

W. S. Graham, "The Hill of Intrusion"

"If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" asks Shylock, defining himself as human as he begins to "feed" his revenge. And what is more ordinary in the child's life than his hunger for revenge and, indeed, the experience of being tickled? From a psychoanalytic point of view it is curious that this common, perhaps universal, experience has rarely been thought about; and not surprising that once we look at it we can see so much.

An absolute of calculation and innocence, the adult's tickling of the child is an obviously acceptable form of sensuous excitement between parents and children in the family. The child who will be able to feed himself, the child who will masturbate, will never be able to tickle himself. It is the pleasure he cannot reproduce in the absence of the other. "From the fact that a child can hardly tickle itself," Darwin wrote in his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, "or in a much less degree than when tickled by another person, it seems that the precise point to be touched must not be known." An enigmatic conclusion, which, though manifestly untrue—children know exactly, like adults, where they are ticklish—alerts us to the fact that these "precise points" are a kind of useless knowledge to the child, that they matter only as shared knowledge. They require the enacted recognition of the other.

Helpless with pleasure, and usually inviting this helplessness, the child, in the ordinary, affectionate, perverse scenario of being tickled, is wholly exploitable. Specific adults know

where the child is ticklish—it is, of course, only too easy to find out—but it is always idiosyncratic, a piece of personal history, and rarely what Freud called one of the “predestined erotogenic zones.” Through tickling, the child will be initiated in a distinctive way into the helplessness and disarray of a certain primitive kind of pleasure, dependent on the adult to hold<sup>1</sup> and not to exploit the experience. And this means to stop at the blurred point, so acutely felt in tickling, at which pleasure becomes pain, and the child experiences an intensely anguished confusion; because the tickling narrative, unlike the sexual narrative, has no climax. It has to stop, or the real humiliation begins. The child, as the mother says, will get hysterical.

In English, the meaning of the word *tickle* is, so to speak, almost antithetical, employing, as Freud said of the dream-work, “the same means of representation for expressing contraries.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites, among nineteen definitions of the word, the following: “In unstable equilibrium, easily upset or overthrown, insecure, tottering, crazy . . . nicely poised.” Other definitions describe a range of experience from excessive credulity to incontinence. The word speaks of the precarious, and so of the erotic. To tickle is, above all, to seduce, often by amusement. But of the two references to tickling in Freud (both in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), it is used as virtually synonymous with stroking: included, quite accurately and unobtrusively, as part of the child’s ordinary sensuous life. Describing the characteristics of an erotogenic zone, Freud writes:

It is part of the skin or mucous membrane in which stimuli of a certain sort evoke a feeling of pleasure possessing a particular quality. There can be no doubt that the stimuli which produce the pleasure are governed by special conditions, though we do not know what those are. A rhythmic character must play a part among them and the analogy of tickling is forced upon our notice. It seems less certain whether the character of the pleasurable feeling evoked by the stimulus should be described as a

“specific” one—a “specific” quality in which the sexual factor would precisely lie. Psychology is still so much in the dark in questions of pleasure and unpleasure that the most cautious assumption is the one most to be recommended.<sup>2</sup>

Freud is certain here only of what he does not know. But in the light of his uncertainty, which provokes the most careful questions, what is the most cautious assumption we can make about these specific pleasures called tickling and being tickled? In the elaborate repertoire of intrusions, what is the quality—that is to say, the fantasy—of the experience? Certainly there is no immediate pressing biological need in this intent, often frenetic contact that so quickly reinstates a distance, only equally quickly to create another invitation. Is the tickling scene, at its most reassuring, not a unique representation of the over-displacement of desire and, at its most unsettling, a paradigm of the perverse contract? Does it not highlight, this delightful game, the impossibility of satisfaction and of reunion, with its continual reenactment of the irresistible attraction and the inevitable repulsion of the object, in which the final satisfaction is frustration?

A girl of eight who keeps “losing her stories” in the session because she has too much to say, who cannot keep still for a moment, suddenly interrupts herself by saying to me, “I can only think of you when I don’t think of you.” This same, endlessly elusive child—elusiveness, that is, the inverse of obsessionality—ends a session telling me, “When we play monsters, and mummy catches me, she never kills me, she only tickles me!”

“We can cause laughing by tickling the skin,” Darwin noted of the only sensuous contact that makes one laugh. An extraordinary fact condensing so much of psychoanalytic interest, but one of which so little is spoken. Perhaps in the cumulative trauma that is development we have had the experience but deferred the meaning.

## First Hates: Phobias in Theory

His radical solutions were rendered vain by the conventionality of his problems.

George Santayana, *My Host the World*

In his chapter “Instinct” in *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (1892), William James writes:

The progress from brute to man is characterised by nothing so much as by the decrease in frequency of proper occasions for fear. In civilised life, in particular, it has at last become possible for large numbers of people to pass from the cradle to the grave without ever having had a pang of genuine fear. Many of us need an attack of mental disease to teach us the meaning of the word. Hence the possibility of so much blindly optimistic philosophy and religion.<sup>1</sup>

James, of course, is always looking for good transitions, for the passages that work for us. Like Freud, but for different reasons, he is wary of the progress in civilized life. For Freud, civilization compromises our desire; for James here, it compromises our fear. If civilization protects us, or overprotects us, the absence of danger can make us unrealistic. We may need an attack of mental disease as the only available reminder of “proper occasions for fear.” Without proper occasions we lose the meaning of an important word. This mental disease that James recommends, partly from his own experience, or rather the real fear that it entails, should temper speculation, setting limits to the naive ambitions of metaphysics.

But fear, especially at its most irrational, perplexes James in

an interesting way; it connects for him three of his most consistent preoccupations: blindness, optimism, and the doing of philosophy. Because, unlike Freud, he doesn't see fear and desire as inextricable, he is more openly puzzled. Even though "a certain amount of timidity obviously adapts us to the world we live in," he writes, "the fear paroxysm is surely altogether harmful to him who is its prey." After considering the virtues of immobility—the insane and the terrified "feel safer and more comfortable" in their "statue-like, crouching immobility"—James refers at the very end of his chapter on fear to "the strange symptom which has been described of late years by the rather absurd name of agoraphobia." After describing the symptoms, which "have no utility in a civilised man," he manages to make sense of this puzzling new phenomenon only by comparing it to the way in which both domestic cats and many small wild animals approach large open spaces. "When we see this," he writes,

we are strongly tempted to ask whether such an odd kind of fear in us be not due to the accidental resurrection, through disease, of a sort of instinct which may in some of our more remote ancestors have had a permanent and on the whole a useful part to play.<sup>2</sup>

The "disease" returns the patient to his instinctual heritage; but this heritage is now redundant because, in actuality, there is nothing to fear. Agoraphobics, James suggests, are living in the past, the evolutionary past ("the ordinary cock-sure evolutionist," James remarks in his droll way, "ought to have no difficulty in explaining these terrors").<sup>3</sup> The agoraphobic is, as it were, speaking a dead language. So to understand agoraphobia in James's terms, we have to recontextualize the fear, put it back in its proper place, or rather, time. There is nothing really irrational about phobic terror; it is an accurate recognition of something, something that Darwinian evolution can supply a picture for. Fear itself cannot be wrong, even if it is difficult to find out where it fits.

A phobia nevertheless is, perhaps in both senses, an improper occasion for fear, an enforced suspension of disbelief.

James's description of the agoraphobic patient "seized with palpitation and terror at the sight of any open place or broad street which he has to cross alone" is a vivid picture of a phobia as an impossible transition. And it can be linked—as a kind of cartoon—with one of James's famous notions of truth; the agoraphobic becoming, as it were, the compulsive saboteur of some of his own truth. "Pragmatism gets her general notion of truth," James writes in his book of that title,

as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to. Primarily, and on the common-sense level, the truth of a state of mind means this function of a *leading that is worth while*.<sup>4</sup>

The agoraphobic is the figure of the compromised pragmatist. The threshold of experience between this one moment and the next is aversive. He wants to go somewhere—or, in James's more suggestive terms, be led somewhere—but he is unable to find out whether it is as worthwhile (in both senses) as he thinks. The terror, or the inability to hold the terror, preempts possible future states of mind, and so precludes their evaluation. A phobia, in other words, protects a person from his own curiosity.

"Agoraphobia," Freud wrote in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess in 1887, "seems to depend on a romance of prostitution." Despite James's misgiving about its "rather absurd name," and despite its being Greeked for prestigious legitimation, agoraphobia seems rather nicely named. The agora, after all, was that ancient place where words and goods and money were exchanged. Confronted with an open space, as James and Freud both agree, the agoraphobic fears that something nasty is going to be exchanged: one state of mind for another, one desire for another. But the phobia ensures a repression of opportunity, a foreclosing of the possibilities for exchange ("a projection is dangerous," the psychoanalyst André Green has written, "when it prevents the simultaneous formation of an introjection"; in a phobia one is literally unable to take in what one has invented).



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